

I've spent a lot more time with unbelievers – and post-Christians –
in the last couple years –
and while I hear a fair amount of complaints about Christian hypocrisy,
the biggest objection is about God himself.

How can a good God allow all this rubbish?
All these awful things keep happening –
and he doesn't seem to care...

This is what Leviticus 16 is all about!
This is God's answer to the problem of human sin and misery:

“I will bring you to myself.”

The post-Christians are trying to escape from God –
and they want very much to be “good people” who do “good things” –
but they keep finding themselves falling into their tiny little empires of one!

God's purpose in history is to bring people to himself!
He is opening the way to draw humanity back to himself.

Indeed, this is the big picture of the 5 books of Moses!

Genesis begins with humanity expelled from the Garden.
Deuteronomy ends with the new humanity preparing to enter the Promised Land.
Exodus tells the story of how God brought Israel out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai.
Numbers tells the story of how God brought Israel from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land.
Leviticus takes place entirely at Mt. Sinai.

Exodus ended with the glory of the LORD filling the Most Holy Place –
so that no one could go in!
That was both glorious and troubling!
Glorious – because God now dwells with his people!!
Troubling – because God said that he wanted his people to draw near –
but so long as the glory of the LORD is in the Most Holy Place,
we can't get there...

and when Nadab and Abihu tried –
they were burnt to a crisp!

So Leviticus is all about how humanity can draw near to God
without getting crispy!

Chapters 11-15 have been talking about how Israel must be ceremonial clean if they are to enter the worship of God.

That is why I titled the last several sermons, “Lessons in Purity.”

God had told the priests to teach Israel to distinguish between holy and unholy, unclean and clean.

The priests were to teach Israel about how God demands that those who worship him must be pure and clean.

As 15:31 says,

“Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.”

God is holy.

That which is unclean—that which is impure—may not enter his holy worship.

So chapter 11 dealt with clean and unclean animals –

what sorts of animals may serve as offerings in the worship of God?

Chapter 12 dealt with purification after childbirth –

beginning to show the connection between the womb – and the holy place.

Chapters 13-14 dealt with leprous disease –

how people, garments, and houses can be cleansed and prepared for holy habitation.

And then chapter 15 dealt with bodily discharges –

returning to the theme of the womb and the holy place.

All together chapters 11-15 set up a connection

between people – houses – sacrifices – reproduction

that will run all through both OT and NT –

summarized beautifully by Paul:

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Eph 5:25-27)

This includes *both* cleansing from sin *and* cleansing from misery.

What Paul describes in Ephesians 5 is what the high priest did every year on the Day of Atonement.

After all, remember the context:

16:1

1. Preparation (v1-5)

The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before

the LORD and died,

This is just after Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire before the Lord.

If God is going to dwell in the midst of his people,
then drawing near to God requires that we do it *his way* – not our own!

Leviticus 16 is at the very heart of the book of Leviticus.

The whole book is arranged chiastically around it –
and chapter 16 itself is centered on the high priest's work in the Most Holy Place.

And since Leviticus is the center of the Pentateuch,
that means that the whole Pentateuch – the whole of the five books of Moses –
is centered on what the high priest does in the Holy of Holies!

You can see why the Day of Atonement is the most important day in the Israelite year.

It is only on this day—once a year—that the high priest may enter the most Holy Place.

As Hebrews 9:6-9a says:

⁶These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷but 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. ⁸By 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 ⁹(which is symbolic for the present age).

Hebrews sees the Day of Atonement as the sign
that the way into the heavenly holy of holies is not yet open.
The fact that the high priest must perform this same ritual every year
indicates that the age to come has not yet *really* come.
It is symbolic of the age to come,
but so long as the earthly holy place remains standing,
it is a sign that the reality has not yet arrived.

So let's look closer at what the high priest does,
and how it points us to the dawning of the age to come in Jesus Christ.

First, we must understand the reason why Aaron may only enter once a year.

God says that he will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat (16:2).

²and 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.

God has said that he will dwell with his people.
But the presence of God is a perilous thing.

