

The day of atonement

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[0 : 00] Leviticus 16. The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord.

The Lord said to Moses, Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he chooses into the most holy place, behind the curtain, in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die.

For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. Now, this is how Aaron is to enter the most holy place. He must first bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

He is to put on the sacred linen tunic with linen undergarments next to his body. He is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments, so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on.

From the Israelite community, he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household.

[1 : 02] Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat.

Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.

Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. And he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering. He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain.

He is to put the incense on the fire before the Lord and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the tablets of the covenant law so that he will not die.

He is to take some of the bull's blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover. Then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover. He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood.

[2 : 13] He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. In this way, he will make atonement for the most holy place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been.

He is to do the same for the tent of meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. No one is to be in the tent of meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the most holy place until he comes out having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.

Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull's blood and some of the goat's blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites.

When Aaron has finished making atonement for the most holy place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites, all their sins, and put them on the goat's head.

He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place and the man shall release it in the wilderness. [3 : 30] Then Aaron is to go into the tent of meeting and take off the linen garments he put on before he entered the most holy place and he is to leave them there. He shall bathe himself with water in the sanctuary area and put on his ordinary garments.

Then he shall come out and sacrifice the burnt offering for himself and the burnt offering for the people to make atonement for himself and for the people. He shall also burn the fat of the sin offering on the altar.

The man who releases the goat as a scapegoat must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. Afterwards, he may come into the camp. The bull and the goat for the sin offerings, whose blood was brought into the most holy place to make atonement, must be taken outside the camp. Their hides, flesh, and intestines are to be burned. The man who burns them must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. Afterwards, he may come into the camp. This is to be a lasting ordinance for you.

On the tenth day of the seventh month, you must deny yourselves and not do any work, whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you. Because on this day, atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you.

[4 : 34] Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a day of Sabbath rest and you must deny yourselves. It is a lasting ordinance. The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement.

He is to put on the sacred linen garments and make atonement for the most holy place, for the tent of meeting and the altar, and for the priests and all the members of the community. This is to be a lasting ordinance for you.

Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites. And it was done as the Lord commanded Moses. Amen. Amen. I wonder what, to your mind, is the most important day of the year.

Zechariah was just asking Alexa at lunchtime how many days it is until his birthday. I think that's fairly clear what is the most important day in his year, or maybe Christmas for some children. Maybe some countries, people would tend to focus on the day of their independence as the key date of the year. As Christians wanting to give the right answer, we probably say Easter Sunday, don't we?

[5 : 47] Well, for a Jew, from the time of the Exodus through to Jesus' day, there are really two candidates for the most important day of the year. You have the Passover commemorating their rescue from Egypt, saved from death by the blood of the Lamb.

And then six months later, you have the day of atonement. Yom Kippur. That's the day that we're given instructions for here in Leviticus 16. I don't think it's terribly helpful to try and pick the most important between the two.

But at a push, I think the day of atonement takes it by a nose. Because where the Passover commemorates God's goodness in the past, God's rescue long ago, well, the day of atonement is the key to ongoing relationship in the here and now.

This is a really important day, and therefore a really important chapter. Furthermore, this chapter, chapter 16 of the book of Leviticus, is the pivot of the whole book.

In fact, it's the pivot of the whole of the first five books of the Old Testament taken together.

However, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, all of it hinges around Leviticus 16, the day of atonement.

[6 : 58] And we discussed some of that structural centrality back at the start of the series. You can go listen to the recording if you're so inclined. But what that means for us here today is that the day of atonement is therefore, in some sense, the culmination of the previous 15 chapters.

And it's kind of the source of spiritual energy and dynamism, motivation to carry out the imperatives, the instructions of the following chapters.

It's the culmination and the basis on which we continue. And let's be honest, this chapter does come as a breath of fresh air, doesn't it?

A change, a little bit more narrative, something a little bit more immediate. John Currid says that the laws dealing with skin diseases seem to go on almost ad infinitum.

I did go and look at just how long it took to read through those chapters last week. I think we have some sympathy with John's point of view here, don't we? Certainly the Hebrews coming to hear Leviticus 16, they would have felt the weight of those foregoing laws.

[8 : 05] The burden of the law has become almost unbearable. But now the author describes the day of atonement by which the sins of Israel are dealt with.

This is the great day of deliverance, the culmination of the worship of Israel for the entire year. Therefore, the fact that the people are unable to keep the laws laid down in Leviticus is taken care of through the sacrificial system, which finds its ultimate climax in the day of atonement.

This is the means by which human inadequacy is addressed. So my intention is to consider this chapter under three headings.

