

Lesson 18: Leviticus 16-17 The Day of Atonement

Introduction

Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements						
Key Passage: 19:2						
1-7 Ritual	8-10 Priesthood	11-15 Purity	16-17 Atonement	18-20 Purity	21-22 Priesthood	23-27 Ritual
Sacrifices	Consecration	Ceremonial cleanliness	Substitution	Moral cleanliness	Standards	Festivals, etc...

Leviticus chapters 16 and 17 focus on sacrifice of atonement. Chapter 16 provides Israel with instruction for the Day of Atonement ritual while chapter 17 emphasizes the symbolic importance of blood in Mosaic ritual. The two chapters are pressed together as a single unity by the ceremonial purity code on one side and the moral purity code on the other. In fact, the whole structure of Leviticus starting with the outer ritual sections, then the priesthood sections, then the purity sections funnels our attention inward to chapters 16 and 17. These chapters are the focal point of that chiastic structure.

At the same time, there is a hinge between chapters 16 and 17 that separates them, that separates two major sections of text. For the first part of this lesson, I am going to consider 16 and 17 as the central point of Leviticus, and I am going to focus on the Day of Atonement. Then for the second part of the lesson I will consider the hinge between the two chapters and the two major sections of text that the hinge divides. So, we start with Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)



Leviticus majors on providing commands and prohibitions, dos and don'ts. This is the stuff of the second question of covenant, "How then ought I live?" And with so much law to consider and so much challenge to pursue holiness, we can easily miss the extreme theological significance of the monuments of grace that are firmly established in the Torah. All the Levitical laws point centrally into this annual ritual of atonement. Not only does the Day of Atonement take central place in Leviticus, but with Leviticus taking central place in the five books of Moses, that puts the Day of Atonement at the literal center of the Torah.

We have seen the theological truth of grace with Abraham in Genesis 15. What does it mean that God walks through the sacrificed animals of covenant? If you break covenant with me, then let me die. The holiness that God requires comes as a gift of grace, can only come as a gift of grace. That truth was reaffirmed in Genesis by the almost sacrifice of Isaac. A son must die, but not Isaac. The righteous son of God will die. The ram symbolically took Isaac's place. Then in Exodus 12, God brought wrath down on Egypt, yet gave Israel a covering to escape that wrath. The wages of sin is death, but the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of a house averted the required payment for sin. This monument of grace was established as the most important of Jewish feasts, the Passover feast, a yearly reminder that salvation comes by grace through the blood of the lamb. It was at the Passover meal that Jesus said, take and eat this bread, my body broken for you and drink this wine, my blood spilled out for you. John the Baptist recognized Jesus, announcing him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." It is his blood that averts the angel of wrath. The Passover is a monument of grace.

Because, so much of the law speaks to the details of life and worship to answer the second question of covenant, it is easy to mistakenly view Torah as a system of works righteousness, as things we must do. In order to correctly understand and apply all the detailed commandments that help God's people answer the second question of covenant, we must correctly answer the first question of

covenant. “How can I, a sinful man or a sinful woman, enter into a sure and loving relationship with my holy, righteous, and pure creator God?” So far, the monuments of grace have taught us it is by grace alone through faith. And it is not the strength of your faith that is critical, but rather the work of God that enables the gift of grace. It is the strength of his righteous character and the strength of his righteous action that enables grace. It is the strength of that, the strength of what God does, that is the critical factor; not your faith.

Now at the center of Torah, the center of the Levitical law with all its teaching on the holiness of God and all the commands and prohibitions, we come again to a monument of grace, repeating again for us the foundational theological truth about relationship with God. To be in relationship with God, you must be holy just as he himself is holy. And that comes to you only as a gift of grace received by faith. That’s the message of the Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 16 starts this way, verses 1-3.

¹ Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they had approached the presence of the LORD and died. ² The LORD said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron that he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die; for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. ³ Aaron shall enter the holy place with this: with a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.”