Aaron has already learned this the hard way.
He lost two sons to the holiness of God!
So now God warns the high priest not to enter the Most Holy Place,
except for once a year,
and he prescribes a detailed ritual to perform
in order to avoid being consumed by the holiness of God.

There are four parts to the chapter:

- 1) the preparation of the high priest
- 2) the offerings presented in the Most Holy Place
(and not surprisingly, the very heart of the passage
is when blood is presented at the mercy seat in verses 16ff!)
- 3) then there are the concluding rites back in the tent of meeting
- 4) the statutes regulating the Day of Atonement
- so that the passage ends back where it began.

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.

Verses 3-5 lay out the preparations.

First he must bring a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering;
then he must bathe his body in water;
then he must put on the holy linen coat and the linen undergarment and the linen turban;
He is the holy priest, therefore he must wear the holy garments.

And in order to prepare for entry, he must bathe his body in water –
a point that Hebrews 10:22 echoes –
since “our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience,
and our bodies are washed with pure water.”

Our baptism is our priestly anointing – as we are prepared for entry into the Most Holy Place!

He has the bull for the sin offering for himself,
and the ram for the burnt offering for himself.

But for the people, he must take two male goats for a sin offering
and one ram for a burnt offering.

Only now he is ready to begin.

2. Outline of Offerings: the Necessity of Atonement (v6-10)

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.^[a] 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.

Verses 6-10 explain the preliminary actions.

As usual, the priest must make atonement for himself before he is able to atone for others.
So he offers the bull as a sin offering for himself and the whole priesthood.
Then he must take the two goats for the people’s sin offering,
and set them before the LORD at the tent of meeting.
Then he must cast lots—one for Yahweh and one for Azazel.
(we’ll come back to this, but let’s just follow the action for now).

3. Offerings (v11-28)

a. The Sin Offering for the Priests – Incense and Blood before the Mercy Seat (v11-14)

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.

Verses 11-14 start the actual sacrifices.

The high priest kills the bull,
then he takes a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD,
and two handfuls of sweet incense.
The incense is designed to keep a cloud over the mercy seat,
so as to protect Aaron from the glory of the LORD.

The incense (which symbolizes the prayers of the saints)
was designed to protect the High Priest.

(Think of how the people gathered to pray when Zechariah offered incense in Luke 1)

Then he would take the blood of the bull and sprinkle it seven times
on the front of the mercy seat on the east side.

b. The Sin Offering for the People – Blood before the Mercy Seat (v15-19)

Now that his own sin is atoned for,
he kills the goat of the sin offering for the people,
and sprinkles its blood in the same way that he did with the bull. (v15:)

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.

Verses 16-19 explains the importance of this ritual.

These verses are the center of chapter 16 –
and chapter 16 is the center of Leviticus –
and Leviticus is the center of the Pentateuch –
so these verses are the very heart and soul of the Five Books of Moses.

So listen carefully!

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.

The sprinkling of the blood is to make atonement for the Holy Place,
for the tent of meeting, and for the altar.
But at the consecration of the tabernacle,
all of these things were already consecrated and made holy for God’s use.

Why does God say that the Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar
need to be atoned for?

“Because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel
and because of their transgressions, all their sins.”

Both the uncleanness of the people AND their sins contaminate the Holy Place.
After all, what is the Holy Place?

The place where God dwells with his people!
The place where earth and heaven meet!

If humanity is going to ascend the hill of the LORD –
if there is to be a new and living way for humanity to enter the presence of God,
then sin and uncleanness must be dealt with.

Again – remember what Hebrews 9 says.

The fact that *only* the high priest can enter *once a year* –
means that *only the high priest* enters the new creation.
And he can only stay for a few minutes.

From the standpoint of Israel in the wilderness –
this is amazingly glorious!

We have been so far away from God for so long –
now there is one man who gets to spend a few minutes in glory?!!
Thanks be to God!!

Because if there is *one man* – then there will be more!
This is where the story is going!

And that is the message that Hebrews tells to us!
Because now – *one man* has entered the heavenly Holy of Holies!
Not just once a year!
But once for all!
And now – because Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father –
we enter the heavenly Holy of Holies *in him!*

The New Creation has dawned!

