

The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)

I. Introduction

A. This morning we're finishing the first half of Leviticus

1. So, if we step back for a moment, we can remember that Leviticus is answering the question - how do the Israelites dwell with a holy God? How can God dwell in the midst of an unclean people?
2. And Leviticus is split roughly into two halves, with the first half focusing on the sacrificial system and the second half on community law
13. We've been referring to the first half as Judicial Holiness, answering the question, "how does Israel become holy?"
14. And the second half we'll look at as Practical Holiness, answering the question, "what does Israel's holiness look like in daily life?"

B. Like I just said, we're finishing the first half of Leviticus this morning, Judicial Holiness - and we've covered three topics so far

1. First, we looked at the 'Provision for Holiness' and the description of the sacrificial system and saw how the different sacrifices taught Israel what sin was and how God would atone for their sin
12. Then we looked at the 'Mediator of Holiness' and the inauguration of the priesthood, those who would oversee the sacrificial system, and we saw the preparation and the purposes of the priesthood - a mediator that represented man to God and God to man
13. And then, for the last several weeks, we've been looking at 'Reminders of Holiness' and the cleanliness laws and saw how the priests were to teach Israel about God - and we concluded that they were to teach Israel her great need, her ultimate hope and her necessary distinction - the priests were to point the people to the gospel using vivid, tangible types to display eternal truths

1 C. This week we're going to study the culmination of the first half of Leviticus and look at the Day of Atonement

1. The Day of Atonement is the climax of Leviticus and the capstone for the first half of the book
2. In many ways, the Day of Atonement merely reviews and integrates all the lessons of the first half of the book
3. On the Day of Atonement the mediator of God's people enters God's presence to offer sacrifices to wash away sin because the people were unclean
4. This was the great yearly reminder, the continuing pageant, that would keep all these topics at the forefront of God's people's minds - the Day of Atonement called the Israelites to remember where their hope was and to look for a great day when these things would be accomplished

D. Because the Day of Atonement is a capstone to the first half of the book of Leviticus, I've already covered many of the important topics in Leviticus 16 over the last months

1. So, this morning, I'm going to go over Leviticus 16 briefly, describe the ceremony and its purposes, but I won't go into as much detail on every point as I might otherwise, because a lot of it would be repetition
2. Leviticus 16 is chock full of glorious theological truth, in fact, it's full of so much truth that we've spent the last five months considering these truths and we'll just briefly review them this morning

E. Let's start by reading Leviticus 16

1✘ F. Proposition: The Day of Atonement is the great climax of Leviticus and integrates all the teaching on the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and cleanliness into one great day on which Israel is made clean before God calling us to look forward to one great day when these things were fulfilled in Christ.

1. What did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?
12. How does this point us to Christ?
13. How should this be applied to us?

1 II. What did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?

1 A. First, the Day of atonement reminded God's people that they were contaminated

1. The last three times we were in Leviticus, we have been studying the cleanliness laws - and as we've studied them, we've seen how they ultimately pointed to Christ and the gospel
2. But another thing the cleanliness laws did was to make it virtually impossible for the Israelites to be always clean - someone was always unclean and everyone was unclean sometimes
3. And this is where the Day of Atonement comes in - if God's people are so continually unclean, it is a virtual certainty that God's sanctuary will be contaminated - regardless of the washings and the prescriptions and the laws just given, God's people will contaminate the sanctuary and provoke God's wrath
- 1 4. The Day of Atonement is the prescription to God's people's continual uncleanness, so at the center of the ceremony, we see verses 15-16 - *"Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that 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, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.*
5. Because God had chosen to dwell in the midst of His people, His house had become filthy and needed to be cleaned - the Day of Atonement was a continual reminder that God's people were unclean, even in their best efforts they would contaminate God's sanctuary and they were ultimately unworthy to dwell with God

1 B. Second, the Day of atonement reminded God's people that God was infinitely holy

1. God's people were contaminated, but God was not - God was infinitely holy, infinitely righteous, infinitely clean, and thus God's people's contamination was a terrible affront to this holy God
2. So, Leviticus 16 opens with a stern warning, a warning that referenced the calamity of Leviticus 10 to highlight its severity, Leviticus 16:1-2 - *The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died, and the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.*
3. God was holy, God's people were not - therefore, no one, not even the high priest, could trespass - as R.C. Sproul was fond of saying, "The human dilemma is this: God is holy, and we are not; God is righteous, and we are not."
4. The absolute prohibition of entering the holy place, except on the Day of Atonement and only with the rituals prescribed reminded God's people of God's holiness which stood over against their contamination

