

Elementary

The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting (Leviticus 1:1 ESV)

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:17-18 ESV)

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. (Gal. 4:1-2 ESV)

What Does The Law Teach Us About Atonement

July 18th. 2021

Leviticus 16:1-10

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Leviticus 16.

What is wrong with the world?

Truly, what is it? At the very root, why are things so terribly broken? Why are our brothers and sisters in South Africa living in fear right now? Why do tornadoes rip apart our friends' houses in the middle of a beautiful week? Why is it that there is conflict in the news and in our homes and in our hearts.

What is wrong with the world?

The first five books of the Bible – the Pentateuch – present the entire storyline of the world in miniature. In these five books we learn that God is holy, and that we are NOT. We were made to enjoy His presence, but our sin and rebellion has created a terrible separation. That separation is what is wrong with the world. We were made to live in perfect harmony with God, but our sin has placed a chasm between us.

In these verses, we learn about the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16 – our passage for this morning – could fairly be referred to as the heart of the book of Leviticus. And, since Leviticus represents the heart of the Pentateuch, our passage today represents the heart of the heart of the Law! The Day of Atonement was observed once a year, on the tenth day of the seventh month. As one commentator notes:

Without question, the Day of Atonement was at the heart of Israel's calendar and life.¹

Before we unpack this sacred day, I want to give a brief definition of atonement. This explanation almost seems too easy to be true, but it is, in fact, a very helpful description and it is easy to remember. Commentator L. Michael Morales defines atonement this way:

Atonement is reconciliation, at-one-ment.²

Our sin separates us from God. Atonement, then, functions to bring us together by dealing with the sin that should drive us apart. At-one-ment. That's what this ceremony is all about. It introduces – albeit in shadow – God's gracious answer for the problem of our sin and rebellion.

This passage introduces us to the most important ceremony in the Old Testament. This is hallowed ground, and we're going to read the text in full. Look with me to Leviticus 16. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

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.

¹ Michael Morales. *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A biblical theology of the book of Leviticus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 167.

² Michael Morales. *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A biblical theology of the book of Leviticus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 31.

⁶“Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. ⁷Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁸And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. ⁹And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and use it as a sin offering, ¹⁰but 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. ¹²And 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 ¹³and 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. ¹⁴And 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. ¹⁶Thus 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. ¹⁷No 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. ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And 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. ²¹And 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. ²²The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.

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. ²⁴And 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. ²⁵And the fat of the sin offering he shall burn on the altar. ²⁶And 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. ²⁷And 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.

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 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 did as the Lord commanded Moses. (Leviticus 16:1-34 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now, admittedly, that was a lot to take in. Don't tap out. I want to assure you that, in spite of all the intricate details, this ceremony teaches us five elementary lessons about atonement. By God's grace, I want to help unpack those for you this morning. Let's pull this text apart now and ask the question: What does the Law teach us about atonement?

What Does The Law Teach Us About Atonement?

First, the Law teaches us that:

1. Atonement demands humility

Last week we considered the tabernacle complex. Try to visualize that with me again. First, there was the outer courtyard sectioned off from the camp with curtains. Levites with spears stood guard around the tabernacle to make sure that no one entered unworthily. In the court you could see the large altar for sacrifices and the wide basin where the sacrifices would be washed. There was also the tent of meeting that was only accessible for the high priest. Do you remember all of that?

But what we didn't discuss last week was that, within the tent of meeting, there was another curtain. Behind *that* curtain was a place called the holy of holies. That was where the ark of the covenant was stored and where God's glory tangibly dwelt with the Israelites. The ark wasn't simply another ornament – it represented the footstool of God's throne. In Psalm 99:1 we read:

The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! (Psalm 99:1 ESV)

The holy of holies was essentially an earthly shadow of the throne room of GOD! No one was EVER allowed to enter the holy of holies.

Except on the Day of Atonement. On that day – only once a year –the high priest was permitted to enter into *the very throne room of God*.

Therefore, the Day of Atonement was a day of humility. Before entering the holy of holies, the high priest was to remove his normal uniform with all of its ornamentation. Instead, he was to clothe himself in simple, sacred linen. Then, dressed in his humble garments, the high priest was to enter the throne room with the utmost caution. Look at the scene that's described in verses 12-13:

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.** (Leviticus 16:12-13 ESV)

Try to picture this scene: Aaron stands by himself in the tent of meeting staring at the curtain that leads into the holy of holies. He's never been in there. God's glory is in there. Undoubtedly, his mind flashed back to the sight of his two sons, Nadab and Abihu, and their scorched remains. Aaron knows that God's holiness is not something to be taken lightly. He knows that he is not fit to stand in the throne room of God.

And yet, he has been invited in! So, in faith, he follows God's instructions with exact precision. He picks up a burning ember from the altar and he puts it into his incense bowl. As he steps through the curtain, he throws two handfuls of sweet incense into the bowl and a puff of aromatic smoke fills the room. The smoke shields him from seeing things in that throne room that are too glorious for him to see. One careless glance above the ark would kill Aaron instantly. No one can see God and live. Under the cover of smoke, he performs the cleansing ceremony, and then he exits the holy of holies, not to return again until the next year.