But what happens to our sin?

For that, we need to look at the *other goat!*

c. The Other Goat – Bears Israel’s Iniquities into the Wilderness (v20-22)

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.

Verses 20-22 tells us of the scapegoat who must be sent to Azazel (verses 8-10)

What—or who—is Azazel?

The apocryphal book of Enoch (8:1) refers to Azazel as one of the fallen angels,
so it seems likely that the “scapegoat”
is being sent outside of the covenant community to this demonic figure.

After all, what is the purpose of the sin offering?

The sin offering is designed to remove the unintentional sins of the people.
Wilful sins are not included.

Wilful sins are dealt with by cutting the person off from the covenant community,
either through execution or banishment.

Remember the law of the sin offering?

If the sin offering is brought for a priest or for the whole congregation,
then the carcass of the sin offering is burnt outside the camp.

But if the sin offering is brought for an individual,
then the priest may eat the meat.

The sin offering on the Day of Atonement,
covers all of the unintentional sins
that were “missed” throughout the year.

You will note that in verses 27-28,
the sin offerings for the priest and the people are indeed burned with fire
outside the camp.

But there is another aspect to this sin offering – the scapegoat.

Aaron must lay both hands on the head of the live goat,
and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel.

And then the goat, bearing the sins of the people,
must be sent out into the wilderness by some Israelite man.

The goat then bears the iniquities of the people out of the camp to a remote area.

The man who released the goat is to wash his clothes and bathe his body,
and then he may return to the camp.

Why wasn't the first goat enough?

Think about it.

Every morning and every evening the priest offers burnt offerings to the Lord.
Every day the priests offer various sin offerings and guilt offerings for individuals,
priests, or the whole community, as needed.

And now once a year there is a special sin offering to cover the whole year.

But the death of these thousands of animals isn't enough.

The sin offering on the Day of Atonement was designed to cleanse the tabernacle,
so that it would not be defiled by the uncleanness and sins of the people.

The sin of the people is transferred to the scapegoat
and removed from the camp.

As the goat is driven out into the wilderness—to Azazel the demon—
so also the sins of the people are removed to the wilderness.
Leviticus 17:7 supports this:

“So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons,
after whom they whore.”

The scapegoat reminds us that there no animal is sufficient to pay for our sins.
When Psalm 103 says that God separates our sin from us
as far as the East is from the West –
well, at the Fall, Adam and Eve were expelled to the East;
and when the High Priest enters the Most Holy Place –
he is going West!

The “east” is represented here by the Wilderness –
that place outside the camp –
a place of danger and death.

d. The Cleansing of Aaron and the Other Participants (v23-28)

²³ “Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting and shall take off the linen garments that he put on when he went into the Holy Place and shall leave them there. ²⁴ And he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place and put on his garments and come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people and make atonement for himself and for the people. ²⁵ And the fat of the sin offering he shall burn on the altar. ²⁶ And he who lets the goat go to Azazel shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. ²⁷ And the bull for the sin offering and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the Holy Place, shall be carried outside the camp. Their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be burned up with fire. ²⁸ And he who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp.

Having completed the ritual in the Holy Place,
Aaron would take off the linen garments,
bathe in water in a holy place,
and then put on his garments and finish the burnt offerings,
offering the whole burnt offerings and the fat of the sin offerings,
making atonement for himself and the people.

What’s the deal with washing with water *after* being in the Holy Place?

Actually, we learned this lesson last week.

When a husband goes into his wife,
they both need to wash (and they are unclean until evening).

In the case of the high priest going in to the Most Holy Place
he does not become unclean (after all, there are no “waste products” here!)

Everything he brings has a purpose!),
but he does have to wash,
not to get the unclean off –
far from it!! –
rather, it is because he has been in the holy presence of God himself!

He is now going to return to ordinary life.
Holiness is contagious!
And if the holiness of God should come in contact with the unclean,
it would surely destroy the unclean!

