

Atonement

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. It is so lovely to have you with us. Let me encourage you to grab a Bible and come with me to the book of Leviticus and turn to chapter 16.

And know that as you're turning there, you are turning to one of the most significant chapters in all of the Bible. Maybe you've picked this Sunday, you're joining us today, you're thinking, what is the good news right at the heart of Christianity?

Maybe you're watching this today, you're feeling a million miles from wanting to worship the Lord. You've gone cold in your love for Jesus, you're laden with your guilt, and you're thinking, I'd rather not.

Let me encourage you to tune in. What a Sunday you've picked. Leviticus chapter 16. Wonderful chapter of the Bible. And here's what I want to do as we get into this today. Here's what I want you to picture. I want to picture that you're sitting there on the 1st of January, right, any year.

1st of January, you're sitting there. You're staring at that Cliff Richard calendar that your gran has got you for Christmas, right? We always end up with a Cliff Richard calendar somehow.

[1 : 09] And you're thinking, gran, you shouldn't have, you really shouldn't have. But there you are. You're looking at this calendar and you're circling your big dates. I don't know if you're the only, maybe we're the only family that does this. I don't know. Beginning of the year, there's the calendar.

We're circling the dates that we're looking forward to. Here's my question for you as you're looking at that calendar. What dates are you circling? Okay. What for you are the biggest days of the year?

So here's what I want you to do. Go on to the Zoom chat or the YouTube chat. Or 10 seconds. Turn to the person next to you on the sofa who you're watching this with. What for you are some of the biggest days of the year?

10 seconds. So personally, we've got our big days, don't we? Got our birthdays.

Love our birthdays. Maybe for you, it's your wedding anniversary. Maybe for you, it's cup final day. Maybe for you, maybe yesterday you were Welsh.

[2 : 10] You thought that was the Grand Slam day. Didn't quite happen. I don't know. Maybe you're at school. The last day of term is the biggest day for you. Maybe you're a parent. You're thinking the first day of term is the biggest day for you.

Personally, we've got our big days. Nationally, we have our big days. If you're Scottish, St Andrew's Day is a big day. Saw during the week, didn't we? Dublin, what did they do?

They had a drone light show there for St Patrick's Day. Americans, they go crazy for Thanksgiving. And don't we all love Christmas Day? These big days that we're looking forward to.

Here's the thing we need to understand as we come to Leviticus 16. That if you are an Old Testament Israelite, you're sitting there with your BC calendar open in front of you.

This day is one of the first days that you're circling. Big day. This day that's called Yom Kippur.

[3 : 09] The Day of Atonement. Huge day if you're an Old Testament Israelite. Huge day. And if you come with me, get into the text. If you look at chapter 16 from verse 29, you'll see that this day happens once a year on the seventh day of the tenth month.

This is an actual day. One day a year. And if you scan your eyes over verses 29 to 34, the rest of that little section, you'll see that this is a day of complete rest.

So nobody's working on this day. Everybody's off. I guess it's the equivalent of what we would call a bank holiday. And it's interesting because on this one day, this is the one day of the year when God calls his people to fast.

Presumably to prepare their hearts, focus their minds to celebrate and receive everything that this day is all about. This is a day of rejoicing.

This is a day of reverence. And let me just say structurally, it's been placed right at the heart of the book of Leviticus so that future generations can see just how big a day this is.

[4 : 31] Why? Well, because this is the day when you can know that all of your sins are atoned for and they are gone forever.

And because of that, you can know personally and as a nation, you can know that your God lives with you. Now, atonement is the key word that runs through this section.

Atonement, sins paid for, sins dealt with, sins cleansed. Atonement, atonement, atonement, atonement. It keeps coming up in this chapter. It's a day of atonement.

Huge day in the life of Israel. And maybe you're watching this. I don't know. You hear all that. You're kind of thinking to yourself, do you know what? I'll just stick with Black Friday. Thank you very much. That's my big day of the year.

Well, let me just say to keep you involved. If we can understand what this day is all about and we can see and savour everything that it's pointing to, not only will we understand a bit more about why Easter is such a significant time of the year for Christians, but we'll understand why this is the best news that any of us can ever hope to hear.

[5 : 47] Here is the day of atonement. And with that goal in mind, let me give you the simplest sermon outline ever. Ready for it? One, two, three.

One day, two goats, three words. One, two, three. So let's get into this, shall we? Here's what happens on this one day.

The drama, as we jump into it at verse one, the drama centres on one man, right? The ones keep rolling, actually. The drama centres on one man.

