

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Leviticus 16

Dr. George O. Wood

Leviticus 16 is the chapter we're looking at today, one of the great chapters of the Old Testament. I'm going to read selected verses from Leviticus 16. "The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the LORD. The LORD said to Moses, 'Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover [or the "mercy seat" as the King James says]. This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on. From the Israelite community he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. He is to cast lots for the goats—one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat'" (Leviticus 16:1–10, NIV). Verses 20–22, "When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's

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head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert” (NIV). Verses 29–34, ““This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or an alien living among you—because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean of all your sins. It is a sabbath of rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement. He is to put on the sacred linen garments and make atonement for the Most Holy Place, for the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and for the priests and all the people of the community. This is to be a lasting ordinance for you. Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.’ And it was done as the Lord commanded Moses” (NIV).

This is the Day of Atonement, known to us now as Yom Kippur. Perhaps our greatest familiarity with Yom Kippur arises out of the 1973 Egyptian invasion of the Sinai when it was Yom Kippur and the Jewish nation was caught unprepared for the invasion. The law for Yom Kippur follows the teaching that has been given in Leviticus 11–15. There have been laws regarding purification in these chapters—laws related to food, laws related to childbirth, laws related to skin disease, and laws related to bodily discharges.

Chapter 16 comes at the conclusion of all these to say that the sacrificial system recognized that in spite of all the safeguards for sacrifice to be given for sins committed, in spite of all the regulations, there will yet be sins for which there is no sacrifice given. People will be ignorant for the need of a sacrifice of a sin they have committed. They won’t be aware of it. Some will have been hesitant to offer sacrifice because they don’t want to own up to what is going on. So

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God simply ordained that once a year the slate would be wiped clean. And for all the people who didn't offer sacrifices and should have there would be a day in which one sacrifice given would atone for the whole mass of the people for a solid year. It's called Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement.

The solemnity of the day is seen in the fact that it was to be on the tenth day of the seventh month—both numbers indicate completeness. The idea is symbolically of completeness.

Atonement itself means to wipe clean. This Day of Atonement everything would be wiped clean.

I. In this Yom Kippur day there was a call for individuals to repent and to seek the face of God.

That was one of the major purposes for Yom Kippur. And it still is, even though now the Jewish nation cannot practice Yom Kippur as it would in the Old Testament, because the Jewish nation today does not have the Holy Place, it does not have the ark of the covenant, it does not have the temple in which to worship. Out of necessity when practiced today it is not a matter that involves the full teaching of the Old Testament. We learn in the Book of Hebrews that there is only one complete fulfillment of Yom Kippur and that is in Jesus Christ who has gone into the Holy of Holies on our behalf.

But it was a call for individuals to repent and to seek the face of God.

II. Another purpose is that God saw fit that every year the whole nation should renew its commitment to Him.

Yom Kippur provided that means of annually renewing the commitment of the whole nation to Him. There is a need in our own life today to periodically re-evaluate our commitment to the Lord and renew that commitment to Him.

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I, as many of you, grew up in a church where there was emphasis on recommitment. Especially this occurred in Sunday night services, when I don't know how many times on a Sunday night I walked down an aisle to rededicate my life to Jesus Christ. There's been a lot of criticism of that by some of us who went through that system because it gave us kind of a sense of insecurity about our salvation. We wondered if we'd ever be completely right before God. Yet there was a lot of value and there is still a lot of value in the continual recommitment of our life to God. If we don't act and renew our commitment, commitments have a way of sort of dying if we don't keep them at the forefront. God has a pattern in His word to regularly re-evaluate and renew our commitment to Him.

III. A third purpose for this Day of Atonement would be a reminder to the priest that they needed to be cleansed, as well as every article in the tabernacle needed to be cleansed.

There are really two significant things I want to say about Yom Kippur. They contrast with one another. This certainly was a heavy day. It was a day of solemnity. A day that was to be a day above all holy days, a day of solemnity. This was the day in the calendar year for such solemnity. It was a heavy day for a number of reasons. The first reason comes to us right out of the first couple of verses. The Lord gave the instructions for Yom Kippur to Moses after the death of the Aaron's two sons.

A. One reason for the day being a heavy day was the memory of Nadab and Abihu. Their story is told in Leviticus 10. What they did was go into the Holy of Holies and offer unauthorized fire. They were disregarding the instructions that had been given to them as priests by God and thought they would do it their own way. As a result of trying to do religion their own way, they were struck. The two oldest sons of Aaron practically on their day of ordination were devastated and buried.

