

Text: Leviticus 16:1-34 - The Day of Atonement

Exegetical Big Idea: God has provided a means of atonement for sins in the form of sacrifice.

Homiletical Big Idea: **Good Friday was the final and true Day of Atonement.**

Fallen Condition Focus: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the result of that sin is the wrath of God and death.

Background:

This chapter comes at an interesting place in the book of Leviticus. There's the exciting events of chapter 10 with Nadab and Abihu which we'll talk about in a moment, but then from chapter 10 to chapter 16 are the chapters that we tend to read quickly. Those are the chapters about skin disease, and mould, and things like that.

And then we come to chapter 16. Which almost seems out of place. Chapter 16 is what is called the Day of Atonement, the annual sacrifice that the priest makes on behalf of the people of God to atone for (or pay for) all of the sins of the previous year.

Here's the point. God has laid out laws to follow in order to be in relationship with him, but we have a constant problem of not only breaking those laws and sinning, but also just being in a sinful and broken world we are separated from God for many reasons. This is what the word "unclean" in the Old Testament generally means. Whether because of sin, or because we live in a broken sinful world, we are "unclean", while God is always pure and "clean".

If you eat food you're not allowed to, you're unclean. If you are close to a dead person or animal, you're unclean. If you have a skin rash, you're unclean. If you have mould in your house, you're unclean.

Chapter 16 is the way to deal with that uncleanness.

Intro:

I've been excitedly learning about the recent Artemis space missions. The plan for these missions is to send people back to the moon. The last time someone was on the moon was in 1972. Before my time. I've always been fascinated with space stuff, so when I heard that NASA was planning on sending more people to the moon I got pretty excited. The launch that happened this past Wednesday was pretty amazing to watch.

Well why would they do that you might ask? Well the answer is that sending a spaceship to the moon is a very hard thing to do, and so you have to build up to it. You have to do missions that take small steps at a time in order to make sure when the real day comes for the mission to go to the moon, everything has been practiced and ready.

And even so, before they land people on the moon, they have to do a mission of sending a spaceship up there to land that has no one on board.

All of these missions are exciting, but all of them are only practice for the real thing. The real big one, is the mission that is planned for a few years still, where people will actually land and walk again on the moon.

All the missions up until that are simply getting ready for the big one to come.

In Leviticus 16, we are introduced to a special day on the Israelite calendar called “The Day of Atonement”. It happened once a year, and the point of the day was to pay for, or “atone”, for the sins of all the people of Israel.

But we see the Day of Atonement in a different way than the people of Israel in the Old Testament did. We see it as pointing to, and getting us ready, for the real and true Day of Atonement which is the day Jesus died on the Cross. The day we are recognizing and celebrating today. The day we call Good Friday.

And as we look back on the Day of Atonement that the Old Testament Israelites celebrated, we can actually see better what exactly Christ did on the Cross.

Because in actuality, that first Good Friday about 2000 years ago was the true Day of Atonement.

### **Good Friday was the final and true Day of Atonement.**

#### **Vv. 1-6: God is holy, and we have made ourselves unholy**

We are reminded in the opening verse of something that happened back in chapter 10. At this point the tabernacle is all set up and the priests have begun their work in it. God was very specific in his laws about how the priests were to perform the work in the tabernacle, and this is the issue in chapter 10. Two priests, Nadab and Abihu, enter into the Lord’s presence, which seems to be the inner part of the tabernacle called the Holy of Holies. This was a small separate room from the rest of the tabernacle which housed the Ark of the Covenant. This gold covered box with its solid gold lid signified God’s presence with his people. God of course is present everywhere, but in a special way he was present in this little room. Now separating this little room from the rest of the tabernacle was a giant thick curtain. If you’ve heard of the curtain around this time of year, that’s the curtain we’re talking about.

So Nadab and Abihu seemingly walk through this curtain, and into the little room when God had told them not to! This was so serious, that God put them to death. They did not take the holiness of God seriously. To say that God is holy here means that he is perfect, and without any sin or evil. The problem was, that Nadab and Abihu were not perfect, and did have sin. God is holy, and they were not.