It's not just any man. It's a priest. Not just any priest. The high priest, who in this case is Aaron. He's the one man who's at the heart of this drama.

And verse two, the ones keep on going. God invites Aaron in his role as representing the entire nation to come into one place.

[6 : 48] See it? One day, one man, one place. Now, where is this place? You'll see it in the text. Inside the curtain or behind the curtain.

So Aaron's to come into this one place within the tabernacle called the Holy of Holies. Special because it is the place where the Ark of the Covenant is.

It is sacred because it is the place where God has promised to meet with the high priest. This is where he lives. It's a glorious thing that God would choose to live in the midst of his people.

It's a glorious thing. But remember the context. It's a frightening thing. See the context. Verse one and two. This has come straight after the time when Nadab and Abihu have just casually, complacently, just ran into this place and lost their lives.

The nation, Aaron in particular, so aware that this is a glorious thing. And this is a holy thing. You can't just run into the presence of a holy God unless he invites you.

[7 : 56] Right? And to shelter the people from the fire of God's holiness, there is a massive curtain which is put up, which is effectively a no entry sign. It is not safe for you to come in here.

And yet on this one day, God invites the high priest to come into his presence. Now all of these details are hugely significant, which we'll see at the end. But in this one day, God invites Aaron to come into his presence.

You ever had that feeling? You ever had that experience when you've found yourself in the presence of greatness? I remember as a junior lawyer, within the first few weeks of me starting at my first firm, having to go into the senior partner's office to get something signed off.

And so there I am, a fresh-faced 23-year-old, walking up to his door. His name is in a huge plaque on the door, senior partner. And all the letters after his name.

I swear there was more letters after his name than there was in my name. And so there I am, knees trembling, palms sweating, and he asked me to come in. Have I had an experience like that?

[9 : 03] How much more would Aaron have felt that as he approaches the place where the holy God lives? The only way you would ever dream about going in there is if God ushers you to come in.

What's interesting, again, a lovely detail here if you look at verse 4, is that God tells Aaron that he needs to get changed before he comes in.

Now, we would expect, wouldn't we, just looking at that, this would be a dressing-up kind of affair. You ever got one of those invitations to a party and it just says black tie? Black tie means dress up, doesn't it?

Everyone's looking out, their best dress and their dickie bow tie. But the invitation here, interestingly, is not to dress up, it's to dress down. Isn't that fascinating? It's to dress down.

God says to Aaron, to come in here, you need to take off your kingly gear, take it off, and you have to put on this linen tunic, this linen outfit. In other words, if you're going to come in here, you need to dress like a servant.

[10 : 11] Because that's what you're doing in here. You're serving. In your capacity, it's the high priest. It's what you're doing. Because look what's happened.

If you look at verse 16, the place where God dwells, because of all the people's sin, because of their uncleanness, is in need of a deep clean.

Think about it like this. This is how I was trying to picture it this week. You ever had that experience where you've found yourself in the middle of a really busy city, and you happen to go out that morning, and you're wearing a brand spanking new white t-shirt?

You ever had that experience? And you're going through the day, I don't know where you are, London, Beijing, whatever you are, and you get to the end of the day, and you look at your t-shirt, and you smell yourself, and you think to yourself, this thing is filthy.

Take that concept and crank it up a few gears. Imagine it's not just a white t-shirt that you're wearing. Imagine you're wearing a white t-shirt, and you're living in an entirely white house.

[11 : 14] White carpets, white wallpaper, white sofas, white shaggy dog, and you happen to be living in your white house in the middle of a coal mining town. Okay, what's going to happen every time you open a window?

What's going to happen every time you go out your front door? Dirt's going to come in, isn't it? Now, the cumulative effect of that, what's going to happen to your house over the space of a year?

It's going to be filthy, isn't it? It's kind of like, kind of like, what's happening here. God lives in the midst of his people. He's right in the middle of his people.

And their sin, their uncleanness, has polluted the place where he lives. So what needs to happen, verse 17, is that atonement needs to be made. Atonement needs to be made.

So what the priest is about to do is going to atone for everything. Right? The sanctuary, the altar, the tent of meeting, the priests, and all the people.

[12 : 16] In other words, individual sacrifices covered individual sins. The atoning sacrifice here covers every one of God's people and everything that's going on and everything that they've ever done.

So that this God can continue to live with his people. Because that's his heart. He loves. He's a God of love. He wants to dwell with his people. And this is the day when you can know that that has happened.

Big day. Huge day. So we move from one day to consider two goats. Verse 6.

