

## Sermon

## Leviticus: The Scapegoat

Portions adapted from "Atonement," by D. Marion Clark @ SErmonCentral.Com

As the "lame duck" President met with his successor in the Oval Office, near the end of the orientation, he presented the incoming leader three numbered envelopes, with specific instructions to open them, in order, when great difficulties arose. After the new President completed his "honeymoon" period with the media and the public, the nation experienced an economic downturn. He opened the first envelope. Inside was a card that read: "Blame me." So he did, criticizing the former administration. After a while, social upheaval brought about a critical domestic crisis. The President opened the second envelope. Inside was a card that read: "Blame my party." He did so, in an overt display of partisan politics. About a year later, foreign policy resulted in serious problems and the President opened the third envelope. Inside, the card read: "Prepare three envelopes."

It's been said, "Those who smile in a crisis have found someone else to blame. One enterprising Wall Street commentator actually offered himself for hire as a corporate scapegoat. He wrote that – for a price of course – he would gladly be hired by any business for the express purpose of accepting blame for whatever went wrong, admitting to nearly anything and willingly letting his name and photo be paraded before the condemning public <https://www.thestreet.com/opinion/easy-money-corporate-scapegoat-for-hire-776956> I wouldn't be surprised if he had a flourishing business.

We regard a scapegoat as someone we can wrongly blame for our misfortune; some naïve innocent whom we can sacrifice to the angry mob, but today, from Leviticus we will learn the true meaning of a **scapegoat** as one who carries our sins away to never return; but we are getting ahead of our story.

The first seven chapters of Exodus very graphically describe how to give a sacrificial offering to God. There were basically five different sacrifices one could bring.

- First, there was the **burnt offering** in which every part of the animal was completely "turned into smoke," except for its skin which was given to the priests as a form of payment. In fact most of the offerings gave the skin to the priests, so I assume that many a Levite entered into the tanning business. This burnt offering was specifically to declare one's **devotion to God**, or to make **atonement** for the people.
- Then there were **grain** and **fellowship offerings**, given as an act of gratitude for God's blessings upon the person. These offerings could be made in raw flour, baked goods, drink, or animal sacrifice. With just a token portion burnt on the altar and the rest of the bread, meat, or drink divided up between the priests and the offeror so that everyone got to have a feast. Meat was not a regular part of the Hebrew diet, so these sacrifices were truly celebratory.
- Then there were the **sin** and **guilt offerings**, the first for accidental violations, or to be cleansed from ritual or physical impurity, the second was in confession of intentional sin and usually also required restitution to be made to the offended

parties. While the priests got to keep most of the meat from these offerings, the penitent offeror got nothing back.

Interestingly the type of animal sacrificed for a guilt offering depended upon the importance of the sinner: an offering for a priest's or for communal sin required a bull, for a leader or a commoner – a male or female goat; for a poor commoner – two doves or a grain offering.

Many theologians have unsatisfactorily tried to make all these offerings into one prophetic illustration of the future sacrifice that Christ Jesus would make for us all. I haven't been able to see that pattern, but since the letter to the Hebrews does teach that Christ's single sacrifice satisfied what all the previous sacrifices could not do, perhaps they are on to something (Hebrews 10:1-14).

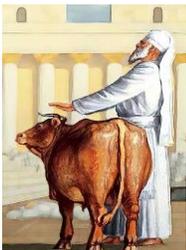


But there is one thing that all these offerings clearly did teach, which was that the *wages of sin is death, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins* (Leviticus 17:11, Hebrews 10:10) . To impress this lesson on the people, every one of the animal sacrifices required the person bringing the offering, to come to the altar and lay their hand on the head of the animal while the priest slit its

throat and collected the blood; thus signifying that the offeror was claiming his sin and transferring it to the animal. But, since these offerings had to be repeated after every known infraction, they also taught that such sacrifices never could completely clear one of sin.

But there was one annual festival in the life of Israel that did clearly teach what would one day become a reality for us through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who became both our **sacrificial lamb** and our **scapegoat**.

Every year, ten days after **Rosh Hashanah** – the new year's celebration – came **Yom Kippur** "the day of atonement." On this day the high priests made a sacrifice first for his own sin and the sins of his fellow priest and then for all the people; essentially a national confession of sin, for which the people waited anxiously to see if God would forgive them and grant another year of existence; this was a day of national fasting, repentance and seeking of forgiveness.



First Aaron the high priest would trade in his fancy priestly robes for a simple tunic as he laid both his hands on the head of a bull while it was sacrificed as a sin offering for himself and all the priests who served with him. This was the only day of the year that he was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle, carrying a bowl of the shed blood to sprinkle a drop on top of the mercy seat resting on the ark of the covenant.



After offering this sacrifice Aaron next cast lots (a form of rolling the dice) over a pair of goats which had been brought to the altar to see which one would be sacrificed for the sins of the people. On the goat to whom the lot fell, Aaron again placed his hands on its head while it was slain, thus transferring the sins of the people to the animal. Then its blood was also sprinkled on the Mercy Seat within Holy of Holies inside the Tabernacle.

By emerging alive from the tabernacle after this blood offering, Aaron and the high priests who followed him thus assured the people that God had accepted this sacrifice in their behalf. Years later, the high priest would have a rope tied around his ankle while entering the Holy of Holies with these offerings lest God refuse his offering and strike him dead, so that the other priests had a safe means for pulling his body back out of the Holy of Holies.