These two men, were sons of the High Priest Aaron. So this chapter for Aaron is a painful and serious reminder of God’s holiness.

Now look at verse 2 with me. God tells Moses to tell Aaron that Aaron himself is *not* allowed to do the same things as his sons did, and walk into God’s presence whenever he feels like it. What does that tell us about Aaron? That he isn’t perfect either! He has sin too.

So how does Aaron or anyone for that matter, enter into this most holy place in the tabernacle behind the curtain? Well let’s look at V.3. There is a way, and here it is: Aaron has to bring some animals with him, put on some special but plain clothes that are only to be worn for this ceremony and for nothing else, and he is to take a bath. I think we can see a bit what the taking a bath and putting on special clothes is supposed to show us. These are both pictures of cleanliness. So he does this. Is he clean yet? Nope.

He needs a few more animals. In verse 5 we are told that the people of Israel are to supply him with two goats. So what does he do with all these animals? Well the first answer comes to us in verse 6. Aaron is to offer the bull as a sin offering *for himself* and shall make atonement for himself and his house.

It's Aaron's job as the high priest to offer the sacrifice to pay for the sins of the people of Israel. But before Aaron can even come close to doing that job, he has to first offer a sacrifice for his own sin! It's not just the people of God has sin, but even the priests. And before coming into the presence of God to do any work to pay for the sins of the people, Aaron himself needs to be cleansed from sin.

[It's kind of like I invited you over to my house for lunch and I was about to make you a sandwich. You're supper excited for this sandwich because you're really hungry and I make excellent sandwiches. But right before I am about to make you your sandwich, I sneeze into my hand. What do you think you're going to tell me to do before I touch your food? Wash my hands! And why is that? Because you don't want me germs and grossness on your food!]

The picture here is that God is holy and clean, and only people who are holy and clean can be in God's presence. So before Aaron can even go into God's presence he himself has to be made clean and holy.

How did we get this way? And the answer goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. They were the very first humans and they brought sin into the world when they decided to disobey God. And every human being after that has disobeyed God, and continues to do so. Every human being is unclean and unholy. Even Aaron the high priest. There's a problem here. Aaron is what we call a mediator. He's supposed to be the person who is between a sinful people and a holy God. He is supposed to offer the sacrifice that cleans the people so that they could be right with God. But how is the mediator supposed to make people clean if he himself is dirty?

[Anyone like to play in the rain? My kids do. Imagine I am outside playing in the rain with my kids. Now everyone knows that rain also means mud. So when we're playing we make a big mud mess and we get all covered in mud. Well eventually we have to go back inside, and there is no way we can go back inside all muddy. We have to get cleaned up! Well how well would it work if I offered my muddy sleeve to wipe the mud off of my kid's face? It's not going to work! No, instead we yell inside to mom who will graciously bring us a clean towel.]

Aaron's problem here is that he is also muddy with sin. And that's why Good Friday is the real Day of Atonement. Good Friday is different, because the mediator has no sin of his own. In this way Jesus is the only real mediator, or priest, who can really enter into the presence of God and perform the act that makes God's people clean. Jesus does not need to make a sacrifice for his own sin because he has none! This is why we call Jesus the "Great High Priest", because no other priest can do what Jesus did.

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In fact, Jesus doesn't just hand us a towel to clean our muddy sin off. He offers himself. Which means the sin that is on us, is only cleansed because it goes onto Jesus, which is what we see next.

### **Vv. 7-19: Sin must be paid for, either by the sinner or a substitute.**

So the sin problem remains, and now we get into the main events of the Day of Atonement. We pick it up in verse 6, where Aaron is to take the two goats that he got from the people of God and bring them to the entrance to the tent of meeting. He is to "cast lots" for these two goats. Casting lots in this

context was the priest basically what we would consider flipping a coin. These two goats are going to have very different jobs, each with very significant meaning. One of these goats is “for the Lord”. As we’re going to see in a moment, that simply means it will be a sacrifice. But the other goat “is for Azazel”

What on earth does that mean? Well there has been lots of study as to exactly what it means, but if we look at this whole chapter, it is clear that at least “Azazel” means wilderness.