And this is incredible. He comes to the tent of meeting. What is he bringing? He's bringing a bull to sacrifice for his own sin. And as well as that, verse 7, he's bringing two goats. Two goats.

Cast lots, right? What goat's going to play what part? It falls. Verse 9. Goat number 1 is up. Goat number 1 is going to be killed to atone for, shed its blood for, die instead of, the people because of their sin.

[13 : 21] So verse 15. The high priest kills it then brings its blood inside the curtain and sprinkles it on the mercy seat. This is the place where God has explicitly said he will meet with his people.

So think about what's going on there. This little goat, this little goat bearing the sins, dying instead of all of the people. Little goat, all of the people.

That's what's happened. The fate of goat number 1. Died. Blood spilt. Atones for all the people.

And the priest then turns his focus, Aaron turns his focus to think about goat number 2. Verse 10. There's a difference between the fates of the goats. Goat number 1 is dying.

Goat number 2 is going to live. Have a look at the end of verse 10. Where is this goat going? What's going to happen to this goat? This goat is for Azazel.

[14 : 22] Now some take that Azazel as a place name. It's way out there in the wilderness. Somewhere that they've called the wilderness space. Way outside the camp. That's Azazel. It might be that.

But it is probably more likely it's just the Hebrew word from which our translations get scapegoat. Scapegoat. Now that's the term we get.

That's the term we use all the time. Have a think in your mind. Famous scapegoats from history. Some of you might be old enough to remember Yoko Ono who was John Lennon's wife.

Rumors were going around at the time that apparently it was her influence that led to the breakup of the Beatles. And because of these rumors she was enemy number 1 in the eyes of all the fans and reporters.

Right? She was a scapegoat. I'm old enough to remember David Beckham getting sent off in the 1998 France World Cup. He gets sent off. England go out.

[15 : 22] Back home people are burning strips. Beckham seven. Straw men chopping their heads off. He's the scapegoat. Some of you might just have seen in the news this week about a man called Tom Hayes just out of prison.

He was the first banker back in 2008 to be jailed for allegedly rigging the stock markets that resulted in the financial crash. He was in jail served his time he's just out and he's trying to prove his innocence before the court taking his case to appeal.

What's he saying? He's saying in 2008 people were just desperate for somebody to blame and I was that guy. He was a scapegoat. Somebody who takes the rap somebody onto whom all the blame goes well here's the original scapegoat.

That's this goat. And try and get into this right? Verse 20 Aaron is to get the goat. Now if you know anything about sheep or goats have you ever tried to catch one you know that they don't just kind of flop over and roll over and give themselves to you.

No Aaron's got to catch this thing. Maybe he's running around I don't know he's got to wrestle it to the ground and then he's got to highly symbolically place both of his hands on its head.

[16 : 39] Do you see that? Both of his hands on its head and he has to confess over it all the sins of the people. Wonder how long he was there for?

Confessing over it all the sins of the people and all the sins that phrase comes up again and again and again all the sins and there's thousands of them thousands of Israelites and each of them have got thousands of sins and all of their sin all their gossiping all their envy all their backstabbing all their lustful thoughts all their fights all their anger every single sin loaded onto the head of this little goat and after doing that Aaron brings the goat out so the people can see someone else has got the job of leading this goat out of the camp right imagine that job your job is to take the goat who's representing all your sins all the sins of your sins of your people including your own on its head get it out of here get it out you can imagine can't you the scene as the people line up making a way right make a way for this to happen get this goat out of here everyone's watching this moment some will be celebrating this moment some will be hugging embracing one another some will be weeping some will just be still in reverence as they respond to the goat who goes because they understand what is going on in this moment all of my sin atoned for and gone this is the goat that goes and as it goes you can know that you are never seeing your sin again never seeing it again and so having done all that the high priest verse 23 having served goes back in takes off his linen garments and leaves them there he bathes makes himself clean puts back on his usual attire and a few more jobs and his work is finished until next year and then the year after that and the year after that every year this happens every year this big day every year you can know as you think about what's going on in this moment that your sins have been atoned for your sins have been dealt with the price has been paid and the goat has taken them away it's a big day as God engraves this way of thinking into the minds of his people why well because this man would pitch up many many years later and be the very fulfillment of everything that this day stood for so friends here's what we're going to do is we almost bring this to a close one day two goats three words and the three words are the last that Jesus uttered on the cross cried out what did he cry

