

The Big Story

Sacrifice and Atonement

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Week 10 | Leviticus 16

In our *Big Story* series, we've seen that God created a good world and placed people in it to enjoy his presence and reflect his goodness. We chose our own way, and the world fractured. Ever since, God has been at work to redeem what is broken and restore his people.

This week we'll journey with the Israelites after their supernatural escape from Egypt. God rescued them from slavery and invited them into covenant relationship with himself. At Sinai, God came down to dwell among them, but his holy presence was both good and dangerous. How could a sinful people live in close proximity to the God of life? *Leviticus* sits right in the middle of that question. The laws and rituals were a gift from the Creator. The holy God had come near and must teach ordinary people how to live close to him without being consumed. Of course, all of this is a foretaste of what he would ultimately accomplish in Christ.

As modern readers, we may find the rituals of *Leviticus* strange, and even a little unsettling. There's a lot of blood! But for ancient Israel, these were God's gracious way of making nearness possible. The rituals and sacrifices were "drawing-near" gifts, joyful acts of gratitude and humble trust. Pilgrims went up to the sanctuary longing to meet with the Lord, because sacrifice was a way to say thank you for his faithfulness and to repair what sin had broken.

At the center of *Leviticus*, and really at the center of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), stands the Day of Atonement. On that day, God himself makes a way to purify his dwelling and to carry his people's sins away. In Jesus, all that *Leviticus* points to is fulfilled once for all. This week we will let *Leviticus* remind us how good God's holiness is, how costly and gracious atonement is, and how near God has come in Christ to make us his own.

Day 1

After rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, God brought them to Mount Sinai and invited them into covenant relationship with himself. There, he gave them instructions for building a sacred tent—the tabernacle—where his visible presence would dwell among them.

Today's passages take us inside that moment. We'll see what it meant for the holy God to move into the midst of his people and how his nearness would both bless and challenge them. As you read, watch for the tension between God's glory and human weakness, and the grace that makes his presence possible.

Read

Exodus 40:34–38 (NIV)

³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

³⁶ In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; ³⁷ but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. ³⁸ So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

Leviticus 1:1–2 (NIV)

¹ The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. He said, ² “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When anyone among you brings an offering to the Lord, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.

Leviticus 26:11–12 (NIV)

¹¹ I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. ¹² I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.

Think About

The tabernacle was a portable sanctuary, God's “dwelling place” among the Israelites. Every tribe set up camp around it, orienting their entire community around God's visible presence. It was designed by God to be a reminder of Eden, where God once walked freely with humanity.

But the people's sin nearly destroyed that hope. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the law, the Israelites grew impatient and made a golden calf, calling *it* the god who had brought them out of Egypt (Exodus 32). Their idolatry shattered the covenant they had just entered into. The relationship between God and his people was broken, and his holy presence became a threat rather than a blessing. When the tabernacle was finally completed, God's glory filled it, but Moses couldn't enter (Exodus 40:35). The very one who had met with God face-to-face on the mountain was now unable to step inside the tent of meeting.¹

¹ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 321:

That's where the book of *Exodus* ends and *Leviticus* begins, with a denial that begs the question: How can sinful people live near a holy God?

The first words of the book hold the answer. "The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting: 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When anyone among you brings an offering to the Lord...'" (Leviticus 1:1–2). The word translated *offering* comes from a Hebrew root meaning "to draw near."² God doesn't abandon his people because of their sin and idolatry or reject them and withdraw into heaven. He calls out to them and shows them how to approach.

Through *Leviticus*, God provides a way for his people to live in his presence—by grace, through sacrifice.³ Each ritual, each offering, each holy act was a sign that the covenant relationship could be restored. Their worship was not about earning God's favor but about celebrating the fact that he desired to dwell with them and had offered them mercy. As one scholar puts it, the tabernacle "was a visible symbol of the truth that God lives among his people."⁴

Leviticus begins with invitation, not exclusion. The holy God who filled the tabernacle wanted to make a home in the midst of his people, and ultimately in the hearts of all who belong to him.

Respond

Holiness is not just one of God's attributes. It's the essence of who he is, the wholeness of his character — his complete and perfect goodness, love, and justice.⁵ God's holiness reveals the distance between him and us, but it also shows his desire to bridge that gap. From the tabernacle to the cross, his goal has always been relationship. He doesn't lower or lessen his holiness to meet us. In Christ, he raises us up to share in it.

