

LIVING WITH A HOLY GOD REQUIRES THAT GOD DO THE IMPOSSIBLE

Leviticus 16:1-34

INTRODUCTION

I want you to imagine with me that you are a family member of one of those who died in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Your mother or father or husband or wife or child had to decide between being burned to death or jumping out a window on the 100th floor. One day as you are watching the news you are shocked as you see pictures of Osama bin Laden getting off an airplane in Washington, D.C. while a military band plays rousing music. You watch as President Bush warmly greets him with the Arabic kisses on the cheek. He and President Bush approach a podium with microphones and you listen as the President tells how he has invited Mr. Bin Laden to come live in the Lincoln Bedroom in the White House. He is going to be the President's closest advisor and will accompany him into every security briefing and will have access to everything to which the President has access. How will you feel about President Bush and his administration? Would you not be outraged? Would you not view the President as one of the most corrupt men who ever lived? Would you not feel betrayed? This is the man who orchestrated your loved ones horrific death. He is the one who sent out video rejoicing in the death of your loved one and thousands of other innocent people and giving the highest praise to the criminals who carried out these barbaric acts. It would be the highest form of treason and injustice for the President to welcome him in this way. Under what conditions would it ever be right for this scenario to happen? There is no possible way for this situation to ever happen. It is impossible for Osama bin Laden to ever have this experience. The only thing that he can expect from the U.S. government is a quick and speedy death. Anything else would be a violation of justice.

I would suggest to you that what we are witnessing here in this book of Leviticus is God doing exactly what my imaginary scenario pictures our President doing. I alluded to this a couple of weeks ago when we were looking at God ordaining Aaron to be his high priest. Aaron is a traitor to God of the highest order. He built an idol and led the people of Israel in a worship service to the idol only days after he and all Israel promised to never do this and in the face of the enormous kindnesses that God had given to him. In today's passage we see that this traitorous person is being accorded the highest privilege that any human can be given: entry into the one place on earth where God visibly manifests his glory in the cloud over the mercy seat that is on top of the Ark of the Covenant. It isn't only traitorous Aaron that is being welcomed into his presence but also the entire nation of Israel who is described several times in this passage as a sinful, transgressing, unclean group of people (vv. 16, 17, 19, 21, 34). What I want you to notice is that in 15:31 God says to Moses and Aaron, "You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them." God says that if the Israelites become unclean they will defile his sanctuary and he will have to kill them. Now look at 16:16, "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." Why is chapter 16 in Leviticus? It is because Israel is unclean, thus the sanctuary is defiled and needs to be cleansed. But God said in 15:31 that if they defiled the sanctuary he would kill them. Yet here we see that he has instituted this elaborate ceremony for the purpose of cleansing the tabernacle and the people. Notice also that uncleanness is not merely a matter of touching the carcasses of unclean animals or having a flow of blood or the wrong kind of skin rash. Rather, as I sought to demonstrate last week, the cleanliness laws are a continual reminder of the real problem, they are rebels and sinners. Leviticus 16 is a shocking chapter in light of 15:31. This chapter demonstrates that God is able to do the impossible. He is able to make a way for him to forgive and live with traitorous people without him becoming an unjust judge.

If you are not yet convinced that this chapter is in the Bible to show how God does the impossible, notice how it begins. This passage begins with a reminder of the rebellious nature of this people by calling attention to the rebellion of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons who ignored God's word and sought to worship God in the way they wanted and so God killed them. The fact that this chapter begins with a reminder of what happened to

those two rebellious men serves notice that what this chapter contains is nothing short of a miracle. What we are witnessing in this passage is how God has done the impossible. He has made a way for he and sinful humans to live together without his justly killing us and without he being accused of being a corrupt and unjust judge. He has made a way for it to be right that terrorists in his kingdom can live together with him forever, receiving all the benefits of being citizens of his kingdom and not only citizens but beloved sons and daughters. This chapter answers the question that reverberates throughout the first five books of the Bible: how can this holy and just God live with these criminals, these unclean people when he has explicitly stated that the only way they can live with him is if they always obey him?

This chapter answers that question and describes how God has done this miraculous thing through the person and the work of Jesus Christ. This chapter is directly referred to and alluded to dozens of times in the NT. The bulk of Hebrews 7-10 has this chapter as its backdrop. What Martin Luther called the most important paragraph in the entire Bible, Romans 3:21-26 has the central ceremony of this chapter at its center. The record of the curtain being torn in the temple in Jerusalem when Christ died on the cross has v. 2 as its backdrop. If you are here this morning and see yourself as you truly are, a terrorist in God's kingdom, and you desire to forsake your life of terrorism and be accepted by the one against whom you have fought your whole life long then this chapter is packed with good news for you because in this chapter God reveals how he has made the impossible, possible.

MAIN POINT

God does the impossible by ...

