THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Leviticus 16:1-34

Key Verse: 30

“because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins.”

In chapters 1-7, we thought about the five basic offerings: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering, which all refer to Christ Jesus. Chapters 8-10 concerns the ordination of the priests, that is, Aaron and his sons, and the beginning of their ministry. The ordination of the priests was so carefully and solemnly done with the sin offering, the burnt offering and the ordination offering each day for a week. The ordination ceremony was performed before the entire assembly of God at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The priest had to stay there day and night for seven days doing what the LORD required so that they would not die. So when Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 2:9 to the suffering scattered early Christians, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood…” how sensational it was! In chapter 9, when Aaron carried out the priestly duty following God’s commands, the glory of the LORD appeared and the fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering, and all the people shouted for joy and fell facedown. But in chapter 10, when Aron’s two sons, Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire contrary to God’s command, the fire coming out from the presence of the LORD consumed them, and they died. The priestly duty was indeed solemn. In our time, the unauthorized fire can refer to all humanistic ways to serve God apart from the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection. Chapters 11-15 are about cleanness and uncleanness of God’s people, of whom God said, “Be holy, because I am holy.” Specifically, God was concerned about the food, a woman’s labour, infectious skin/leprous disease, and bodily discharge. God wanted his people to be holy, set apart from the people of the world regarding the daily matter of eating, and he provided the way of being ceremonially clean from uncleanness through proper offerings. These teachings are important to the people of God in our time when the people are occupied with food and sex, no concept of holiness and sin, cleanness and uncleanness, right and wrong.

Today’s passage, chapter 16, is the core of Leviticus concerning the day of atonement. We see in this passage the excellent revelation of Jesus, particularly his sacrifice and his main work as Christ. So this chapter is one of the most important chapters in the Bible.

Now verse 1 says, “The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the LORD.” As we thought of, the two sons of Aaron, Nadab (meaning ‘free generous gift’) and Abiju (meaning ‘he is my father’) died when they offered the unauthorized fire before the LORD. They tried to approach the presence of God in their own way. The death of these two was a very painful event to Aaron, their father. So God spoke to him through Moses. In verse 2, it says, “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.” When Aron began the priestly ministry in a right way, it pleased God and the glory of the LORD was displayed. Now the LORD God would appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. We remember that when God descended on Mount Sinai in fire, the whole mountain trembled violently that the people were afraid to hear God’s voice and Moses himself trembled with fear (Heb 12:2-21). When the tabernacle was built, God would dwell there as he promised in Exodus 25:8, “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” At this time, he would appear in the cloud specifically over the atonement cover in the Most Holy Place. Aaron was to enter the Most Holy Place once a year, following God’s instructions. Otherwise, he would die. That was God’s serious warning so that the same thing as the death of his two sons might not happen.

Here is how Araon is to enter the sanctuary area. He is to put on the sacred linen tunic with linen undergarments next to his body and linen sash around him and linen turban. Then he is to offer a young bull for his own sin offering and a ram for the burnt offering and two goats for the sin offering of the Israelite community and ram for their burnt offering. Especially offering a young bull for his own sin offering is stressed in verses 6 and 11. Verse 6 says, “Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household.” In verse 11 it says, “Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering.” This shows how weak and fragile human priests are. However, our great high priest Jesus is different as one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners…” (Heb 7:26).

Then the LORD says in verses 12-13, “He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the certain. He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die.” God said to Moses in Exodus 33:20, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” God’s presence would be there on the atonement cover above the Testimony. The smoke of the incense would conceal the place so that Aaron might not die. Then what shall Aaron do? Verse 14 says, “He is to take some of the bull’s blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover, then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover.” Now we see that on the day of atonement the blood of the bull was sprinkled in the Most Holy Place on the front of the atonement cover, that is east side of it, and seven times before the atonement cover that is on the atonement cover. This is an revelatory description uniquely written here in the Scriptures. Until now the blood was sprinkled as far as the curtain of the sanctuary (Lev 4:6) that divided the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Now the blood would be sprinkled deep into the atonement cover above the Testimony in the Most Holy Place. The atonement cover is the mercy seat above the Testimony, that is, the Ten Commandments. The law was given through Moses as a blessing for his people so that they might live by it. But when the people could not keep it, it brought condemnation and death. Paul said in Romans 7:10, “I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.” In short, the law brings God’s dreadful judgment. But the mercy seat/atonement cover is above the Testimony, and the mercy seat would function through the sprinkling of the blood. Sprinkling seven times means complete sprinkling. This is truly amazingly revelatory beautiful description.

