

Leviticus - Our Scapegoat Sent Away

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0 : 0 0] Thank you, that's beautiful.

God chasing after his sheep and rejoicing at bringing them back home. We're talking about that this morning. Turn with me to Leviticus 16.

Leviticus chapter 16. In the next few weeks as we move toward Easter and get ready for the Easter season, we're going to spend some time talking together about the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

The cross and the empty tomb are, of course, the culmination of God's great story of redemption, of what he's doing all the way through the scripture. They're to be the ground of our faith, right?

The basis of our hope and our joy. And Paul writes about the cross of Jesus. He says we should never boast except in the cross of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 0 5] That the cross alone is our glory. And we cling to for our own hope and tell others for their hope. Only Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That's the good news of the gospel message. The cross and the empty tomb are so simple in many ways that a child can understand the beauty, the essence of what God is doing there.

But they're endlessly rich and complex as well, like a diamond with many, many unique facets that can be appreciated and marveled at. And this idea of a crucified and risen savior didn't just pop out of nowhere in the story of God's redemption.

Like many great stories, as the plot develops in the Old Testament, we get glimpses, glimpses of the climactic scenes that are coming even early on in the story.

You could call these events and images foreshadowing. Seeing ahead something that's coming even though we don't see it clearly quite yet. So we're going to talk about foreshadowing for the next few weeks.

[2 : 1 8] There are significant events in their own right to teach God's people to trust him. And there are also snapshots that help us prepare for God's ultimate act of redemption through his son.

These images help us when we get to the cross and the empty tomb of Easter to have a fuller and richer understanding and appreciation of what God has accomplished for us there.

There are dozens of such images through the Old Testament. Events, prophecies, patterns that go on in the Old Testament. And we're going to look at just a few of them in the coming weeks.

But that's the context that we have on this side of the cross, right? We now see the cross itself. And looking back, we have the context where we know the story that these stories are foreshadowing.

We see what's coming. So how can looking back at these stories help us understand the work of Christ more? How can they help us glory more in our Savior? That's what we're asking as we look back.

- [3 : 23] So one image today from Leviticus 16. We're going to read the passage as we go. But let's pray and ask for God's help as we study his word together.
- Holy Spirit, this is the word that you delight to use. And we know that you delight to show us Jesus more clearly and more gloriously than we have seen him before.
- We also know that that's what our hearts need this morning. We do run after a lot of other things. But we confess to you this morning that what our hearts most need is a clear vision of Jesus.
- Holy Spirit, show us Jesus this morning in the word of God that we might see him clearly, that we might praise him deeply, that we might honor him in every aspect of our lives.
- Would you come and work and teach us? We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. When I was a kid growing up, we never had a no shoes in the house policy in our family.
- [4 : 36] It was just never something that was real important at my house. But as a result of that, when I went to friends' houses, and some of those friends did have such a policy that you were to kick your shoes off at the front door, I regularly, even when I didn't mean to do something wrong, forgot that rule.
- Didn't remember that my shoes were on when I came inside. And I remember the embarrassment of even unintentionally tracking mud in from playing outside on their new carpet that they kept so nice and clean.
- And I remember looking and seeing, oh no, I did that. And looking down at my shoe and, oh no, oh, that was mine. It's all my fault.
- I don't remember getting yelled at by any of my friends' parents. Apparently they were patient people. But I do remember thinking that I wanted to crawl under a rock.
- Or that I wanted just to go home immediately. I felt so bad that I had done this to their house. I just wanted to be away. But I never did anything quite like the damage caused by a giant St. Bernard in one of my favorite childhood movies.
- [5 : 48] Beethoven, you may remember, is a dog who, when he comes in one day, leaves muddy footprints from the front door all the way around the house, on the carpet, on the walls, going up the stairs, all the way until his owner, George, finally finds him right there.
- Wet, muddy, filthy in the middle of the white bed. Right? Just sitting there looking up at him. In fact, shortly after this, what happens is that Beethoven gets up on all fours and shakes like a giant St. Bernard can shake.
- And the mud goes all over everywhere. Right? And so, of course, he scolded and sent out to the doghouse literally and figuratively.
- This is not acceptable in this house. But, I mean, hey, he was really just being a dog, wasn't he? I mean, he just rolled around in the mud and then came inside.
- I was just being a boy. I just went outside and played and then came running inside for a drink. But our muddy, sweaty, wet selves didn't belong in the nicely decorated, white-carpeted homes with new bedding on them.
- [7 : 11] That's what I call a purity problem. Day in and day out, Beethoven and I were not clean enough to be in those homes.
- Even if we intended no harm or were trying to be careful and do our best, we were out of place. The Israelites are facing a similar problem in Leviticus.
- You see, if you don't read Leviticus every morning, just to remind you where we are, Exodus comes right before Leviticus. And the end of Exodus is God moving in.
- God shows up and begins to dwell right in the middle of his people, Israel. He gives them instructions on how to build a home for him there. We call it the tabernacle.

