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Leviticus 16

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A PRIEST AND TWO GOATS LEVITICUS 16: THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

When I was asked to preach, this chapter was the first text that came to my mind. This might surprise you, because Leviticus is perhaps best known as the book that defeats many people in their attempt to read through the entire Bible. It's easy to get bogged down and confused about all of the rules and sacrifices that don't make any sense to us today.

But Leviticus 16 is actually a very important chapter for us to understand. This text describes the most important holiday of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, or as we know it, the Day of Atonement. This was the day when the sins of the people that had accumulated all year would finally be dealt with.

The reason that the Day of Atonement is important for us as Christians is that this ceremony provides us with one of the best Old Testament pictures of what Jesus accomplished for us. We will begin by understanding the significance of the Day of Atonement for the people of that day, and then we will look forward to the New Testament to see how the author of Hebrews lands the imagery of the Day of Atonement in the person and work of Christ.

Leviticus 16:1-22:

Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they had approached the presence of the LORD and died.

The LORD said to Moses: "Tell your brother Aaron that he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die; for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.

"Aaron shall enter the holy place with this: with a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

"He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and the linen undergarments shall be next to his body, and he shall be girded with the linen sash and attired with the linen turban (these are holy garments). Then he shall bathe his body in water and put them on.

"He shall take from the congregation of the sons of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering.

"Then Aaron shall offer the bull for the sin offering which is for himself, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household.

"He shall take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the doorway of the tent of meeting.

"Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat.

"Then Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the LORD fell, and make it a sin offering.

"But the goat on which the lot for the scapegoat fell shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat.

"Then Aaron shall offer the bull of the sin offering which is for himself and make atonement for himself and for his household, and he shall slaughter the bull of the sin offering which is for himself.

"He shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring it inside the veil.

"He shall put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, otherwise he will die.

"Moreover, he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle {it} with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.

"Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat.

"He shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and thus he shall do for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their impurities.

"When he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, no one shall be in the tent of meeting until he comes out, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household and for all the assembly of Israel.

"Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat and put it on the horns of the altar on all sides.

"With his finger he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it seven times and cleanse it, and from the impurities of the sons of Israel consecrate it.

"When he finishes atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall offer the live goat.

"Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness.

"The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness. (LEV 16:1-22 NASB)

A. Introduction and Contextual Link to the Death of the Sons of Aaron Lev 16:1-2

Verses 1-2, which set the stage for the story, refer back to an incident in Leviticus 10, when the LORD had killed the sons of Aaron the high priest. Basically, Aaron's sons had not respected God's instructions for how they were to approach him. Offering "strange fire," they approached the LORD in an unauthorized way, and he killed them.

So the chapter starts with this warning, that if Aaron enters the Holy Place of the tabernacle whenever he feels like it, then he will die like his sons. Instead, God lays out the correct way in which Aaron could enter the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle. And, as we will find out later in the chapter, this will be happen only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

The titles "tabernacle" and "tent of meeting" are synonymous. This was the portable building that was the center of Israel's worship while they were in the wilderness, and it was the place where God dwelled. The tabernacle itself was composed of two sections, and it was surrounded by an outer courtyard. The outer section, called the Holy Place, contained an altar of in-

cense, as well as a lamp stand and table for bread. The inner section, behind a veil of separation, was called either the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies, depending on your translation. This was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, and this was where God's presence dwelt. There are times in our chapter today where the NASB uses the term "Holy Place," but if you see the phrase "inside the veil," it is clear that it is talking about the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies.

B. Details of the Day of Atonement Ceremony 16:4-28

Verses 4-28 describe the events that took place on the Day of Atonement. The chapter is a little confusing, because verses 4-10 summarize the events, and then verses 11-28 backtrack and go into more detail about each element. I will try to simplify this by describing briefly each of the key elements of the ceremony in chronological order.

1. Preparation of the priest and the animals 16:4-5

First, the preparation of the priest and the animals (verses 4-5). Aaron would have removed his high priestly robes and breastplate and put on the clothes of a servant: a linen tunic, undergarments, sash and turban. Then he chose two goats from the congregation, and a ram. These would have been the finest animals available, perfect, without defect.

2. Sin offering for Aaron and family 16:6; 11-14

Second, Aaron would offer a bull as a sin offering for himself and his family. This is summarized in verse 6 and described in detail in verses 11-14. First, he killed the bull in the outer court of the tabernacle. Then he would enter the Most Holy place with the blood of the bull and sprinkle it on the mercy seat, the gold lid that covered the ark of the covenant.