The LORD continues to say in verses 15 and 16, “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.” Sprinkling of the blood was to make atonement for Aaron, his household and for the whole community and for the Most Holy Place, and for the Tent of Meeting and the altar before the LORD in the following verses. Making atonement is covering sins through appeasing God’s wrath and thus bringing propitiation and peace with God. It is through the blood. Particularly verse 19 says, “He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it (the altar before the LORD) with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites.”

Then in the New Testament we find the astounding meaning of this. Hebrews 9:12 says, “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, having obtained eternal redemption.” Certainly, it is through Christ’s death on the cross, shedding his whole blood (his pores, shoulders, head, two hands, feet, and side). Redemption includes the forgiveness of sins (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14). The author of Hebrews says continually that the blood of goats and bulls is for ceremonial and outward cleansing. And he continues in 9:14, “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…” In Hebrews the analogy of the comparison means “for beyond” and “totally different.” The blood of Christ unblemished brings true perfect forgiveness. Through the forgiveness of sins by his blood we have become his redeemed people belonging to him eternally. What a grace, forgiving and redeeming!

There is a hymn Song “Jesus Paid It All” which says, “For nothing good have I Whereby Thy grace to claim; I’ll wash my garments white In the blood of Calvary’s Lamb. Jesus paid it all; All to Him I owe, Sin had left a crimson stain; He washed it white as snow.” Praise Jesus! May we dwell in this grace of forgiveness and redemption by his blood!

Jesus entered the Most Holy Place before us on our behalf as Hebrews 6:20 says, “It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf…” It is so that we may also enter such a place of God’s very presence. So the author of Hebrews says in 10:19-22, “Therefore, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body…let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from guilt conscience…” What a spiritual secret! What an encouragement to draw near to God relying on what Christ has done for us! And Hebrews 4:6 says, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” Truly Christian life is not what we try to do and accomplish, but to accept what Christ has done for us and know its effect by drawing near to him and approaching the throne of grace. This is living by faith.

Now let’s think of the scapegoat. The LORD says in 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 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.” What an interesting event! Yet, how weird it is! What a poor goat! In Hebrew, “the scapegoat” is *Azazel*, *Az* meaning “goat” and *Azel*, “send.” It is goat-sending for removal. This goat is the goat of removal. The goat carrying all the sins of the Israelites and being sent to a solitary place in the desert, what is the meaning of this? It is the separation of the sins of the Israelites from the people. Sin is to be separated from the people. At the beginning sin was not in the world. The world God made was a perfect world without sin. But sin entered the world through one man, and sin and death came to all men (Ro 5:12). Who can separate sin from people? It is restoring the world into the original state. It is truly paradise restored. How can it be done? The goat carries all their sins away from the people to the place of solidarity in the desert, where no man would be living. The sin would not be back to the people. It would be gone forever. David says in Psalm 103:12, “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” It is another way of making atonement as verse 10 says, “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.”

Its true meaning is found in Christ Jesus. Hebrews 10:4 says, “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goat to take away sins.” And 1 John 3:5 says, “… he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him there is no sin.” No one, but Jesus takes away our sins as the scapegoat for our sins. Isaiah 53:8 says, “He was cut off from the land of living because of the transgression of his people.” Carrying the sins of his people he was sent far away into the desert, to a solitary place, to no man’s land. Goats do not give us a pleasant impression, but that of rebelliousness. At the time of judgment the goat standing on the left is separated from the sheep on the right. Yet, Jesus became the scapegoat, being blamed and carrying all the blames and condemnations because of the sins of his people of God. Jesus was tried again and again, before the Sanhedrin, Pilate, Herod and again Pilate. During these series of trial Jesus remained silent, though he could speak loud for all the wrong blames and accusations. He spoke only when his identity had to be clear. According to Isaiah 53:6-7 “we all, like sheep, have gone astray, but the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth…” He stayed on the cross, even when all sorts of people, the passersby, the religious leaders, the solders and even those who were crucified with him hurled insults at him. Then he gave up his spirit and breathed his last. According to Hebrews 13:12 he was crucified outside the city gate.