And so when Leviticus opens, there's a problem. Because the holy, holy, holy God has taken up residence in the middle of the Israelite camp.

[8 : 09] And their problem's bigger than mine because God's white-hot holiness means that when his home encounters something unclean, it dies. The end of Leviticus 15 has already told us there's going to be this purity problem.

And in verse 31, he says, There's death that's at issue because an unclean people are living close to the house of a holy God.

And that's the context of our passage this morning in chapter 16. Let me read you the first part of it. Do you hear what's happening as this passage starts?

This is a real problem, right?

I mean, you may break the rules on purpose and have a sin problem, but you may even forget the rules and in your uncleanness muddy God's house and die.

[9 : 47] The uncleanness of very regular activities made very regular people unworthy of coming into God's presence.

And so this story, as we keep reading through chapter 16 this morning, is about what's necessary for someone, for the high priest himself, to come near to God's house.

Right here, the first warning is don't come at all. And the rest of the chapter is going to say, but when you do, here's how it works. It's the day of atonement. Okay, here we are.

The one day of the year where the high priest is actually going into that most holy place, into the presence of God. How will he go in?

Verse 3. In this way, Aaron shall come into the holy place. He's going to have his hands full. With a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for the burnt offering.

[10 : 43] He shall put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body. And he shall tie the linen sash around his waist and wear the linen turban. These are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on.

A bull. A ram. A full bath. Brand new, shining, white linen clothes. All that just for the holiest guy in the whole nation to come into God's house.

That is the utter purity of God. God. The holy, holy, holy God who's different and set apart from his people.

That no one can be near him and live. That the people he created to live with him cannot in their fallen state even survive the purity of his presence.

Not even, by the way, the high priest Aaron. Hey, who picked Aaron and thought he would be a good guy? God. God picked one man and said, I want you to mediate my presence to my people.

[11 : 52] Even that guy can't come in. It's not safe for him. One of the things Leviticus is very clear on over and over is the priest's need for sacrifice for himself too.

Before he offers sacrifices on behalf of the people, he's over and over and over offering sacrifices for himself. He's not worthy to come into God's presence.

And God makes that very clear. Lest anyone be confused. Lest they be tempted to share his glory with another and think, oh, that priest is a really holy guy. That's important for us to remember.

Don't forget that. Don't forget that leaders you respect. That pastors, that writers you love their opinions are not right up here kind of next to God.

They're just not. God is here by himself and we are all together over here unworthy. Don't expect them to be like that.

[12 : 53] They'll disappoint you. If you think that of anyone that, you know, he's not God but he's, you know, he's pretty close, you don't know them very well at all. We're all over here together fundamentally unclean and impure before a holy God.

Not even able to walk in to the room where he is. Do you see your purity problem again this morning? Do you know that you deserve to be kept away?

That you don't belong near God because of your impurity and your sinfulness any more than muddy Beethoven belonged on that white bed. It doesn't fit.

You don't belong. Do you remember that trying to be near God at all should cause you to be consumed by holy fire? God's people had regular reminders of that, didn't they?

In these sacrifices. What would be done so that they could continue living near God? If he just moved in in the midst of the camp, how was this going to be okay?

[14 : 02] Or would they all just quickly die out? Let's keep reading about this day of atonement. What happens as you go through Leviticus 16 is Aaron gets two goats from the people.

And then here's what we do. We can call the next chapter a scapegoat solution. Look at verse 7. Aaron's going to take these two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats. One lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. Don't get too hung up on that word. It's a weird one. I understand. It's difficult to know exactly what it means.