3. Sin offering for congregation 16:15-19 Goat #1

The third step was the sacrifice of a sin offering for the congregation, described in verses 7-9 and 15-19. Two goats were brought forth and lots were cast to see which would be selected. The chosen goat was then killed and the high priest would bring the blood of the goat back into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle it on the mercy seat, just like he did for the bull.

4. Scapegoat ritual 16:10; 20b-22

The fourth step was the scapegoat ritual, which is summarized in verse 10 and described in verses 20-22. Here, the high priest would take the second goat, confess the sins of the people over it, and then send the goat away into the wilderness.

5. Concluding steps: Cleansings, burnt offerings and disposal 16:23-28

The final steps are described in verses 23-28. The high priest would change his clothes, wash, and then offer two more burnt offerings. The dead carcasses would be removed and everyone involved would have a final ceremonial washing.

C. The Significance of Key Figures in the Day of Atonement Ceremony

So those were the key elements of the Day of Atonement. But to understand the significance of this day, we need to focus on the main figures involved in the ceremony. And, as you can tell from the title of my sermon, there are three key figures: a priest and two goats.

1. The priest

But this wasn't just any priest. The key figure here is the high priest of Israel, originally Aaron, and then his descendants. It's clear from the story that this is a busy day for Aaron. He is the central action figure. He is the one who washes, slaughters, sacrifices, and sprinkles the blood of the animals. Typically, Aaron would have had other priests to help him with all this work, but not on the Day of Atonement. On this day he is all by himself in the tabernacle.

What is the significance of the priest in this ceremony? The most important thing for us to understand about the high priest is that he functioned on behalf of the people, as their representative before God. Think of our modern concept of a power of attorney where you can grant someone the

legal right to act on your behalf. This was how God had designed the office of high priest. On this day he was acting out a ritual, not just for himself, but as the legal representative of the people. We see this in verse 17: "When he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, no one shall be in the tent of meeting until he comes out, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household and for all the assembly of Israel."

2. Goat # 1: Sacrifice goat

The first goat, the one that gets sacrificed is described in verse 15 as the "goat of the sin offering." The purpose of this goat is made clear, because five times we are told that it is used to "make atonement" for something. What does this mean? The root Hebrew word for "atone" means "to cleanse" or "to purge." As we look at the passage, it is clear that there are two objects of atonement. The significance of the first goat is that it functioned to cleanse both the tabernacle and the people from the uncleanness brought on by sin.

Before we get into this, let's talk for a minute about the concept of uncleanness. A significant theme in the book of Leviticus is distinguishing between clean and unclean. This contrast describes the condition of someone or something in relation to its normal state of existence. We might think of it as "physical purity." So, if a person touched a dead carcass or had an open sore or ate an unclean animal, he would be considered unclean until he went through the proper purification ritual to be cleansed. Uncleanness was contagious. When clean and unclean came into contact with each other, the clean thing always became unclean; it never worked the other way.

This whole distinction between clean and unclean is foreign to us today. But in Israel, this concept of physical purity was significant, because God was physically present with his people in a way that is not the same today. Proper maintenance of physical purity was crucial to ensure that God would continue to dwell with his people. We see this in Leviticus 15:31, where God says, "Thus you shall keep the sons of Israel separated from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling My tabernacle that is among them." The tabernacle was set up in the middle of the camp of Israel, and it could be defiled by the uncleanness of the people.

a. Cleansing the Tabernacle

This is important, because if you are like me, you have a certain mental picture about the Day of Atonement, a picture that is likely partial and incomplete. I've always thought of the Day of Atonement as a day when the people's personal sins were forgiven. But in reality, it was much more than that. The entire nation of Israel lived with a Holy God in their midst, and all year the people's sins had contaminated or defiled his dwelling place that was in the middle of the camp.

So, as the Day of Atonement approached, the people would have experienced a range of emotions. On one hand, there would have been anticipation about that day, but there also would have been a sense of apprehension as well. What would God do? Would he continue to dwell in the midst of an unholy people? Or would he kill them like he killed Aaron's sons when they violated his regulations? Fortunately, what God did was provide a means by which the tabernacle could be cleansed—by the sacrifice of the first goat. Verse 16: "And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel." So we might think of the blood of the sacrificial goat functioning like a detergent to cleanse and wipe away the contamination and uncleanness that had been brought into the tabernacle because of the people's sin.

b. Cleansing the people

The tabernacle is not the only thing that was contaminated by sin. The people themselves had been defiled and needed to be cleansed by the blood of the first goat as well. Throughout the OT, it is clear that the only way that sin could be dealt with was by the shedding of blood. And even though the priests regularly offered sacrifices for specific offenses, the people could never deal with every sin or offense they had committed.