John the Baptist exclaimed when Jesus was coming toward him in John 1:29, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” It seems that when apostle John wrote this, he had in mind not only the Passover Lamb but also the scapegoat. The important thing is for us to behold the Lamb of God, the scapegoat. Again, here Leviticus 16:22 says, “The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place…” Those who do not look at the scapegoat Jesus should carry their sins all by themselves even to the end of their lives, finally bearing the consequences of their sins. Meanwhile their souls would become more and more leprous. Then who can look, behold the scapegoat that carries all our sins into the desert? Only those who realize their sins and recognize them. Truly to realize, recognize and confess sins is a blessed life. A Psalmist expressed this blessedness this way, “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him” (Ps 32:1-2). For this blessedness we need the word of God through which we can examine and discover our sins and wrongdoings and wickedness before God. How easy it is to live without self-examination and self-discovery! Then we blame others, even condemn them, thinking that I am okay, though not okay at all before God. What a terrible life it is that I give much pain and grief and hurt to others and to God, but I do not even sense it! Can you image to live together with those who have no self-discovery at all? Not just one day but through one’s whole life.

Adam the first man, when God pointed out his sin, did not recognize his sin, but blamed his wife and God, saying, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” (Ge 3:12) Oh, poor Adam, ugly husband. In reality, there are many ugly husbands and ugly wives. Truly I was one of them. Sometimes out of her frustration my wife said, “You never say ‘I am sorry.’” Then my response was “not never”, not understanding her agony and heart pain. For many nights I slept well, not knowing her body pain and pained heart. I was a man of no self-discovery. I believe that I am getting better. We can say that our Christian life is the life of self-examination and self-discovery in light of God’s word so that we can look and behold the Lamb of God, the scapegoat Jesus, who takes away our sins to the solitary place into the desert. Lord, help us to live in this grace, going deeper into it.

Also, our Christian life is to separate ourselves from sin, not to embrace and be attached but detached to it. We remember Joseph who ran away from the woman who temped him day after day, refusing to be with her in any situation. Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:22 says, “Flee the evil desires of youth…” He says in 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, “Fell from sexual immorality…” and in 10:14, “Flee from idolatry.” We are to flee from all tempting or distracting internet site, any such site, any sin of pride, disobedience, lust, laziness, complacency, worry or fear. We should not let sin be attached to us, any kind of sin, hating sin.

The LORD says in verses 29 and 31, “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 clean you. Then before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a sabbath of rest, and you must deny ourselves, it is a lasting ordinance.” Here “deny yourselves” is “fast”, “afflict yourselves”, or “humble ourselves.” And verse 34 says, “This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.” What a day, a day of atonement! It was once a year for all the sins of the Israelites: “you will be clean from all your sins.” But Jesus did it on a single day, once for all. It is as God prophesied in Zechariah 3:9, “…I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.” It was the day Jesus was crucified, AD 30 or 32 on the fourteenth day of Nisan, the day of Passover (Friday), three in the afternoon, the time of the evening sacrifice. Revelation 9:15 says, “And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind.” In the same way, God scheduled the very hour and day and month and year of his Son’s crucifixion to remove the sin of the world on that single day. As for us is the very day we truly believed in Jesus, who died for my sins and rose again. And it is very day I made a confession, “You are the Christ.” As you know, the New Testament is written in Greek, “Σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστὸς.” “Χριστὸς” is in Hebrew, *messiah* meaning “Anointed.” In the Old Testament, prophets, priests and kings were anointed. No one would all these offices, but Jesus. Jesus is our perfect prophet, preface priest, perfect king. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” So Jesus’ words are the ultimatum and optimum. More than that, he is the Word. Jesus is our great perfect priest, offering through the eternal Spirit himself unblemished to God by dying on the cross. He brings the perfect forgiveness and so perfect salvation and always lives interceding for us. He is my Saviour. He is our perfect eternal king through rising from the dead, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of kings of the earth. He is the Christ, the Christ of God, God’s chosen One before the creation of the world. So he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He is everything to me, the most important person in my life, to whom I give my thanks and praise and my whole dedication. Again this is the day I make the confession, “You are my Christ; you are everything, all the world to me; you are my lover.” “You are the Christ”: this is all about my faith, all about life, all about the world, all about history. This confession is to be in the present, not in the past or in the future. And we are to grow in this confession of Christ.

Praise Jesus who shed his blood and entered the Most Holy Place having obtained eternal redemption, and who became the scapegoat carrying all our sins far away. May we live in this grace of Jesus, beholding him and drawing near to God in him.