

SESSION 3

THE PICTURE OF FORGIVENESS

Leader pages on pp. 140-143

THE POINT:
GOD'S PLAN HAS ALWAYS INCLUDED FORGIVENESS FOR HIS PEOPLE.

LEVITICUS 16:6-10,15-19,20-22

⁶ "Aaron will present the bull for his sin offering and make atonement for himself and his household. ⁷ Next he will take the two goats and place them before the LORD at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ⁸ After Aaron casts lots for the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other for an uninhabitable place, ⁹ he is to present the goat chosen by lot for the LORD and sacrifice it as a sin offering. ¹⁰ But the goat chosen by lot for an uninhabitable place is to be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement with it by sending it into the wilderness for an uninhabitable place."

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¹⁵ "When he slaughters the male goat for the people's sin offering and brings its blood inside the curtain, he will do the same with its blood as he did with the bull's blood: He is to sprinkle it against the mercy seat and in front of it. ¹⁶ **He will make atonement for the most holy place in this way for all their sins because of the Israelites' impurities and rebellious acts. He will do the same for the tent of meeting that remains among them, because it is surrounded by their impurities.** ¹⁷ No one may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the most holy place until he leaves after he has made atonement for himself, his household, and the whole assembly of Israel. ¹⁸ Then he will go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it. He is to take some of the bull's blood and some of the goat's blood and put it on the horns on all sides of the altar. ¹⁹ He is to sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse and set it apart from the Israelites' impurities."

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²⁰ "When he has finished making atonement for the most holy place, the tent of meeting, and the altar, he is to present the live male goat. ²¹ Aaron will lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the Israelites' iniquities and rebellious acts — all their sins. He is to put them on the goat's head and send it away into the wilderness by the man appointed for the task. ²² The goat will carry all their iniquities into a desolate land, and the man will release it there."

MEMORY VERSE

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KEYWORDS

Make atonement (v. 6)—The Hebrew term (*kaphar*) can also be translated as "to cover over," "pardon," or "appease."

Blood (v. 15)—It is only through the shedding of blood that atonement can be made for sin (Heb. 9:22).

Mercy seat (v. 15)—The mercy seat was on top of the ark of covenant. The Hebrew term for "mercy seat" (*kapporet*) literally means "propitiatory." Both propitiation (wrath averted) and expiation (sins removed) are in view.

WHAT SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT FORGIVENESS AND THE DAY OF ATONEMENT?

Imagine an inexperienced hiker taking a trek on a mountain trail. The hiker notices a sign expressing the need to stay on the marked path, but he chooses to ignore it. Overestimating his abilities and sense of direction, he goes off the path and ends up getting himself lost. After a while, a park ranger finds him and escorts him back to safety, explaining that this is not the first time this type of situation has occurred. Fortunately for the hiker, the ranger is aware of individuals' propensity to ignore instructions and thus get themselves into situations from which they cannot get themselves out. This story provides a glimpse into God's relationship with humanity. In dealing with His chosen people in ancient Israel, God understood the people were prone to deviate from the standards He had laid out for them. Because of this, God put a system in place by which the people could be restored and have their sins removed.

On the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the people's religious observance, an elaborate ritual by the High Priest ensured the people's forgiveness. This annual observance demonstrated God's mercy in offering a way for people to be forgiven.

God Provides a Way for Our Sins to Be Forgiven

// Leviticus 16:6-10

The Day of Atonement was an important day in the religious life of the ancient Israelites. When God gave Israel the Torah, He designated Aaron (the brother of Moses) to be the nation's first High Priest, with males in succeeding generations continuing the priesthood. They were to be Levites, and the book of Leviticus derives its name from the Levitical concerns that it addresses. The immediate context for the instructions regarding the Day of Atonement is the untimely death of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 16:1). The circumstances leading to their deaths are described in detail in Leviticus 10. There we find the brothers "each took his own firepan, put fire in it, placed incense on it, and presented unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them to do. Then fire came from the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev. 10:1-2). While this punishment may seem harsh at first, it serves as a reminder that coming before the Lord in worship is a serious matter and must closely follow His directions and standards.



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In light of this background, it becomes easier to see how gracious God is in providing instructions for how Aaron, as the High Priest, could offer sacrifices in a way that would honor God. According to these instructions, Aaron is to make a sacrifice for his own sin first and for the sin of members of his household. Before he can act on behalf of the people, he has to ensure that his own sin has been addressed. Leviticus 16:3-5 details how Aaron had to prepare himself for his great responsibility.

Having presented an offering to make atonement for himself and his family, Aaron is to make a presentation to the Lord on behalf of all of Israel. This presentation involves two goats, one to be the sin offering goat and one to be designated as the scapegoat. This may seem like a tedious process, but the detail prescribed demonstrates how seriously God takes sin and how He wants to rid His people of it. The sacrifice of the first goat purifies the tent of meeting, since it is in the midst of sinful people. The second goat, the scapegoat, is sent away from the camp of the people, illustrating the fact that their sin is removed from them. Their sin does not surprise God since He prescribes a way to take it away.