So let’s look together at verse 11. Aaron has cast the lots for the goats, and he brings with him the goat that was for the Lord. But before he can do the work for the people of God, he has to present the payment for his own sins. He first needs to kill the bull as a sin offering for himself. He kills the bull, and then we are told that he takes some of the blood of the bull *into* the holy of holies, behind the curtain, and sprinkles some of this blood on the lid of the ark. Now Aaron is in the presence of the Lord, inside the most holy place that Nadab and Abihu were not supposed to be. But Aaron is not there.

But remember he still has the goat, so he goes back out to kill the goat. And in the same way he enters again into the Holy of Holies and takes some of the blood of the goat to again sprinkle it on the lid of the Ark.

Why do all of this? It seems messy. But it has a very important meaning. Look with me at verse 16. “This he shall make *atonement* for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgression, all their sins.” Remember that atonement means to pay for something. And what is being paid for? This verse actually tells us three times: “uncleanness...transgression...sins”.

That’s three ways of saying the same thing! Aaron and the Israelites have lots of sin, and it needs to be payed for. Sin demands a payment. Sin costs something, and it has to be atoned, or payed for. And in this case, what is being paid for the cost of the sin? It’s the animals! The bull for Aaron and the goat for the rest of the people of God. The life of the animal is the payment for sin. It’s either the animal dies, or the sinner dies. Something has to lose its life in order to pay for sin. In Leviticus 16, it’s a bull and a goat.

But why sprinkle blood? I think a simple way to understand this is to think of the blood as a receipt, or proof, of payment.

[My mind thinks of Costco. The kids here will probably think of snacks when I say the word Costco, but the grownups who do the shopping will understand this. When you buy your things at Costco, you get a receipt for the things you bought. It’s a list of all the things in your cart that you bought and on the receipt it says “Paid”. Now at other stores you can throw it in the garbage, but not Costco. When you go to leave the store what do they do? They ask to see your receipt. Why do they do this? They want to read your receipt, and look at what’s in your cart, and make sure everything is paid for!]

Try for a moment to imagine the scene. God’s presence is in the Holy of Holies, and Aaron walkthrough the curtain into the small room. We didn’t read these verses but there is a smoky haze in the room. And the lid of the Ark is called “the mercy seat”. It’s called that because guess who is pictured to sit on it? God! So in walks Aaron through the curtain and we can image God seeing Aaron. Although we know God knows everything, but for a moment imagine that God looks at Aaron and wonders if Aaron coming in still full of sin like Nadab and Abihu, or if Aaron has gotten rid of his sin. And Aaron walks up to the lid, or mercy seat, and sprinkles the blood of the animal that died as a payment for sins. The picture here is when God sees the blood, he sees the receipt for the payment of sin.

And it is this receipt that means Aaron does not die. But it also means that things are now “clean”. The people are clean of their sins! But also the whole tabernacle is clean. The tabernacle, even just being on earth with sinful people gets contaminated and needs the sacrifice to make it clean.

And all of this is to get into the presence of God. Without the payment for sin, there is no getting into the presence of God.

And this is what’s so special about the true Day of Atonement. Jesus is the great High Priest as we say earlier, but he’s also the sacrifice. As Jesus dies on the cross, he is becoming the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement that the bulls and goats were. When Jesus hangs on the cross and offers himself as the sacrifice, God sees the blood of Jesus and sees the full payment for sin. In fact, Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1 that those who trust in Christ have been “sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ”. That’s supposed to remind us of the Day of Atonement!

The picture we get of Good Friday here is that Jesus shed his blood, and gives his life as a payment for sin. But since Jesus is also the priest, the picture is also that Jesus sprinkles *his people* with his blood. What’s the result? When God looks at you, and sees the blood of his Son, he sees the payment for your sins paid in full. And just as the result was for Aaron in Leviticus 16 was that he was able to enter into the presence of God, the person who is sprinkled with the blood of Jesus is able to enter into the true presence of God.