Shocking, I know. First, the need for atonement. Second, the means of atonement. And then third, the man of atonement. In thinking about the need, the means, and the man, we're not going to exhaust the depths of this chapter.

This isn't just the pivot of the Pentateuch. It's also, it's fundamental. It's foundational for so much of the New Testament as well. The closing days of Jesus' life, Paul's writings, the letter to the Hebrews, all of them, an understanding of the ritual and the meaning of the day of atonement.

[9 : 16] All of them assume that we have that knowledge. And this is therefore in no sense a dusty old ritual or a bloody gory old spectacle.

No, this is fundamental to our knowledge of what we claim to believe today. If we do not understand the day of atonement, then we do not come close to understanding the riches of what is going on on the cross.

So first then, the need for atonement. The preceding chapters have made this very clear, haven't they? Atonement is a must. And these are but one small part of the weight of the law in countless ways, big and small.

God's people daily fall short of his standards. They did so then, they do so now. People fail to keep God's law. And there are these daily sacrifices and so on.

But there seems to be this sense in which there's kind of a gradual accumulation of the matters that are unattended to. And so you need to kind of almost sweep up the residue, deal with the leftovers once a year, deal with anything that hasn't been caught elsewhere.

[10 : 27] The unconscious failings. The times when somebody doesn't know that the garment's unclean before they come into the temple courts. This passage is very clear that as well as making atonement for the priest and for the people, there's also a need here to make atonement for the objects.

Atonement for the mercy seat. For the most holy place. For the holy place. For the altar. Each of them needs to be sprinkled or smeared with blood.

Verse 20 says, When Aaron's finished making atonement for the most holy place, the tent of meeting and the altar, then he shall bring forward the live goat. So he makes atonement for all of these objects.

These holy places. These things have been tainted. Cleansing is required. That's clear from the phrasing of verse 15. He shall slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood.

He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. In this way, he will make atonement for the most holy place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites.

[11 : 35] Whatever their sins have been, is to do the same for the tent of meeting, which is among them, in the midst of their uncleanness. So the problem here is the uncleanness is there in the camp.

Unclean people, unclean objects are there in the surroundings, potentially coming way too close to the holy tent of meeting. And this uncleanness needs to be dealt with.

And these day of atonement rituals provide the way. Good and when and the atonement day rituals make the impossible possible. That which could not otherwise happen here is done.

By cleansing the sanctuary, these rituals permit the holy God to dwell among an unholy people. Fellowship with the holy God. That's the objective.

This is a massive plank of the means by which it is achieved. It is necessary because of the uncleanness of the people that affects the whole environment.

[12 : 33] And this addresses that uncleanness. So what then is the way? What is the means of atonement on this day? As you no doubt noticed as we were going through, there are a variety of different elements, a number of different animals being sacrificed.

But it seems to me that the particularly special part, the part that sets this day apart from any other sacrifice, is this pair of goats.

These two goats aren't part of the daily sacrifices or rituals for ordination or whatever. This is the only time that you have this pair of goats.

So we're going to focus on them. Verse 5 tells us these goats are taken from the Israelite community. They come from the people on behalf of the people. And certainly they come with all of the expectations of any sacrificial animal.

These need to be perfect and unblemished. And surely that perfection is going to be even more strictly applied here than on any other day for any other sacrifice.

[13 : 37] This is the high point of the sacrificial year. So these will be absolutely perfect animals. Verse 8 brings us to this casting of lots.

One lot falls to the goat that is for the Lord. Verse 9 tells us that's going to be sacrificed. And then the other goat is the scapegoat. The word here being translated scapegoat, it is a little bit obscure. If you're so inclined, you can go read all kinds of articles analyzing different possibilities of what's in view. I'm not going to go over it just now. Scapegoat is a good brief term. This is an excellent translation.

It is helpful to understand what's going on. If you want to expand scapegoat slightly in your minds, you can think of it as the goat of going away. This goat is defined by its function.

This is the one that leaves. One goat's sacrificed. The other one escapes. It leaves. It's taken away off into the wilderness, carrying sins with it.

[14 : 34] Verse 20 and following describes this in a little more detail. When Aaron has finished making atonement for the most holy place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat.

He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites, all their sins, and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task.

The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place, and the man shall release it in the wilderness. So step one, he gets both hands and lays them on the goat's head and confesses the sins of the people.

Note here that both hands are being placed on the goat's head. When the priest does this, he takes both hands and puts them on the head. The usual sacrificial ritual, you've got the person bringing the offering and they put one hand on the animal's head.