I. Giving us a perfect priest (vv. 2-6, 11-14, 23-25, 32-33)

The chapter begins by telling Aaron that while he cannot enter the Most Holy Place, that is, the inner sanctuary, behind the curtain, where the mercy seat is located anytime he wants, yet he can enter it on this tenth day of the seventh month by following these instructions. The chapter then outlines what he is to do on this Day of Atonement. What I want to do is give you an overview of what he had to do and then help you see the glory and greatness of Jesus as he is revealed in Aaron, the high priest. The first thing that Aaron has to do is change his clothes. He must take off the bejeweled and colorful and royal high priest clothing and turban, take a bath and then put on plain white linen clothes and turban. He then is to take two male goats from the congregation of Israel and he is to cast lots to see which one is "for the Lord" and which one is "for the scapegoat." Once the goats are distinguished he is to take a young bull and kill it as a sin offering for himself and his sons, retaining some of the blood in a bowl. Then he is to take a censer with burning coals from the altar of burnt offering and after putting two handfuls of fine incense onto the censer he is to enter into the Most Holy Place enveloped in the cloud of incense and carrying the bowl of the bull's blood. He then is to face eastward and sprinkle some of the blood on the floor of the Most Holy Place in front of the Ark of the Covenant with the mercy seat on it. Then he is to turn around and sprinkle blood seven times on the mercy seat itself. After he completes sprinkling the blood of the bull of the sin offering for his and his sons' sins he comes out of the tabernacle and returns to the altar of burnt offering. He then performs the sacrifice of the sin offering for the people using the male goat that is "for the Lord" and then he performs the ceremony with the scapegoat. But then notice in vv. 23-25 how he takes off these servant clothes, takes another bath and then puts his glorious high priestly clothing back on in order to finish the ceremony which includes the burnt offerings for himself, his sons and the people.

There are five contrasts that the letter to the Hebrews in the NT draws between Aaron as he acts in this capacity and Jesus. The point that Hebrews is making is that the insufficiency of this system and the necessity of a better and perfect priest was built right into the system. Every believing Jewish person knew that this system was inadequate for these reasons. I want you to see the glory of Christ as I list these contrasts. First, in Hebrews 7:23 we are reminded that there were many high priests in Israel because they kept dying and then the son was named priest in place of his father. 16:32 draws attention to this succession of priests. However, no one succeeds Jesus because he lives forever and thus has a permanent priesthood. Second, Aaron has to offer a sacrifice for his own sins because he is a sinner. However, as Hebrews 9 makes so clear, Jesus was blameless

and did not have to offer any sacrifice for his own sins but entered the sanctuary by means of his blood shed for our sins. Third, the high priests have to offer these sacrifices year after year without end. However, as 9:26 says, Christ "has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." His sacrifice was a once for all sacrifice. Fourth, Aaron entered into a "man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one." However, Christ entered into heaven itself, into the true Most Holy Place where God truly lives forever. Fifth, these sacrifices that Aaron makes year after year are only a reminder of human sinfulness. They do not permanently get rid of sin but remind Israel every year that they are still unclean sinners. However, Christ's once for all sacrifice makes those who trust him perfect forever.

There are additional ways that the glory of Christ is revealed here. First, do you remember what the first act of Jesus' revealing himself as the Savior of the world was? He was baptized by John the Baptist. Remember when John protested and told Jesus that he should be baptized by him that Jesus said, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." I've always puzzled over what that statement means. I think the meaning of it is seen right here. The high priest would be unrighteous and thus unfit to act as the representative of the people if he did not as the first act of this day take a bath. Thus Jesus "took a bath" at the beginning of his priestly ministry. As he began the work that would end in his death, he took a bath in John's baptism.

Second, the high priest's normal attire is fit for a king. It connects him closely with the tabernacle and the glory of God. His regular clothing is symbolic of the divinity of Christ. Notice that in order for him to enter into the Holy Place to represent the people he must lay aside his divine attire and put on the very plain and simple attire of a servant. The clothing he puts on, while holy, is less glorious than even the clothing of the normal priests. Twice in the gospels Jesus changes his clothes. In John 13 he takes off his robes and puts on the towel of the servant in order to wash the disciples feet. Then he puts his regular clothing back on. Second, he is stripped of his clothes by the Roman soldiers prior to being put on the cross. Then, prior to his burial is dressed with the burial clothes of a rich man by Joseph of Arimathea. This physical undressing and dressing pictures that ultimate "undressing" that Christ performed when he, the eternal Son of God laid aside his glory and "dressed" in the clothing of a man, a servant and now, upon his resurrection is once again clothed in his glory as the divine Son of God. He had to "put on" humanity in order to perform the sacrifice that would enable him to enter into the Most Holy Place as our representative and atoning sacrifice. This is the point of Hebrews 2:17, "For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and that he might make atonement for the people." Jesus "took off" the clothes of his divinity, dressed in the clothing of humanity in order to be our priest and sacrifice. Now he has put back on the clothing of his divinity through his resurrection and ascension to be our eternal priest, making intercession for us in God's presence.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the high priest enters into the Most Holy Place enveloped in a cloud of incense where he stands before God who also is appearing in a cloud over the mercy seat. The Hebrew word for cloud is the same in both cases. In almost every other occurrence of this word in the Law of Moses it refers to the manifest or visible glory of God. It seems most likely to me that we also are seeing here in a type that the human priest who enters the Most Holy Place is also the divine Son of God even if he has laid aside his divine "clothing" in order to perform these sacrifices. Only a human priest can represent us because God has made a covenant with human beings. Yet only a divine priest can represent us because only God himself has the authority to live in the Most Holy Place.