But it comes from the concept of a goat that is sent away. There's one goat that's going to be sacrificed to the Lord and the other is going to be sent away into the wilderness.

And that's the one that's referred to as being sent to Azazel. Verse 9. Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and use it as a sin offering.

[15 : 01] He sacrifices it to the Lord. But the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

So this goat is prepared to be sent off and sent away. And we read in the next several verses particulars of the sacrifices.

As Aaron cleanses himself, he cleanses the altars, cleanses the tabernacle. And then at verse 20 we come back to the scapegoat. The one that's going to be sent away.

Listen to the rest of his story. When he's made an end of atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting in the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, all their transgressions, all their sins.

And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area.

[16 : 05] And he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. Aaron lays his hands on the head of the goat, right? He's transferring sin from the people of God onto the goat.

And then the goat is taken where? Outside the camp. Into the wilderness. Sent away from the community of God's people, yes. But away from what else? From the presence of God, right?

This must go away. The goat sent away from the presence of God. This was how atonement was made, at least temporarily, for the sins of the people.

The only way they could go another year with God dwelling among them, that their sins, even the ones they were unaware of, could be taken far away by the scapegoat.

That's the way it's translated in many Bibles, so you don't have to use Azazel and confuse everybody. The word refers to a scapegoat. We know what a scapegoat is, right? It's someone who is blamed for something that he's not responsible for, or at least not entirely responsible for.

[17 : 13] You may think of Mrs. O'Leary's cow. You may not. But you may think of Mrs. O'Leary's cow who was blamed and scapegoated for the great Chicago fire.

That was the story that was told that this cow had kicked over a lantern. It wasn't true, but the cow was blamed for a terrible event. Or, if you're a sports fan, you may think of who?

Bill Buckner, right? I know that was the first name that came to mind. Bill Buckner, the first baseman for the Red Sox in the 1986 World Series, who regularly is blamed as the one who lost the World Series because a ground ball went right through his legs.

And when you hear people talk about that, it's as though Buckner single-handedly lost the World Series when, in fact, there were several games played and many other opportunities for other people on his team to perform well or not before the Mets beat them.

But it's blamed on him. He takes the brunt of the blame. Well, this passage in Leviticus is where the concept of a scapegoat comes from. When you've blamed a sibling for all of your sins and gotten away with it, maybe that's one you're more familiar with.

[18 : 27] Someone else who takes the blame instead of you. One who is sent away, carrying the blame and guilt of all the others. In this case, for God's people, a scapegoat sent away from the presence of God so that everyone else can remain near the presence of God.

Right? And that's where we start seeing an image of the cross, isn't it? A glimpse of the cross of Jesus there. Do you start to see it?

Foreshadowing? Jesus, too, is sent away outside the city, isn't he? Carrying his cross up to Golgotha, outside the camp of God's people, but away from God's presence as well, right?

What does he cry out on the cross? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? As he's bearing our sins, God turns his face from him.

The very one, Jesus, who knew the glory of the presence of God, of living in his presence, having dwelt with him from all eternity, he knows now distance from God.

[19 : 40] He experiences God's rejection. He's sent away from God to die. Why? So that we can come near God and live.

Stop and realize what's happening. We are the filthy, muddy, sinful ones who deserve to be sent away, away from God's presence.

You don't belong here. And yet the pure, sinless Son of God is sent away in our place so that we can be welcomed into the presence of God.

Hebrews speaks of this Day of Atonement. It talks about how God's people would do it year after year. And then of how Jesus, as our great high priest, fills the role of priest and sacrifice in an even greater way than the Levitical ceremony.

Look at chapter 9 of Hebrews. Into the second part of the tabernacle, into that holy place, only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, with blood, and he's going to offer for himself and the sins of the people.

[20 : 54] And the writer of Hebrews says, By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing. As long as this Day of Atonement, year after year, this practice continues, it's because there's not an openness into the presence of God, right?

But, verse 11, When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

For if the blood of goats and bulls could sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Do you see what the writer of Hebrews is saying? If the goat sent away once a year could keep the people ceremonially clean to be in God's presence, to live near him for the next year, how much more does the blood of Jesus do that for us?

