

Elementary

*For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.
(Leviticus 11:44 ESV)*

*I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.
(Leviticus 26:12 ESV)*

What Does The Law Teach Us About Atonement?

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Leviticus 16:1-22

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Leviticus 16:1. This morning we are trying to answer the question: “What does the Law teach us about atonement?”

To answer these questions we’ve been going back to kindergarten. Calvin said that:

“The ceremonial law of the Jews was a tutelage by which the Lord was pleased to exercise, as it were, the childhood of that people, until the fulness of the time should come when he was fully to manifest his wisdom to the world, and exhibit the reality of those things which were then adumbrated by figures, (Gal. 3:24; 4:4).”¹

Adumbrate means to PREFIGURE – to pre-figure means to ILLUSTRATE IN ADVANCE. So that’s what the Day of Atonement is. It is an ILLUSTRATION IN ADVANCE of something that was COMING.

And of course, we know what was coming.

Jesus was coming!

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), paragraph 3315.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV), he was doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing as an Old Testament believer. He was drawing a line from the anticipatory rituals to the fulfilment of those things in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And that’s why we bother to go back into the Old Testament to read about these rituals because they help us to draw lines that lead to Jesus as well. A Jesus disconnected from Passover and from the Day of Atonement and from all of these various threads of anticipations is NOT THE REAL JESUS! He is an idol of our own imagination and such a Jesus cannot save. So we’re on a search this morning for the Christ of Scripture and we are picking up the trail as it were in Leviticus 16. The Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur. The holiest chapter and the holiest day in the Old Testament calendar. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1 and reading all the way through to verse 22. This is God’s Word to us.

The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died,² 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 But in this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place: with a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.⁴ 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.⁵ And he shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

⁶“Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house.⁷ Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting.⁸ And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel.⁹ And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD and use it as a sin offering,¹⁰ 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.

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.¹² And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the

LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil ¹³ and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die.

¹⁴ And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.

¹⁵ “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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ No one may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the Holy Place until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel. ¹⁸ 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 some of the blood of the goat, and put it on the horns of the altar all around. ¹⁹ And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel.

²⁰ “And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. ²¹ 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, and 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. ²² The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:1–22 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

As I mentioned earlier, our goal for this morning is to answer the question: what does the law teach us about atonement? We want to know what atonement is and we want to understand how it works. If we understand those things then, hopefully we will be better prepared to recognize, appreciate and appropriate the person and work of Jesus. First of all then:

What Is Atonement?

To begin answering that we’ll need to take a second look at the first two verses in Leviticus 16. Look at verses 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,² 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. (Leviticus 16:1–2 ESV)

Did you catch that? This story takes place immediately AFTER the death of the two sons of Aaron – Nadab and Abihu – which was narrated back in Leviticus chapter 10! We forget sometimes that Leviticus is a worship manual – not a history book – and therefore sometimes the material is arranged according to liturgical categories and not according to strict chronology. But if we pay close attention we can recreate the chronology which helps us understand the original context. We’re being told here that this event – the Day of Atonement – was prescribed by God immediately AFTER the defilement caused by the carelessness and foolishness of Nadab and Abihu.

Well, ok then, that helps us understand what this event was about. It was, first and foremost, about purification.

1. A purification

Remember, one of the big ideas in Leviticus is this idea that IT IS HARD FOR SINFUL PEOPLE TO LIVE WITH A HOLY GOD. That’s the CENTRAL TENSION of the book! That’s the central tension of the entire Pentateuch – the Books of Moses. You will recall that God had offered Moses a pretty sweet deal back in Exodus 33. He said: I’ll send an angel to help you with your battles but **my presence I will not send**, because it’s dangerous! It’s DANGEROUS to have the Presence of God in your midst. I AM HOLY – God says, and you love SIN – and that’s going to be a serious problem! If you try to hold on to your sin while you are holding on to me - you will be obliterated!

Some of you need to hear that. For some of you that could be the main take away today. You are EAGER for the presence of God. You invite God into your marriage, your home, your business – but you want to hold on to your sin! You want to give yourself permission to do a few things that you know God doesn’t like. Brother, sister – hear me now: you are playing with fire. You’re

going full Nadab and Abihu and you are inviting serious consequences into your life. So you need to either let go of God or let go of your sin because you can't have both.

That's what God warned Moses about but Moses wouldn't have it. He said:

“If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?” (Exodus 33:15–16 ESV)

We don't WANT TO LIVE without the Presence of God! We want to figure this out! We will do the work. We will take the risk. We will do whatever you tell us we need to do to get rid of our sin – because WE NEED YOU LORD – we can't live without you. We won't live with you – so show us what it will take to make that happen.

That's what this is about.

Gordon Wenham says here:

“The aim of these rituals is to make possible God's continued presence among his people.”²

So that's it, that's what is going on here and that's why in verse 3-19 the emphasis is on the PURIFICATION of the tabernacle – the place or the symbol of God's presence among the people.

