

The Day of Atonement

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Before we continue our series, In My Place, a series on the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, let's pray and ask God to bless our time together.

This morning I want to talk to you about a problem that the people in today's passage faced and a problem that every human being – all of us face as well.

How can people, who are sinful, have a relationship with a holy God in whom there is no sin? How can sinful people relate to a God who is angry at their disobedience? How can those who have transgressed God's law enter into a relationship of peace with a God whose pure and righteous wrath is stirred and provoked by their every sin?"

Well the answer in both the Old and New Testaments is this:

We need a perfect substitute to bear our sin and absorb the wrath that we deserve.

Two weeks ago we saw how this point was made through the first Passover in Exodus 12. There, a blemish free lamb was slain for each family, and its blood was sprinkled on the door of each Jewish home. The lamb died in the place of the firstborn children of each Hebrew family, saving them from God's judgment which fell upon Pharaoh and everyone in Egypt for their rebellion against God's word.

And today, we want to look at **Leviticus 16** to provide us with a different vantage point from which we can marvel at the beauty and brilliance of this same glorious truth – that Jesus died in our place to save us from the punishment for sin that we deserved. The vantage point I am talking about is provided for us by the Day of Atonement – or Yom Kippur as our Jewish friends call it.

The Day of Atonement was the climax of the sacrificial system which as a whole was God's ordained means to resolve the problem we introduced earlier:

*How can those who have sinned against God in the past
who continue to transgress His law on a daily basis
who will continue to sin in the future...
How can they **enjoy relationship** with the One
whom they have so grievously offended?*

Now it's important for us to note here that though thousands of years separate us, we have a lot in common with the people of the Old Testament. In particular we have this in common: the mountain of our iniquity, sin and uncleanness is simply too high and too steep for us to climb (Goligher). Our sin stands as a huge barrier between us and fellowship with God. We simply cannot get to God on our own for as the Apostle Paul has said:

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

If you think back to Exodus 20, when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai – where was God? Well, he was at the top of the mountain with Moses. And where were the people? They were at the bottom of the mountain; and God told them in effect "don't you dare attempt to climb the mountain".

He said that if they even touched the mountain they were to be stoned to death (Ex.19:12). Why was that? Well, because God is holy and pure and the people were sinful and impure.

The people proved their impurity by worshipping the golden calf in defiant rebellion against Yahweh even at the very moment Moses was receiving the law of God on behalf of the people. On that day God gave His people the Law – and a little later on in the book of Leviticus he gave them sacrifices– including the chief sacrifice we read about in our passage – and why? Because he knew they would fail to keep his law – and because he knew that on their own they could not even begin to draw near to God. Apart from Christ brothers and sisters, this is the situation of each person here as well.

What I want to show you this morning is that the ceremonies commanded for the Day of Atonement served a picture, or a dramatic illustration, as an “acted out prophecy” if you will, foreshadowing what Jesus would one day accomplish on the Cross (for more on that you can read Hebrews 8,9 &10). I want to help you understand how the high priest, the sin offering and the scapegoat each point to Christ and his work of substitutionary atonement. I want to establish, again, the necessity of substitution and I want our hearts to be stirred afresh to worship God for our great salvation.

So looking at Leviticus 16, our first observation is that

The High Priest Points to Jesus

16:1 *The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died...*

Let’s just stop right there.

Some of you may recall that earlier in Leviticus 10, Aaron’s two sons Nadab and Abihu, acting in their role as priests sought to burn incense before the Lord in a way that was not authorized by the Lord – and as a consequence, “fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them”. And the lesson in that for God’s people was that you dare not relate to God casually – as if He is on the same level as you are – but instead God is to be related to as holy. And you can’t have a relationship with him at all if you don’t come to him by means of The Way he has laid out in his Word.

2 *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.*

So what God is saying is that the holy of holies (the most holy place)– that small room in the tabernacle where the ark of the covenant held the ten commandments – and where God would appear in the cloud of incense – was off limits to Aaron, the high priest. The exception to this would be the Day of Atonement – which occurred once a year....which is spoken of a little later.

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.*

The Holy Place of course was the area of the tabernacle just outside of the Most Holy Place – the holy of holies. So when Aaron comes into the Holy Place, he is to bring a bull and a ram.

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*

So the high priest has to be bathed and clean, and wear special clothing for the occasion of making sacrifice unto the Lord. The sash around his waist was so that if the high priest died while sprinkling blood on the mercy seat within the holy of holies, temple workers could use a rope to pull him out.

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

Now what you need to know here is that these initial sacrifices are for Aaron and the other priests – because they too were sinful. Now let's jump down to verses Leviticus 16:11-14 where the author Moses continues to talk specifically about the sacrifice for Aaron and the priests.

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.

So, what's happening here? Well, before we even get to the sacrifice for the people, Aaron has to make sacrifice for himself. Why? Well because although the high priest could become externally clean and "perfect", if you will, by taking a bath and wearing certain clothing – the priest was fundamentally a deeply flawed and sinful individual – just as we are.

You see, the one performing the act of atonement for sin, was himself a sinner profoundly unholy and unacceptable to God! Therefore, in order for **him** to enter into the Holy of Holies – where the presence of God dwelt in glory and purity and majesty and power – blood needed to be shed on his behalf, lest he be consumed like Nadab and Abihu!

Even Aaron needed one who would die in **his** place – which only served to draw attention the fact that a greater high priest was needed – a perfect high priest, a pure high priest, a holy high priest – a priest acceptable to God by virtue of his own merits and his own righteousness who could perform a perfect once for all, entirely effective act of atonement – utterly and completely acceptable to God and never to be repeated again.