How much more has Jesus made us clean, moving us from death to life? The way into the presence of the holy God is now open.

[22 : 17] That's what's happened. The first section is no longer being practiced. The day of atonement is no longer needed because Jesus has flung the doors open to come into God's presence by his blood.

The cross says we have the privilege of living in the presence of God and serving him every day. So the question for us now is not merely do you know you deserve to be kept away, but have you placed your hands on the one sent away?

In other words, have you confessed your sins and trusted Christ's sacrifice on the cross in your place so that he has carried your sins far away and you can draw near to God?

That's the call of the gospel for us. Have you placed your hands on Jesus to transfer your guilt to the scapegoat? Have you done that?

Or are you clinging to other solutions? Perhaps you're denying the weight of your problem. You're minimizing your uncleanness. It's really not that bad. Or perhaps you're still trying to handle it yourself to clean yourself up, to somehow perform better.

[23 : 35] Listen, friends, this is good news. The scapegoat was sent away so that God's people would never have to be. Jesus experienced the rejection of the Father so you would know his welcome.

God knows we've blown it. He knows us. He's not confused. That's why there's a scapegoat, a lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Won't you trust him? Won't you place your hands on him this morning and let him take care of your sins so that you can live with God? He's opened the way. He invites you in.

Come in to the presence of God and know him and trust him. I don't know if you're anything like me, but for me, I've heard these things for many years.

I grew up in the church. I've known about my sin and the cross and that Jesus has opened a way for God. I've believed these things. But still, many days, if I'm honest, I feel distant from God.

[24 : 41] I talk about walking with God in the nearness of relationship, but oftentimes, I see and feel the uncleanness of my sin and my failures more than I feel near to God.

When Christy and I lived in St. Louis, we moved into our first apartment together there and we were excited to be in this small apartment and worked on getting the little living room filled out.

All of it was tied together by a beautifully clean, light-colored carpet remnant that was there in the middle of the room. Made it feel like home, really.

Tied the whole room together. I think it was the first weekend that we had that bound remnant in our home that I stood up from a chair and bumped the ironing board and knocked a hot iron onto the new carpet, immediately searing an iron print onto the carpet right there before I could even get down to pick it up.

Some of you have done that before, apparently. It happens very quickly. Now, you may be able to wash mud off furniture. This iron print was not coming off. I felt awful.

[25 : 59] I put myself in the doghouse. My wife had worked so hard to save money and make our apartment a home, and I had dirtied it.

So I did what any good-thinking husband would do, and I turned the rug every which way and rearranged the room several times trying to get that iron print to go away. I rearranged furniture, hoping it would be under a coffee table or something, and every time you could still see it.

Every time I saw it, I felt the guilt, the unworthiness again. Listen, my wife had forgiven me and moved on. She loved me. I couldn't stop seeing the iron print.

I think that's the way I often feel about my sin, that I feel the guilt and the unworthiness of it, the shame I feel that keeps me at a distance from God, even a God who loves me and has forgiven me.

Look at the rest of this passage. I want us to notice something together. After this whole scapegoat thing, after they go through this whole process and it's finished, year after year, what's going to happen?

[27 : 14] Verse 29. It's going to be a statute to you forever. In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, the native or the stranger who sojourns among you.

For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. And the priest shall make atonement wearing the holy linen garments.

He shall make atonement for the sanctuary, the tent of meeting, the altar, for the priests, for all the people of the assembly. And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins.

Aaron did just as Moses had come up with as a great idea for God's people. No. Aaron did as the Lord commanded Moses to be done year after year.

Whose idea is all this? Is this the priest's idea of how to stay alive near God because they live closer to God's house than everybody else?

[28 : 15] Is this the people's idea because they're headed into battle and they need this mighty warrior God to be cajoled into staying on their team so they win? No.

It's not. It's the plan of God himself who is gracious in his character, who's committed to dwelling among them, who is intent on addressing the distance that they feel between himself and them, who refuses to allow their weakness and their sin to keep him from those that he loves.

It's his idea, isn't it? To do this over and over and year after year. And then to do it once for all. How much more is that what God was doing on the cross for us?

How much more is that what he expected to happen when his son paid that sacrifice? God wanted to dwell with his people. And Hebrews 10 tells us this. In these sacrifices, what there is is a reminder of sins.