The death of Aaron’s two sons is brought up again. The holiness of God is not a religious invention. God is holy. He expects his priests to treat him as holy. There is a weightiness, rightly accompanied by fear when entering into the presence of holy God. I wonder how much we miss this in the freedom we have been given in our New Covenant worship. We have so much grace that we miss how dangerous God is. The rituals that teach this have been removed. There is a negative side to ritualistic worship that God has ended. It can so easily fall into a repetitive pattern where the worship is disengaged from the symbolic truths meant to be impressed on the worshiper through the ritual. It is like foot washing, if you have every been a part of a foot washing ceremony. I have two or three times. How do we recapture the emotional and spiritual power impressed on the disciples by Jesus himself doing something so unexpected as to wash their feet? That was a real life situation. A ritual is automatically different. It is quite hard to ritually recreate the impact of a respected leader taking the towel and washbowl of a servant and kneeling down spontaneously to wash the feet of his followers. That spontaneity of Jesus is automatically lost when a foot washing is put on a conference schedule. It can still communicate. It can still be special, especially the first time you let someone wash your feet. But being made into a ritual, it is quite a challenge to maintain the original intent of the experience.

And I wonder what the experience of the first Day of Atonement must have been like that first time. The death of Aaron’s sons had just happened. This was a heavy, serious time. Their death would certainly heighten the sense of respect and awe of any priest who dared enter into the holy place. The whole event was experiential. You see the blood drain out of the bull and the ram and the goat. You watch the priest, dressed in gold and blue and scarlet take that blood and enter into the holy place. The smell of the animals and of blood mixes with the holy incense, a special incense reserved only for the holy place. Life and death are communicated through sight and smell and sound. There is a weightiness, a fear, a holiness to the ritual as Aaron enters into the tent and further into the Holy of Holies where the visible presence of God is manifest.

We learn in this text that Aaron is to never enter into the Holy of Holies except this one day out of the year. And whenever he does, he must make sacrifice. He cannot enter without the blood of a bull. So, here a bull and a ram must be sacrificed for Aaron alone, as atonement for his sin and the sin of his household, the priests. He is a sinful man. He cannot make atonement for the people until first atonement has been made for him. The text also refers twice to the mercy seat. That is what my Bible calls it. Your Bible might call it the lid of atonement or simply the cover. The Hebrew word

being used is a form of the word atonement, which in a basic sense means to cover over and which also means to ransom. The word is referring to the lid on the ark of the covenant. I am going to use the phrase mercy seat because that's what my Bible translation is using, though atonement cover might be better.

After preparing himself through washing and sacrifice for his own sin, Aaron is to take two male goats to make atonement for Israel. This is 16:8-10.

⁸ Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat. ⁹ Then Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the LORD fell, and make it a sin offering. ¹⁰ But the goat on which the lot for the scapegoat fell shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat.

Lots are cast for the goats. Dr. Douglas Stuart makes a guess that the lots are like two dice with alternate dark and light sides. Two dark sides would indicate a no, two light sides a yes, and one dark, one light, a try again.¹ Anyway, some kind of lot is cast to decide which goat will be sacrificed and which goat will be sent out into the wilderness.

Your Bible might use a strange word for the second goat. It is the literal Hebrew azazel. My Bible uses the term scapegoat. In the New American Commentary on Leviticus, Mark Rooker gives us four variant interpretations for this Hebrew word.² I will start with the ones I think least likely. First, the apocryphal book *1 Enoch* mentions a demon named Azazel. If that is the idea, then verse 10 would have this goat being presented alive before the Lord and then being sent out to the demon Azazel in the wilderness. It seems very unlikely to me that we would have a random demon named in a holy ceremony of atonement. The wrath of atonement comes from God, not Satan. We are never ransomed from Satan. We are ransomed from the wrath of God. It is God's justice that must be paid back. It is God we owe. *1 Enoch* is not authoritative. And it has this kind of interest in demons. And it came much later than Leviticus. We have no reason to assume that it is giving us a correct interpretation here. A second option is that the term means "entire removal." That option fits with the purpose of the second goat but does not have good linguistic support. A third option, widely accepted in Jewish tradition, sees the root word for "strong" or "fierce" in the word azazel and concludes that azazel is the destination the goat is being sent to. For a fourth option, others see the root words for "go away" and "goat" in the Hebrew azazel. And that would be the "go away goat" or the "scapegoat" as my Bible version puts it.

Whatever the original meaning of the term, the text defines for us the point of second goat. That is not in question. Just the term is in question. But it does not really matter that much. Both goats are said to make atonement for the people. In the atonement of sacrifice animal are always symbolic. It is not a real atonement. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us in Hebrews 10:4, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." So, with these two goats we are given two different symbolic truths regarding atonement.

After Aaron sacrifices the bull to cover his own sin. We then have the ceremony of the two goats. The first is in 16:15-16.

¹⁵ Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which 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, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. ¹⁶ He shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and thus he shall do for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their impurities.

