

4. Too hot to handle (studies in Leviticus) - Further up and further in

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[0 : 00] And so we come to this great chapter, Leviticus 16, which I call Further Up and Further In. You'll know where that comes from, at least those of you who know me will know where it comes from.

It comes from the end of the Narnia stories, where Eslan is about to reveal himself, exactly who he is, and the unicorn describes it as a deeper country and says we are further up and further in.

Remember the whole book of Leviticus is spoken to people gathered around the mountain of God to hear the voice of God, and now in a sense they are further up the mountain.

Many of the things that have been revealed in the early chapters are now focused more clearly and developed more fully. And although the title doesn't occur in the chapter itself, this is the major festival of Israel's year, the Day of Atonement, or more literally the Day of the Atonement, when everything was covered, every sin, every fault, every weakness was covered.

And at the very heart of the book, and at the very heart of the books of Moses, is this great chapter. Now, those of you who have been here on our Leviticus series will know that in chapters 1 to 7, we have the basic sacrifices which allow sinful people to approach the holiness of God.

[1 : 23] And in chapters 8 to 10, we have the ordination of priests, Aaron the high priest, and his sons. And then those who were here this morning saw how we moved out from the sanctuary into the rest of our lives, into very mundane things, and looked at living in the fallen world.

But here we are in a deeper country. Everything depends on this, what you might call, annual spring cleaning, when all the sins, all the weaknesses, all the faults of the past year are swept up.

It's interesting to notice what the introduction is. Chapter 16, verse 1, The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the Lord and died.

You can read about that in chapter 10. The two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, basically burst their way into the most holy place of all, and offered sacrifices that God had not prescribed, that he had not laid down.

Basically saying, Lord, we know better. I know you've talked through Moses, but why bother about that? We know better. And as a result of this, they were destroyed. Now this holy place, or the Holy of Holies, was the third division of the old temple.

[2 : 44] There were the outer courts, there was the holy place, where the main sacrifices happened, and then there is the Holy of Holies, where only once a year, one man is allowed to enter.

And this is the place where the Ark of the Covenant was. The Ark of the Covenant, that's essentially a kind of chest, which God had ordered Moses to have built, and which contained the Torah, the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, the Word of God.

And on top of it was what the text says, the atonement cover. And in his, in one of the early biblical translations, Coverdale, one of the earliest translators, he translated this by the beautiful and evocative phrase, the mercy seat.

And this is where the high priest is approaching, approaching the holiness of God. Here is a great object lesson of what was to happen on Calvary. We go further up and further in.

We climb that mountain, and that mountain points forward to that other mountain. Jesus Christ, I think upon your sacrifice, you became nothing, poured out to death.

[3 : 58] So that's the background then. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest, once a year only, and only after the rituals were carried out, was allowed to approach the immediate presence of God.

As we look at this chapter, I want to say three things about it. First of all, the right way to approach God. How do we approach God? Secondly, the reasons for approaching God. And finally, the lasting relevance all this has for us. Now, first of all, the right way to approach God. Now, as I've said so often in these studies in Leviticus, the rituals have gone, but the principles remain.

And first of all, the high priest's own preparation. Verse 3, Aaron shall come into the holy place with a bull and a ram, and he shall put on the holy linen coat.

He offers a sin offering, which basically the priest is saying, Lord, I'm a sinner, as the rest of Israel are. I need to be forgiven. I need your forgiveness.

[5 : 04] And that, of course, is how we still approach God, isn't it? We can approach God in no other way than as sinners. As forgiven sinners. That's the way we approach God.

And he also offers the burnt offering. The burnt offering we looked at last week, which is wholly consumed on the altar, showing that Aaron is saying, Lord, I'm presenting my body.

And since he's the representative, of course, of the people, he's saying, I'm presenting the people as a living sacrifice. So you see how relevant all that is to us. Now, in chapter 8, the garments of the high priest were very elaborate, and we looked at the symbolism last Sunday evening.

This time he is to discard these elaborate garments and wear linen in verse 4. And linen is a sign of humility and purity.

If you read in the book of Revelation in chapter 19, the wonderful poetic picture of the coming of Christ under the title of the marriage, the wedding of the lamb, you read this.

