

Jesus and the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)

Hello, my name is Stephen Sizer. Please open your Bible and turn with me to Leviticus 16. Today we are going to meet Jesus in a very unusual place. Have you ever heard the expression ‘a scapegoat’? Where did this expression come from? The term goes way, way back to Leviticus 16 when God introduced an annual festival called the Day of Atonement. Also known as Yom Kippur, it became the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. It is a day of national mourning, of humiliation, of fasting, repentance and forgiveness. The word “Atonement” means “to cover or reconcile”. Sin defiles and separates us from God. Atonement reconciles us to God by means of a sacrifice in our place. That is why the Day of Atonement has been called “The Good Friday of the Old Testament”. And here is the clue to what we can learn from Leviticus about the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Jesus is our High Priest

“The Lord said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron that he is 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. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. This is how Aaron

is to enter the Most Holy Place: He must first bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.” (Leviticus 16:2-3)

Every September on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest bore the heavy burden. He became for one day, the mediator between God and His people. Every year on this special day the responsibility was all his. He had to do it alone. No one else was allowed to be with him. He entered the Holy of Holies alone, wearing special clothes and carrying a bowl of blood. He offered a sacrifice to atone for his sin and those of his people. So sacred and so terrifying was this holy place, the people tied little bells to the High Priest's clothes so that they could hear if he stopped moving. And they tied a rope to his leg so that if he fell ill, or died while in the Holy of Holies, they could drag him out. In the New Testament, Hebrews compares the High Priest's role with Jesus.

“But when Christ came as high priest ... He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.” (Hebrews 9:11-12)

Jesus is indeed our great High Priest.

2. Jesus is our Atoning Sacrifice

“Then Aaron 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 two 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. (Leviticus 16:7-9)

Aaron brought two goats to the entrance of the tent of meeting. There the fate of each goat was determined by lot. One would die, the other would live. The first goat was sacrificed to show how seriously God viewed sin, that sin leads to death. Aaron was instructed,

“He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull’s blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been... having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.” Leviticus 16:14-17)

The prophet Isaiah looked forward to the day when the Messiah would fulfil this role in Isaiah 53:

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

Drawing on this picture, Apostle John explicitly describes Jesus as the atonement sacrifice.

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2)

The writer to the Hebrews goes further showing how the Lord Jesus fulfilled both the role of High Priest and the atoning sacrifice as well.

“He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:12-14)

Notice the contrast however, between the High Priest and Jesus, and between the animal sacrifices and Jesus sacrifice.

- Aaron was spotless in dress, Christ was spotless in character.
- Aaron entered the earthly tabernacle, Christ entered the heavenly tabernacle.
- Aaron was hidden behind the veil, Christ ripped open the veil.
- Aaron offered for his own sins, Christ offered for ours.
- Aaron entered once a year, Christ entered once for all
- Aaron offered for the whole nation, Christ offered for the whole world.
- Aaron offered many sacrifices, Christ offered one.
- Aaron offered animal blood, Christ offered His own.

Jesus then not only our High Priest. Jesus is also our Atoning Sacrifice.

3. Jesus is our Scapegoat

The first goat represented the atonement for sin. The second goat symbolised what had happened to their sin.

“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 wilderness as a scapegoat... 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 head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness ... The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness.” (Leviticus 16:10; 20-22)

The High Priest had to place His hands on the head of the scapegoat, and confess all the sin and rebellion of the people. Then the goat was led out into the wilderness. This symbolised the removal of the people's sins as far away as possible. King David had the scapegoat in mind when he wrote in Psalm 103, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12). As the scapegoat walks further and further into the wilderness and finally disappeared on the horizon, the people had the visible confirmation and assurance that their sins had been atoned for. The first animal that died showed how God had forgiven their sins. The second animal showed that God had now not only forgiven but also forgotten their sins. Forgiven and forgotten, the two go together. If it is not forgotten, it is not forgiven. But in Jesus Christ, our sin is both forgiven and forgotten. |Justified means 'just as if I never sinned'. In Jesus Christ, sin has been banished to a barren and uninhabitable place where it belongs. The word translated wilderness is 'Azazel' in Hebrew. It means much more than simply the desert or wilderness.

The desert was also thought to be the place where demons and evil powers lived. In contemporary Hebrew, the word Azazel is used for hell. So in Hebrew you might say “Go to Azazel”. I wonder if this image of the scapegoat is to be found in an event that occurred at the beginning of Jesus ministry, when the Spirit of God drove Jesus into the desert to be tested by Satan? (Matthew 4:1-11). Or perhaps after his death when he went to Hades to preach to the departed? (1 Peter 3:19-20). It is surely no coincidence that it was in the desert that John the Baptist cried out when he saw Jesus ““Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Did John foresee that Jesus would be the scapegoat? This is why Jesus death at Calvary is called the sacrifice of atonement – because he covers all our sin. The Book of Leviticus emphasizes the fact that blood, represents life.

“For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” (Leviticus 17:11)

Like the story of Abraham who almost sacrificed Isaac in Genesis. Like the Passover lamb sacrificed in Exodus,

the image of the two goats offered on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus, point to Jesus. To Jesus who would make further sacrifices unnecessary. Hebrews 10 says,

“Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” (Hebrews 10:11-14)

Here then, on the Day of Atonement, we see a glorious picture of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Great High Priest who intercedes for us. He is our Atonement Sacrifice who takes the punishment for our sin. He is the scapegoat who carries our sins far away. If we recognise Jesus as our High Priest, our mediator, our scapegoat, who died in our place, we may enter God’s presence without guilt or fear,

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:19-25).

So, when you are tempted to look for a scapegoat to cover up your failures or mistakes, remember you already have one. The one who in love, willingly gave himself in your place. May God bless you!