I know we keep coming back to this point but the reason we do is it is so fundamental to our relationship to God. One day you and I are going to stand in the presence of this God who is a consuming fire and against whom we have waged a guerilla war. We will stand before him as terrorists who have ravaged his kingdom. You are not going to be standing in front of a wishy washy, tolerant being who is just happy that you are who you are and so glad that you want to live with him. You are going to stand before a perfect, just and holy judge against whom you have performed acts of terrorism. Do you want to be there by yourself or with the perfect priest and Advocate, Jesus Christ representing you?

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➤ *And by...*

II. Providing a perfect substitute to atone for us and clean up our pollution (vv. 15-19, 24-25, 27-28)

In vv. 15-19 the high priest continues the ritual by killing the male goat that is "for the Lord" and bringing its blood into the Most Holy Place and performing the two sprinkling acts as he did with the bull. This blood we are told makes atonement for the tabernacle which has become defiled by the uncleanness, that is the transgressions and sins of the people of Israel. Then he comes out of the tabernacle and takes the goats blood and rubs it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and sprinkles some on it in order to atone for the altar because it too has become defiled by the sins of the people. Notice also in v. 17, which is a summary verse, that the atonement that is made is also for the people. So the blood of this goat, sprinkled on the mercy seat and on the altar cleanses both the place where God dwells and the people who live with God. In Hebrews 9 this is the point that is repeatedly made. Jesus, by his own blood, both cleanses heaven from the defilement that we bring into it by our presence and he cleanses us by making taking the punishment due to us for our sins. Thus we are able to draw near to God now with confidence and we will draw near to him in the new heavens and the new earth forever because Christ is the male goat of atonement whose blood continually cleanses heaven from our defiling presence and cleanses us from our sins by its atoning power.

I can't leave this portrait of the work of Christ without showing you its connection to what is arguably one of the most important verses in the Bible. Turn to Romans 3:21-26 which we had read for us earlier. In v. 25 the phrase, "sacrifice of atonement" in the NIV is a translation of the word that is used seven times in Leviticus 16 and translated there, "mercy seat" in the NIV. The mention of this word in this paragraph is preceded in Romans 1-3 with over two chapters describing the "uncleanness" of human beings due to our sin, just like there are five chapters describing the uncleanness of the Israelites prior to chapter 16. 3:21 begins Paul's description of how it is that unclean, sinful people are made right with God. As he describes how unrighteous people obtain God's righteousness he uses this word and thus connects us back to this passage. The mercy-seat is the thing that stands between the presence of God and what is inside the Ark of the Covenant which is the Ten Commandments. The covenant God made with Israel that says that if Israel obeys his Law he will reward them with life but if they disobey he will kill them. God is in the cloud over the mercy seat and looks down at the covenant which Israel and we have broken but between he and that broken covenant is the mercy seat, covered in the blood of the unblemished male goat. This is Christ. He is the mercy seat covered with his own blood that stands between God and the broken covenant which condemns us to death. God does not kill us covenant breakers because the crucified Christ is the blood covered mercy seat who stands between us and God. God's anger has been satisfied by this blood covered mercy seat.

Finally, notice that God made Christ to be our mercy seat to demonstrate his justice because he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. What that means is this. Long before Jesus was crucified God did not kill Aaron as he deserved for making an idol and leading the people in the worship of this idol but rather invited him to come into the Holy of Holies. Therefore, God has left himself open to the charge that he is a corrupt, unjust judge. He killed Aaron's two sons as they deserved to be killed but he did not kill Aaron as he deserved. Therefore, it appears that he has acted like a crooked judge. What does God answer to this charge? He says, I killed my son instead of killing Aaron. Aaron's sins have been punished, they have been atoned by my son who is the mercy seat spattered with his own blood. According to v. 26 this is also how God will answer the charge that he is a perverted judge for letting John Swanson enter into his heaven.