We might think about spring house cleaning to understand what's going on here. Even if you clean your house every week, over time things will still get dirty and junk will accumulate. Sometimes you need a deeper cleaning

to really get your house in order. That's how you can picture the Day of Atonement, as a spiritual spring housecleaning that dealt with a year's worth of accumulated sin. Verse 30 says, "For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the LORD."

So the significance of the first goat is that it functioned as a sacrifice, providing blood to clean both the tabernacle and the people. Now, let's consider the live goat or scapegoat.

3. Goat #2: Scapegoat

We are all familiar with this term "scapegoat," which originates from this biblical story. If we say that someone is a scapegoat, we mean that an innocent person has been forced to pay the consequences for something he didn't do. What we see in this story is that the scapegoat functions primarily as a sin bearer. Verse 21: "Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness. . ."

There are three different Hebrew words here that are translated iniquities, transgressions, and sins, and each has a slightly different nuance of meaning. Combined, they comprehensively describe every type of sin that a person could commit. So Aaron would symbolically place all of the sins of the people onto the scapegoat and it would bear the sins into the wilderness. The painting by William Holman Hunt, "The Scapegoat," captures the complete desolation of the wilderness that the goat was driven into, where it would quickly die.

The key point that we need to understand about the scapegoat is the principle of **substitution**. The scapegoat was a substitute who bore the sins of the people and removed them from the camp.

D. The Day of Atonement was Permanent and Yet Incomplete 16:29-34

The chapter now concludes with verses 29-34. Here God commands that this ceremony be formalized into an annual observance by the nation of Israel.

"And this shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls, and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you shall be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is to be a Sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute.

"So the priest who is anointed and ordained to serve as a priest in his father's place shall make atonement: he shall thus put on the linen garments, the holy garments, and make atonement for the holy sanctuary; and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar. He shall also make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly.

"Now you shall have this as a permanent statute, to make atonement for the sons of Israel for all their sins once every year." And just as the LORD had commanded Moses, so he did." (Lev 16:29-34)

Notice how God underscores the importance of this day by saying three times that it is to be a permanent statute. Even after Aaron dies, his successor high priest will take his place and lead the people in this ceremony each year. We can't escape how significant the Day of Atonement was to the religious life of the Israelites.

But, as significant as this day was, we also need to see just how incomplete it was as well. I use the word "incomplete" because, as the people watched the scapegoat disappear over the horizon, they understood that only one year's worth of sin had been dealt with. Each year, the ceremony would have to be repeated again and again and yet again, because the removal of sin on the Day of Atonement was not permanent. And although this Day allowed God to continue to dwell with his people in his tabernacle, their access to

him was restricted. Only one man could ever enter the Most Holy Place, and only on this one day each year. Because the people continued to be unclean and contaminated by sin, they were hindered from experiencing full access and complete fellowship with their God.

So, as great a day as this was, it was incomplete, because it did not meet the deepest needs of the people. But fortunately, God did not design it to be complete, because he never intended the Day of Atonement to meet the deepest needs of his people. Rather, the purpose of this day was to point them forward to the ultimate fulfillment of the Day of Atonement in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

E. Christ Fulfills the Day of Atonement

This is why Leviticus 16 is an important chapter for us to understand. The true significance of the Day of Atonement is that all three of the key figures, the priest and the two goats, are types and shadows that point forward to Jesus Christ. And the details of the Day of Atonement ceremony provide illustrations that help us better understand what Christ accomplished. This is made clear in Hebrews 9-10, where the author draws upon the imagery of the Day of Atonement to focus us on the superior work of Christ. The main point of these chapters is that Christ fulfilled the Day of Atonement because he is a superior high priest, a superior sacrifice, and a superior sin bearer.

1. Christ is a Superior High Priest

Let's consider how Christ is a superior high priest to Aaron and his descendants. Hebrews 9:11-12:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

We established earlier that the high priest functioned as a legal representative to stand before God and offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. This image of the high priest helps us understand what Christ did, because he accomplished in reality what the OT priest could only do in ritual. Instead of entering a man made tent, Christ entered the true Holy Place, heaven itself. Instead of sprinkling the mercy seat with the blood of a goat, Jesus offered his own blood as a sacrifice for our sins. And instead of repeating this ritual each year on the Day of Atonement, Jesus offered a permanent sacrifice that would not need to be repeated. Hebrews 10:12 says, "but He (speaking of Christ), having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD."