And who is that High priest? He is quite obviously our wonderful Savior Jesus Christ. Speaking of him, the author of Hebrews writes (Heb. 7:26-28):

26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. 28 For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Folks, each one of us here, needs not only a perfect sacrifice – but someone qualified to offer that sacrifice to God on our behalf – in other words *to do the work* of bringing us salvation. When Jesus went to the Cross, with every drop of His blood, with every tear he shed, with every grief he bore – e wasn't just a passive recipient of the punishment we deserved, but he was also the great high priest who in love offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice. Do you remember what Jesus says in John 10?

*the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down **of my own accord**. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.*

Indeed Jesus performed *the work of salvation* for us that we could never perform for ourselves and which no other human priest could perform for us. I want to conclude this point by reading from Hebrews 4 where the author writes:

*"14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, **yet without sin**. 16 Let us then with confidence **draw near to the throne of grace**, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

Folks, let this truth sink deeply into our souls: we can draw near to God today, because of Jesus' high priestly work on our behalf. What are you going through this week? What new trials do you face? Where do you need mercy? Have you come to the Lord and his throne of grace in prayer? Remember, you have a relationship with the Creator of the universe and He promises mercy as you draw near. In all your trials and suffering – do not forget that His throne of grace is open to you and his love is toward you. Draw near to Him. His presence and his mercies await you there.

Now lets move on to our second observation:

The Sin Offering Points to Jesus

Let's pick things up in verse 15 which is about the atoning sacrifice that was made for the people.

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.*

Now what's happening here is that a goat is selected to be slaughtered on behalf of the people who, by virtue of their sin, have made the tabernacle – the place of worshipping God – unclean – and therefore cannot approach God without justice being executed. And as we talked about last time, the Bible says that 'the wages of sin is death' and that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.' So in our passage, Instead of the people dying – who dies? – the goat. The innocent goat is punished instead of, in place of, as a substitute for, guilty Israel.

The life of the innocent goat is exchanged for the lives of the people – which is of course a shadow of what Jesus has done for us. And listen: If you look closely enough at the shadow in this text– it is not difficult to see Jesus hanging suspended upon the Cross for your sins and mine. For through the death of our innocent Savior, a new society of people washed in the blood of the Lamb has been created. This new society is called the church and in the NT, it is this new society of redeemed people who are the living tabernacle or the living temple of God (2 Cor. 6:16).

Back then, only one man had access into God's presence and then only once a year. But now, each and everyone of us as His people, have access into the presence of God for as Jesus has said – where two or three are gathered, there I am with them.

If we lived in the OT age, not one person here would have access into God's presence. Not one person here would be permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies. But now through the blood of Jesus, all who call upon the name of the Lord may freely enter into His presence without fear or shame. And one day our experience of His presence – which we now know in part will be full and complete! For in Revelation we read:

21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place [1] of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, [2] and God himself will be with them as their God. [3] 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Folks I trust you can see – that the sin offering on the Day of Atonement, points to Christ who died in our place that we might have access to God – not only now...but forever in a place where there will be no weeping or sorrow.

Now for our third observation...

The Scapegoat Points to Jesus.

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."

At this point, the sin offering portion of the ceremony is complete and what's left is for the high priest to lay both of his hands on the head of this second goat, this live goat and confess over that goat all the sins and transgressions of the people. What this symbolizes is imputation. The guilt of Israel's sin was being imputed to that innocent goat. And in the same way what took place on the Cross is that our sins – your sins, my sins – were imputed to Jesus.

I want you to just consider that right now. As Jesus was crucified your sins – all of them – past, present and future, were laid upon his innocent head. This is why the apostle declares that "he became sin, who knew no sin that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

So the high priest laid his hands on the goat and confessed the sins of Israel over that goat, and then that goat was sent away into the wilderness to die – which reminded the Israelites that by virtue of the sin offering– their sins had been removed from the sight of God. He was not going to hold their sins before his eyes or treat them as their sins deserved.

That is what through the Cross, God has done for you and me. The Psalmist declares "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." But the only reason he can say that is because as Matthew 27 records

at...about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus cried out these words in utter anguish. To have that blessed eternal fellowship with the Father broken, to have that beautiful unity disrupted by our sin, was torment to the Savior's soul. In that moment, as he took our sins upon Himself, Jesus became our scapegoat. He went to that wilderness of abandonment in order that we who believe in Jesus might never ever, ever go to that place; in order that God might be able to say to us in Hebrews – "I will **never** leave you or forsake you."

Because Jesus was forsaken, we who have embraced the Gospel can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we will never be forsaken. Shortly after Jesus uttered these words, He breathed his last and that at that moment, the temple curtain, which blocked access into the holy of holies, was torn in two. That was to show that Jesus' death on the Cross was effectual – it was a dramatic act of God to show that we now have access into the very presence of God.

CONCLUSION

Jesus resolves the problem all of us face.

*"How can people, who are sinful,
live in relationship with a holy God in whom there is no sin?"
How can they **enjoy relationship** with the One
whom they have so grievously offended?"*

Through Jesus and Jesus alone. The scriptures make clear that we need a perfect high priest; we need a sin offering; we need a scapegoat. Jesus is the final high priest; Jesus is the final sin offering and Jesus is the final scapegoat. There has only ever been one perfect substitute for sinful human beings. There is really is only one way for sinful people like you and me to enjoy relationship with a holy God. And that's through the perfect, innocent substitute who died in our place.

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