[6 : 09] To her, that's to the church, to the bride of Christ, was given to be dressed in white linen, which is the righteousness of the saints. And then there was a water of cleansing.

So the high priest had to prepare. Now, when he had gone through all that, he would realize that this was no easy, no casual approach to God. As I say, we don't go through all that.

We're not required to wear linen. We're not required to go through those rituals. But the only way we can approach God is through sacrifice. Through the sin offering, where our sins are forgiven, and through the burnt offering, where we offer ourselves.

And then he offers sacrifices. Rams and bulls, as in the usual sacrifices, and then goats. And we'll come to the goats later on. Now, in verse 12 and following, I'm obviously not going to go through this chapter verse by verse, because it's a very long chapter and very complicated.

What I want to try to do is to show the principles. Verse 12, He shall take a censer full of coals of fire, two handfuls of sweet incense, and put the incense on the fire before the Lord.

[7 : 18] In the incense cloud, God appears. And he appears shrouded in mystery. In the Old Testament, we are told no one can see God.

And Moses, in Exodus, has been given a partial vision of God. Moses, in Exodus, says, Lord, show me your glory. And the Lord partially answers it.

He gives him a glimpse, if you like, of his back parts. And it's wonderful that 15 centuries later, Moses' prayer is answered fully, when he stands on the holy mountain, with Elijah, and looks face to face, with the glory of God himself.

And they speak of the exodus that is to be carried out. Can you imagine Moses standing on the holy mountain with Elijah, realizing with wonder and astonishment what all those rituals had fully meant? He obviously had a glimpse of what they meant, but he realized now the event which was to fulfill them was about to happen. Blood is sprinkled seven times, seven symbolizing complete cleansing.

[8 : 24] Now this would be a very solemn, very moving occasion. Those participating and those observing would never forget it. Now what's that got to do with us? And I think, what I want to say is this.

These rituals, as I've said before, are illustrations of the plan of salvation that was already in the heart and mind of God. Now let's be careful what we mean by that.

I must confess, up to fairly recently, I think my thinking was somewhat sloppy on this. I thought something like this. God made the world perfect. God made it good. God made it in such a way that it reflected his glory.

And then something went wrong. And he intervened to put it right. Now you see what that's suggesting. That is suggesting that God brings in plan 1B. When the original plan for creation didn't work.

And that it's almost saying, well God didn't quite foresee this, but he handled it very shrewdly and very capably. But that can't be right. Surely what is truer to say is this.

[9 : 33] That from the very beginning, even before the star shone in the sky, even before any living creature walked the earth, God had planned from all eternity that the center of his purposes would be to show his glory by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is what creation is about. And that is how we know for certain that the old creation will culminate in the new creation. That's what Peter says in his first letter.

Peter talks about the precious blood of Christ foreknown before the foundation of the world. Before there was a human being had ever lived or had ever sinned.

Peter says this was foreknown before the foundation of the world. But made manifest in the last days for your sake. Someone said before ever there was a sinner on earth.

There was a savior in heaven. In other words, what God does in Christ is not a kind of reaction to something that had actually thrown his plan askew.

[10 : 44] This is what God intended from all eternity. And that does not mean that humans have no responsibility. It doesn't mean that the fall was anything less than rebellion or anything like that.

It means that in his grace, God from all eternity planned that his son would become flesh, that he would die, that he would rise again, that he would send his spirit, that one day he would judge the world and bring in the new creation.

And that's the importance of these old rituals. There are object lessons of something that was already in the mind of God. It's not a different God in the Old Testament who is bloodthirsty, who wants to be appeased by sacrifice.

It's a different God in the New Testament. This God we meet in Leviticus 16 is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. How deep the Father's love for us.

How vast beyond all measure. That's what Leviticus 16 is saying. So, first of all then, the right way to approach God. We approach God when we approach him as sinners.

[11 : 50] When we approach him on the ground of sacrifice. Secondly, the reason for approaching God. And that's given in verse 6. And that's the title of the whole chapter. Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house.

Now, we looked briefly at atonement last week. But we want to say something about it again. Atonement has two basic ideas.