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I think that probably the inference is that up until that time the going into the Holy of Holies had been more a matter of free access. But now because of this sin of Nadab and Abihu the access to the Holy of Holies had been limited to once as year. The memory of Nadab and Abihu had to bring to Aaron every time he went on the Day of Atonement into the Holy of Holies a sense of “I’m only going once a year because of something tragic that happened in my family.” That memory had to be a haunting thing for him. It was Nadab and Abihu who in Exodus 24 had gone with Aaron and the seventy elders of Israel up to the mount where Moses had received the commandments. They saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise His hand against these leaders of the Israelites. They saw God. They ate and drank. Nadab and Abihu had one of the most unusual privileges of all people. They saw the God of Israel. This sometimes gets confusing for us as we read the Old Testament because we find phrases that say you cannot see God and live. Then we read a phrase like this, “They saw the God of Israel.” The difference no doubt is the fact that the seeing here that’s described in Exodus 24 is the seeing of the God of Israel not face to face, but a sort of seeing His feet. The seeing face to face was what was evidently prohibited (see Exodus 33:20).

Nadab and Abihu were in a position of unusual spiritual privilege. Yet they were struck down. I think when you look at spiritual parallels today you do not have to search very far to realize that past spiritual experience is no guarantee of present spiritual vitality.

Is it possible that you are in this room this morning, and at one point in your spiritual experience you, like Nadab and Abihu, literally in a sense saw God and you ate and danced...you had an experience with God? You were close to God? You had a personal revelation of God in your

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heart, and your heart and life was alive with joy? But over the years something has happened within you; today you're nowhere in relationship with God as you were then.

The Lord is simply in this message, calling you back, reminding you that your past spiritual experience is not sufficient to carry you into today's needs, today's challenges. God wants you to have a whole fresh experience with Him and not depend or rely upon the past. God is merciful to us and He doesn't strike us as He struck Nadab and Abihu. He gives us the chance to come back and renew a childlike dedication to Him.

B. A second reason why the Day of Atonement was a heavy day for Aaron and for the people who participated in it is that there was necessity of sacrifice by the high priest for his own sins. Only one person could go into that Holy of Holies which represented standing before God. That person was the high priest and he had no ability to come there on his own. He had to come with blood. No one could ever enter the Holy of Holies without blood. God's presence was such that unless there had been some means of forgiving sin for the person who entered the Holy of Holies that person could not stand in the presence of God.

Sacrifice also was made for the people.

C. A third thing that made the day heavy was the modesty of dress that the priest wore. We had an earlier description in the Book of Exodus and also in the Book of Leviticus of the priests' regalia. And it was gorgeous, the outer garments that he had. If you had seen the high priest in his full vesture of office he would have taken rank over any academic procession of gowned doctors.

But he couldn't wear that when he went into the Holy of Holies—before God. He had to take off all the color, all the gems, all the splendor and simply wear white linen. When you stand in the presence of God, no matter what your uniform may be as it relates to other people, when you

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stand in the presence of God you're called upon to dress with humility and to be humble. The priest was reminded even through his dress that he was a mere mortal when he stood before God. He answered not for his office, he answered for himself when he stood before God.

The priest a lot of times wore his beautiful garments but not on this day. He humbled himself before God.

D. Another solemnity of the day was the limitation of sight within the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was dark for one thing. But another thing, God wanted to make sure that the high priest didn't even see the altar with the cherubim with the mercy seat which was the lid on the ark of the covenant. So He mandated that enough incense be wafted in the Holy of Holies so the high priest couldn't even see the atonement cover. Again, God was teaching His ancient people respect for Him. Teaching them an awesomeness in regard to worshipping Him. Then there was the affliction that was to be practiced by all the people as another sign of the heaviness of the day. They were to take it as a complete day of rest. They were to deny themselves during that day. This was to be a lasting ordinance for them.

They needed to recognize that this day, this day when God clears us of our sin is a sacred day to God. It's no cheap grace. It's an investment on God's part on our behalf.

One of the things that comes through on the Day of Atonement is the sense that is true throughout the whole Old Testament that the anger of the Lord is about to break out. The only thing that can stop that anger from breaking out is if there be a sacrifice and if blood be applied. And on the Day of Atonement the blood was applied to the ark of the covenant. To the mercy seat. Perpetually there is a sense that our sin has offended God and God's anger is about to break out. And the only thing that can prevent his anger from breaking out is an atonement. An offering that was given, a blood offering so that life is transferred for our life.

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Sometimes living in the age of the New Testament this almost sounds like a strange thought to us. Yet it's a very New Testament thought as well as an Old Testament thought. There is only one thing that can prevent the wrath of God from breaking out upon us and that is that Christ Jesus was sacrificed for us. Only when His blood has been applied to our lives is God's wrath no longer against us. We must not understand the wrath of God as though God just gets up in a bad mood and decides to punish people. The wrath of God is a righteous kind of wrath.

