

April 10/11, 2004

*Easter Weekend*

## **The Day of Atonement**

**Leviticus 16:1-28**

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Our world today is full of people who believe they are masters of their own fate. They believe they are captains of their own ship—that they are in control of their own lives. Then some crisis happens and they cry out to God. But when the crisis passes they go back to being the captain of their own ship and the master of their own fate again.

It really comes from a belief that God is like a genie in a lamp. You put the cork on the lamp and you pretty much live your life your own way. Every once in a while something happens and you need some help. So you take the cork off and you rub the lamp...and out comes God. He does whatever is needed, then He goes back in the lamp and you put the cork back on and wait until you need Him again.

That certainly raises the question: Is that really how it works? Does God really allow Himself to be manipulated around like that? Probably many of you by now have seen the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, which is a depiction of the suffering of Christ on the cross. You really have to ask the question: Why? Why was that necessary? If it's possible just to rub the lamp and out comes God, then what was the whole point of Jesus on the cross?

It is important to understand that the cross was not an accident. It was not because Jesus' plan went bad and He ended up crucified on a cross. The cross had been anticipated for thousands of years. It had been pictured and planned for. It was the culmination of God's plan to make it possible for sinful people to experience a relationship with a holy God.

When you read through the Old Testament you find that there are many pictures, images, of God's plan of redemption—God's plan one day to redeem His people from their sins. One of those pictures is in Leviticus chapter 16. I'd like to try and recreate that this morning. Turn with me to Leviticus chapter 16. Leviticus is the third book of the Bible, after Genesis and Exodus. You can read the first part of chapter 16 at your leisure. It has a lot of technical description of what we're going to talk about today. I want to pick it up in verse 29, which offers a summary of what this event was all about.

**“This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls, and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you shall be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is to be a Sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute. So the priest who is anointed and ordained to serve as priest in his father's place shall make atonement: he shall thus put on the linen garments, and holy garments, and make atonement for the holy sanctuary; and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar. He shall also make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. Now you shall have this as a permanent statute, to make atonement for the sons of Israel for all their sins once every year.” And just as the LORD had commanded Moses, so he did. (vs. 29-34, \*NASB)**

This is an event, a celebration, in the life of the Hebrew people called Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement. We're going to try to recreate the events of that day to help us understand the meaning of the cross and to help us understand how it is that sinful people can enter into the presence of a holy God.

The text tells us that it was a Sabbath day, which means it didn't really matter which day of the week it landed on—that day was a Sabbath day. It was a day when the people would do no work, which was symbolic of the fact that the work would be done *for* them and they would just rest and watch as the events of the day unfolded.

It is a very sober thing to enter the presence of God. As a matter of fact, Leviticus 16 opens with the reminder that Aaron's two sons had been careless in the presence of God, and God had struck them dead. They were priests, but they were priests who did not honor God's holiness, and God would not tolerate that. So you can imagine how sobering it was for these people as this was described for them.

Now to understand what happened on that day, you have to understand the tabernacle. It was surrounded by a large fence that created a courtyard. It was about 75' x 150'. In that courtyard there was an altar where the sin offerings and the burnt offerings would be offered. As you headed toward the tent, there was a laver that would be filled with water, which was the place of cleansing before you entered into what was called the Holy Place.

When you entered into the Holy Place, you actually entered into the tent proper, and there was the table of showbread; there was the candlestick; and there was the altar of incense right in front of the veil. Now the veil was that which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. It was not so much a curtain as it was a fabric wall. It was as much as 3½" to 4" thick. It was a veil made of purple and blue and scarlet, and it separated out the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.

God dwelt among His people in the Holy of Holies. Within the Holy of Holies there was the Ark of the Covenant, and on top of the Ark of the Covenant was a mercy seat. It was a seat of pure gold. There were two cherubim that hovered over the mercy seat with their wings outstretched guarding the mercy seat. God promised that was the place where a holy God would meet with sinful people. It was the very dwelling place of God Himself. Because the people were sinful, God dwelt in this Holy of Holies that was set apart just for Him.

The Holy of Holies was so sacred that no one was allowed to go in at any time, except for the high priest—and the high priest could only enter behind the veil one time a year, and that was on the Day of Atonement. The people understood that if anyone entered the Holy of Holies at any other time they would be immediately struck down—because sin was not allowed to enter the presence of God.

Now to fully understand the dynamic there, you have to understand the condition of the people. In order to do that, I'm going to ask Jerel to come up and be my volunteer. "Jerel, has there ever been a time in your life where you can imagine you've ever done anything that could *possibly* be considered a sin? Ever a time when you had a bad thought, or perhaps for one moment you did not love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind?"

The Bible says if you have committed just *one* sin—if one moment in your life you had a bad thought or you lied or you committed a sin—then you become clothed in that sin. So we're going to place this robe on Jerel, which is going to represent his sin. It really doesn't matter if

Jerel is a big sinner or a little sinner. The fact is, if you've ever failed to keep God's standard of perfection *at all*, then you are covered in your sin.