The Hebrew word translated make atonement. First of all, it can mean wipe clean. To clean off dirt from something. Or it can mean to pay. To cover.

And of course, we still use that, don't we? About paying a debt. We have enough money to cover it. We wipe the slate clean. That's something we still say. And that's reflected in so many of our hymns.

There was no other good enough to pay the price for sin. He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in. The blood which cleanses our sins.

[12 : 53] Now, in the daily sacrifices and the burnt offering, the sin offering, the peace offering, blood flowed. And that covered sins temporarily because it pointed forward to the once for all sacrifice.

But here there is an additional detail. Let's look now at verse 9. Verse 8, first of all. And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats. One lot for the Lord and the other for Azazel.

Now, if any of you are using the NIV, you will notice that you'll notice that the NIV does not translate the word Azazel as it is here.

The NIV says the one goat for the Lord and the other sent into the desert as a scapegoat. And this, of course, is where we get the term scapegoat.

French Bible calls it, forgive my pronunciation, lebuk emiser, the goat which is sent out. And, of course, the Hebrew word Azazel can be translated that way.

[13 : 59] And this is our term, the scapegoat. And it does symbolize the removal of sin. You see, the first goat which is sacrificed symbolizes the blood that covers our sin.

Jesus offers his blood, the letter to Hebrews tells us, and by offering his blood covers our sin. But that goat that's sent into the desert is also a symbol, a picture of him going into the far country and taking our sins away.

What the psalmist says, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he taken our sins from us. But I think there may be another meaning in Azazel.

Azazel only occurs here in this chapter in the Hebrew Bible, so we can't get any light from other passages. But it does occur in Jewish literature as a demonic figure in the kind of evil presence that would haunt deserts and waste places.

So I want to suggest to you this also symbolizes something else about the death of Christ. Jesus died to defeat the devil. It's not one John tells us for this reason.

[15:08] The Son of God was revealed that he might destroy the works of the devil. Christ destroys him and robs him of his power. He unarms the strong man as Mark's Gospel says.

He takes away his power and frees those who are captive to him. So you see how the two goats together are symbolizing the fullness of the work of Christ.

The goat that is sacrificed, the blood sprinkled on the altar, precious, precious blood of Jesus, shed on Calvary, shed for rebels, shed for sinners, shed for me.

That's what it's doing. But also the goat that goes into the desert, into the far country, into the land which is away from the presence of God and disarms the demonic power that lurks there, defeats the devil and his angels and makes it possible for us to have victory as well.

So the reason for approaching God is for atonement. But why do we need atonement? Some of you know the phrase, the good God will forgive me.

[16:18] That's his job. It's a French thing. This seems to be the evening for French. *Le bon Dieu me pardonnerai. C'est son métier.* That's what the French says and those of you who know French will probably laugh at my pronunciation.

But that's a saying that was attributed to the philosopher Heine or to the empress Catherine. Since the philosopher lived before the empress, he probably should be given the credit for inventing it if credit is the right word.

You see, this is how many people think about God, isn't it? Of course he forgives sins. That's why it's so difficult, actually, to get people to rejoice in the love of God these days. If people don't feel the guilt of their sins, if they don't feel the need of forgiveness, then the love of God is going to be taken as a sort of, of course he loves me.

That's his job. Isn't that what God is about? Loving. And unless we have side by side and hand in hand with the love of God, the judgment of God and the holiness of God, the love of God is simply going to be despised.

We need atonement because God is holy. We cannot go into his presence as we are. We need a substitute. And these rituals, the hand laid on the goat, represented the sins being transferred from the sinner to the goat.

[17:39] That goat was sacrificed and therefore the sinner was covered. The sinner was forgiven. And Jesus stands between us and the anger of God. And on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied for every sin on him was laid.

That's what, that's the doctrine that's sometimes called penal substitution. The doctrine that's under so much attack nowadays. Our problem is, as I say, that we have a sentimental idea of the love of God and we have a very weak idea of the holiness of God.

Earlier generations wrestled with another problem. How is it that a holy God can have any sinners in heaven at all? That is the problem of earlier generations.