The annual ritual begins with the tabernacle the Israelites use while traveling to the Promised Land and continues with the Temple when built by Solomon centuries later. Through the casting of lots, the outcome is unknown to the people beforehand but is always known by God. Atonement uses various pictures for what happens to sin, with descriptions referring to sin as being covered, removed, or purged. In any case, the sin no longer separates the people from God.

HOW DOES THE IMAGE OF THE TWO GOATS AFFECT YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF SIN IN GOD'S VIEW?

God Requires a Sacrifice for Our Sins to Be Forgiven // Leviticus 16:15-19

In the verses between the passages in the lesson, Aaron is commanded to take coals from the fire and incense to make the place foggy and smoky so he would not be able to view the presence of God. The glory of God's presence with the people of Israel is centered on the mercy seat found in the holy of holies. As God had already explained to Moses when he asked to see God's glory, human beings were not allowed to see God's face and remain alive (Ex. 33:20). Aaron probably recalls the fate of his sons mentioned at the beginning of the chapter when receiving this instruction. Again, the importance of heeding God's instructions for worship should be recognized.

The slaughter of the animals and sprinkling of their blood are



DIGGING DEEPER PRESENTING A SACRIFICE

The sacrificial system in ancient Israel prescribed various types of sacrifices for a number of reasons, including offerings for sin and offerings for giving thanks. Irrespective of the type of sacrifice, one thing remained the same across various times and places: the people presenting the sacrifice had to give up something of value as part of their religious devotion to God. Sin offerings, most notably on the Day of Atonement, had to be repeated at regular intervals since the people regularly sinned. There was no way for the people to remain ignorant about the serious implications of sin. These sacrifices foreshadowed the sacrifice made by Christ, who "entered the most holy place once for all time, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12).

What do the sacrifices mentioned in the Bible teach you about God's view of sin?



commanded to be done in a precise manner to make atonement for the people. The mercy seat is literally the lid or covering of the ark of the covenant, but the importance here is that it signifies the covering of the people's sins. Instructions for building the ark were given in Exodus and upon its completion, the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments were placed inside of it.

Additionally, it contained a gold jar with manna that God had miraculously provided to feed His people and the staff of Aaron that had budded (Heb. 9:4). As part of the atoning process, Aaron is to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat and the altar. Performing this ritual is a great responsibility for Aaron and the High Priests who will succeed him, as they will be acting on behalf of the people before God. No one is to accompany the High Priest when he performs this duty, further underscoring the solemn responsibility he performs.

As important as these individuals would be in the religious life of the people of Israel, Christians recognize a greater High Priest. Unlike Aaron, who first made a sacrifice for his own sin, Christ the High Priest needed to make no such sacrifice. Christ knew no sin, so He did not have to offer a sacrifice for Himself (2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 7:26-28). In addition to serving as the High Priest offering the sacrifice, Christ also is the sacrifice. Through His death on the cross, forgiveness is made possible for the sins of humanity. 1 John 2:2 says, "He Himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not

only for ours, but also for those of the whole world." Thus, the repeated Old Testament sacrifices point to what Christ would do once and for all. Christ "bore our sins in His body" (1 Pet. 2:24).

HOW WOULD YOU EXPLAIN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS BEING THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE FOR OUR SINS?

God Separates Us from Our Sins // Leviticus 16:20-22

Having fulfilled the prescribed acts for the atoning sacrifice, Aaron is to deal with the scapegoat. Aaron is to place both of his hands on this second goat's head and confess all the sins of the people of Israel. The severity and pervasiveness of sin is highlighted by the three references mentioned: "the Israelites' iniquities and rebellious acts—all their sins" (v. 21).

Imagine how much time it could have taken to review the list of the people's sins. In this part of the ritual, Aaron transfers the sins of the people onto the scapegoat and has it sent away into the wilderness. With this act, the people's sins are counted as having been sent away from them. When completing this ritual, Israel has the assurance of atonement as they follow God's prescribed way of dealing with sin.

While the High Priest is performing the rituals of atonement, the people themselves have a role. Beyond the passage in focus, Leviticus 16:29-30 states, "This is to be a permanent statute for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month you are to practice self-denial and do no work, both the native and the alien who resides among you. Atonement will be made for you on this day to cleanse you, and you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord." The people are to take time to reflect solemnly on the importance of this occasion and remember what is necessary to have their sins removed from them.

As the Day of Atonement is to function for the Israelite community as a day of communal focus on the need for a sacrifice for sin, so too Good Friday has come to serve as a reminder about the importance of atonement for Christians. To this day, Jewish people recognize the importance of

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the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) and observe it through fasting and attending prayer services.

Each year on Good Friday, Christians throughout the world remember the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. All of the Christian community's worship centers on this great sacrifice made on our behalf. We, of course, are to remember and give thanks to God for the atonement we have with Him through Jesus Christ much more often than once a year. Christians ought to remember the sacrifice of Jesus and glorify God for it, every day.

As the ancient Israelite community has its sins removed on the prescribed Day of Atonement, we as Christians have the assurance that by putting our trust in Jesus Christ and accepting His sacrifice that God removes our sins from us. The idea of God having a desire to dwell and put up with unholy people is truly amazing, yet that is exactly what He has done. Beginning with the Day of Atonement, the people of God have had numerous opportunities to reflect upon the significance of this reality.

