

## **Sin: Forgiven and Forgotten** **Leviticus 16**

So we're spending a few weeks looking at the Old Testament book of Leviticus. And so far we've seen that holiness, and the fact that God is dangerously, awesomely holy, dominates the book. And just like the core of a nuclear reactor sits in the middle of a nuclear power-plant, this holy God dwelt among his people in the Most Holy Place, in the Tent of Meeting, pitched right in the centre of the tribes of Israel.

But as we've seen, that kind of set up was far from simple, because the holy and the unholy cannot mix. And if they did mix, the results were catastrophic for the unholy, for the people, people like you and me. So the Lord gave them rules about what was clean and unclean, to teach them, every day, that God is holy, and the pure and the impure cannot mix. But then in his grace God also provided sacrifices, like the guilt offering Andy told us about last week.

And in chapters 1-7 and 11-15 you can read about the sacrifices that dealt with sin and made the people ritually clean again once they'd become unclean. And it was all designed to keep the people's access to God open, and enable him to dwell with them.

But just think for a moment about the cost of all those sacrifices.

Imagine you are an Israelite, and you and your family have a small herd of sheep, say 20 animals in total. And you've got a small family - maybe 6 kids, because that was small in those days! And they're all teenagers. And you're sat at home after a hard day, and little Johnny comes through the door. 'Dad, I'm really sorry, but I've done something stupid, I've sinned in such and such a way.' And you say 'that's ok son, we can make a guilt offering, go and take a male lamb, and go to the priest in the tent of meeting.' And you're down to 19 animals. Then your oldest boy David walks in, 'Dad, I'm really sorry, I've gone and done....' And you're down to 18 animals. And as he's following Johnny to the priest, your eldest daughter Naomi walks in, 'Dad, I'm really sorry...' 17 animals. And then Ruth comes in and it's 16, and then your wife - 15, and in your despair you say something you shouldn't have said - and it's 14.

Can you see how the cost of sin and uncleanness would mount up? And it's only Monday and 1 quarter of your flock has gone. Can you imagine what that would do to you? Firstly, it would make you and your family incredibly conscious of your sin and God's holiness. Secondly, it would drive home to you the sheer cost of your sin, and that the outcome of breaking God's laws was just death, death and more death, as you send off another lamb, never to return.

But thirdly, wouldn't there come a time when you began to think, 'I can't spare another lamb! There's going to be nothing left!' And the sin goes unatoned for. And then what? Well, there were rules for those who couldn't afford it - because forgiveness has never been the prerogative of the rich. But the temptation to let it go, and turn a blind eye, and silence your conscience and let these sins and uncleanness mount up would be strong. And that's just the sins you know of. What about all the ones you don't know of that are mounting up?

I don't know if you've read the reports about Mt Everest, but with all the climbers who visit, and leave all their rubbish, Everest is rapidly becoming a mountain of garbage. There's litter everywhere. Or the articles in the news last week, of how discarded plastic now pollutes every corner of our oceans. Well, spiritually speaking, as the people either turned a blind eye to sin or didn't even realise they had sinned in the first place, the camp of Israel would begin to resemble our plastic contaminated oceans or rubbish strewn Everest. And whilst like the oceans and the mountains the camp should have been pristine and pure, with the holy and the unholy kept far apart, it would have become polluted. And that would have threatened their relationship with God.

And think how that works in your own life. You sin in some area, and you feel weighed down by the guilt of it. And because you feel spiritually down, you let your guard slip in some other area as well. And that feeling of separation from God grows, and prayer becomes increasingly difficult, and God feels increasingly absent, and it feels ever harder to draw near to him. Why? Because the holy and unholy cannot mix.

So for them, what could turn their situation around? Well, one philosopher famously said on his death-bed: 'of course God will forgive me... that's his business.' And we could convince ourselves that forgiveness is a cheap thing for God, a wave-of-the-hand thing. But Leviticus tells us that sin and forgiveness are anything but cheap.

Instead the Lord does something far more wonderful. It's called the Day of Atonement, in chapter 16. We're going to read the first ten verses which are a summary of the day, and then we'll look in more detail at the rest of the chapter. But in God's grace, at the end of this day, every year, Israel's slate was completely wiped clean, and every sin – known or unknown – was atoned for. But as we'll see, what was true for them, is even more true for us in Christ.