The Day of Atonement was a day of humility – for the high priest and for the people. In verse 31, the Israelites are instructed:

It is to be a Sabbath of solemn rest for you, **so that you may humble yourselves**; it is a permanent statute. (Leviticus 16:31 NASV)

The Day of Atonement was an annual reminder for the Israelites that God is holy and that they were not. It reminded them that there was nothing that they could do in their own strength to bridge the gap. On that day they fasted, they rested, and they trusted. It was to be a day marked by widespread humility.

Atonement is not to be taken lightly.

Christian, don't ever forget that it is a mind-blowing MIRACLE that you get to talk to God. It is a MIRACLE that God dwells in us and that we are in relationship with Him. The Holy King of the Universe clothed Himself in flesh and came down to us! He then clothed Himself in our sin and died for us. He did it all to make atonement for us – to make us at one with himself. That is a MIRACLE! We could never do anything to deserve that!

The more we understand the miracle of atonement, the more we come to see that it demands humility. Second, the law teaches us that:

2. **Atonement requires a substitute**

This passage is filled with bulls and goats and we're going to unpack the various ceremonies that make up the Day of Atonement in our next two points, but first I want to highlight this obvious yet essential observation: Atonement demands a substitute.

The penalty for sin is death. God was clear about that on day one. He told Adam and Eve not to dishonour Him by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and he warned them:

for in the day that you eat of it **you shall surely die.** (Genesis 2:17b ESV)

You shall surely die! That is the penalty for sin. The Apostle Paul says the same thing in Romans 6:23:

For the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23a ESV)

The Israelites had sinned. Therefore, the Israelites deserved death. WE have sinned. Therefore, WE deserve death. The Bible is clear about that.

But what we see on display in this ceremony is that God has made a gracious provision to restore us to Himself. He has made an allowance for a substitute to take our place. The bulls and the goats that we are going to be discussing are standing in the place of the Israelites and are observing the curse for the Israelite's sins. Every single Israelite would have learned this lesson on the Day of Atonement. Atonement demands a substitute.

I know that was brief, but points 3 and 4 are really an extension of this. The most powerful lessons that we learn about atonement derives from what exactly *happens* to these substitutes.

As we turn our attention to those substitutes, we learn:

3. Atonement cleanses and restores

The notion of “cleansing” is perhaps the piece that we are inclined to overlook when we revisit this chapter as modern-day readers. We often fail to recognize the way that our sin pollutes.

For example, when we think about Adam and Eve's sin, we will immediately point to the consequences that *they* felt as a result. *They* were expelled from the garden, and *they* lost their eternal life. However, have you ever stopped to think about the fact that the impact of their rebellion was felt in the earth itself? Do you remember that part? God turned to Adam and said:

cursed is the ground because of you; (Genesis 3:17b ESV)

The *whole world* fell under a curse. And the whole world *remains* under a curse. In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul talks about how the earth is still groaning under the weight of sin. Our sin pollutes. It spreads. It infects.

The tabernacle – and even the holy of holies – was no exception. In fact, this whole ceremony is introduced with an allusion to the death of Nadab and Abihu. When Nadab and Abihu died in the tent of meeting it created a serious problem and posed some serious questions.

How could the God of life dwell with His people in a tent that had been polluted by death?

How could a holy God reside in a tabernacle that saw sinners coming and going day after day?

If God was going to dwell in the holy of holies, then the holy of holies needed to be purified. That's one of the primary lessons that we are supposed to learn here. In the Day of Atonement, God made a way for the tabernacle to be cleansed. In fact, as one commentator notes:

The main purpose of the day of atonement ceremonies is to cleanse the sanctuary from the pollutions introduced into it by the unclean worshipers. Without a purpose such as this there would have been little point in the high priest putting his life at risk by entering into the holy of holies.³

It was dangerous for the high priest to enter the throne room of God, but it was absolutely *necessary*. The tabernacle *needed* to be cleansed on a yearly basis. From the holy of holies – from the very centre – and working outwards, the high priest was to sprinkle the blood of the blameless sacrifice to cleanse and atone for his sin and the sin of the nation.

For God to dwell in the midst of His people, the tabernacle, the priests and the people needed to be cleansed and restored from all of the pollution of sin that they had accumulated.

That principle is true, Old Testament and New. If we are going to be at one with God, we need more than forgiveness. Forgiveness averts His wrath and keeps us from receiving the consequences for our sins. But we want *more* than that! We want to be brought back into

³ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 228.

relationship with God. We want to live with Him and enjoy Him. And that means, we need to made clean. But after all that we've done, what can wash away our sin? What can make us whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! O precious is the flow that makes us white as snow! No other fount I know – nothing but the blood of Jesus!⁴

When Jesus died as your substitute, he died so that you could once and for all be CLEAN. And now, having been sprinkled by the blood of our perfect substitute, God Himself dwells in you, believer. The Apostle Paul writes:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16 ESV)

Praise God! Atonement cleanses and restores! It also removes our sin:

4. Atonement removes our sin

The service begins with Aaron making a sin offering for himself. We discussed the sin offering on week one. Aaron placed his hand on the head of the bull and he confessed his sin. In that moment, in a display of mercy and grace, all of Aaron's sin was – in God's eyes – imputed onto the bull. The bull was then killed – dying the death that Aaron deserved.

