

The Book of Leviticus

Lesson 10: The Day of Atonement -- Leviticus 16:1-34

There is one day in Israel's calendar that towers over all the others. The Hebrews called it Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and on that single day each year the whole weight of a nation's guilt was gathered up, carried to the very throne of God, and dealt with by blood. Picture the morning: the camp is hushed, no fires of celebration, no music in the streets. Israel is fasting and afflicting its soul. Everyone knows that today the high priest will do what no ordinary man dares to do. He will walk behind the veil into the Most Holy Place, into the room where God's presence dwells above the mercy seat, and he will go in alone.

Leviticus 16 opens with a reminder we must not skip past. It comes right after the deaths of Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, who offered strange fire and fell dead before the Lord. So God says to Aaron, in effect, do not come whenever you please into the holy place behind the veil, or you will die. The point lands like a stone in the chest. The presence of God is not a casual thing. A holy God and a sinful people cannot simply mingle as if nothing stood between them. Something stands between them, and its name is sin, and the wages of sin is death.

Yet here is the wonder of this chapter. God does not leave Israel shut out forever. He opens a way. He tells Aaron exactly how to come, with what blood, behind which veil, on which day, so that atonement can be made and the people can be clean. The mercy seat, the blood, the incense, the two goats, every detail is a doorway. It says that the God who is too holy to be approached carelessly has Himself provided the means by which sinners may be covered and brought near.

And as we read it, we are not merely studying ancient ritual. We are watching a shadow fall across the page, the shadow of a cross and an empty tomb and a High Priest greater than Aaron. The writer of Hebrews tells us plainly that all of this was a figure for the time then present, pointing forward to Christ, who entered not into a tent made with hands but into heaven itself, with His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption for us. So read this chapter slowly. It is one of the clearest pictures of the gospel in the whole Old Testament.

Group Discussion: Why do you think God surrounded His own presence with so many warnings, veils, and conditions? What does the carefulness of Leviticus 16 teach us about the holiness of God and the seriousness of approaching Him?

Personal Reflection: When you come before God in prayer or worship, do you come with a casual heart or with reverence and gratitude that a way has been opened for you at great cost? What would change this week if you really believed your access to God was purchased by blood?

Read Leviticus 16:1-34

Study Questions

1. What does the warning to Aaron in 16:1-2, given right after the death of Nadab and Abihu, teach us about the holiness of God and why sinful people cannot approach Him carelessly?
2. When you think about your own sin, do you tend to take it lightly, or do you feel the weight of it as Leviticus 16 presents it? Why does that difference matter?
3. Trace what the high priest had to do before he could enter the Most Holy Place (washing, the special linen garments, the sacrifice for his own sin in 16:3-6, 11-14). What do these requirements reveal about the priest, the people, and the God they served?
4. Aaron had to make atonement for himself before he could make atonement for the people. Where in your own life do you need to deal honestly with your own sin before you try to help others with theirs?
5. Describe what happened with the two goats in 16:7-10, 15-22, one slain as a sin offering and one sent away alive bearing the sins of the people. What two truths about atonement do these two goats together teach?
6. The scapegoat carried Israel's sins away into a land not inhabited, never to return. Have you truly let God carry your confessed sins away, or do you keep dragging them back and carrying them yourself?

7. What was the significance of the blood being sprinkled on and before the mercy seat (16:14–15), the place above the ark where God met with His people? How did blood make a meeting between a holy God and a guilty nation possible?
8. The Day of Atonement was a day of fasting and afflicting the soul (16:29–31), not casual religion. What does genuine humbling and self-examination look like for you, and when did you last set time aside for it?
9. Hebrews 9:11–12, 24–28 and 10:1–22 declare that Christ is the true High Priest who entered heaven itself, not with the blood of goats but with His own blood, once for all. Using Leviticus 16 alongside Hebrews 9–10, explain in full how the Day of Atonement was a shadow fulfilled in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Address the high priest, the blood, the entrance behind the veil, the two goats, and the yearly repetition. Why does it matter that Christ's atonement does not need to be repeated?
10. Because Christ has opened a new and living way through the veil (Hebrews 10:19–22), how should you now draw near to God? What does it mean for the way you live, worship, and deal with sin that your great High Priest has already gone in for you and obtained eternal redemption?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 9:11–12, Christ entered the true Most Holy Place once for all with His own blood and obtained eternal redemption; Hebrews 9:24–28, Christ appears in heaven itself for us and will appear a second time apart from sin; Hebrews 10:1–14, the repeated sacrifices could not take away sin but Christ's one offering perfects forever; Hebrews 10:19–22, we may now draw near through the veil, that is His flesh, with a true heart; Romans

3:24–26, God set forth Christ as a propitiation through faith in His blood to declare His righteousness.

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