

LEVITICUS 16

Day of Atonement





Leviticus 16:1-10

Focus Thoughts

The Day of Atonement. It was the greatest day of the year!

Chapter 16 is at the heart of Leviticus, arguably of the entire Scriptures, as it describes what happened on the tenth day of the seventh month in ancient Israel. According to Jewish tradition, that day was unforgettable for many reasons: Adam had sinned and repented, Abraham was circumcised, Isaac was offered up on Mount Moriah, and more recently Moses had made atonement for the idolatry of the golden calf and the LORD had given him the second set of tablets on which were written the commandments – all on that day. However above all else, this was now the greatest day of the year because it was declared to be the Day of Atonement.²⁵ And if we are to understand what it means to be holy in God's eyes, there is no more important passage in Old Testament scripture than this. As one commentator has put it: "Atonement is the whole message of Scripture."²⁶ The New Testament documents cannot be read well nor the gospel understood without a thorough understanding of Leviticus 16.

The day was full of drama hinging on the actions of Aaron, the High Priest. Unless God's regulations were strictly obeyed, his life would be forfeited. His disobedient sons, Nadab and Abihu, had already died, burnt to death, at the entrance to the Tent.²⁷ Now Aaron, dressed in white linen as a sign of repentance, was not only to approach the Tent, but to go through the courtyard, past the altar, into the Holy Place, then through the heavy curtain into the Holy of Holies, into the darkness and the cloud of God's presence where stood the Ark of the Covenant with its solid gold covering and hovering angels. Here was God's power and glory, the earthly throne of Yahweh. And Aaron was to enter not just once – but three times.

On the first occasion, Aaron carried incense and a censer full of burning coals from the altar (16:12-13). Clouds of perfumed smoke filled the room, covering God's glory from the direct gaze of the High Priest. Then a second time, with bull's blood to sprinkle on the Ark and the ground directly in front of it (16:14). Then again, a third time, with the blood of a slain goat (16:15). When the ceremony was complete, the High Priest and his family, the tabernacle, and the people of Israel were clean in the LORD's eyes – for another year.

This was the day of "atonement," the day when the holy God and his imperfect people were again made one, hence the term "at-one-ment." However the Hebrew term more correctly means "to wipe out," "to erase," "to cover," or more generally "to remove."²⁸ This is what the LORD required, for if the holy creator was to dwell with unclean humans in a groaning creation then sin must be covered, guilt removed, shame erased, and holy wrath turned away. And throughout the Old Testament era, that covering and removal was most often signified by the shedding and sprinkling of the blood of animals and birds – over and over again.

In twenty-first century secular societies such as ours, these regulations may seem strange, perhaps even macabre. However, for New Testament authors, it is only in the light of such practices that the gospel of Jesus makes any sense at all. Christ assumes the role of the High Priest, entering into the presence of God once and for all. He brings his own blood rather than that of animal sacrifices. His human body is like the curtain barring the way to the Holy of Holies. At the cross it is broken and so the curtain is torn down. And Christ himself is the final dwelling place of God's mercy, taking the place of the Ark with its golden mercy seat in the



ancient tabernacle. At every point, the gospel portrays Jesus as the one who fulfills the events of the Atonement Day, once and for all. And we haven't yet spoken about the "scapegoat" driven into the wilderness, the significance of which we will consider in the article following this one.

Our reading of the gospel is too little governed by the stories of the Old Testament. It is too little grounded in the accounts of the holy God and his tabernacle living in the midst of rebellious Israel in the land of Canaan. It is time we grasped again the vast gap between the holiness of God and the fallenness of humans by understanding the gospel in its relationship with the complete story of scripture. May we lead our children and students to do likewise as we work with them today.

Prayer

Again LORD, we ask your forgiveness that we do not know your word, the Bible, as well as we ought. Forgive us LORD for our selective reading, for failing to take seriously the unity of the scriptures as bearing witness to the gospel of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Father, we thank you that we can be at peace with you. Thank you for the atoning blood of Jesus. Thank you for making reconciliation with us even though we know that we are sinful people. May we walk in new freedom today, filled with the Spirit of Christ. LORD, we commit our children and our students to you. We ask that they may understand what it means to be at peace with the holy creator God of the universe. Fill their lives with your presence we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Further Thoughts

"Expiation ... Propitiation" Frustration! What do they mean?

NT authors use many ideas to capture the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. Two of them are conveyed by these difficult words: Propitiation and Expiation. Consider the following explanation of these terms:

The word expiation begins with the prefix "ex", which means "out of" or "from." Expiation means to remove something. In biblical theology it has to do with taking away or removing guilt by means of paying a ransom or offering an atonement. It means to pay the penalty for something. Thus, the act of expiation removes the problem by paying for it in some way, in order to satisfy some demand. Christ's expiation of our sin means that He paid the penalty for it and removed it from consideration against us.

On the other hand, propitiation has to do with the object of the expiation. The prefix in this case is "pro", which means "for". Propitiation has to do with what brings about a change in God's attitude toward us, so that we are restored to the fellowship and favor of God. In a sense, propitiation points to God's being appeased. If I am angry because you have offended me, but you then appease me, the problem will be removed.