Now the reality is, everything that Jerel's soul longs for—his significance, his meaning, his purpose in life, to know the freedom of forgiveness, to have release from his shame and guilt and to experience the very presence of God—lies behind that veil. But it's not possible for Jerel to walk through and enter the presence of God because he has this sin. "So because of that, Jerel, I'm going to ask you to go sit on that stool in the darkness." The Bible says because of our sin we dwell in darkness; we cannot experience a relationship with a holy God. The people understood that.

It's also very important to understand that the people knew the events of this day did not atone for their sin, but they were symbolic of God's promise to Abraham that one day God Himself would atone for their sin. So these events were merely a picture of what was to come, and they would believe by faith that God would keep His promise someday and their sins would be atoned for.

So on this day, the Day of Atonement, the people would rest and they would watch as these events were done on their behalf. It began with the high priest, and the first thing the high priest had to do was to deal with his own sin because he was a sinner. In Leviticus 16 it is Aaron. He would take a bull out into the courtyard, and the bull would be sacrificed on the altar. The bull would be cut open and the blood would pour out. Aaron understood it was symbolic of God's promise that God Himself would shed His blood to atone for their sin. So this was symbolic of saying, *We believe that*.

The priest would take some of that blood and he would approach the tent. But before he could go in, he had to stop and cleanse himself at the laver. Part of the ritual of that day was that the priest would take off his priestly garments. In those days the priests wore garments that were very ornate and very beautiful. But on this particular day, the priest had to take those off. He would bathe in the laver, which was symbolic of being cleansed from his impurities. Then he would put on a linen garment, which was a very simple fabric that was really the fabric of a servant. It was a way of saying, *I bring nothing into the presence of God; I'm nothing more than a humble servant as I enter into God's presence*.

So he would clothe himself; then he would enter into the tent. At this point he disappears from the view of everyone. You have to remember that these people knew that Aaron's sons had been struck dead because of their sin before God. When the high priest went into the tent, they did not know if that high priest would come out or not. So there was tremendous tension in the camp.

The priest would disappear into the Holy Place. Before he would enter into the Holy of Holies, he would take a fire pan and put coals in the fire pan. Then he would take incense from right in front of the veil. As soon as he stepped behind the veil, he would put the incense on the coals—which would create this smoke. It would fill the Holy of Holies with smoke. The smoke was there for a reason. If the high priest could directly see the mercy seat of God, because God's glory and God's holiness was so awesome he would immediately die. So the only way to approach the mercy seat and not die was to fill the room with smoke. It would in some way create a barrier, so that he would only see part of the holiness of God and he would live.

So he would step behind the veil and he would put the incense on the coal, and it would fill the room with smoke. Then when the room was filled with smoke he would approach the Ark of the Covenant. On top of the Ark of the Covenant was the mercy seat, and he would take this blood and he would sprinkle it on the mercy seat. This was symbolic of saying, *I know what I deserve for my sin is condemnation and death, but at this place God meets me and gives me mercy.* Once the blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat, then it was sprinkled before the Ark. The priest would exit out from behind the veil, would come through the Holy Place, and emerge again into the courtyard.

This was a tremendous moment for the people, because at that moment they understood that God had accepted the sacrifice. The high priest was still alive and he had atoned for his sins. At that point he would come out into the courtyard and the people would bring him two male goats. He would cast lots, and one of those male goats would be determined to be the sacrificial goat and one would be determined to be the scapegoat.

Now it was up to the high priest to deal with the sins of the people, as he had dealt with his own. So he would take this goat and he would put it up on the altar. He would cut it open and the blood would flow. The people by faith would believe, *This is symbolic of God's promise one day to atone for our sin.* Again the priest would take this blood and he would head into the Holy Place and into the Holy of Holies. And again he would sprinkle this blood over the mercy seat, symbolic now of the sins of the people. He would then sprinkle it before the Ark, and then he would come out from behind the veil.

But this time in the Holy Place he would take that blood and he would sprinkle it throughout the Holy Place, because that was their place of worship. Day by day that is the place where the priest went in and offered worship to God. But because these people were sinners and these priests were sinners, it was necessary to cleanse the place of worship—because God is holy and cannot dwell with sin. So once a year the place of worship was cleansed with this blood. When the high priest completed that, he would again come out. And once again the people were relieved that he was still alive, which was symbolic of the fact that God had accepted the sacrifice.

The priest would then again go out into the courtyard. This is perhaps the most dramatic moment of the day. He would bring forth the scapegoat and he would place his hands on the forehead of the scapegoat. He would confess the sins of the people and place them—transfer them—onto this goat. “Jerel, I’m going to take this robe off of you to symbolize that.” In essence, what the priest did was he took the sins of the people and he placed them on the scapegoat. And when that process was completed, someone who was appointed would take the scapegoat and would begin to wander out across the hills into the wilderness. They would watch as the goat finally disappeared. The person would take the goat so far out into the wilderness that it was lost, never to return again. It was symbolic of the fact that their sins for that year had been taken away from them and would never return again. For them it was a glorious moment!