The two hands seem to be emphatic. The weight of sin pressing down, almost the sense that it can only be fully conveyed by kind of getting right in there and pressing down on the animal.

[15 : 44] The weight of sin, the seriousness of this ritual. But more substantially than that, note three different words here are being used. He confesses all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites, all their sins.

These different words, wickedness, rebellion, sins, they have kind of different nuances in view, but I don't think it's actually the different kind of dimensions on sin that's being focused on here.

It's the repetition. It's the sense of all of it, all encompassing, all of the sins, whatever they might be. All of the sins on this animal's head, all their accidental wrongdoing, all the casual mistakes, a whole year's worth of the consequences of their ignorance and inadvertent misdeeds.

And not just the accidental things. Harrison says that the Hebrew term, pasha, this is the one being translated transgressions, this also carries with it a consistent sense of revolt, rebellion against an overlord.

So some of the offenses for which atonement was being made would have been committed despite the known will of God. So this isn't only the accidental things, this is actually conveying also those sins that are committed in deliberate rebellion, people who know they're going against the revealed will of God.

[17 : 05] This is a really comprehensive situation. All their sins put on the goat's head and verse 22 says it will carry them away. The sins are going to be removed not just from the people but removed right out of the camp.

The sins go off into the wilderness. Maybe as the man's leading that goat away, maybe the people sing just as we did. Psalm 103, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

God takes the sins away. They're carried off by the goat. So both of these goats have a part to play. Come back to verse 5 with me.

From the Israelite community, he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Do you see that these two goats are for a sin offering?

One offering, singular. One offering made by means of these two animals. One that's killed and one that's sent away. And each of these two animals, it is not a separate thing, but rather each is symbolizing or emphasizing a different aspect of this one singular sin offering.

[18 : 21] The goat that dies. The goat that dies shows propitiation, shows sins being paid for by death, shows the shedding of blood that produces the forgiveness of sins.

God's righteous anger poured out against the people's transgressions. God's anger averted. And this second goat, the one that's being sent off into the wilderness, this second goat then pictures the actual, the complete removal of the sins for which the price has been paid.

So because the price is paid, because the blood is shed, then the sins can be removed. One shows the means, the other shows the effect. This is what's happening.

This is the result. This is the good news for you of this death over here. The first goat shows the means of atonement. The second shows the effect of atonement, the removal of guilt.

Now, it can't be that there's something magic in using both of the animals, that it's only kind of once a year that the sacrifice can have that effect.

[19 : 30] It can't be that the other sacrifices are ineffective. Certainly, Christ's death on the cross, there is only one sacrifice there. It certainly accomplishes both dimensions in a single sacrifice.

Let's not have any doubt about that. So it's not that the other sacrifices are inadequate, but rather that more is being demonstrated here, perhaps more than that more is actually being done here.

So why two animals? I'm pretty sure it's for the benefit of the people watching. It's not for God's benefit. It doesn't really matter much to him how many sacrifices are or aren't given on the face of it. Why does he choose to have two? For the benefit of the people who see that goat depart and know. They see their sins are removed.

Surely the psychological impact of that is profound. As the sins are carried off into the desert, no longer to be held onto by the people who committed them.

[20 : 33] Sometimes I think we could do with a goat to send off. Because we find ourselves holding onto our sins, don't we?

We know intellectually, we know that God is willing to forgive. And yet somehow we don't let them go. And yet God says he's removed our transgressions as far as the east is from the west.

The apostle John writes, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. It's not open to debate.

It's a promise of almighty God. Now, we don't see a goat walking away. But I wonder if we should be making more of our participation in the Lord's Supper.

if that ought not to be to us the same kind of reminder, the same sort of concrete experience, something that you do, see, taste, that shows you what's happening.

[21 : 42] That here, here in our hands, on our lips, is the body that was sacrificed to take away our sins. We taste the blood that was shed for our forgiveness.

Perhaps we do better to focus a little more on that than we are sometimes inclined to. Alongside that sort of tangible process, the Israelite has heard his sins being confessed over the head of this goat.

But maybe we do well to make more of confession as well. Because we have that same opportunity to confess our sins. We have an opportunity to participate in incorporate confession.

We have an opportunity to come to almighty God in private confession, to come and to lay our sins before him, trusting that he is faithful to forgive us. To forgive us from our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Not just the removal of uncleanness, but the provision of true cleanness, even holiness. He's faithful to forgive us our sins.

[22 : 55] Proverbs 28 says, whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. We see that in our experience, don't we?

Holding on to our sins does not produce a good result. But confessing them to almighty God brings forgiveness, brings mercy.