IS IT EASY OR DIFFICULT FOR YOU TO TRUST THAT GOD HAS REMOVED YOUR SINS FROM YOU?

DID YOU KNOW?

People may wonder why the rituals on the Day of Atonement were necessary. The Day of Atonement demonstrates God's holiness and God's love. God is holy and will not overlook or ignore sin. However, God is also loving and chooses to have fellowship with sinful humanity. Thus, God laid out a plan to restore fellowship with human beings. God wants to be at one with us and took the first step to make this possible. Indeed, it has been said that atonement really means "at-one-ment." It is our holy and gracious God's way of choosing to interact with unholy and rebellious people. The sacrificial system in the Old Testament served to remind the people of their sin and God's promise to remove their sins if they followed His prescribed method of atonement. Christ's sacrifice ensured that this forgiveness is available to all people.

Biblical Truth: "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

How would you explain the necessity and effects of Christ's sacrifice?

LIVE IT

Do you understand the role of sacrifice in receiving forgiveness from God?

The Day of Atonement is an important event in the story of God's forgiveness. Consider some other pictures of God's forgiveness in the Old Testament. Find or create a representation of that forgiveness as a reminder this week. This may be a word, image, or piece of music that makes the idea of God's forgiveness real to you. Think of a new way to express your gratitude for the sacrifice made by Christ.

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- **Understand.** We cannot minimize the effects of sin, because God does not. He takes sin seriously. The "giving up" that sacrifice requires demonstrates sin's seriousness.
- **Remember.** Christ is our great High Priest. He understands our condition, having experienced this life Himself. Being sinless, He is our High Priest. Through Him, we can come to God boldly (Heb. 4:16).
- **Share.** Think of someone you may know who is burdened with guilt because of sin. Remind them that God willingly forgives.

DAILY READINGS

1. PURCHASED IN BLOOD // EPHESIANS 1:7

The first animal sacrifice was by God to cover Adam and Eve's sin. From the very beginning, death was always the penalty for sin. In the case of the children of Israel, God gave specific instructions to Moses for Aaron to atone for the sin of the people. Blood had to be shed. Without this sacrifice, they would have died in their sin. But we have a better sacrifice. In His infinite love, Jesus presented Himself as the ultimate, sinless sacrifice that both covered our sin and completely and removed the penalty of death. Through His blood, we have access to the Father and victory in every circumstance. Thank God for the blood of Jesus!

Jesus's blood was the final atonement for sin, and it never loses its power!

2. THE WEIGHT OF THE BLOOD // 1 JOHN 2:2

1 John 2:2 tells us that Jesus "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and...for those of the whole world." Think about how many people live their whole lives feeling hopeless because of the weight of their sin. They don't know of the sacrifice Jesus made for them in dying on the cross, so in our gratitude, we get to spend the rest of our lives testifying to what He's done for us, how His blood cleansed us and made us new, how He covered us in His infinite love and gave us access to eternal life. The world needs what Jesus made available. If we won't share the good news, who will?

Because of Jesus, we no longer have to carry the weight of sin and death!

3. TAKE YOUR OWN ADVICE // LEVITICUS 16:20-22

It can be easy for us to share with others the salvation and forgiveness Jesus' death provided access to, but when we fall into sin, it can be hard to take our own counsel. Feelings of condemnation can be all too real. We, too, can feel unworthy and hesitate to bring our sins before Him, but consider this. If a symbol of separation of sin in the Old Testament was transferring sin to the head of

goats and sending them out into the wilderness, then Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection would mean obliteration of it! This is our reality, so let's not spend another minute holding onto something He died to free us from!

Jesus died so that we never have to be separated from God again!

4. "IF YOU WANT IT DONE RIGHT..." // JOHN 3:16

Growing up, I often thought of God as angry, waiting for me to mess up so that He could punish me. The truth is He created us because He wanted relationship with us. Think about the intentionality in creating Adam from dirt, the precision, and then bringing him to life with His breath! He didn't want Adam to be alone, so He created Eve and commanded them to replenish the earth. Then, instead of giving up as man would have done; God's eternal plan continued. Jesus chose to leave heaven, wear a human body, and die to reestablish relationship. God knew if atonement was to be made once and for all, Christ was the only answer. This is a picture of forgiveness, a picture of love.

Jesus loved us so much that He chose to restore us Himself!

5. A CHILDLIKE DECISION // MATTHEW 6:14-15

Think about the last time you saw two kids get angry and walk away from each other only to reemerge as "besties" a little while later. It wasn't that they didn't hurt; they simply chose to forgive and move on. Children can teach us a lot about the heart of God. Forgiveness can be one of the hardest decisions to make when it comes to those who hurt us, yet God reminds us that we've sinned against Him, and He forgave us. Therefore, His expectation is that we model the same. Though sometimes easier said than done, we should remember that just as we were undeserving and He still forgave, so should we. Forgiveness freely received should be freely given.

Forgiveness goes both ways. If we won't forgive others, we can't receive Christ's forgiveness.