1 C. Third, the Day of atonement reminded God's people that they needed to have their filth carried away

1. The high priest was invited to approach God's presence once a year to wash away the corruption of God's people, but only with very specific rituals to deal with corruption
2. And there were three great rituals with two different goats and one ram - the first ritual we already looked at, a goat was sacrificed as a sin offering, its blood was required to wash away the contamination of God's people which they had tracked into God's place - blood was shed to wash away sin
3. But then there was a second goat, the goat of wandering, the scapegoat, and this goat was not sacrificed
4. Instead, this goat was brought to the high priest who laid his hands on the head of the goat and confessed all the sin of the people over this goat - symbolically, these sins were transferred from the people to the goat
5. And then the goat was sent out into the wilderness - to the ancient Israelites, the wilderness was that which was outside the realm of God, outside God's camp, away from God's presence, the haunt of jackals and demons - it represented the everlasting void that is where God is not
6. Now, this doesn't mean that the Israelites thought there was a limit to God's rule, power and authority, or that there was anywhere where God was not - David himself says that there is nowhere he can go to get away from God's presence - but the wilderness represented that which was outside God's presence
- 1 7. So when the goat was driven out into the wilderness, it took their sins with them, away from them and, perhaps even more importantly, away from God; the goat was the symbolic representation of what David says in Psalm 103:12 - *as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*
8. The goat took the people's sins upon itself, and then walked out into the void, carrying their sins away, never to be seen again - their filthy, their corruption, their contamination had been carried away
9. Only after this ceremony had been completed could the third ritual, the burnt offering be made - for God's wrath to be turned away, first the people's sin needed to be done away with
10. The people needed to be made clean, then and only then could blood be offered to appease the Holy God

1 D. Fourth, the Day of atonement reminded God's people that they needed a mediator to intercede for them

1. As we already considered, the Day of Atonement stood as a reminder that no one could enter the Most Holy Place, to do so was to transgress on the Holy God and provoke His wrath, but a sacrifice needed to be made, the sanctuary needed to be cleaned, and their sins needed to be carried away - someone needed to approach God
2. So, for 364 days a year, no one was allowed to approach God, but one day a year, the Day of Atonement, one man was allowed to approach, to mediate between God and man
- 1 1 3. So Leviticus 16 concludes with verses 30 - *For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins.*"
4. The people needed a mediator who could approach, who could make atonement for their sins, who could cleanse the sanctuary and who could ensure God's continued presence with His people

1 E. Fifth, the Day of atonement reminded God's people that their mediator needed to be perfect

1. Aaron and his sons were appointed to be the mediators of the Old Covenant; Aaron or his successor was the one welcomed into the Most Holy Place once a year to make atonement for the people
2. But, not only did Aaron have strict rules on how he was to make atonement for the people, before that he had strict rules for how he had to prepare Himself
- 1 3. First, he had to wear specific clothes, not his regular priestly garments, Leviticus 16:3-4 - *But in this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place: ... 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.*
4. Aaron couldn't wear the honorable vestments of his office, instead he was to wear simple, clean, white clothes - the linen garments represent cleanliness or holiness as does the command to bathe first and then put on the clothes - the priest needed to be worthy to approach God, he needed to be holy
- 1 5. Second, he had to offer sacrifices for himself before he could offer sacrifices for the people, Leviticus 6:11 - *Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself.*
6. The people needed a mediator because they were unworthy to approach God, but this meant the mediator needed to be worthy - he needed to be clean, he needed to be purified from sin
7. Only a perfect mediator could approach God - unfortunately there was no such mediator, so the high priest cleaned himself up as best he could and then went in with terror, hoping he wouldn't be destroyed

1 F. Sixth, the Day of atonement reminded God's people that they needed to rest and to wait with repentance

1. As has been the case many times in Leviticus, most of the commands in Leviticus 16 are not to the people - the people are not to do anything, atonement will be made for them
- 1 2. But the people were commanded to do one thing, Leviticus 16:29-31 - *And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either 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. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever.*
3. The great day on which the people's sins could be atoned for was not to be ignored, it wasn't any regular day - the people couldn't do anything to atone for their sins, they had to trust that their mediator could do it, but they were called to afflict themselves
4. Now, immediately what afflict themselves means is defined - they are to rest from their work; it is to be a solemn Sabbath, a day of rest - and I think these displays two things
5. First, the people were not called to do anything to effect their atonement, but they were to wait in hopeful expectation - you can imagine families and communities gathered together throughout Israel on that great day waiting to hear if the priest had returned unscathed, if the sacrifice was accepted - the Sabbath was an call to rest and to trust, "I can do nothing so I must trust in the mediator"
6. But then, second, the word used, 'afflict', is important I think - the word can mean afflict or humiliate and is often associated with a conquered enemy or with fasting, especially repentant fasting
7. The day was not only a day of resting trust in the mediator, but also a day of repentance - as the sins of the people were confessed over the goat, the whole land was to humble themselves with an attitude of repentance - atonement was being made for them, they were the sinners who needed to be cleansed
8. So once every year the whole of Israel was brought together and called to repentance and faith - they needed atonement to be made for them and they needed someone else to do it