At that point the priest would go back to the laver and he would again cleanse himself—because he had taken upon himself the sins of the people and transferred them to the goat. Now he was contaminated again. So in the laver he would again cleanse himself. He would take off his linen garments and he would put back on his priestly garments. He would come outside into the courtyard, take a ram, and this time offer the final sacrifice of the day—which was a burnt offering. As the aroma of that burning sacrifice would go throughout the camp

and into the sky, it was symbolic that God had accepted the atonement for sin. It was really a glorious day for the people.

In our illustration here with Jerel, it is an awesome thing that Jerel's sin has been removed. It was placed on the scapegoat. It's gone! And because that's true, we would want Jerel to be able to enter directly into the presence of God.

But these people understood that the blood of bulls and goats *could not* atone for sin. It was merely symbolic. The reality is, the next morning they would wake up...and the sin was back. They were sinners, so they understood they had no access to the presence of God. But what they did understand is that one day God promised that He would send the fulfillment of what was pictured on this day—that one day sins would be atoned for once and for all. And they waited...and they waited...and they waited. For hundreds of years, generation after generation, they waited for that day. Until finally, in God's perfect timing, God became flesh, was born of a virgin, laid in a manger. He would live a perfect life on this earth, ultimately to be nailed to a cross—not by accident, not because His plan went awry—but because that was what God had intended for thousands of years.

That day when Jesus hung on the cross, He became the sacrificial goat. He became the sacrificial lamb that would shed His blood to atone for the sins of the people. Jesus became the fulfillment of that scapegoat. He became sin for us. He took sin upon Himself, and our sins could be transferred to Jesus on the cross. Jesus became the means by which we can be cleansed. We're cleansed by being washed in His blood. Jesus became the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement as He hung there on that cross.

For thousands of years the people waited for that moment. And as Jesus hung on the cross, He paid for the sins of the world. When the deed was done, when sin had been atoned once and for all, Jesus uttered those words, "IT IS FINISHED!" The Bible tells us at that moment the veil in the temple was torn top to bottom—not torn by human hands, but torn by the very hands of God. It was symbolic of the fact that Jesus had become the veil.

The Book of Hebrews tells us He became the very door into the presence of God, that it was Jesus' flesh on the cross that atoned for sin. Hebrews tells us that the blood of bulls and goats, year after year after year, had no power to atone for sin, but was merely a picture of the day when Jesus Christ would atone for sin once and for all. And now on the basis of Jesus' death on the cross, the veil has been torn and sinful people can enter into the presence of God.

The reality for us today is to recognize that every one of us wears this cloak of sin. None of us are perfect. That cloak of sin prevents us from experiencing a relationship with God. We can't enter the presence of a holy God with this sin. But because of Jesus' death on the cross, we are able to enter through the tent. In our illustration, if Jerel is willing to believe by faith that Jesus died on the cross for his sins—that Christ atoned for his sins on the cross—what he is doing is placing his sin on the cross and saying, *By faith, I believe Jesus did that for me.* Then Jerel is now able to enter into the *very presence* of God and to have a relationship with Him.

The Old Covenant was a picture that looked forward to the day when sins would be finally atoned for and people could dwell in the presence of God. The day Jesus died on the cross ushered in a New Covenant. It is a covenant where there is no longer a veil that separates a holy God from sinful people, but the cross now becomes the door. The cross becomes the

entrance—that sinful people can believe by faith. It’s a Sabbath rest: I don’t *do* anything. I just believe that Jesus did this *for* me.

Pat said it so beautifully in his testimony on the video we saw earlier. Many people believe that to experience God somehow they have to clean themselves up; somehow they have to *do* something. But there’s not enough that you can do that causes that robe to be removed. The only thing you can do is to believe by faith and take that robe of sin and place it on the cross. You have to believe by faith that *Jesus did this for you*.

It is on that basis that we enter the presence of God; we have forgiveness of sin. He takes away our shame and our guilt. He gives our life meaning and purpose and significance. It is God’s amazing grace. Grace is that underserved, unmerited favor. When we stand before the mercy seat, what we deserve is death and condemnation. But what we receive is mercy and life! That is why Jesus died on the cross—that we might know God.

Maybe you have never placed your faith in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. Maybe you have known the Easter story, but you have never understood what it meant. You may have never understood what it meant to *you* and what your response to Jesus’ death must be.

Perhaps this Easter weekend, in the quietness of your own heart, you will say, “Yes, I believe by faith Jesus did that for *me!*” And for the first time in your life, you will find that which satisfies your soul. You will find the forgiveness of sin and you will enter the presence of God—both now and forever.

*Our Father, we are thankful that after thousands of years of hoping and waiting, God became flesh and was nailed to a cross for the sins of the world. Lord, if any of us choose to believe by faith that Jesus died for us, You have promised to forgive our sins—to remove them as far as the east is from the west—and to grant us access into the very presence of God, both now and forever. Lord, it’s because of Your amazing grace that we have new life. For that we say thanks. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

\*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

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