Take time to marvel at who God is and praise him. Take a moment to thank God that his presence is not something you have to earn or fear, but something he freely gives through Jesus.

Pray: Lord, thank you for your desire to dwell with your people. Thank you that you are not distant or disinterested but near and personal. Help me to live today with an awareness of your holy presence and gratitude for your unfathomable grace.

² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 49.

³ Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 48.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 16

⁵ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 26; cf. Hartley, *Leviticus*, lvi–lvii.

Day 2

This week we're exploring how a holy God makes a way for sinful people to live in his presence. Yesterday we saw how Leviticus begins with God calling from the tabernacle, inviting his people to draw near. Today we'll look at what makes that invitation possible—*atonement*.

Read

Leviticus 17:10–11 (NIV)

¹⁰ “I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people. ¹¹ For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

Psalms 24:3–4 (NIV)

³ Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?
⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god.

Hebrews 9:22 (NIV)

²² In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Think About

Leviticus 17:11 says, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes **atonement** for one's life.” So, what is atonement?

The Hebrew word for **atonement**, *kippur*, carries two main meanings: to repay a debt and to purify.⁶ Sin creates both a moral debt and a spiritual pollution. According to Leviticus, it damages the people's relationship with God and contaminates the very space where he dwells. Sacrifice was the way God allowed both to be cleansed and restored. It wasn't a human invention or a bribe to win God's favor. God says, “I have given it to you.” Atonement was his gracious gift.⁷

In Israel's worship, blood symbolized life. When it was offered on the altar, that life became a substitute for the sinner's own. The blood didn't possess magical power. It represented the cost of sin and the grace of God.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 232

⁷ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 25

In offering a blameless life, God's people were reminded that life with him is costly but never out of reach. He provides what he requires.⁸

The pattern of sacrifice was also meant to shape the heart. Each offering described in the first several chapters of Leviticus—burnt, grain, peace, purification, or guilt—was an act of surrender, gratitude, or restoration. The worshiper brought something valuable, laid it down “before the Lord” and trusted in his faithful presence and provision.

For Israel, atonement wasn't just about guilt. It was about communion. Atonement restored the peoples' relationship with God so he could continue to dwell among them. The sacrifices were visible signs of invisible grace. They declared that the holy God desired to live among his people.

All of this points forward to Jesus. When John the Baptist saw him and cried, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29), he was drawing on the imagery of *Leviticus*. Through Christ's sacrifice, the debt is repaid, the pollution is cleansed, and the door into God's presence stands open forever.

Respond

You may not use the word *atonement* very often or maybe you've never really understood what it means. *Leviticus* shows us that atonement is God's gift of grace, making a way for us to live in his presence. Take a few moments to thank him that he has already provided the way through Jesus.

Pray: God of mercy, thank you for making a way for me to live in your presence. Thank you that your grace goes before me and your Son's sacrifice covers me. Teach me to live each day as someone who has been made clean and welcomed to draw near to you.

Day 3

This week we're exploring how a holy God made a way to dwell with his people through the sacrifices described in *Leviticus*. Over the next two days, we'll slow down to look carefully at *Leviticus* 16, the central chapter of the Torah, where God establishes the Day of Atonement.

Today we'll focus on the first half of the chapter (verses 1–19), where the spotlight falls on the high priest. We'll see how he prepared himself to enter God's presence, how the sanctuary was cleansed from the effects of sin, and how God provided a way for his holiness to remain among his people. Then we'll consider how all of these rituals point to their fulfillment in Christ.

Read

Leviticus 16:1–6 (NIV)

⁸ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 1020

16 The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord. ² The Lord said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron that he is 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. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover.

³ “This is how Aaron is to enter the Most Holy Place: He must first bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ⁴ He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on. ⁵ From the Israelite community he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

⁶ “Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household.

Leviticus 16:11–15 (NIV)

¹¹ “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. ¹² 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 curtain. ¹³ 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 tablets of the covenant law, so that he will not die. ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ “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.

Hebrews 9:11–12 (NIV)

¹¹ But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. ¹² 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, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

Think About

Leviticus 16 sits at the very center of the Torah, the first five books of Scripture. Ancient Hebrew writers often placed the most important ideas at the middle of their works, a literary way of highlighting what everything else points toward. At this ‘center of the center,’ the covenant story reaches its focal point. We see that God’s desire to dwell with his people is matched by his provision to make it possible. What happens here explains everything that came before and points ahead to everything that will follow.⁹

⁹ Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 19–20.

