

The Greatest Day

Leviticus 16:1-34

Don't hold me to this, but I were told to preach about Jesus Christ from any four Old Testament texts, I think I would choose Isaiah 53, Psalm 110, Genesis 3:15, and our text this afternoon, Leviticus 16. Certainly, this chapter is the climax and the centerpiece of everything that there is to learn in this book of Leviticus. It is that important.

This was the greatest day in the whole year. Yom Kippur. The day of atonement. This was the greatest event that would take place in the lives of God's people in the OT every year.

Let me explain very briefly the outward rituals of the day of atonement, and then we'll take up our study of what it all means. Aaron, the high priest, would first dress himself as a slave, taking off all the outwardly beautiful garments of his ordinary priestly duties and putting on a simple linen outfit. He would take a bull and two goats as a sin offering and one ram as a burnt offering. He would first take the bull to the alter in the tabernacle, and offer it for his own sins. Then he would take incense and enter the Most Holy Place, the place where the mercy seat was. He could only do this once a year, and he had to be alone! Then he would kill one of the goats as the sin offering for the people, inside the veil of that Most Holy Place. Next he would take the other goat, still alive, and send it away into the wilderness with another priest, where it would also be killed. Then he would leave the Most Holy Place, cleanse himself, and offer the burnt offerings for the people. And that was it. A great feast day to be celebrated on the tenth day of the seventh month, every year.

So what does it all mean? Let's start with the introduction,
v.1-2

Remember Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's two oldest sons,
Lev. 10:1 "Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. 2 So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD."

God's explanation was clear, in the very next verse,
Lev. 10:3 "This is what the LORD spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified.'"

So we must regard God as holy, but as sinful men, we ourselves are not perfectly holy. Rather, we are contaminated by sin. And that's where we ought to begin in examining Leviticus 16.

I. THE DEFILEMENT OF SIN.

That's why atonement is necessary! That's why all these animal sacrifices that we have studied in Leviticus are required. Because,

A. Sin defiles the people of God.

And I want to understand that word defile! Sin renders us unclean. Dirty. Contaminated. Guilty.

Sin is not a psychological maladjustment, but a defilement. It is not a disease, but moral decay. It is not something to be treated with medicine, but something to be killed. And it is not something that God merely overlooks. Instead, the truth is that "without shedding of blood there is no remission."

And so we have blood.
v.3

And, v.11
v.14-15

We've covered all that in detail in previous weeks, but something else stands out clearly here on the Day of Atonement. Not only were the people defiled, but so also the place, the tabernacle! Because,

B. Sin defiles the place of meeting between God and his people.

And blood had to be shed to "make atonement for the Holy Place."

v.16

Then, v.18-20

Now, what does all that mean? How is it that the altar needed to be purified? There is a great answer to that question. It has to do with the horrible defilement of our sins. Everything we touch is defiled because of us, and God can't meet with us unless all that defilement is removed.

For a perfectly holy God to meet with unholy people, we have to be washed. And so does this place of meeting! That's why the place of worship was so important in the Old Covenant. Because the place of worship was the place where God would dwell among his people. And that place had to be set apart.

Now, the outward regulations don't apply to us today. We don't need a purification ceremony to sanctify this building. But for God to dwell among us, we do have to set this place apart as holy! This is a holy convocation. This is a holy meeting, for we are meeting with a holy God.

This meeting is not a part of our ordinary lives, it is not to be treated as profane or common. This meeting is not casual or informal, for we are meeting here with God!

Having said that, let there be great delight in your soul to realize that God is willing to meet here with us. And that he finds pleasure in accepting us and receiving our worship. As he did with Aaron's worship. Aaron could actually enter into that Most Holy Place and be accepted by God. Not killed!

Keep in mind, that High Priest would never forget what happened to Nadab and Abihu, and he was, quite literally, risking his life to go behind that curtain. And what a glorious scene it is, when Aaron takes the sweet incense before the Lord and is permitted to be found before God himself.

v.12

The very fire that consumed the sin offering is the fire that caused this fragrance to be a sweet smelling aroma before the Lord. And that same burning incense is what allows Aaron to see God and not die, for surely the incense burning in front of the Mercy Seat would have obscured some of the brightness of the glory of God, such that Aaron would not die.

v.13

So, for all the horrible defilement of sin, there we have the picture of God meeting with man. So great is his grace.