After making these blood offerings, the high priest would next lay both his hands on the remaining goat, *confessing over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness* (Lev. 16:21)

This was the **scapegoat** which had a red scarf symbolically tied around its horns and was then led far enough out into the wilderness so that it could never return. While the people could not see what the high priest was doing in the Holy of Holies, they very clearly could see the scapegoat bearing their sins as it was led out of the Tabernacle, past the tents of the people, out of the encampment and then driven into the wilderness never to be seen again.

The releasing of this scapegoat represented the sins of the people being carried away, never to be held against them ever again. What a powerful image! One goat takes on their punishment and the other carries their sins away. Both were part of the same sacrifice.

The image presented by both the sacrificial and the scapegoat, is that of a vicarious, substitutionary, atonement provided for them by God. The teaching in simpler terms is this: **Either we pay the penalty for our sins, or we accept a sacrifice made in our behalf to cover the debt of our sins.** Sin alienates--it defiles and separates us from God. The Biblical term "**atonement**" means "to cover or reconcile". Atonement provides a bridge to life, the removal of guilt. What these two sacrificial animals could only symbolically do, Christ Jesus did for us once for all. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, he was both our **sacrificial lamb** and our **scapegoat**.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way,  
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:6



Jesus was also our scapegoat

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows .... upon him was  
the punishment that made us whole, Isaiah 53:4-5

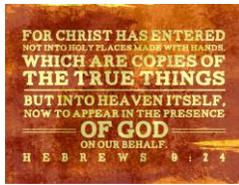


Thus Leviticus chapters 1-7 and 16, give us the origin of both the sacrificial system and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Through Moses, God had presented an elaborate system of offerings and sacrifices, which had various functions, but the underlying premise was summed up in these words, **"be holy, for I am holy"** (Leviticus 11:45).

God is holy; therefore His people must be holy. There is an obvious problem. The Hebrews were not holy. They were sinners. How then, could God dwell among them and they with God? Annually, the Day of Atonement visually and symbolically assured the people that their sins were at least up to the present, forgiven and taken away never to return.

As the Psalmist would later sing, *it is God who forgives all our iniquities, who heals all our diseases .... He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ... as far as the east is from the west, so far He removes our transgressions from us.* (Psalm 103: 3-11).

What the day of Atonement could only symbolize, what the psalmist could only sing about, became a reality for us in the life and death of Christ Jesus. As the letter to the Hebrews teaches, that what was done in those Old Testament rituals were but a shadow of the reality that would one day be found in Christ (Hebrews 9:1-10).



*For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.. (Hebrews 9:24-28).*

What this passage is telling us, is that what the Hebrews thought was the real thing was just a shadow of the reality to come. The earthly Tabernacle was just a copy of the real heavenly temple of God; the physical bloody sacrifices were but object lessons pointing to the real sacrifice to come. The High Priests and all other priests were but actors portraying the real High Priest of God. Christ is our real High Priest. His sacrifice of Himself is the real sacrifice that makes real atonement for all of our sins. And He has entered into the true Holy of Holies of the true temple of God, making atonement once for all, with His blood.

How then should we respond to all this???

Since we have a great priest ...let us approach [God] ... with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience Hebrews 10:21-22

*Since we have a great priest, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Christ has not only sprinkled the heavenly mercy seat with His blood, but us as well; thus we have been made holy.*

Here is the real marvel of it all. Having entered the Holy of Holies in Heaven, our High Priest has torn down the curtain that separated God from His people.

After the temple was built, no one ever saw the mercy seat again – the gold lid covering the ark of the covenant which represented the presence of God. No one, not even the High Priest could ever look upon it. The one time he entered each year, he first carried in a brazier filled with smoking incense that prevented his eyes from gazing on the seat. But our High Priest was not a sinner, though He bore our sins. He thus entered directly into the presence of God his Father and sat down at His right hand. He has opened the way so that we – yes, we! – may boldly follow him in.

Let us therefore come  
unto the

**boldly**  
**throne of grace.**

Hebrews 4:16

*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16).*

We are bidden to follow Jesus, our High Priest, into the Holy of Holies before the mercy seat to find mercy, not judgment. Think about this. When we take scripture seriously and believe what it says about God and about us – that God is holy and that we are sinners, who have only been made holy through Christ's sacrifice in our behalf, only then can we understand how truly great is the love and mercy of God.

The Apostle John described God's love this way:

*God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10).*

God's love is so great, that He provided His own Son who willingly became both the guilt offering for our sin and the scapegoat who carried it away – as our Bible says – *as far as the east is from the west*. That is what the Day of Atonement can teach us about Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Savior.

One final point about the various sacrifices, while I said I could not find how all of them illustrated the sacrifice that Christ Jesus made for us, let us think again for a moment about the Burnt Offering – given as an act of devotion to God and completely *turned into smoke*. Is this not a perfect illustration of Christ Jesus' willingness to completely offer Himself in sacrifice for our sin. Hebrews records this poem about Jesus as if it were a song He was singing as He came into our world.

*'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God." (Hebrews 10:5-7)*

And by that will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10)

Thus when the Apostle Paul declares that in view of God's mercies given to us, our only reasonable response in worship, is to give ourselves *as living sacrifices* back to Him to be transformed by the renewing of our minds....that does seem to be our only

reasonable response. Christ became our burnt sacrifice so that we might become His living sacrifices – Holy and acceptable to God.

Let's pray about this.