Thus propitiation brings in the personal element and stresses that God is no longer angry with us. Propitiation is the result of expiation. The expiation is the act that results in God's changing His attitude toward us. Expiation is what Christ did on the cross. The result of Christ's act of expiation is that God is propitiated. It is the difference between the ransom that is paid and the



attitude of the One receiving the ransom.²⁹

Leviticus 16:20-22

Focus Thoughts

Floppy ears. Big, sad eyes. The hairy black goat twitched ever so slightly, standing quietly at the tabernacle entrance. It was held, facing the gathered multitude, awaiting the High Priest's return. Its fate had been sealed by the casting of lots.

When Aaron came back this goat would be driven into the wilderness to "Azazel" (16:10) – possibly the name of a demonic being to which the goat was being sent, however more likely a reference to the deserted place far away, utterly removed and completely separate from Israel's forgiven people – a place from which the goat would not return.

This ceremony was unlike any other on the day of atonement. In the sight of the people, Aaron laid both hands on the head of the chosen goat (16:21). As their priestly representative, he made confession for Israel's faults. Three different words are used in 16:21 – "iniquities," "transgressions," and "sins." Aaron was not transferring his own guilt to the goat, rather all the sins of the nation, every wrong deed, each unintended failure and deliberate act of defiance. All was confessed over the chosen goat.

Then a designated priest took the goat away. Tradition has it that the people lined the path. As the goat passed they pulled at its wool, spat and struck out, whistled at and wounded it. This was the despised goat on which the nation's sins had been laid. And somewhere in the Judean wilderness, a long way from Jerusalem, tradition has it that the goat was momentarily freed and then thrown from a cliff face, to be injured and perhaps killed in its fall, so as never to return. Using a system of signal flags, the priest would then message back to the High Priest and the gathered throng that the people's sins were forgiven – for another twelve months.

Two goats had been chosen on the day of atonement. The first was slaughtered as a sin offering, its blood sprinkled inside the Holy of Holies, the throne room of Yahweh. (16:15 ff.) The second was driven to Azazel. If the first animal's sacrificial death pictured the means of atonement, then this second animal, widely referred to since William Tyndale's 1530 translation of the Bible as the "scapegoat," pictured the effect of atonement, the complete removal of guilt. It is this removal that the psalmist celebrates: "As far as the east is from west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."³⁰ And the fate of both goats richly image the death of Christ Jesus as God's "once and for all" act of atonement, to take away the sins of the world.

Guilt and shame have always destroyed human life and liberty. They continue to do so in our times and places. This is an era when we are not so sure about distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, guilt and forgiveness, shame and acceptance. Such uncertainty is a contributing factor to high incidences of depression and despair, particularly among young people. Teachers and parents must again lay foundations in these areas of human experience and surely the words of Leviticus 16 and the ancient ceremonies that gave rise to them provide a critical starting point for understanding and instruction. The prophet Isaiah wrote of a suffering servant who, like the scapegoat, would bear our griefs and carry our sorrows,



one on whom iniquity would be laid, one who would be taken away and cut off from the land of the living.³¹ Christ Jesus became that suffering servant. And in the light of the gospel, New Testament authors celebrate the hope and expectation that we can stand before God without shame. The freedom of forgiveness through Christ has been declared by Almighty God. It can also be embraced within human societies in which we offer each other the same grace the LORD has offered us. May we lead our children and our students into such freedom today.

Prayer

LORD, we often live as though we were unforgiven. We bear our own guilt. We wallow in our shame. We punish ourselves. Please forgive us. Today, we recognise again your gift of forgiveness through Christ. As we read in the Scriptures, we understand that he has taken our sins away. They have been separated from us, and we from them, as the east is from the west. LORD, help us to live in the freedom of forgiveness. Help us not to take your grace for granted – as though it were cheap – for we recognise that Christ died on the cross for us. He took our place and bore your wrath against our wrongdoing. Thank you LORD. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

²⁵G. F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* [reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978], 326, and M. D. Herr, "Day of Atonement," *Enclad* 5:1382

²⁶Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*. Map on lining papers. (233). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

²⁷Leviticus 10

²⁸Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*. Map on lining papers. (231). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

²⁹Quoted from *Tabletalk*, June 13, 1990, accessed on 7 July 2008 from: <http://net.bible.org/illustration.php?topic=517>

³⁰Psalm 103:12

³¹See Isaiah 53:4 and 53:8



¹⁹Leviticus 11:45

²⁰Mark 7:19

²¹Demarest, G. W. quoted in Rooker, M. F. (2001, c2000). Vol. 3A: Leviticus (electronic ed.). Logos Library System, The New American Commentary (196). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers

²²See for example Luke 5:12-14

²³Luke 7:22-23

²⁴This story is taken from the website of the Leprosy Mission in New Zealand. It was accessed on 10 July 2008 from <http://www.leprosymission.org.nz/index.shtml>