¹ Rooker, M. F. (2000). *Leviticus* (Vol. 3A, pp. 215–216). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

² Rooker, (216).

The blood of the goat is sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. The mercy seat is the covering of the ark of covenant, so inside the ark is the covenant, the law of Israel. Remember, the law serves two functions. As a minimal bar, the law functions to mitigate the effects of sin in society and to motivate basic good behavior. The law in this sense seems doable. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not move boundary markers. Do not eat forbidden foods. Celebrate required holidays. A decent person could conceivably keep that law. You probably keep a thousand laws a day in your society because you are a decent person. We could stack up all these criminal law books and you don't break any of those laws.

There are harder laws in Moses that can be challenging even for the decent person. You might be tempted to break the gleaning law if it has been a bad harvest, and you need food for your family, so you are going to go back over your field again instead of leaving it for the poor. Or you might struggle to always show respect to the gray headed person, especially to certain gray headed persons. Paying your full tithe could be a struggle for you in needy times. These may be hard ones for you. They may be easy ones for you. We may need to find others that challenge you personally. Our circumstances and experiences play a lot into which laws we particularly might struggle to keep. Maybe it is the law to love the foreigner, maybe it's the traffic laws. I don't know what you struggle with. These laws may all be doable, but we still struggle. We still don't quite do them all. We struggle with them.

And even if we think we could do all of these civil laws, the law of Moses also functions as a moral code, calling God's people to the highest of standards. On the surface we may think we can follow the first nine commandments of the ten commandments. But then we get to number 10. "Do not covet." How are you doing with that? That's a law of the heart. We can't keep it. We want things that are not ours. We want what has not been given to us by God. We covet other things. We are not satisfied with everything we have. We covet. And if that alone does not trip us up, we are also told, "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul." "Be holy as the Lord your God is holy." Is that really required? Is that serious? Who can do that? Love people, love God, be holy. That is all you have to do. And then you will have met the law. The moral requirement of law starts in your heart, "Do not covet," moves out to your words, "Do not curse," and continues on to concrete action, "You shall be careful to perform what goes out of your lips (Deuteronomy 23:23)." Obedience to civil law is expected. There will be criminal punishment for those who break the minimum bar of the legal code. But to enter into relationship with holy God, we are not considering the minimum legal bar of society. We are to pursue holiness in thought, in word, in action. That is the requirement.

On the Day of Atonement, as Aaron enters into the Holy of Holies, God's presence resides above the ark of the covenant. As the true and righteous judge, he looks down into the ark. He looks at the law. And he judges his people guilty. Every last one of them has failed to love God and failed to love their neighbor. The wages of sin is death, eternal separation from holy God. Only the holy can be in relationship with him. Aaron then sprinkles the blood of the goat on the mercy seat. The blood covers the covenant. Death has been made. The penalty of sin is paid. That is the symbolism of the first goat.

Paul refers to the mercy seat in his famous declaration of the gospel in Romans 3:23-25. He uses there the Greek word hilasterion, which is the word used by Jewish scholars to translate the Hebrew word for mercy seat. In Greek culture the word hilasterion had the idea of satisfying the wrath of the gods. The theological word for that is propitiation. To propitiate God is to satisfy his wrath. Liberal Christian scholars who would separate Jesus from this old holy fear of God want us to believe that God would be so barbaric as to force his son to die on a cross to satisfy his own sense of justice with his blood. They are correct. God would not force his son to do that. The son went willingly. The Jewish translators who used the word hilasterion understood that the atonement being made in Leviticus 16 is a propitiation of the wrath of God. God is angry. God's justice demands anger. It demands death for sin. Holy fear is a right emotion when we stand in the presence of a holy God.

Paul understood that God's wrath must be propitiated. And he understood that it would take more than the blood of bulls and goats. This is Romans 3:23-25.

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

"Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation." The word propitiation here is that word hilasterion, the mercy seat. Your Bible might translate it as sacrifice of atonement. And that is fine. Sacrifice of atonement is that which propitiates. It is the sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God. Jesus is that sacrifice which propitiates the wrath of God. Unlike Aaron, Jesus did not need to make sacrifice for himself before making atonement for us, because unlike Aaron, Jesus is sinless. This is what we needed. A sinless man to take our place. But more than a sinless man. An infinite man. A divine, sinless man who could make payment for the sin of not one other man, but for the sin of every human being that has ever lived or would yet live. Jesus made that payment. And it was satisfactory. That is the righteous action of God that enables grace. Jesus fulfills the symbolism of the Passover lamb and the symbolism of the goat of atonement.