The chapter opens with a reminder of what had gone wrong. Earlier, Aaron's sons had approached God in the wrong way and died in the fire of divine judgment (Leviticus 10:1–3). Now God gives Aaron clear instructions for how to enter his presence safely, not whenever he wishes, but once a year, and only with the proper preparation.¹⁰ The message is clear. The holy God who dwells among his people must be approached with reverence and humility.

In the chapters leading up to this moment, Israel learned how easily human life could become unclean through contact with death, disease, or sin. The Day of Atonement provided a yearly cleansing, a way to renew both the people and the sanctuary so that God's presence could remain in their midst.¹¹

On this day, the high priest removed his ornate robes and put on simple linen garments—plain white clothes that symbolized humility and purity.¹² He bathed himself, offered a bull for his own sins, and then carried its blood into the Most Holy Place. There he sprinkled it on the *atonement cover*, also known as the mercy seat. This was the golden lid over the ark where God's visible presence rested.¹³ Beneath that lid were the tablets of the covenant. The blood came between the God who judges and the law that condemns, creating a space of mercy instead of wrath.¹⁴

That image becomes the hinge of the biblical story. The mercy seat in the tabernacle pointed ahead to another meeting place between divine justice and mercy—the cross. The apostle Paul uses the same word for mercy seat (*hilastērion* in Greek) to describe Jesus, saying that “God presented Christ as a place of atonement through the shedding of his blood” (Romans 3:25). What the high priest enacted once a year, Jesus accomplished once for all. He entered not an earthly tent, but heaven itself, offering his own blood to cleanse our hearts and bring us near to God (Hebrews 9:11–12).

On that ancient day, one man went behind the curtain for a nation. Now, through Christ, the curtain is torn, and all who belong to him are invited in. Our great high priest has made the way open forever.

Respond

How does knowing that Jesus is your great high priest change the way you approach God? Take a few moments to thank him for making a way for you to come near—not once a year, but every day.

Pray: God of mercy, thank you that in Christ, your holiness doesn't keep me at a distance. Thank you for Jesus, my great high priest, who has opened the way into your presence. Help me to live with awe, humility, and gratitude for the grace that has drawn me near.

¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 227–228.

¹¹ Wenham, 228.

¹² John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas: Word, 1992), 235–236.

¹³ Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus* (NAC 3A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 212–213.

¹⁴ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 234; cf. Romans 3:25.

Day 4

Yesterday we watched the high priest enter God's presence with sacrificial blood to cleanse the sanctuary. Today we'll turn to the second half of Leviticus 16 (verses 20–34), where the focus shifts from cleansing the tabernacle to removing the people's sin.

This second act of the Day of Atonement shows that God not only purifies what is defiled but also carries away what is condemned.

Read

Leviticus 16:20–22 (NIV)

20 "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. 21 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 wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. 22 The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness.

Leviticus 16:29–34 (NIV)

29 "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 a foreigner residing among you—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. ³¹ It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. ³² The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement. He is to put on the sacred linen garments ³³ and make atonement for the Most Holy Place, for the tent of meeting and the altar, and for the priests and all the members of the community.

34 "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites."

And it was done, as the Lord commanded Moses.

Hebrews 9:11–14 (NIV)

11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. 12 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, thus obtaining eternal redemption. 13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 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, so that we may serve the living God!

Hebrews 13:11–12 (NIV)

¹¹ The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

Think About

After making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the high priest turned to the courtyard, where a second goat waited. Placing both hands on the animal's head, he confessed over it "all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites — all their sins" (v. 21). Symbolically, those sins were transferred to the goat, which was then led into the wilderness by a man appointed for the task.

The people watched as their sins disappeared over the horizon, carried to a desolate place where they would never return. The first goat's blood had cleansed the tabernacle, making it fit for God's presence. The second goat carried away the people's guilt, making them fit for God's presence. Together they pictured both sides of atonement — cleansing and removal, forgiveness and freedom.¹⁵

The wilderness symbolized a place cut off from life, a realm of chaos and death. There, the goat bore away everything that separated the people from God. The unseen blood rituals inside the tent were completed by this public act that everyone could see. It was a living picture of grace and God's desire not only to forgive his people but to free them from the burden of their sin.¹⁶

While the high priest acted on behalf of the nation, the people also had a role to play. They were commanded to "afflict themselves" — to humble their hearts, fast, and repent (vv. 29, 31). True atonement required repentance and faith in God's mercy.