Once Aaron was done with his own sin offering, two goats were brought before him. Lots were thrown for the goats – you can imagine the rolling of dice – and one goat was set apart for a sin offering. His blood was used for the cleansing ritual that we just discussed. The text tells us of the other goat, however:

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. (Leviticus 16:10 ESV)

Now, if you have a good study Bible then you will probably find some discussion in the notes about how we should understand "Azazel" here. Was it a place? Was it another name for the

⁴ Robert Lowry. *Nothing But The Blood Of Jesus*, 1876.

devil? Was it just a name for the goat? Truthfully, it doesn't really matter which option you choose because they all make the same point. Commentator Jay Sklar notes:

The overall function of the goat remains clear: to make atonement on the Israelites' behalf by bearing their sins far away.⁵

THAT is the point that this object lesson so vividly makes. Just imagine this scene: In the sight of the leaders of the nation, Aaron placed his hand on the head of the scape goat and he confessed the sin of the Israelites. Then, bearing all of the sin of the nation, the scapegoat was led out of the camp and into the wilderness until it was no longer visible. As the Israelites watched the goat disappear over the horizon, the point would have been clear and powerful – their sin had been removed! By God's grace, their sin had been laid on the substitute and they had just witnessed with their own eyes that the sin was gone! In this powerful object lesson, we learn that atonement removes our sin.

In the same way, we can look to the cross where our sin was carried by our substitute, and we can proclaim with the Psalmist:

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

Some of you are struggling to see this piece of the atonement puzzle. See it now. If you have placed your trust in Jesus – if you have confessed your sin and if you believe that Jesus died on the cross as your substitute – then your sin is GONE! The scapegoat has disappeared over the horizon. It has been paid for. It has been banished. In God's eyes it is absolutely, positively, beyond-a-shadow-of-a-doubt GONE!

Believe that! Rest in that! Live in that! From the earliest days, God knew that you would struggle to believe this piece so He built in a powerful, visible demonstration. Do you know why He did that? Because He wants you to look and to know in your heart that the substitute was enough. Christ is enough.

⁵ Jay Sklar. *Leviticus TOTC*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 210.

And, before we conclude this morning, the Law teaches us that:

5. Atonement is initiated by God

This is so important. Our passage today does not begin with Moses and Aaron trying to formulate a plan to somehow curie God's favour. It begins with God speaking to Moses saying, "This is how Aaron is to enter." Old Testament and New, God goes first!

While it is true that God is wrathful towards sin, it is also true that He is PROACTIVE in making a way for sinners to be cleansed and redeemed.

Listen, we have unpacked some details this morning that highlighted the holiness of God and the severity of sin, but as we see all of THAT we need to resolve to hold it in unison with THIS glorious truth: Our God is LOVE! His holiness and his love are not in opposition to each other – they are bound together inseparably. God's love is a holy, cleansing love. His love doesn't leave us in our sin. He refuses to abandon us to our self-destructive ways. He picks us up, and He washes us off, and He puts our feet on the right path, and then He goes back, and He takes the initiative to settle all the debts that we have incurred!

That is the grand story of the Bible and, if we're being honest, it is the grand MYSTERY of the Bible. Atonement makes sense on our end. *Of course* we want to be at one with God! *Of course* we want a relationship with Him! He is glorious, and holy, and perfect, and AWESOME!

The fascinating and shocking piece that we see here is that God desires to be one with *us*. More and more often I find myself marvelling with David:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
⁴what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:3-4 ESV)

In spite of our unworthiness. In spite of our hearts that are prone to rebellion. In spite of all the times that we have sinned against Him. Our God is PROACTIVE in bringing sinners home.

Atonement is not something that we do. We can't bridge the chasm that exists between ourselves and God. We can't do enough good deeds to erase our sinful past. We can't manufacture a ladder to heaven. Atonement is something that God must do FOR us. And friends, He has done it!

God initiates. God draws. God makes a way. God leaves the 99 to go after the 1.

This story doesn't begin with Moses and Aaron saying to each other, "How are we ever going to draw close to our holy God?" It begins with our holy God saying, "This is how you can come near. So, come."

He says the same thing to us today.

God has made a way for you to come home. He has sent His Son to be your substitute. Jesus has died so that you could live. He has absorbed all the sin that should have separated you from God. His blood was shed so that you could be washed clean. The way has been made.

Do you feel far from God? You don't have to. Come.

Do you feel broken and dirty? You don't have to. Come.

There is nothing else in the world that is more important than this: God has made atonement for your sin.

So, come. Come in humility. Come in faith. Come in repentance. Come and look to Jesus who has removed your sin and who has washed you white as snow.

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.
(Revelation 22:17 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.