God's anger is much like this. He looks at the creation, which He has made. And looks at the fact that His creation has been marred. It is unacceptable to Him. His anger is motivated against it. It's as though if you had been the creator of a masterpiece and someone came along and defaced it and ruined your work, you would be angry with them. God designed us to be complete and holy and righteous—sons and daughters of God. Sin has defaced the creation of God and God's anger is therefore directed against it because imperfect and ruined works cannot hang in His royal hall. His wrath therefore is about to break out. The Day of Atonement is really a presentation of blood offering to redirect the wrath of God so that His love can be applied to us. From time to time I think we need to be reminded that God has a zeal for us. That zeal is seen in Jesus of Nazareth who came to die for our sins. If God took our sin as something light, if He could deal with it in another way other than the sacrifice of His Son, He would have. But we must deal with our sins as seriously as God deals with our sin. Any view of sin that is lighter than God's view of sin will leave an incomplete remedy in our lives.

IV. The Day of Atonement was a heavy day but the day of atonement was also healing day.

The healing of the day is seen from several illustrations out of the Day of Atonement.

A. I think one of the beautiful illustrations is seen in the story of the two goats—the scapegoat and the sacrificial goat. One goat was for the purpose of satisfying the claims of God and the

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second goat was for the purpose of satisfying our needs. On that Day of Atonement after Aaron had offered sacrifice for himself, two goats had been selected and lots were cast and one goat was to be sent into the wilderness. And one goat was to be immediately led to the altar of burnt offering. The goat that was led to the altar of burnt offering and killed was atonement for the sins of the people. It satisfied the claims of God. But the other goat, called the scapegoat—and we use the word whenever we want to transfer blame for doing something wrong to somebody else—the scapegoat was led into the tent and the priest laid his hands on the scapegoat and confessed all the sins of the people. Then the scapegoat was led out in the desert place, out in the wilderness and it was never to be seen again. By this act, the people of Israel were to know that not only had their sins been forgiven through the sacrifice of the goat but their sins were carried away and to be seen no more—the scapegoat going off in the wilderness. It's a dramatic story.

It reminds us of certain prophetic words that come to us, that God wants us to have in mind about our sins. Psalm 103:12, "For as far as the east is from the west so far does He remove our transgression from us." Isaiah 43:25, "I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake and I will not remember your sin." Micah 7:19, "Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."

The story of the Day of Atonement is that when God forgives our sins He forgives them completely. They are removed from us to not be remembered again. The slate is clean. If the Lord has forgiven us then the sin has been removed, as far as the east is from the west. Since the Scriptures tell us that God doesn't remember our sin, God has no recollection of that sin. It is gone.

That is one reason, by the way, we must be very sensitive to repeated sin. It maybe a repeat to us but it's not to God. It's fresh. God remembers them no more. Many of us have the view that God

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is recording our sin like a computer records all the information that's plugged into it. Any time God wants to readout our sins all he needs to do is step to the keyboard of the computer and out comes a printout of all of our sins. If someone were to try that the computer would say, "syntax error," because there is no printout. If our sins have been forgiven they have been forgiven completely. The scapegoat is telling us our sins are removed from us. Too many times we're defeated in our Christian life because we confess our sin and we don't believe God has forgiven us. But we live with it. God has really forgiven. Maybe we haven't forgiven ourselves and maybe we can't forget. But God has forgiven and God has forgotten. That's the beauty of the Day of Atonement. God really forgives and forgets sin.

B. Another fantastic thing about the Day of Atonement is the ark of the covenant. The ark was a little chest, made out of acacia wood, covered with gold. Inside of it were the tablets of the Law that God gave to Moses, Aaron's rod that budded, and a pot of manna. Most particularly the Law. The Law was there to say that in the Holy of Holies God's law stood. Over that box was a lid called the Mercy Seat, which was beaten out of solid gold. Out of the beaten gold were two cherubim whose wings touched one another over the top of the ark. This was the place in the Holy of Holies where the high priest would come and apply blood twice a year—one for his own sin and the other for the sins of the people.

There's something very dramatic about the ark of the covenant and what it tells us about God. God has in His nature both Law and grace, this Law which insists that righteous conduct be upheld, and His grace which forgives the sinner. They are in God in equal proportion. God's Law and God's grace. But we see the New Testament beginning to unfold in that ark of the covenant because what God has done in the Old Testament is not put His grace and His Law side by side. He has chosen to turn them so that His grace stands over His law. When we have broken

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God's Law and when we have failed He has chosen to elevate His grace over His Law. That's one of the beauties about the Day of Atonement that has been given for us. Christ forgives us when we have broken His law.