The writer of Hebrews looks back on this day and tells us it was always pointing forward to something greater. The blood of animals could never cleanse the human heart. Only the self-giving love of the Son of God could do that. "Christ entered once for all into the holy places ... by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

Like the scapegoat, Jesus was led outside the city, bearing the sins of his people (Hebrews 13:11–12). Like the high priest, he made atonement by his own blood. In him, the two goats of Leviticus 16 converge — one life poured out, one life sent away. Through his death, sin is not just covered; it is carried away forever.

Now, through the torn veil of his flesh, we have confidence to enter the presence of God (Hebrews 10:19–22). The Day of Atonement is no longer an annual ritual but a finished reality.

¹⁵ Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus* (NAC 3A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 213–214.

¹⁶ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 234–235

Respond

Jesus carried your sin away so that you could live free and forgiven. Is there any guilt or shame you're still holding onto? Burdens he has already removed?

Take a moment to bring those before him. Confess any sin you've been harboring and ask for his forgiveness. Invite the Spirit to give you the power to repent, to make things right where you've caused harm, and to walk in freedom from habits that once enslaved you.

If shame still lingers from sins long forgiven, name those feelings before him. Then picture your sins disappearing over the horizon, carried away and gone for good.

Pray: Merciful Savior, you carried my sin into the wilderness and left it there. Thank you for the freedom and forgiveness you purchased with your blood. Help me to live as someone made clean, unburdened, and near to your presence.

Day 5

Today is a day for reflection and prayer — a time to invite the Spirit to make the truths we've seen this week in Scripture real and personal in your life. All week we've been exploring how a holy God makes a way to live among sinful people. Ask the Spirit what that means for you and the people around you.

Remember the Story

Leviticus tells the story of how God moved in to live with his people and teach them how it was possible for them to dwell with a holy God. Through sacrifice and atonement, God provided cleansing for their sin and freedom from guilt so that his presence could remain in their midst.

At the center of the Torah, the Day of Atonement revealed God's heart — not to push his people away, but to draw them near. The blood of one goat cleansed the sanctuary, while the other carried sin into the wilderness, never to return.

These rituals point us to Jesus, our great high priest and perfect sacrifice. On the cross, he became the meeting place of divine justice and mercy, where sin was judged and grace overflowed. And because of Jesus, the story no longer ends in separation. The curtain has been torn, the distance closed. The holy God who once dwelled behind a veil now makes his home in the hearts of his people.

"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings." Hebrews 10:19–22

Celebrate the Author

When we step back and see the big picture, the story of Leviticus is about love. God's holiness is not a barrier but an invitation. From the beginning, he has longed to be with his people, to make them whole and to share his life with them.

Every sacrifice, every ritual, every drop of blood was God's way of saying, "I want you near." The Day of Atonement finds its fulfillment in Jesus, who carried our sins away and opened the way into the Father's presence. The holy God became the redeeming God, and through him, we can come close without fear.

Worship him today as the one who not only forgives but welcomes, who not only cleanses but restores. He is the God who came to dwell with us, and who promises that one day we will dwell with him forever.

Find Your Place in the Story

Live the Story

Because your sin has been carried away, you are free to live as someone who is fully forgiven. You don't have to earn your way into God's favor, because you already have it in Christ. Walk in that freedom today. When guilt or shame creeps in, remind yourself that Jesus has already taken it far away.

But freedom never makes sin cheap. The cross shows us how costly it truly is. Take time to examine your heart and turn away from anything that dishonors the God who gave everything to draw you near. Repentance isn't about fear or shame. It's the grateful response of a heart that knows it has been forgiven at great cost.

Tell the Story

The world is full of people weighed down by guilt and longing for a clean slate. Tell them what God has done for you through Jesus. Share how he has removed your sin and set you free. Let your life be a picture of the grace that draws people near to him.

Look Ahead

Next week, we'll pause our journey through *The Big Story* to turn our hearts toward gratitude and anticipation. As the holidays draw near, we'll take time to thank God for his faithfulness and prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ, the ultimate expression of God's desire to dwell with his people.

Discussion Questions

1. What part of Leviticus 16 stood out to you most this week, and why?
2. How does understanding the Day of Atonement deepen your appreciation of what Jesus accomplished on the cross?
3. What does God's holiness reveal about his love and his character?
4. How does knowing that your sin has been "carried away" change the way you relate to God?

5. Why is it important to connect atonement with repentance, forgiveness, and freedom?
6. How can you live out and share this part of the story with others this week?