So just as Moses veiled his face so that the people would not see the fading glory,
so also the High Priest must bathe after leaving the Most Holy Place.

The same is true for those who burnt the carcasses of the sin offerings outside the camp –
as well as for the one who took the goat to Azazel.

They are not said to be unclean due to their service –
but because of their participation in the ceremony of the Day of Atonement,
they too have contracted “holiness.”

4. Statutes Regarding the Seventh Month: the Importance of Atonement (v29-34)
Indeed, the statutes of verses 29-34 point out that all Israelites should take this day seriously.

²⁹ “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^[b] and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. 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. ³¹ It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever. ³² And the priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the holy linen garments. ³³ He shall make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. ³⁴ 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.” And Aaron^[c] did as the LORD commanded Moses.

The Day of Atonement was set as the tenth day of the seventh month.

All Israelites were to humble themselves on that day.

It was to be a Sabbath—no one was to work—not even the stranger among you.

“It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you,
and you shall afflict yourselves.” (verse 31)

As we will hear in Leviticus 23,

the seventh month was a busy month in the liturgical calendar of Israel.
The first day of the month was the Feast of Trumpets,
a day of solemn rest.
The tenth day was the Day of Atonement,
and then from the 15th to the 23rd was the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles).

The Day of Atonement was to be a day of fasting (that is the meaning of “afflict yourselves,”
see Psalm 35:13; Isaiah 58:3, 5).

It was the only required fast in the Jewish calendar.

If God was going to dwell in the midst of an unclean, sinful people,
then there would need to be a regular cleansing of the people
and of God’s dwelling place.

The Day of Atonement was a day not only for the rituals in the tabernacle,
but also for every Israelite to humble himself before the LORD.

Hebrews 9

Hebrews 9:11-28.

9:11-14

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come,^[e] then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² 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. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify^[f] for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our^[g] conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Jesus has not merely entered the earthly tent,

he has entered the heavenlies with his own blood as the final sacrifice.

Therefore 9:15-22

¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.^[h] ¹⁶ For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. ¹⁷ For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. ¹⁸ Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. ¹⁹ For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰ saying, “This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.” ²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

The Old Covenant required the slaughter of millions of animals
in order to purify Israel.

Why? 9:23

²³ 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.

The monotonous character of the OT sacrifices was pointing to its own futility.
The OT sanctuary was merely a copy of the heavenly sanctuary.
The OT priests were pictures of Christ, the heavenly priest.

And 9:24-28

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. ²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 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.

This concludes with a stinging indictment of the law:

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. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

We have now been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (10:10)

You might have expected it to say that we are justified through the offering of Jesus,
but remember what all these sacrifices were designed to do.

Yes, they were designed to deal with sin,
but WHY?

So that the people of God might be sanctified,
set apart for the service of God.

And by that one offering,

Jesus “has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (10:14)

Every Sunday we celebrate the new Day of Atonement.

Yes, we afflict ourselves.

When we come to worship God, we come confessing our sins,
but unlike Israel of old,
we do not need to wait for a new sacrifice to cleanse us.
We confess our sins with full confidence in that sacrifice which has already cleansed us.

But Hebrews also gives us a warning.
10:26-27

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

In the light of the OT teaching on the sin offerings,
this takes on a clear meaning.
If we return to our wilful rebellion,
there is no sacrifice for that.

This is not talking about our petty day-to-day sins.

This is talking about the basic character of our lives.

Unintentional sins are those “ordinary” sins that afflict us all.

Intentional sins—deliberate sins—stem from a fundamental rejection of the gospel.

This is talking about the one “who has spurned the Son of God,

and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified,

and has outraged the Spirit of grace.” (10:29)

The one who clings to Christ and turns away from sin is not in view.

This is one who prefers idols to Christ.

Therefore (10:35-39)

³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

³⁷ For,

“Yet a little while,

and the coming one will come and will not delay;

³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith,

and if he shrinks back,

my soul has no pleasure in him.”

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

You have need of endurance.

The endurance to live faithfully day by day,

to do the will of God,

and to believe the promises of God—even in the midst of trial and temptation.