There is one part of this ceremony that is new, and unique. We've not seen it before in all the descriptions of the various sacrifices. It is a particular form of the sin offering, translated simply, the scapegoat. And when Aaron had finished atoning for the Holy Place with one of the goats, he begins with the other goat, the one still alive.

v.20

Remember, v.8

And, v.10

So what is,

II. THE WORK OF THE SCAPEGOAT?

We see what the High Priest does.

v.21

Aaron confessed the sins of the people, as he laid his hands on the head of the live goat. That was a most solemn and sober event, probably spoken with tears. Confession of sin is a most sorrowful event, when it is done sincerely. No doubt Aaron was feeling the weight of those sins upon his own heart, but more importantly, he was pouring them out into the goat!

Here is the most crucial element in understanding God's work of redemption.

A. Our sins are transferred to a substitute.

And the substitute then receives the curse of the law, the condemnation of the unrelenting justice of God. That's why it is called a scapegoat, for it bears the blame for others. All of God's people. And the curse upon that goat was represented by the fact that it was led out into the wilderness, to an uninhabited land, to be killed.

When we meet for corporate worship, and especially when there is a specific prayer in our order of worship labelled "confession of sin," this is the picture you ought to have in your mind and soul. Picture this goat. Picture yourself as the priest laying your hands upon the goat, earnestly and sincerely confessing your sins. And then picture the goat being led away to the slaughter.

As you picture those things, understand that Jesus is that scapegoat! So it is, in the shadows of the Old Covenant, that you are laying your sins upon Jesus. And you ought to be weeping in the sorrow of your own repentance, even as you realize that your sins are removed from you.

I said earlier that this was one of the four OT passages I would choose to describe the work of Christ, and one of the others was Isaiah 53. The language there gives us an explanation of what the day of atonement in Leviticus 16 was all about.

Is. 53:1 "Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him. 3 He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all....12 He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors."

I don't think I need to give you a New Testament reference to prove to you my interpretation is correct, but let's look at one clear reference that does tie together the scapegoat of Leviticus 16 and this man of sorrows with the work of Christ.

I Peter 2:21 “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 22 “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; 23 who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Dear ones, this is your only hope for eternal life. Your sins are transferred to Jesus.

But something else was shown forth at the day of atonement. Not only were our sins transferred to a substitute, not only were our sins removed from us,

B. Our sins are removed from God’s presence.

This is great!

Usually we think only in terms of sins being taken away from us. For example,

Ps. 103:10 “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; 12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

What a precious thought. What a glorious encouragement. But this is even better, when you think about it. Not only are our sins removed from us and placed upon that scapegoat, but also that scapegoat was sent away from the presence of God!

Outside the camp, as we studied before with the sin offering. The sacrifice for sin meant not only removing those sins from us, but also removing them from the awareness of God!

v.22

So it is, that Jesus not only takes our sins away from us, but he takes them away from God! He takes our sin “outside the camp,” as this scapegoat in the wilderness.

Heb. 13:11 “For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. 12 Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.”

Therefore, our sins are forever removed from the presence of God. And there is nothing more encouraging that I could ever possibly preach to you!

In that same light, with some more insight into this great day of atonement, let me continue with that encouragement. Notice something about the day of atonement. Only one man went in to the Most Holy Place. Only one man.

III. THERE IS ONLY ONE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MEN.

You recognize, I expect, that I am quoting from the New Testament.

1 Tim. 2:5 “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.”

So in Leviticus, we have the,

A. Old Testament shadows.

v.17

And we know that one man would act according to God's own regulations, upon the threat of his own life.

v.2

And we know that this one man was permitted to go inside the veil only once a year.

v.34

So what are the,

B. New Testament realities?

Heb. 9:23 "Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another-- 26 He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. 27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

Jesus accomplished the very thing pictured for us in Leviticus 16. Once and for all. He actually tore down that veil, to continue the imagery. And he has gone into the presence of God in heaven, where he now continues to appear in the presence of God for us. And, he will come again a second time in triumph and glory!