1 III. How does this point us to Christ?

1 A. Jesus is the better scapegoat who can truly carry away His people's sin

1. The scapegoat was a glorious type, a promise that God would make a way for Israel's sin to be removed, and, as we just saw, David rested in that promise - their sins would be removed as far as the east from the west
2. But the Old Testament recognizes that the scapegoat is a promise and not a fulfillment, and it looks forward to a better fulfillment, and one glorious place is in Isaiah 53 and the description of the suffering servant
- 1 2 3. So, toward the end of Isaiah 53, the ministry of the suffering servant is summarized in Isaiah 53:11-12 - *Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.*
4. There needed to be a greater sin-bearer, a greater scapegoat, one who could truly bear the sins of the people away so that the many would be made righteous - the Old Testament longs for this servant to appear
- 1 1 5. And this is exactly what Jesus has done, so John the Baptist sees Jesus and describes Him like this, John 1:29 - *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away (or who bears away) the sin of the world!*
- 1 1 6. And Peter describes the death of Christ as the sin bearing, 1 Peter 2:24 - *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.*
- 1 1 7. So Hebrews 9 concludes that Jesus has borne away His people's sin once for all, Hebrews 9:28 - *so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.*
8. God's people need their sins carried away into the wilderness, we need to be cleansed, to be no longer contaminated - the scapegoat promised that and Jesus fulfilled it
- 1 9. So Hebrews 10:15-18 concludes - *And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; saying ... "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.*

1 B. Jesus is the better mediator who can truly fulfill the promise of the Day of Atonement

1. Hebrews is, in a many ways, a commentary on Leviticus, helping early Jewish believers understand how Leviticus was pointing to Christ and had been superseded in Christ - and the core of Hebrews is a discussion about how Jesus has fulfilled the Day of Atonement in a better way than the Aaronic priesthood, and it gives four reasons:
- 1 2. First, because Jesus is a better priest
 - 1 a. Hebrews 7:26-28 - *For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.*
 - b. Aaron and his sons were appointed priests as types, but they could never truly fulfill their role - but Jesus was the greater High Priest, the perfect mediator, unstained by sin and able to approach God
- 1 3. Second, because Jesus has entered a better sanctuary
 - 2 a. Hebrews 9 starts with a discussion of the limitations of the Tabernacle, Hebrews 9:1-9 - *Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place. ... These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. 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 (which is symbolic for the present age).*
 - 1 b. And then, it sees Jesus entering a better Tabernacle, Hebrews 9:11-12 - *But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 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.*
 - 1 c. Or again, Hebrews 9:24 - *For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.*
 - d. Not only was Jesus the better priest, able to approach God, He has entered into the better sanctuary of which the Tabernacle and Temple were only types - Jesus has entered the very throne room of God

- ① 4. Third, because Jesus has offered a better sacrifice
- ① a. Hebrews also sees the limitations of the sacrifices the priests offered, Hebrews 9:9-10 - *According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.*
 - ① b. And then, it compares Jesus' sacrifice, Hebrews 9:13-14 - *For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*
 - ① c. And again, Hebrews 9:23-26 - *Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ... [It was not] to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*
 - d. The Aaronic priests could only offer sacrificial types, the blood of bulls and goats, which everyone could see could not really do anything to wash the people - but Jesus came bearing a better sacrifice, His own blood that was powerful to cleanse, that could truly deal with sin
- ① 5. Fourth, because Jesus has purified forever
- ① a. Since the sacrificial types were merely types, they couldn't effect their purpose, Hebrews 10:1-4 - *For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*
 - ① b. But then Hebrews looks to what Jesus has accomplished, Hebrews 10:11-14 - *And 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, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*
 - c. The priests presided over the Day of Atonement year after year because their ministry could never really do anything except look forward in hope, but Jesus has appeared as the better priest in the better sanctuary with the better sacrifice and therefore He has accomplished His purpose and purified His people forever

① C. **So Jesus made an end to the veil separating us from God**

- 1. The Day of Atonement was a great reminder every year of how far the people were separated from God and how terrifying God was in their midst - even the priest who was welcomed to come entered in terror
- 2. But Jesus, having borne away His people's sin and having fulfilled the great sacrifice of the Day of Atonement, has reconciled God to His people and set aside the terror
- 3. No longer would God be separated from His people and a terror, instead God's people would be welcomed to approach, and there is a great symbol of this glorious end to the first covenant and the inauguration of the second
- ① 4. Luke 23:44-46 - *It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.*
- ① 5. And the author of Hebrews looks at this great event, and meditates on its meaning, Hebrews 10:19-20 - *Therefore, brothers, ... we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,*
- 6. God's people had been separated from Him, but no longer - the sacrifice had been complete, the ritual fulfilled, God's people's sin set aside and now they could approach, the way had been opened through the curtain
- 7. Where once only the High Priest could go and then only once a year in great terror, now all could go because Jesus had opened the way

① D. **Kid's Question: What did the Day of Atonement always look forward to?**

- ① 1. Jesus cleansing us,
- ① 2. Bearing away our sins,
- ① 3. And opening the way to God.