Look at verses 11-13. After preparing and purifying himself Aaron begins to purify and prepare the SPACE – the place where God and the people are going to interact. He takes coals from the altar and some incense and he passes through the curtain into the holy of holies. Once inside, he puts the incense on the coals which will make a thick smoke which creates a shield as it were to keep him from gazing directly on the Lord – which would kill him. So he sees through a FOG, as it were. He sprinkles the blood of the bull on the mercy seat - which was the covering lid of the ark of the covenant which symbolized the FOOTREST of God – or the place where heaven

² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 228.

reached down to earth. He sprinkles some blood into the air in front of the ark because this would be where the High Priest would stand to pray for the people and to bring their concerns before the Lord.

Now look at verse 15:

“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.” (Leviticus 16:15 ESV)

So Aaron is going in and coming out and going back in again. He’s got to coat everything with blood – the bull’s blood for him and the goat’s blood for the people. Every point of contact between God and the people has to be SANITIZED with HOLY BLOOD!!!

Does that resonate all the sudden in a COVID19 world?

Sin is a contaminate! And so everything WE touch has to be CLEANED in advance of the coming of the Lord.

Are you seeing that?

This is all about PREPARING for the PRESENCE OF THE LORD!!

Now in Kindergarten we’re talking about the Tabernacle – then in High School we’re talking about the temple – but you know if you’ve read the Bible – that ultimately, the plan was ALWAYS for the Presence of God to take up residence in the hearts of his people – in the latter part of the Old Testament after the temple had been destroyed the prophets promised that very thing. In Ezekiel God says:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. (Ezekiel 36:25–26 ESV)

Did you hear that? I will sprinkle clean water on you!! I will CLEAN YOU. I will SANITIZE YOU. I will PURIFY YOU and then I will put my spirit within you. That's the principle we're learning here – you have to CLEAN THE SPACE before you can receive the Spirit!!!!

That's the elementary lesson here.

Every point of contact between a sinful people and a holy God has to be covered in sacrificial blood.

Atonement is about PURIFICATION – and we see in these rituals that it is also about expiation.

2. An expiation

Remember, we've got a bull, a ram and two goats. The bull and the ram were sacrificed off the top in association with Aaron and the priesthood. Then we've got the two goats. The first goat was killed as a sin offering on behalf of the congregation. We talked about that. Everywhere the people would potentially have contact with God, the blood of the goat had to be sprinkled. It went on the mercy seat, it went into the air in front of the ark, it went on the tent and it went on the altar.

But that leaves one goat. What happens to him?

Look at verse 20:

“And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. ²¹ 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, and 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. ²² The **goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area**, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:20–22 ESV)

This is what theologians refer to as “expiation”. Expiation means to REMOVE or to TAKE AWAY – that's what these people needed!! That's what we all need! Because are all STAINED

by sin – we can't get rid of it by our own efforts! No matter how hard we try we can't get rid of it – we can't remove THE STAIN! Do you remember that scene in Macbeth when Lady Macbeth is consumed with guilt for her role in the murder of the King?

“Out, damned spot! Out, I say!”³

She is scrubbing her hands like a madwomen because she is consumed with guilt over what she has done. She SEES the blood, even when no actual blood remains. She FEELS the stain! And she knows that she needs to have that stain REMOVED – that's what the Day of Atonement is all about. R. K. Harrison says here:

“the purpose of this very dramatic portion of the day of atonement ritual was to place before the eyes of the Israelites an unmistakable **token** that their sins of inadvertence had been **removed from their midst**.”⁴

You see, we need more than a little Fabreeze. Men love Fabreeze don't we? Why wash your hockey equipment when you can just spray a little Fabreeze on the bag? But sin is stronger than the stench of your rotten hockey equipment – some of you wives may not believe that – but its true. So we can't just spray a disinfectant on it – we need a deep clean. We need to REMOVE THE ROT ENTIRELY. And that's what God is promising here – TOTAL REMOVAL. TOTAL EXPIATION.

“as far as the east is from the west, **so far does he remove our transgressions from us**.” (Psalm 103:12 ESV)

The people of God were saying that and singing that BEFORE the cross of Jesus Christ because they saw it promised and foreshadowed in the Day of Atonement rituals. And they knew they needed it. They knew that their sin attracted the WRATH of Almighty God – so they had to get rid of it and by his grace, and through this ritual, they could do that. Andrew Bonar says here:

“Wrath against these confessed sins will now alight in the desert, not upon them. “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all”, is their song.”⁵

³ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), 70.

⁴ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 173.

⁵ Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus in the Geneva Series Of Commentaries*, (USA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), 312.