## **Leviticus 16:1-10**

### **Sins Forgiven**

Now if anyone wanted a reminder that sin was not cheap or forgiveness easy, the Lord tells Moses in v2 to tell Aaron, his brother and High priest, that he was 'not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die.' Why does he say that? Because v1 reminds us that two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, had tried to do exactly that and died as a result. Because you can never take entering God's holy presence lightly. In fact, only the High Priest could go behind the curtain and enter that Most Holy place, as a representative of the nation, and he could only go on one day a year.

But look what he had to do to survive that. First, he had to get out of all his fine, priestly clothes, and v4, he had to 'bathe his body in water' and then he had to put on simple linen clothes. Then, before he could offer sacrifices for others, the Lord says, in v11, that "Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house." So the High Priest had to atone for his and the other priests sin before he could hope to enter the Most Holy Place to atone for the people.

And so having killed the bull, he took its blood behind the curtain into the Most Holy Place holding a censer of incense. And the burning incense created a cloud, a smoke-screen, over the ark of the covenant, so he didn't risk looking on God's holy presence and dropping dead as a result. Then seven times he had to sprinkle the bull's blood on the ark.

Now why the ark, why there? Because it contained the tablets of stone on which the 10 Commandments were engraved, the summary document of God's covenant with his people, the very thing that the priests and the people continually failed to keep.

Then, having atoned for his own sin, he went back outside the tent and took two goats. And he cast lots for the goats. And the lot that fell for the Lord, that goat was sacrificed. And he took its blood back behind the curtain and he sprinkled it over the mercy seat that covered the ark. Then he came out of the Most Holy Place, and sprinkled some in the tent of meeting itself, and then he came out of the tent and sprinkled some on the altar of burnt offering outside the tent. And the Lord says in v16, "Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins."

But did you notice the direction all of this flows in? Atonement begins in the Most Holy Place, the place where God dwelt, and then it moves out from there – to the tent, then to the courtyard, and later, as we'll see, to the desert. It's all coming from God's presence, forgiveness and cleansing flows out from him to them.

But to our modern ears, isn't all this stuff about sacrifices and blood just a bit gross? Well, the Lord explains why this was all necessary in the next chapter "The life of the animal is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Lev 17:11). Now you might think the life being in the blood sounds weird, and yet we still talk like this today, don't we? You see posters appealing for blood donors, and what do they say? 'Give Blood; Give Life.'

But the consequence of sin isn't life, is it? As Paul says, 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:23). And you know that's true from personal experience don't you? Sin brings relational death – it kills friendships and marriages; it brings spiritual death – it kills our relationship with God; but when God is dwelling in your midst, it also brings physical death, as Nadab and Abihu discovered. And so the goat becomes the substitute for the people. The goat dies so they don't have to die. And this is substitutionary atonement, as God's anger is turned away, and the goat takes the fall for them.

And so, by the end of this Day, all their sin, all those times they had failed to love God or their neighbour as they should, knowingly or unknowingly, all those times they had turned a blind eye and grown hard to sin, by the end of the day, it had all been paid for, it had all been forgiven and the people could breathe again.

And it was possible because God was a gracious God who made atonement possible. As the Lord says in v30, 'For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from *all* your sins.' And it's God's doing.

But if the first goat symbolised how you could be forgiven your sin. The second one symbolised something just as powerful. Because even when you know you're forgiven, the sense of guilt and shame can remain crushingly real, can't it?

### **Sins Forgotten**

Well, if the first goat was for the Lord, the second one, we're told in v9, was to be 'sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.' Now, no-one knows for sure what that word Azazel means, but traditionally it's been read as combining the word for goat (*ez*) and the verb for going away, (*azel*) – so it's the going-away goat – the scapegoat.

And the High Priest was to take this live goat, and v21, 'Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat.'