So now, after the blood of this first goat is sprinkled in the Holy of holies over the law, the live goat is sent outside the camp, Leviticus 16:20-22,

²⁰ When he finishes atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall offer the live goat. ²¹ Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send *it* away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who *stands* in readiness. ²² The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.

The sacrificed goat paid for the sins of the people. What is the result? The result is that their sin is removed far from them. The second goat symbolizes this result of atonement. Jesus died to pay for your sins. What is the result? Psalm 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." How far is east from west? Eternally far.

The Blood of Atonement (Leviticus 17)

The first 7 verses of Leviticus 17 confirm the desperate need for the day of atonement. The human heart is desperately wicked. At first, in chapter 17 we think we are just reading further regulations about sacrifice. All sacrifice must be brought to the tabernacle. God does not want the people making sacrifice on their own out in the wilderness. He does not trust them. He wants them to bring their sacrifices into the light of the tabernacle worship, to sacrifice openly as part of the community and in conjunction with his priests. The prohibition is not without reason. There was a motivating factor. Considering the Israelites have not set out from Mount Sinai, verse 7 is a bit shocking.

⁷ They shall no longer sacrifice their sacrifices to the goat demons with which they play the harlot. This shall be a permanent statute to them throughout their generations.

What in the world are goat demons? And what are the people doing with the goat demons? This is ridiculous. While still at Mount Sinai, some of the people are sacrificing to lesser gods out in the wilderness. The term could imply goat demons or goat idols or goat gods. Scholars have suggested that they may be the Semitic version of the Greek satyr, the part man, part goat creatures that the Romans called fauns. They would not have been anything as nice as Mr. Tumnus. The Greek version was drunken and lecherous. Perhaps, the Semitic version was connected to fertility.

The debacle of the golden calf is recent. Yet, there persists this problem of idolatry. It is a different kind of idolatry. The golden calf was meant to be Yahweh. That was the sin of molding God into a human vision of God. And it was performed on a national level in connection to the national God. Sacrifice to the goat gods is the idolatry of the common man. We know that God cares about the big

things. He is the national God. But what about the little things? What about success at my job? What about my crops and my family and my relationships? We need leverage. We need power to get things done. We need our personal, individual idols to help us manage the more day to day needs of the average person. We need a God who understands the desires, the needs of the average person.

And ancient people knew where to get this power from. There were plenty of greater and lesser gods to seek out. Some people today do something similar when they look at the horoscope or when they are praying to particular saints. We are seeking out lesser gods to help us out. Many modern Christians understand they have to be more practical. We know we are only supposed to pray to the one God. We do not have the option of seeking spiritual power in other places. So, we do it ourselves. We seek success and fulfillment in education or in relationship or in career or in a stuff or in a sports team or through entertainment or by escape into the internet or escape into something darker. These are the names of our gods. We give our hearts to a multitude of sources, either to control our circumstances, or to feel self-worth, or experience pleasure. That's why people have always made sacrifices to the idols, for power, for identity, for pleasure. And whenever a good thing God has made provides for us what we ought to find in relationship with God, that thing has become an idol. Everything I just named, except for the darker things, everything I just named is something to be enjoyed as a provision of God, but which has the potential of taking the place of God.

The sin of the Israelites was clearer. They were making illicit sacrifice to false gods. So, God commanded that all sacrifice be brought to the tabernacle. Maybe there is something there for us. Is there anything in my life that I could not bring to church, that I could not bring to God's holy community and lay down before God, to thank God for it and to give it over to God? Is there anything I can't bring into the light, I can't put into his hands? Is there anything that I want to hide, that I want to hold onto as a source of life, that I can't absolutely give up? Then maybe that is for me a goat demon.

So, as I have said, the golden calf and the goat demons represent two kinds of idolatry: the calf is the molding of God into a human idea. And we have already talked a lot about that, making God more appropriate for our society. The goat demon is a seeking of life outside of relationship with God. In the narrative of the Torah, the first is particularly attached to the priesthood, the second to the people. So, though the people urged Aaron to mold the calf, he was the focus of that story. The priesthood failed the people by failing to stand up for God's revealed vision of himself. That is the job of the priests, to hold on to the revealed word and to make that word known, to hold onto the right vision of who God is or the revealed vision of who God is. With the goat demons, no priests were implicated. This is a sin of the people.