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➤ *And by...*

III. Removing our sins as far as the east is from the west (vv. 10, 20-22, 26)

After the priest has finished with putting the blood for himself, his sons and the people on the mercy seat and on the altar of burnt offering he then takes the other male goat, called the "scapegoat" in the NIV and places his hands on its head and confesses over it all the sins of Israel. Then, a person who has been standing by leads the goat out of the camp and out into the desert where it is let go. Verse 22 explains the meaning of this act, "The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place..." It is quite clear what is being symbolized here. The priest is placing all the sins of Israel upon this "scapegoat" and they are then being completely removed from Israel into the wilderness, where they, along with the goat, are forgotten. Again, God lives in the midst of Israel and thus the sending of the sin laden goat into the wilderness is also symbolic of our sins, which arouse God's wrath, being removed from God's presence. This scapegoat is not directly referred to any other place in the Bible. Christ is never directly called the scapegoat. However, this idea of God's removing our sins from us and from his own memory is described in numerous places in the Bible.

In Psalm 103:11 we are told, "...as far as the east is from the west, so far has he (God) removed our sins from us." How far is the east from the west? How long can you keep going east before you go west? You will forever go east before going west. East and west are an infinite distance apart. That is how far God has removed our sins from us. Hebrews 10:17 quotes this line from the New Covenant passage in Jeremiah 31, "Their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more." In the context of Hebrews 10 this is a benefit of Christ's once for all sacrifice. For all who have Christ as their priest and their blood spattered mercy seat God has forgotten your sins. He has removed them from you an infinite distance and he remembers them no more.

This last week two different people asked me about the final judgment and whether or not Christians will have to answer for their sins. Will God review and evaluate our entire life including all of our sins if we are trusting Christ? The short answer is, no he won't because through Christ, our sin bearer who has carried our sins into the wilderness, he has forgotten them. If you are in Christ you will never have to give an answer to God for your sins because Christ has already answered for them. We will be evaluated but the evaluation of Christians will be for the purpose of rewarding us on the basis of our works of faith as is made clear in Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 4 and 2 Corinthians 5 to name a few passages. For all who are in Christ, your sins and lawless deeds will never be remembered by God. God has sent your sins into the wilderness, carried their by Christ, who is our scapegoat.

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IV. Calling us to repent of our sins and trust what he has done (vv. 29-31, 23:26-32)

I want you to look at vv. 29-31. In v. 30 the promise of this day is restated. Atonement is made for you to cleanse you. Now the question is this: who is the "you" referring to? For whom does the priest perform these acts? The answer to that question is in vv. 29 and 31: all those Israelites and non-Israelites who are living with Israel who deny themselves and do no work on this Day of Atonement. The word that is translated "deny themselves" literally means to "afflict or humble yourself." This is a key word in both the OT and the NT for the act of repentance. One of the best illustrations of what this word means is in the parable Jesus tells in Luke 18. This is the parable where the Pharisee and the tax collector go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee stands looking into heaven and prays about himself like this: "Lord I thank you that I am not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I make." However the tax-collector, Jesus says, does not even dare to lift up his head but beats his breast and says, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." Jesus finishes the parable by saying this: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who

humbles himself will be exalted." That word he uses here for "humbles himself" is the same word used back in Leviticus. Thus the only people for whom the Day of Atonement rituals are effective are those like the tax-collector who know they are sinners and mourn the fact that they are sinners. Humbling yourself means that you afflict yourself with the knowledge of your many sins, mourn over them and yearn to stop doing them.

In addition, those for whom the priest atones do not work on this day. They rest from their work. Again, the word for resting used here is used in a number of places in the NT to describe faith in Jesus. Most notably, Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." The act of doing no physical labor on the Day of Atonement in the OT is a type of what every true Christian does every day, they do not attempt to work their way into heaven but stop working and rest entirely in what Jesus has done for them. The only people for whom Christ is the mercy seat, the scapegoat and the priest are those who repent of their sins and rest in his finished work, refusing to trust in their own work but trusting in his work alone. In Leviticus 23:26-32 God restates the necessity of humbling yourself and resting from your work on this day. He then adds that anyone who does not humble himself or who does work, he will kill. The only people for whom Christ is their mercy seat and priest and scapegoat are those who mourn their sin and stop working and rest in his finished work.

My dear friends, mourn over your sins, be sad about them. Confess them to God. Do not be proud of yourself. You are a sinner. You are not the center of attention. Stop trying to make God like you. Stop working and start resting in Christ's work for you. He is your perfect priest. He is your blood splattered mercy seat where God's wrath against you for breaking his covenant has been satisfied. He is the scapegoat who has carried your sins into the wilderness where they are forgotten by God. You can do nothing to get God to accept you or love you. You must stop working and rest each day in Christ. If you do not mourn your many sins and rest in Christ alone, then God will cut you off from his life and his mercy on that great day of judgment.

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