But our generation has the opposite problem. We don't see why he doesn't just invite us all in as we are. You know the chorus, Jesus, take me as I am, I can come no other way.

That's absolutely true. But that chorus goes on to say, take me deeper into you. In other words, when we come to Jesus, we come for forgiveness, for cleansing.

[18:48] So, we need atonement because God is holy and we need atonement because we are sinful. Look particularly at verse 21. And 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, all their transgressions and all their sins.

Notice, first of all, the plurals. These are all plural words and they don't exactly mean the same thing. It's not just vain repetition. Iniquities means our sinful nature, our disposition to go wrong. This is what the reformers meant when they talked about total depravity. They didn't mean, as some have mistaken them to mean, that everybody was as bad as they could possibly be. What they meant was that human beings had a bias to go wrong, that we have a tendency to go wrong and that's what iniquities means, our twisted nature, which is, Luther used a phrase, curved in on ourselves.

That's how Luther described this particular word. In other words, we are so obsessed with ourselves and with our needs, with our desires, with our ideas, that we are not open to God. Then transgressions, probably better translated rebellions, that's deliberate sins. And then the word sins itself, it means the daily and specific sins.

[20 : 13] All those actions which day by day we commit or sometimes omit. We used to pray a prayer when I taught in an Anglican college, deliver us from negligence, from weakness, and from our own deliberate fault.

That's all these different kinds of sins. And the plural essay shows the frequency. And these are transferred to the goats. One goat dies and one goat symbolizes the death of Christ who by his death covers our sins.

The other goat goes into the desert, into exile, just as long before Adam and Eve had been sent into exile out of Eden. As Cain had wandered in the land of Nod, as the people of Israel are later to be sent into exile.

That symbolizes our wandering away from God. God, but also the goats symbolize the way back to God. So the right way to approach God by sacrifice and by humility.

The reason because he is holy and we are sinful. And thirdly, the lasting relevance of all this. And I've already been speaking about that, but I want you to look for a moment at verses 29 to 34, the end of the chapter.

[21 : 33] Moses says, It shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you.

For in this day shall atonement be made. The day of atonement, many of you all know the Hebrew phrase Yom Kippur, which of course was a day associated with one of the wars of last century between Israel and the Arab world.

The most solemn day of the year, all normal activities suspended. Because it's a continual reminder of God's mercy of our debt to him.

And that's why it's never to be forgotten. For on that day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. But secondly, above all, it points to Calvary.

Hebrews 9 says this, Christ entered once for all into the holy place by his own blood. Now notice the difference. Year after year after year, the high priest of the day entered the most holy place.

[22 : 48] Year after year, there was this spring cleaning, so to speak, this cleansing of all the sins of the year. But the great word of the letter to the Hebrews is once for all this has happened.

And when Jesus died, the great, thick, heavy curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom. Notice from top to bottom, not from bottom to top.

Not torn because human beings had made their way up to God, but because God himself had provided a way. The no entry signs were removed. The this is dangerous, keep out signs were taken away.

And the great high priest blazed the trail into the presence of God and opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe. But since he suffered, we read these verses earlier, outside the gate, outside the sacred enclosure, there are no longer any special places where we need to meet him. The poet Cooper says, where'er they seek you, you are found. And every place is holy ground. We don't need to build a special building and go into a special part of that building.

[24 : 00] Wherever we open our hearts to him, wherever a sinner in repentance and faith comes to the Savior, he will find a welcome, he will find the curtain is torn, and there is a way into the presence of God.

So this chapter surely leads us to a deeper appreciation of the work of Christ. Moses, writing this long before, could not have realized all the depths of what he was writing.

The letter of the Hebrews tells us that people like Moses saw these things in the distance. And, as I said, on the mountain of transfiguration, he was privileged to see a further unveiling of all that this had meant.

But also, it leaves with us a sense of awe and of mystery. why the Divine Son left the Father's house and traveled into the far country so that we could be led with him up the mountain into the deeper country is the greatest mystery of all.

What mystery here let earth adore, let angel minds inquire no more. Let's pray. God our Father, we can only bow before you in humility and repentance and say within the words of the Apostle, thanks

be to God for his indescribable gift.
[25 : 37] Amen.