John Sailhamer in his commentary, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, suggests a major division of laws indicated by these two sins of idolatry. So, there is a hinge between chapter 16 and chapter 17. The Golden Calf incident occurred back in Exodus 32. Then there was a renewal of covenant and then Exodus 35 through Leviticus 16 contains narrative and laws focused on the priestly code and the tabernacle. Leviticus 17 tells us about goat idols and from Leviticus 18-26 proceeds on with everyday laws for individual people. It is not a perfect division. We have laws for the priests in 21 and 22. And we have the cleanliness laws that affect everyday life in 11-15. But there is enough in this division to make us notice. The golden calf is followed by priestly laws and then the goat idols followed by everyday laws. Idolatry tempts us away from right worship of God at the tabernacle and idolatry tempts us from a right walk with God in everyday life.

It is also interesting to note that the law for the sin offering requires the sacrifice of a bull if made by the priest, there again is a connection to the golden calf, that calf goes with the priest, and the sacrifice for the sin offering is a goat if made by one of the people, connecting with the goat demons. So, we see this in Leviticus 4 with the law of sin offering, and we see it also here in Leviticus 16 with the regulations for the Day of Atonement. Aaron had to sacrifice a bull or a calf for himself and then a goat for the people. So, the golden calf and the sin offering of a calf are connected to the priesthood while the goat idols and the sin offering of a goat are connected to the people.

Golden Calf	Priestly laws (Calf sin offering)	Goat idols	Everyday laws (Goat sin offering)
Exodus 32	Exodus 35-Leviticus 16	Leviticus 17	Leviticus 18-26

(Sailhamer, 345.)

Both these forms of idolatry persist today, both the molding of God into a more appropriate image for society and the seeking of power and fulfillment outside of relationship with God. The Levitical law teaches us to receive our vision of God from his own word and to bring our desires to his house, entrusting our everyday needs and wants into his hands.

One last word on Leviticus 17. The text emphasizes here the importance of blood in the Mosaic law. Israelites are to treat blood respectfully. They are forbidden to eat blood of any kind. Blood has a high symbolic importance in Mosaic law. The reason for that is given in Leviticus 17:11,

¹¹ For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.

The reasoning made here is symbolic. This is not a scientific statement about blood. It is not a magical statement about blood. It is not a spiritual statement about blood, not in the sense that somehow a person's soul is in the blood. This is a symbolic statement. When a bull or a lamb, offered as a sacrifice, has its jugular vein cut and the blood spills out, as that blood drains from the body, the life of the animal drains from its eyes. It drains from its body. Slowly, the animal becomes lifeless. The blood is a visual picture of the life draining out. The blood represents the giving up of life. God says here that he has given the blood to make atonement for the souls of the people. The blood of bulls and goats symbolized a life given up to cover the sins of the people and turn away the wrath of God. Satisfaction is made. Remember Romans 3:23-25,

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

“In the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed.” That means God accepted the blood of bulls and goats only as symbolic payment. Justice was not satisfied at all by those sacrifices. If Christ had not died, God could be charged as an unjust judge, who lets the guilty go free without payment for their crimes. That's not justice. The death of Christ paid for all the people who lived before him and all who come after him. This was to demonstrate God's righteousness because in his forbearance he passed over the sins previously committed. How are Abraham's sins paid for? By the cross. They were looking forward to something that must happen. We look backward. We remember the true sacrifice of Christ on our behalf every time we take the Lord's supper. His body was broken for us. His blood was poured out. It is the blood of the New Covenant. It is the true payment for sin. By his blood our sin is covered over and sent out from us as far as the East is from the West.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Leviticus 16-17? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Compare the ceremony in Leviticus 16:15-22 and the description of blood as the life of the sacrifice in 17:10-13 with Paul's reference to the mercy seat in Romans 3:23-25. What stands out to you as important or maybe as confusing when you observe the two texts?
3. What are some of the “goat demons” that tempt Christians in your society? Whereas the golden calf represents molding Yahweh to fit modern society, goat idols represent the search outside of relationship with God for means to gain identity, control, or pleasure in life.

- a. What are some things believers pursue to help them gain a sense of identity? What makes us feel included or important or valuable?
 - b. What are some things believers pursue to gain control over their situation? This could be something spiritual or something relational or something physical. What helps you control the circumstances of life?
 - c. What are some things believers pursue to feel good?
4. What is the difference between a good gift from God that helps us feel good or helps us succeed and an idol of the heart that takes the place of God? How do you know when something God has become an idol?
 5. What steps can you take avoid giving something good the place of an idol in your life?