Now did you notice how the Lord uses three different words for what Aaron is going to confess and transfer onto the head of the goat? Iniquities, transgressions and sins. So there's nothing that's going to be missed out. This is all-inclusive. Everything. Sins of commission and omission, stuff they should have done but didn't do, stuff they should not have done but did do. Stuff they knowingly did and stuff they did without even knowing it. Sins in thought and word and deed. Big sins and little sins. He confessed it all, on behalf of everyone, and transferred it all onto the head of the goat. And now the goat became their sin-bearer: v22, 'The goat shall bear *all* their iniquities'. Every sin, of every person.

But then what happens? Instead of slaughtering the goat, the Lord tells them, v21-22: 'Send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.'

Why? Why don't they kill the goat? I mean, if the penalty of sin is death, and this goat is laden with their sin, why doesn't this goat get killed as well? For two reasons:

You see, the wages of sin is not just death, it's also banishment. Banished from the presence of God. In any ancient covenant between a king and his people, the covenant came with blessings and curses: keep the covenant and the king will do this much good for you. Break the covenant, and these are the curses that will fall upon you. And in Israel's covenant with God, her king, it's no different. But the greatest curse they faced for unfaithfulness to God's covenant was exile. Both in Leviticus and Deuteronomy the Lord makes it clear that if they fail to stay faithful to him, they will be banished and exiled from the land where the Lord was leading them, from the land where he would live among them as their God, and they would be cast out of his presence. And if that was the curse that could befall

the nation, individuals faced the same threat for certain serious sins: if they sin against me in such and such a way, they are to be cut off from my people. And to be cut off from God and his people was, and is, the ultimate punishment.

And think about it. Wasn't that what happened to Adam and Eve in the garden? They were able to walk with God and talk with God, and live in God's close presence. But then they rebelled against him. And the result? They were banished from the garden. And ever since, each of us has been longing to return. Or think of Cain's punishment when he murdered his brother Abel. It was to be a fugitive and wanderer. And the reason he dreaded that punishment was because he knew as he says in Gen 4:14, "from your face [From God's good and loving presence] I shall be hidden." Banished. And isn't that something like what you and I feel when we have fallen on our face in some sin, this sense of alienation from God, this sense that our sin has cut us off from God's presence?

So can you imagine how the Israelites must have felt as not just the first goat, but the scapegoat as well, became their substitute. And in God's grace the goat was banished from the camp, and exiled from God's presence, instead of them.

And the guy who led the goat out... did you see what happens to him? You see our Bible translation calls him, v21, 'a man who is in readiness.' But for a number of reasons scholars think this man was probably a marginal figure, someone who lived his life on the edge of the camp. He was likely a criminal, or someone ritually unclean, or a lawbreaker. And he gets given the opportunity to lead the scapegoat out, laden with all his and everyone else's sin. And when he comes back he washes, and is allowed back into the camp. No more life on the margins. The scapegoat's banished to wander alone, and this guy is welcomed back in to the people of God, because the scapegoat has been banished for him. What an image of the Lord's grace!

But that's not all the scapegoat symbolises. It's not just banished instead of them, it also takes all their sins away from them. The scapegoat clears the camp, and their consciences, of all their sins, and God sends it far away, to the never-returning ends of the world. As the Psalmist sings: 'As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us' (Ps 103:12). Never to return. Sins not just forgiven, but sins forgotten.

Now, I know that strictly speaking we can't talk about God *forgetting* our sins. You and I go upstairs to get something and when we get there we've totally forgotten what we went there for. But God's not like us. God forgets nothing. But there are things he chooses not to remember. And as that sin-bearing scapegoat is led away into the wilderness, it is a powerful picture of what God says of himself: 'I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more' (Jer 31:34).

But listen, could these sacrifices really deal with sin? Could a couple of goats really act as substitutes for thousands of people? And the answer of course is 'no'. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin' (Heb 10:4). And yet, if the Lord provides these for the

people, they must be pointing forwards to something, they must be banking on something that really can cleanse sin and take away guilt.

Well, listen to what Paul says when he talks about the law: 'These are a shadow of the things to come' (Col 2:17). Now imagine a shadow. Imagine me seeing Su's shadow and thinking, 'man this shadow is amazing, I want to spend the rest of my life with this shadow.' Now apart from thinking me mad, wouldn't you say, 'er, well if you think the shadow is good, let me introduce you to the real thing.' So if you think the Lord's grace in forgiving and forgetting their sins on the Day of Atonement was great, then what must the reality they were pointing to be like? If the shadow is good, how much more excellent must the real thing be? 'These' Paul says, 'are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ' (Col 2:17).