But only, if the death of Christ is applied to you. And the only way for the death of Christ to be applied to you is by believing. It’s by faith. There’s no other way.

The question is, will you pay for your sins, or will Christ? The payment is demanded either way. You can chose to ignore the sacrifice of Christ, and be your own payment. But that is an eternal price. You will be paying forever in hell. Or you can chose today to accept the gift of Christ as a sacrifice for the payment for your sins, be forgiven of them all, be atoned for, and be forever welcomed into the presence of God.

### **Good Friday was the final and true Day of Atonement.**

#### **Vv. 20-22: Paid for sin is removed sin.**

Once the sacrifices have been made, Aaron turns his attention to the live goat patiently waiting for his turn. The question of course is what is the role of the other goat? Is this a second sacrifice? A second payment? Not exactly.

Look at verse 20-22. After the atoning sacrifice was made, Aaron takes the live goat and places both hands on its head. He confesses over the goat all the sins of the people of Israel. That’s a big task! Aaron obviously doesn’t know all the sins of the people. He’s only human after all, and even if he was able to know all the sins, it would take forever for him to confess them all. What’s happening here is *symbolic*. Notice here that the sins of the people are being placed “onto the head” of the goat. Not only that, but we see again the three-times repeat of the people’s sins: “All the iniquities...All their transgressions...all their sins”. Again, God wants to make it clear that in a real but symbolic way, all the sins of the people of God, including Aaron, are being placed onto the goat.

The picture here is that they are coming *off* of the people, and going *on* to the goat.

Now what?

The middle of verse 21 says that Aaron then shall “send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness”. The man who is in readiness is just an awkward way of saying that this guy trained for this job and it was a special job. It was his job to take the goat out into the wilderness. When the man takes the goat out into the wilderness, he sets it free. The wording here “set it free” doesn’t mean that the goat was once in captivity but now it’s free to be a happy free goat again, like freeing a rhino from a zoo back into the wild. The idea here is that the goat must go away from the Israelite camp!

Do you see what’s going on here? All the sins of the people are taken from them and placed onto the goat. The goat then is sent outside of the camp. And since the goat is carrying all those sins, where are the sins going? Away! In fact there Jewish tradition that later on the person whose job it was to send this goat away would follow the goat to make sure it never came back, and that he would often direct it to the edge of a cliff and send it off the cliff!

Why? Because the point is that the sins are removed and they are never coming back.

[I admit that leftovers sometimes get left in the fridge too long. I wish I could say it’s because I forget about them, which actually is initially the case. But then after a while when I realize they are there and gone bad, I know that one I open that container the smell is going to be horrible. So what ends up happening? I leave it for longer because I don’t want to open it! But the longer I leave it, the worse the smell is going to be when eventually I do have to open it. So eventually the day comes when I pull the container (or containers!) out of the fridge and dump the contents in the garbage. As you can imagine, the smell is horrible. It fills the kitchen. Even when it is in the kitchen garbage it still make everything smell. But a magical thing happens at our house. Every Thursday night, I take all the smelly garbage in all my house and I place it in a bag. I then take the bag and take it outside of our house to the end of the road. I wake up Friday morning and that bag of garbage is now gone forever. It’s not coming back, even if I for some reason wanted it back.]

I think you can see the idea. That goat, which carries all the garbage of sin of all the people goes away from the people and *never* returns. Payed for in, is removed sin.

Years and years later David would write in Psalm 103 that as far as the East is from the West, so are our transgressions removed from us. This is what is happening on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, but everyone can see that there is nothing magical about this goat. What is happening in a symbolic and small way on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, is really and truly happening on the final and true Day of Atonement which is Good Friday.

Jesus on the cross is that second goat. By trusting in Jesus, your sins are being removed from you, and being placed onto Jesus.

If you’ve been in the church for any length of time you would have no doubt heard that before, that Jesus took your sins away. I’ve heard it countless times. I’ve told people countless times. But here’s the reminder that I constantly need: Those sins, are *never* coming back.