So the work of the scapegoat is done. It is finished, and all

that was necessary for the atonement of our sins has been accomplished. Jesus did it all, on the cross. And at the end of those horrible three hours of darkness, when he was sent out into the wilderness, separated from the presence of his father in heaven, remember his declaration,

John 19:30 "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.

It is finished! When Jesus uttered that triumphant declaration, the day of atonement was completed. Our sins were transferred to him, and he took them away from the presence of God so that he will remember them no more.

Then what? Where do we go from there? Where do I go in my preaching from there? Well, what happened in Leviticus 16? What happened next on the day of atonement, after that goat was sent away? The people waited for Aaron's return from the Most Holy Place. And there would be great excitement, great anticipation. The thrill of joy and expectant hope.

And when he does return, he removed those simple linen garments and put back on the priestly robes of beauty, after again cleansing himself.

v.23-24

Now, it is time for the burnt offering, that sacrifice of dedication and consecration with which God was so thoroughly pleased. The sweet smelling sacrifice of total devotion.

And it was a day of celebration!

v.29

It is a sabbath celebration, a day of rest. A day to afflict your souls. Now, that's a bit of an unfortunate translation, because we

usually think of affliction as something hard and burdensome. And sadly, many people view sabbath keeping as that kind of affliction. “Oh, those hard and burdensome rules about the sabbath. Why, it’s as if God just wants to add to your troubles, by forbidding you from doing all sorts of things on the sabbath.”

But that isn’t what it means to “afflict your souls.” The idea is to humble yourself, to humble yourselves by fixing all your attention upon the Lord and his work.

So it is, that sabbath meant ceasing from your work. Also, v.31

Why? Why the prohibition? Why is the Day of Atonement to be considered a sabbath? Why? Look at, v.30

And that’s why we ought to enjoy the sabbath today as well. Not that we send another goat into the wilderness with our sins. But that we rest in that atonement that has already been accomplished for us.

We rest from our ordinary affairs of life, in order to rejoice in our cleansing from sin! We enjoy a sabbath rest by enjoying the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who has cleansed us, that we may be clean from all our sins before the Lord.

And if that is your joy, what will you be doing? Dear ones, the holy sabbath is a day of holy convocation! If you are truly delighting in your salvation, then you will be eagerly delighting in the opportunity for worship.

Turn to,
Lev. 23:26 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 27 “Also

the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. 28 “And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God.”

There are warnings to follow, to be sure, and sabbath breakers were cut off from among the people. But it is the joy of the sabbath that is the natural conclusion of the day of atonement. A day to rejoice and celebrate because the high priest dared to go into that Most Holy Place with blood, the blood of atonement.

Now, our joy is not in Aaron the high priest, but in Jesus.

And we don’t have the ceremonial sabbaths associated with these feast and festivals any longer. But we do have an abiding command, one of ten, calling us to this delightful and joyful celebration of our redemption.

Heb. 4:9 “There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.”

It is a weekly sabbath. And what is the purpose of it? What is the purpose of afflicting our souls, humbling our souls, by refraining from our normal work and engagements? Isaiah answers that question best.

Is. 58:13 “If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, 14 Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The

mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

That great chapter also speaks about the results of a proper spirit of sabbath worship as well, in,

Is. 58:8 “Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’”

I suspect the people who took part in this day of atonement would have used those words to describe their own experiences. They would ride on the high hills of the earth! In our common religious vernacular, it was a great spiritual high!

In the New Covenant, though, we don’t have to wait for one day every year! We don’t have to wait for one man to enter the Most Holy Place. We can do it every week. We can delight ourselves in the joy of the sabbath every week. We, ourselves, can go into that most holy place every week. We can meet with God, and we can know that he will be willing to meet with us.

I don’t know about you, but I need that spiritual refreshment. It is the highlight of the week, that which is anticipated throughout all the other days. I need that rest, from the pressures and problems of the world in which we live. And I am thankful, every sabbath day, for the opportunity.

So this day is our Day of Atonement. And instead of a scapegoat being sent into the wilderness, we have a banquet table. It is the Lord’s table. And we are his guests.

This is a holy place! And by his own promise, God is present

with us.

Heb. 10:19 “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”