Every year you're just being reminded you can't come near him. It's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. It had to be done again next year. It was a temporary remedy.

[29 : 30] The sacrifices are like that iron print burned on the carpet, aren't they? Every time they see it, thinking, oh, I'm not worthy to come and be there. I don't belong here.

Always reminding God's people of their sins. Needing to be done over and over to keep a holy God in the camp. You can understand the people of Israel being hesitant, couldn't you? To come near God.

They were always reminded of their sin, of never being fully okay with God, waiting on the next year's sacrifice or scapegoat. But something changed.

Every priest stands daily at his service offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

For by a single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. He has with his one sacrifice, once for all, made you perfectly clean forever.

[30 : 36] We await no more sacrifice. There's not another one we need to wait for next year. Because you stand in the purity of the perfect Son of God, you walk into the presence of God every moment of every day, clean and pure.

He insists on it. When Jesus dies on the cross, the curtain of the temple, the one that separated the people from the presence of God is torn from top to bottom.

God reaches down and welcomes you into his presence through the death of Jesus. He insists that you come and be near to him. So I'd ask you, are you daily rejoicing and resting in his welcome?

Or are you like me, fixated on the iron print? I'm thinking, you know, I really deserve to keep my distance. Are you keeping yourself in the doghouse of shame over what you've looked at?

How you've failed your family? How you've disappointed God? Maybe you're busy rearranging the rug, trying to assuage your guilt yourself.

[31 : 53] There's some way I can fix this so no one will notice. You tried that? Listen, the good news is this. The cross of Jesus does indeed have an eternal value for you this morning.

That you're welcomed into God's presence forever. Amen. But it also has a present value today for you. You are joyfully welcomed into God's presence today because of the cross of Jesus.

Are you drawing near to him? Or are you devaluing the cross of Jesus by insisting that you deserve to stay distant by saying, Jesus, I know what you did.

It was supposed to be effective, but it wasn't enough for me. Listen, I know you deserve to be kept away from God. I also know Jesus paid the full price to welcome you back to the Father's house.

Don't tell him it wasn't enough. Don't say Jesus paid some of it and I've got to work the rest off. Jesus paid it all. Don't scorn his death by keeping your distance from your Father as though you can't come into his presence.

[33 : 00] That's what it means that Jesus, your scapegoat, was sent away instead of you. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

They're not associated with us anymore in God's presence. That sin you think about every time someone says sin. Jesus has taken it away.

It too goes on him as he carries it away from the presence of God so that you can live at peace with God. Does that thrill your heart? The freedom of that.

Do you love being with your Father because of that? Do you welcome others the way he has welcomed you? Listen, brothers, sisters, who know what it's like to feel distant from God, we all still feel that sometimes, don't we?

We know how much we don't deserve to be near him. Remember this morning who moved in first. Listen to the grace of this.

[34 : 10] This is not anything we deserve. It was our gracious God who created us to live in fellowship with him, who instructed his people to build him a home in the middle of them so he could live there, who instituted sacrifices and scapegoats so that he could stay with them and who ultimately sent his only son to ensure that we could live with him forever and today.

Marvel at that astounding love, at that amazing grace. Lay your hands on Jesus. Give your sins to him and then come boldly into your Father's presence often.

Because Jesus was sent away, we never will be. Because he was sent outside the camp, we are always welcomed into the Father's home.

Because the Father turned his face away from Jesus, he will never, not today, not ever, turn his face away from you.

Let's pray. Father, thank you. It is genuinely too good to be true in our minds.

[35 : 23] We know and feel our filth way too much to feel comfortable with this. We don't even like the idea of someone else being punished for things that we did.

We have too much pride. We'd like to be able to pay it off. To make things right with you after messing them up so badly.

Would you give us hearts that receive the gift of your grace from your Son who was sent away for us?

Would we regularly run into your presence and dance and rest and have joy because we stand before you clean a way that we don't deserve?

It's the only way anyone can stand before you and we stand there clean because of Jesus. Thank you for what he has done. Make us grateful. Bring us into your presence to rejoice in that again today.

[36 : 33] Might we boldly come because we're confident that the sacrifice of Jesus was all that was needed for us. We ask it in his name. Amen.

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