So the need for atonement is huge. The means of atonement is provided. What of the man of atonement? The high priest's role in this ritual is vital, isn't it?

I mean, not that he's the only one involved, the closing verses make clear. The whole community has to participate in this day. It's a day of Sabbath rest. They're to deny themselves. Most likely that denial is a reference to spending the day fasting.

So it's not kind of an automatic process, completely separate from their action. It's not done off over there, separate from them. An attitude of repentance is expected from the people.

[24 : 02] Everybody's involved, involved. But the high priest is the key man. He's the one doing the things. So let's take a look at him. First thing, verse 2.

Even the high priest, even Aaron, the first high priest, even he is told he is not to come whenever he chooses into the most holy place. Even the exalted high priest in all his finery, appointed to his special role as mediator between God and man, even he does not have an automatic right of access.

Still less does anyone else. Furthermore, verse 3, he's to bring sacrifices on his own behalf. Just like at his ordination, he can't come and make atonement for anyone else until he's made atonement for himself.

His own sins must be covered over. He enters into the most holy place, verse 11 and following, only bearing the blood of the bull. Not by any right of his own.

He doesn't have a right to come. He is a sinful man. He is in danger of uncleanness himself. That needs to be covered and dealt with. Now, of course, it may be reasonable to say that the high priest is a man of atonement, but it isn't really right to call him the man of atonement, is it?

[25 : 22] Here's Hebrews 7. Now, there have been many of those priests since death prevented them from continuing in office. But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.

Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need. One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. Jesus Christ is the man of atonement. He is the one who is ultimately able to meet our needs. The high priest had his role to play, and part of that role was to point forwards, to point to the better high priest, to point to the one who was coming.

The high priest was a man holy and set apart, but not totally blameless and pure. Certainly not exalted above the heavens. Only of Jesus, our greater high priest, can this be said.

[26 : 38] And so only Jesus does not need to offer sacrifices day after day. Only he doesn't have to come first with a sacrifice for his own sins before presuming to come on behalf of others.

And therefore only his blood is totally sufficient. The day of atonement repeated year after year. It always pointed ahead. It always pointed to its own insufficiency.

The writer to the Hebrews isn't making up something new. He's interpreting what was always there. Similarly, notice verse 12.

When the high priest entered behind the curtain into the earthly tabernacle, when the high priest came in, he had to fill the room with incense in order to conceal the atonement cover.

Why? So he will not die, says verse 13. Even doing all the right things, there's still this risk of death.

[27 : 37] Because verse 2, God says, he will appear there on the day of atonement. And no one can see God and live. And yet Hebrews 9 tells us, Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one.

He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. And because Christ did that, because he entered the true most holy place, the heavenly sanctuary, entered heaven itself, because he did that, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Because Jesus paid the price completely, we now have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus. No longer is that entry, the preserve of one man on one day, done in fear and trembling.

No longer is someone coming, bearing blood on their own behalf and that of others. No, the one sacrifice has been offered. The price is fully paid, once, done and forever.

So whether in the ministry of the high priests who pointed forwards, or through this now perfect mediatorship of our greater high priest, what we see running through this day of atonement is that God's nature is such that he delights to cleanse sinners, that he is pleased to provide a way to offer the means of forgiveness, that he chooses, he loves to remove sins as far as the east is from the west.

[29 : 20] Micah prophesied, you will again have compassion on us, you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea. This is God's nature.

This is God's character to provide a means of atonement, to provide a way where before there was none to make the impossible possible, to make it possible for people who are by nature unclean and who by practice are constantly sinning, covering ourselves afresh in the taint of our misdeeds, possible for us to be not just clean but acceptable even holy.

It's God's delight to make it possible for people to dwell with the tabernacle there in their midst, to have fellowship with a holy God. And even more than that, his delight to make it possible for us to come into the very throne room of the Almighty.

This is God's character. At the center of this book that's full of the evidence of human wrongdoing we find the means by which that can be wiped away.

We see God's grace displayed. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for providing the means of atonement.

[30 : 41] We thank you for this partial picture, this pointer forwards that we find in the day of atonement. that all those years ago you made it possible for your people to dwell in your presence, to live before your face, to have their uncleanness wiped away, to have their sins dealt with, to have their misdeeds carried as far as the east is from the west.

Thank you that you made that possible then and you make it possible now. We thank you that that can be our daily experience and that we see this picture more clearly, more fully.

That we know better how our sins are truly dealt with. Not by the insufficient blood of bulls and goats but the perfect blood that speaks a better word.

The blood that is truly sufficient that we might therefore be fit for your presence. Thank you God. Amen. Amen.