① IV. How should this be applied to us?

A. Like every week, I want to finish by thinking about how we should apply these truths to our lives today

1. As we look at our passage, though, there is not a lot that our passage calls us to do
2. The Day of Atonement is a passage looking forward to what would be done for us, and so the main thing we need to do is nothing - we can't effect atonement, we can't approach God on our own, we can't cast our sins away
3. But, just like the Israelites who were not to participate in this great atonement and yet were called to something, I think there are two great things this passage calls us to

① B. First, we need to rest with repentance and faith

1. Although the Israelites were not to participate in the Day of Atonement rituals, they were to afflict themselves, to not work and to observe a solemn Sabbath on the Day of Atonement, reminding them that they were to be repentant and to put their faith in their mediator and his sacrifice
- ① 2. And that's how we should respond to our study of this passage as well - those two commands are still the two great commands of the people of God - even Jesus Himself calls us to this, Mark 1:15-16 - *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*
3. When the great High Priest appears to offer the sacrifice to cleanse God's people, we are called to repent and to believe - to acknowledge that our sin needs cleansing and to wait for the great cleanser to do His work
4. And these are not one time activities in the New Covenant, but things we are called to continually, we are always to be people marked by repentance and faith
- ① 5. So Martin Luther, commenting on the parallel passage in Matthew said, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent", he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." - in fact, this realization was arguably the start of the Reformation as this was the first of Luther's 95 Theses
- ① ① 6. And, regarding faith, Paul himself says, Colossians 1:21-23 - *And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.*
7. So, like the Israelites, we need to see the great sacrifice and respond with repentance and faith - acknowledging our failures and trusting in the mediator to make us clean

1 C. Second, we need to have confidence in our mediator

1. As we saw a few minutes ago, the center of Hebrews is an exposition on the Day of Atonement, and Hebrews sees one great application of the Day of Atonement for the New Covenant believer: confidence
 - a. And Hebrews sees this confidence in two ways
- 1 2. First, we should have confidence to live out our faith boldly
 - a. Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who were struggling to understand their new faith and how it related to the Old Covenant, and these new believers faced many challenges
 - i. They faced opposition from other Jews who rejected Jesus and persecuted those who followed Him
 - ii. They faced temptation to turn back to Judaism or to force the old law on new converts
 - iii. They faced doubt because of their limited understanding of how Jesus fits in to the Old Covenant
 - 1 1 b. In the face of these challenges, Hebrews points to Jesus fulfilling the Day of Atonement and calls these Jewish believers to confidence, Hebrews 6:15-19 - *So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*
 - c. Jesus has entered behind the curtain to intercede for us, He is our High Priest behind the veil
 - i. So we have no need to fear, or to hesitate, or to turn back - we have a sure and steady anchor, a hope that cannot be removed
 - d. So when we face opposition, persecution, temptation, doubt, none of these should cause us to waver
 - i. Whatever we are facing, we can face it with boldness in faith because our intercessor is standing in the presence of God Himself
 - ii. What need have we to fear anything here? No one can touch our intercessor
 - e. So we can live out our faith boldly, not dreading the consequences of living out our faith, not cowering in the face of our sin, not fearing what man might do to us - our atonement is complete, our advocate is behind the veil!
- 1 3. Second, we should have confidence to approach God boldly
 - a. After going through how Jesus fulfills the Day of Atonement, Hebrews concludes with an exhortation
 - 1 b. Hebrews 10:19-22 - *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*
 - c. Not only were they to be bold in continuing in faith, they were to be bold in approaching God
 - d. Our intercessor is behind the veil - that gives us great confidence here not to fear anything in this world, and it gives us great confidence there, not to cower before God
 - e. Jesus has opened up the way for us to go to God and so we should approach boldly to seek mercy and grace for our times of need
- 1 4. In fact, these two confidences go together - we can have great confidence in our faith here because we have great confidence that we can approach God through our intercessor who is always standing in the presence of God
 - a. So, let's live lives of prayer, seeking God's mercy and grace for our lives
 - b. And then let us go live out our faith, fearing nothing
 - c. Because we have a great High Priest who is always living to make intercession for us