C. The third beautiful thing about this day was the burnt offering, which was presented last after the sin offerings were all done and the goat had gone into the wilderness. The burnt offering was then finally presented to the Lord and it has always stood for the fact that now life could begin anew with rededication to God.

V. When you come to the Book of Hebrews, and especially chapters 9 and 10, you see the richer fulfillment of this Old Testament passage of Leviticus 16.

We find some differences between the observance that was described in Leviticus 16 and the observance as Christ keeps it for us.

A. We remember that Hebrews says that these things that were in the Old Testament are simply copies of the true worship center that is in the heavens. Here is where everything begins to differ when we compare the work of Christ with what happened in Leviticus. We learn that the annual Day of Atonement has been replaced. There is but one Day of Atonement now in all of human history. That day was the day of Calvary. Christ need not again as the Old Testament priests go in year by year to offer sacrifices first for His own behalf and then those of the people but Christ has once for all entered the heavenly place. There need be no more sacrifice for sin. Christ is the one sacrifice.

B. The second distinction is that Christ had no need to offer sacrifice for Himself. Unlike all the Old Testament priests who had to first offer sacrifice for himself He being without sin did not offer sacrifice for Himself.

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C. A third thing is that in this Old Testament observance Jesus fulfills more than one of the symbols. He is the high priest. But He is more than that. He is also the sin offering. And He is the scapegoat. He is the one who is wounded on our behalf and yet He also carries our sins away with Him and He suffered outside the camp like the goat that was taken outside the camp to wander around the region of the dead so Christ has suffered outside the camp for us and born our sins there.

D. Another tremendous thing about Jesus, according to Hebrews, is that He has rent the veil, the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place and which created a barrier which only the high priest could enter once a year. That's all gone now and we can enter boldly into God's presence and have a view of God that even the Old Testament priests were never allowed to have.

E. Then we're also told in the Book of Hebrews that when Jesus comes to us again it will not be to bear our sins but to bring us salvation. Hebrews has almost this concept that the Lord is still in the Holy of Holies. He has gone into the heavens where He is making intercession for us but when He comes again for us He is going to bring us His salvation—that is, the complete salvation for our body as well as for our spirit. Christ now is in the Holy of Holies waiting to come out and when He comes out again He will bring us to Himself.

F. One last thing should be pointed out. The Old Testament worshipper needed to have faith, as well as we need to have faith. When that high priest was in that Holy of Holies the worshipper couldn't see what was going on. And the worshipper could never see the fact that God forgave his sins. He had to simply rest in the fact that if God said He would He would indeed do it. We have not seen Christ die. We only have it in His Word. But we have a word that is reliable and trustworthy and if we're going to have deliverance in our lives we must begin our Christian

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experience with faith in Him and totally relying on the fact that when He says He will carry away our sins He will do that very thing.

The Day of Atonement—a heavy day in the Old Testament and yet a glad day. A day in which God has met the needs of His people, in which He has taken away their sins.

Closing Prayer

Father, as we look to Your Word we're very conscious of the fact that the way of worshipping You is not something we would invent. We would not invent this Holy of Holies. We would not invent the ark of the covenant. We wouldn't invent the goat dying for sin. We wouldn't invent the scapegoat going off in the wilderness. We would simply have a nice solution whereby You could sign a document or whereby we could get off if we passed with 70 percent or something like that. But You in Your eternal nature have determined that no sin could enter into Your presence and that You would be holy and lifted up and exalted above all. And that the only way into Your presence is with blood. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Lord, in this age when we are so tempted by the secularism and by the humanism of the age to rely upon the idea of man's goodness we come again to Your cross. We come again to Your word and we find again that startling word, "There is none righteous no not one" (Romans 3:10). We all are in need of Your forgiving grace. You are the one slain for us and You have presented Your own blood in the very presence of God as a means whereby we escape the judgment of sin and have life. We thank You for that life today. We praise You and bless You. Lord, if there are persons here in this audience this morning who have never trusted in You for their salvation, never come to You to have the slate wiped clean as atonement means, may today the slate be wiped clean in their lives. I pray too especially for those who have in hearing this message today realized that their experience with You is not where it was where it was one time in the past.

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That the ardor for You has tapered away and You're calling us to be a people who have a fresh and living commitment to You. You're calling on us to renew our dedication and love for You, to lay aside the sins which have beset us and have You wipe the slate clean, the slate of our Christian experience. To let sin be gone and dealt with and to enter into new life with You. Grant, Lord Jesus, that each of us may have that fresh renewed experience with You, that causes our hearts to skip with joy and our feet to tread with lightness and laughter because the Lord God has forgiven us our sins and brought us health and joy and peace. We ask these things Lord in Your name. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Amen.