2. Christ is a Superior Sacrifice

So not only is Christ a superior High Priest, he is also a superior sacrifice for sin than the goat slaughtered on the Day of Atonement. Listen to these two passages from Hebrews 9-10:

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Heb 9:13-14)

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices is a reminder of sins year by year. (Heb 10:1-3)

We discussed earlier how the purpose of the sacrifice goat was to cleanse both the tabernacle and the people from the uncleanness brought on by sin. And once again, we see that Christ accomplished in reality what the sacrifice goat could only do in ritual. The blood of the goat could only cleanse the flesh, meaning that it was only effective for external, ceremonial cleansing. The NT is clear that the blood of bulls and goats is not effective to deal

with matters of the heart. And the very fact that the goat sacrifice had to be repeated each year is proof of its inadequacy.

In contrast, Christ was a superior sacrifice whose shed blood accomplished something permanent: we have had our hearts and consciences cleansed. And just like the cleansing of the tabernacle allowed God to continue to dwell with his people, Christ's cleansing work allows the Holy Spirit to reside in our hearts. We are no longer unclean because of the permanent cleansing work of Christ, the ultimate sacrifice.

3. Christ is a Superior Sin Bearer

Finally, we see in the book of Hebrews that Christ is also a superior sin bearer than the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. Earlier I mentioned that the key principle involved with the scapegoat was the idea of substitution—that an innocent party could bear the consequences of another's actions. Just like the scapegoat bore the sins of the people, the apostle Peter tells us that "Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Pet 2:24). The prophet Isaiah famously prophesied about the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:4: "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted."

The great message of Christianity is that God has put our sins upon Christ, and that Christ has not only paid for these sins with his death, but also that he has removed our sins from us. And once again this act of sin bearing is superior to that of the scapegoat, because it is permanent and complete. Hebrews 9:26 says, "but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

The Day of Atonement is significant for us today because of how effectively it illustrates the work of Jesus Christ. What this Old Testament ritual could only do symbolically, Jesus did in reality. And what amazes me most is how the work of Christ was so comprehensive that it took all three figures in the Day of Atonement ceremony to illustrate what he accomplished. No one Old Testament figure could give us the whole picture of what Christ has done. Each figure that we discussed this morning could only foreshadow a portion of work of Christ, because Christ is the ultimate High Priest, Christ is the ultimate Sacrifice for Sin, and Christ is the ultimate Sin Bearer.

E. Reflection: The Central Truth of the Day of Atonement

As I reflected on the Day of Atonement and its significance for us today, it struck me that the entire ceremony communicated one central truth to the people. The entire chapter teaches us that *Atonement is not something that people do. It is something that is done for them.* Everything about the day communicates this truth, because the people themselves did not participate in the work of atonement. They were represented by a priest who made atonement on their behalf. They were cleansed by the blood of a sacrifice goat, and their sins were removed by a substitute scapegoat. And just in case they missed it, God made it very clear that the Day of Atonement was a Sabbath of solemn rest where they could do no work.

As we think about this truth today, most of us would agree that we cannot atone for our sins, but we must rely on Christ alone. And yet, while we know this in our heads, I find that this truth is one of the hardest for us to truly believe in our hearts. There seems to be something in our human nature that desires to make atonement ourselves. Our pride tells us that we should pay our own way in this world, and that there is no free lunch.

For Christians, it seems that this false belief can manifest itself in subtle ways. Many of us may carry guilt around because of things we have done in our past. We may say that God has forgiven us, but deep down, we don't feel we deserve his forgiveness. So feeling guilty can become a form of self imposed punishment that makes us feel better in some strange way. We can think that we have at least done something to pay our own way.

Others of us try more external methods of self-atonement. After I sin, I often find myself thinking that if I try harder the next day, and succeed where I failed before, that somehow the good will offset the bad. These ideas sound ludicrous when we talk about them, but it is easy to fall into these lines of thinking. And, as subtle as these thoughts are, any of these efforts deny that the work of Christ on the cross was final and complete.

This is the reason why on the Day of Atonement, the people were instructed twice to "humble their souls." The fact is that it requires humility to accept the work of another for the forgiveness of our sins. It requires humility to realize that there is nothing we can do to contribute to our salvation. But just as the people in Leviticus were to observe a Sabbath and humble their souls, so too are we called to stop working and to rest in the completed work of Christ.

This quote from Jonathan Edwards sums it up nicely: "Though millions of sacrifices had been offered; yet nothing was done to purchase redemption before Christ's incarnation, so nothing was done after His resurrection to purchase redemption for men. Nor will there be anything more done to all eternity."

Let us rejoice today that God has forgiven our sins through the complete and permanent sacrifice of his Son. Amen.

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful (Heb 10:19-23)

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