The goat will bear the sins of the people into the desert and the wrath of God will FALL UPON HIM there and not upon the people in the camp! The lightning will crash FAR AWAY!! They will see it, as it were, but it will not come near them. The storm will pass over them, and behind it all, the clouds will part and the sun will shine again and they will enjoy the peace and the favour of the Lord – forever. That’s what is being promised and foreshadowed in this ritual.

So that’s what atonement is, but how exactly does it work?

How Does It Work?

We’re interested in the mechanics – because the mechanics are a significant part of the lesson that we’re supposed to be learning here. The first part of the process is fairly obvious. The work of atonement is affected by means of substitution.

1. By substitution

The second goat is the scapegoat! William Tyndale actually invented that word when he was translating the Bible into English and it has become a recognizable English idiom. Now often in English we use it in a negative way. We talk about people making Joe the Scapegoat – they are shifting all the blame on to Joe – unfairly, UNJUSTLY!

But it’s different if the substitute serves as a scapegoat VOLUNTARILY! Then it isn’t unfair – it is unexpected and undeserved. It’s GRACE! That’s the whole point of this story!

God knows that we can’t deal with our sin on our own so he offers to do it for us through the person of his Son Jesus Christ!

He’s the innocent sufferer – not the victim – he’s the volunteer! He steps forward – willingly – lovingly – to be our substitute. And God accepts that. He allows that. Substitution is PERMISSIBLE within his courtroom.

That's the ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLE that God is teaching here. This is God is setting you up to understand the Gospel! You can't understand the Gospel if you haven't learned the basic principle of substitution so these are the SCALES that will lead you to Mozart. This the long division that will lead to rocket science. This is the Old Testament FOUNDATION that will lead you to Calvary's cross. Without the Day of Atonement you will never understand what the Apostle Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians 5:21 when he says:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV)

That's substitution in all its ULTIMATE, ESCHATOLOGICAL, INCARNATED fullness!

He became SIN – who knew no sin – that we might become the righteousness of God!

That's how atonement works!!

Our sins are laid on Christ and his righteousness is laid on us!

Is that “fair”?

No.

Substitution is not “fair”. Hell is fair. Death is fair. Substitution is not fair – but it is JUST. God accepts it. God allows it. More than that, God provides it through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Hallelujah!!

But it has to be claimed through identification, confession and faith.

2. Through identification, confession and faith

Look at verse 21 again:

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, and all their transgressions, all their sins. (Leviticus 16:21 ESV)

Do you see that? These are not MERE RITUALS – these are expressions of FAITH! This is not a magic show – this is a sacrament. This is an Old Testament ordinance. This is something commanded by God as a MEANS for human beings to identify with what he provides for their salvation. This is way for them to enter a plea in a spirit of penitence and faith, just like what we see in the New Testament. In 1 Peter 3:21 the Apostle Peter says:

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:21–22 ESV)

So Peter says, baptism SAVES YOU – not as a mere ritual – but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through Jesus Christ!!!! Do you get that? If you stand in the waters AS AN ACT OF IDENTIFICATION, CONFESSION and FAITH – it SAVES YOU!!!!!! Not the water. Not the ritual. But the faith, confession and identification IN AND THROUGH THE RITUAL. That is the MEANS that has been provided by God for you to make your plea to him.

Now some of you need to hear that. For some of you that needs to be your main takeaway today. Some of you need to get baptized. You need to stand in the waters as an act of identification, confession and faith. You need to get baptized AS AN APPEAL TO GOD for a good conscience through Jesus Christ!

Now, am I saying that the Day of Atonement points to baptism? No, I'm saying that BOTH the Day of Atonement and baptism point to the cross!! One points forward and the other points backward but the focus and the object is the same! The cross is the climax of the story!! The cross is what God provides. On the cross of Jesus Christ a fountain is opened. There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains!

There is our purification!

And there is our expiation!

The cross is the lightning rod for the awful wrath of God. If we lay our hands on the cross - as Aaron laid his hands on the scapegoat, then our sins will pass from us to Christ and the wrath of God will fall on our sins IN CHRIST and be fully and eternally SATISFIED. The storm will pass, the clouds will part, the sun will shine, his blessing will descend and his peace will be upon us and his Spirit will be within us FOREVER.

That's the Gospel.

That's everything!

That's LIFE, JOY, HEALING, HAPPINESS, WHOLENESS in the PRESENCE of God –
FOREVER, PRAISE THE LORD!

Brothers and sisters, listen to me. If you are here today and you have never laid your hand upon the head of the scapegoat – if you have never taken hold of the cross and said: this is for me. I need this. I am a sinner. Have mercy on me through the person and work of Jesus Christ – then DO IT.

DO IT TODAY!

Why would you delay?

Everything is here for you. Everything is provided for. Through Christ you can have it all. A new heart, a new spirit, a new hope, a new future, with God and God's people both now and forevermore. You can have that all through the person and work of Christ.

So come. Come. Come unto Jesus and be saved. Let me pray for us.