John chapter 19 we read it earlier he cried out it is finished three words one word in the Greek but you'll let me away with it three words it is finished and we have to ask what is finished it's not him that's finished something else is finished what's finished well the themes that we thought about today goat one goat two high priest all of them come gloriously together in the person and the work of Jesus let me just really quickly trace this theme through John's gospel love John's gospel been reading it for years still amazed at the things that you find out as you read it here's what's going on what happens in John chapter one what does John the Baptist declare as Jesus pitches up near the Jordan river what does he declare of him he says here is the Lamb of God who does what who takes away the sin of the world in other words here is the true scapegoat you know our oldest daughter is trying to learn compass directions just now right never eat shredded wheat go around the house saying it never eat shredded wheat never eat shredded wheat it was never eat soggy wheat to bixen my day but we'll get on our way with it never eat shredded wheat you remember learning directions when you were young remember learning that which way is west and you would look and this way is west and you would say to yourself where does west end and well it kind of doesn't end it's just kind of that way and you would turn where is east east is this way and you look over and say where does east end well it doesn't really it just kind of keeps on going

I love that that's how God describes what's happened to our sins psalm 103 we read it at the start as far as the east is from the west how far is that I can't get my head around that that's exactly the point as far as the east is from the west that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us never seeing it again the day the east meets the west is the day that you will see your sins again you will never see it again and Jesus is the reason that you can know that not just as a nice sentiment you can know that I can know that we can know that as a concrete truth in which we can build our lives as far as the east is from the west that's how far that's how far Christ has removed our sins from us he's removed all of our sin on him laid your past sin your present sin your future sin all of it on him because of his work on the cross think about what happens where is

Jesus led as he carries the cross where is he led outside the city there goes on this man carrying the cross there he goes bearing my sin remember there's a hymn that we used to sing at primary school there is a green hill far away without a city wall where the dear Lord was crucified who died who died to save us all there goes the Lamb of God bearing my sin on the cross Jesus is everything that goat number two is pointing to and he's everything that goat number one is pointing to as well John chapter 10 as we move through John's gospel what does he declare of himself who is he he is the good shepherd who has come to do what lay down his life for the sheep tell you what the goat here is making a struggle probably having a fight but the shepherd of God lays down his life for the sheep willingly that's why the new testament keeps talking about

[23 : 49] Jesus' death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for sin that's what atonement means Jesus absorbs and satisfies the wrath of God he takes the hit that I deserve he dies I live he is goat number one he is goat number two and friends in his personal work he is the high priest John chapter 20 Jesus is crucified spoiler alert he rises and Mary runs to the tomb and she's confused there is no body there what have they done with it so she runs back to get the others and Peter and John come running always love how John tells us that he won the race right get over it mate it's all right John won the race he was the first there but Peter looks in and Mary's right she's absolutely right there's no body there he doesn't see anything there but he does see something three times we get it in John chapter 20 in these verses verses 5 and 7 what's there eyewitness detail what's there what's rolled up and left there as

Jesus exits the tomb the linen cloths that were on his body as if to say John's way of telling us that the work of the great high priest is done it's finished once and for all it is finished on this day the high priest who only once a year could come into God's very presence and only upon God's invitation what happens as Jesus dies he's crucified outside what's going on in the temple the curtain is torn in two hugely significant because of the work of this high priest because he is atoned once and all for our sin if you're a Christian you can know that you have right now what only one man and one day a year could do you have access to a holy God as God invites the world to trust in his son as that curtain is torn in two the way to God is open through the work of the son as God invites the world to trust in him and come into my very presence friends one day two goals three words what a day big day everyone's watching in the camp everyone's watching some will be cheering some will be celebrating some will be hugging some will be crying some will just be still in reverence as they respond to everything that this day represents everything that's going on and I take it friends that right now but maybe particularly in a couple of weeks time as we remember Christ on the cross as we remember our great high priest

I take it that our response should be exactly the same let me just close with the words of the Stuart Town end song now the daylight flees now the ground beneath quakes as its maker bows his head curtain torn in two dead are raised to life finished the victory power victory cry this the power of the cross Christ became sin for us took the blame bore the wrath we stand forgiven at the cross the day of atonement Leviticus 16 the glory of the gospel let us pray together father thank you for your great love for us that love that that saw your son come and live and die and rise thank you that he lives because his work is done and so father

I pray for any watching this today who might not know who you are might not understand what you have done lord may this be the day through the power of your spirit that they come to trust in Jesus and have life in his name father I pray for those who are watching this who are just burdened with guilt who are feeling a million miles away from you just now lord may they know the glory of Jesus the son of God who loved us and gave himself for us lord we just praise you that you are the god of all grace and we thank you and we pray these things confidently in our high priest's name Jesus Christ amen