### **Christ the Real Substitute**

You see, at the cross Jesus did everything the Day of Atonement was pointing to.

He became *the* sacrifice of atonement – our substitute, dying in our place, whose blood secured our forgiveness. As Paul writes in Romans 3, 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [declared not guilty] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith' (Rom 3:23-25). And that word *propitiation*, which means something that turns aside God's wrath, is the word used to translate the Hebrew word for the mercy seat, the covering over the ark in the Most Holy Place, where the priest sprinkled the blood. And so once and for all, with no need of repeat, by taking God's wrath for our sin upon himself at the cross, Christ atoned for us and washes us clean.

But he was also our scapegoat. Peter says of Jesus that 'he himself bore our sins' (1 Peter 2:24). Paul says that 'for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21). All our sin was laid on him. And just as the scapegoat was banished from the camp – so Jesus was led outside the city walls. And as Hebrews tells us he 'suffered outside the gate' (Heb 13:12), as he cried out from the cross, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me' as the Father turned his face away from his Son, as he was banished from the father's presence, as he became the scapegoat, so that the Father might turn his face towards you.

And as he breathed his last, the curtain in the temple, that sealed off the Most Holy Place, this physical barrier between us and God, was torn from top to bottom. It's as if the Lord was physically declaring, 'come, the way has been opened. Don't stand far off, don't hide in your guilty shadows any longer, come into my presence, because My Son, you sin bearer, has take the burden of your guilt and shame upon himself, so come and enter in.'

And just as that man on the margins, who led the goat out to the wilderness, was allowed back in the camp, because the scapegoat had taken his sins far away, so you and I can return to our heavenly father, and be counted among his people. Not because of anything we have done, but all because of what Christ, our substitute, has done. And there is no sin, no stain, no guilt, there is nothing in

your present or your past that Jesus' blood cannot cleanse, nothing that he cannot remove as far as the east is from the west. Your sins forgiven and forgotten.

And yet, just knowing that isn't enough, is it? Listen to how the writer to the Hebrews calls for a response: 'Since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.... Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering... And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together' (Heb 10:19-25). Do you see the three let-us's that flow from knowing Jesus is your day of atonement?

Firstly, draw near. Approach him with confidence, in faith. Make use of the access he has made possible, and put your trust in him. Draw near to God in prayer, in worship, in hearing him speak to you through his word. Don't allow the condemnation of the enemy or of your past to whisper 'you are not worthy'. Of course you're not worthy, that's the whole point! But it's because Jesus is worthy that you can come.

But did you see he said that you are to draw near 'with a true heart'? You see on the Day of Atonement, all the rituals would have meant nothing unless the people were truly repentant. As the Lord says to them in v29, 'You shall afflict yourselves [that is fast and humble yourself] and do no work.' And what better picture of that, than the High Priest himself. On any other day he was dressed like a king, in all his beautifully embroidered robes. But on this day, he took all that off, he stripped himself of all honour, and he put on the simple linen garments, because he wasn't making any claims about himself. There was no grandstanding. He was coming humbly. But he was still coming. And because of Jesus, you and I can come boldly and confidently into God's presence. But first we must come humbly and in repentance, claiming nothing for ourselves, and knowing that it's not because we are so great that we can come, but because of Jesus.

Then he says we should hold fast our confession without wavering. You see, when you know what Jesus has done for you, it gives you a resolve, and a courage that does not depend on you. So when you are tempted to doubt, or wobble in your faith, or in speaking about your faith, speak the truth of Christ's sacrifice to your heart and let it strengthen you and embolden you.

But finally he says that in view of what Jesus has done for us, let us stir one another up to love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together. Why so practical? Because what Jesus has done for us is not so we can have our own little private worship party. He calls us into the congregation of his people, where he dwells in the midst. And so we are to live out the good of this together, encouraging one another, and stirring one another up to live lives worthy of our calling.