Satan will constantly remind you of your sins, and how bad they were and how they dishonour God. And this is true! And being reminded of this can put the Christian into a dark existence. I look into my past and see mountains and mountains of sin. But Good Friday, the Day of Atonement, reminds us that those sins were payed for, they were removed from us, and they are never coming back. I have a feeling that there are people, Christians, here today who desperately need that reminder. If you have placed your

trust in Jesus, then your sins are removed from you as far as the East is from the West. Which is to say, infinitely far away. Indeed...

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**Vv. 29-34: Only a perfect sacrifice can perfectly remove sin.**

It really would have been a wonderful day back in the Old Testament times. The joy of having all your sins removed and payed for, and having a fresh start and blank slate. But there is still one major flaw with the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. One giant question looms over the whole thing.

What about when I sin again? So far all this has been for the payment and cleansing of *past* sins. But What about after Aaron takes off the special robes and come out of the temple? Aaron is going to sin again. The people of God are going to sin again. You and I sin again. What then?

The answer to that comes in verses 29-30. This day is to be a “statute to you forever”. This is a yearly thing! Every tenth day of the seventh month was the same thing. Aaron would put on the clothes, bathe in water, get his animals, and head into the tabernacle and yet again cleanse the tabernacle and the people of sin.

[It’s kind of like brushing your teeth. I hope you all brush your teeth. I hope you floss too. I do. I like to think I’m a very good teeth brusher and flosser. I’ve only had one cavity in my whole life. I have a quirk that, and I think it’s a good one, that I cannot go to bed without brushing my teeth. I have to have clean teeth before I fall asleep. I even go to the dentist once in a while to get my teeth professionally cleaned. It feels so good to have your teeth scraped and polished. But how long does that last? Only until I eat again. Maybe I don’t eat for a few hours? Maybe even half a day, but eventually I will eat again. And when I eat, they have to be re-brushed and re-cleaned.]

Can you imagine being an Israelite on the Day of Atonement? Aaron walks out of the Tabernacle and I can imagine maybe there would be a crowd of people cheering that their sins are payed for and gone away from the camp. But then the crowd goes home when it’s all done. If I was in that crowd I would be thinking to myself how thankful I am that my sin was gone and I have a clean slate. I have clean teeth. But then...how long can I go without sinning? The truth is that humans are sin factories! We are very efficient at this. We sin every day, and multiples times a day at that. In fact I wonder how long it took Aaron to sin after he exited the tabernacle from performing the ceremony of the Day of Atonement? Well, add it to the list of things to confess over the goat for next year.

But it gets even worse. Look at verse 32. This job gets passed down from father to son. And when that son grows old and has sons of his own, it gets passed on to them. This sin problem goes on from generation to generation!

And it still does today. The reality is that sin is not just something that we do, it’s something we are. The fact that the job of priest was handed down from parents to their kids, reminds us that sin itself is handed down from parents to their kids. This means that sin is also an identity. We *do* sin, because we *are* sinners.

And the sacrifice of goats cannot deal with problem. Not only do we need our sins forgiven, but we need to have new identities. We need to be made into new people! Goats cannot do this!

But Jesus can. On the true and final Day of Atonement, Jesus paid for sins and removed them. But that's not where the story ends.

On Friday we see atonement at the cross, but it's on Sunday that we see new life. Jesus resurrection, means that those who trust in him also have resurrection. We are resurrected unto new life in Christ, and also have the hope of being resurrection unto eternal life with Christ.

But in order to get to the new life of Sunday, we need to sit at the cross of Good Friday. You want the glory of Sunday? You first need to be atoned for on Friday.

So here is an invitation. Come to the cross of Jesus this Good Friday. It is an invitation. Thousands of years ago on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus, the sacrifice was done in private in a closed tent with no one else around. But on the Day of Atonement that is Good Friday, Jesus hang with his arms wide open as the public sacrifice for all to see and receive the invitation of the gift of his payment.

On Sunday we will glory in the resurrection of Christ and our sharing in that through faith, but first we need to sit at the cross on Good Friday and know that that was the day sin was finally atoned for, because:

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