The Day of Atonement

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Two goats, one offering, one day a year

On the tenth day of the seventh month (Yom Kippur) the high priest performed the most carefully detailed ritual in Israel's entire calendar. It was the only day the Holy of Holies was opened. It was the only day any human entered the immediate presence of God. And it pictured, in advance, exactly what Christ would accomplish at Calvary, only once, and forever.

The Two Goats

"He shall take the two goats and present them before the Lord" (Lev 16:7)

The Lord's Goat

SLAIN · BLOOD TAKEN IN

One goat is chosen by lot *for the Lord*. It is killed at the bronze altar; the high priest takes its blood through the Holy Place, past the veil, into the Holy of Holies, and sprinkles it on the mercy seat seven times. The propitiating blood.

The death of Christ: the blood that satisfies, the propitiation made before God (Heb 9:12; Rom 3:25).

The Scapegoat

ALIVE · BEARING SINS AWAY

The other goat is chosen by lot *for Azazel*. It is kept alive. The high priest lays both his hands on its head and confesses over it *all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, all their transgressions, all their sins*. The goat is then led by a designated man into the wilderness, carrying the sins out of the camp where they cannot return.

The removal of sins by Christ: as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Ps 103:12; Heb 9:28).

The two goats together were one sin offering. Leviticus 16:5 commands the high priest to take *two male goats for a sin offering*: singular. One animal could not picture what Christ would do. The death and the removal of sins are *one work*, but they require two images to be seen. *Christ accomplishes in one act what required two goats to portray.*

The Ritual · Step by Step

Tishri 10 · the seventh month · once a year · *and not without taking blood* (Heb 9:7)

I

IN THE COURTYARD

The High Priest Prepares

Leviticus 16:3–4

On this one day, the high priest does not wear his usual ornate garments of gold and blue and purple and scarlet. He bathes his body in water and puts on the holy linen tunic, the linen undergarments, the linen sash, the linen turban: pure white, plain, humble. He must be inwardly clean to do the work of this day. The proud golden vestments are set aside.

He brings with him a young bull for a sin offering for himself and a ram for a burnt offering. The bull comes first: he must atone for himself before he can atone for the people.

> THE CONTRAST WITH CHRIST
>
> Christ *did not need, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices daily, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself* (Heb 7:27). The high priest entered in linen, having first sacrificed for his own sin; Christ entered *holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners* (Heb 7:26), with no sin of His own to atone for.

II

IN THE COURTYARD

The Bull for the Priest's Own Sin

Leviticus 16:6, 11

The high priest brings the bull near for himself, lays his hands on its head, and slaughters it as a sin offering for himself and his household. He cannot represent the people while he himself stands under judgment. This is the necessary first step. Every year. Every priest.

THE POINT HEBREWS MAKES

Hebrews 9:7 names the limit baked into the system: *only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance.* Christ's priesthood begins where Aaron's could not: with no sin of His own to atone for first. He entered the heavenly Holy of Holies *not with the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption* (Heb 9:12).

III

IN THE COURTYARD

The Two Goats and the Casting of Lots

Leviticus 16:7–10

The high priest takes the two goats and presents them before the Lord at the doorway of the tent of meeting. He casts lots over them: one lot *for the Lord*, the other lot *for Azazel*. The goats are physically indistinguishable. The lot, not the priest's choice, designates which is which.

The goat that receives the lot *for the Lord* is presented as a sin offering. The goat that receives the lot *for Azazel* is set alive before the Lord, to make atonement upon it by sending it into the wilderness.

WHY THE LOTS

The two goats are indistinguishable; the lot makes the assignment. Both roles (the slain substitute and the sin-bearer driven out) are assigned by God. Christ's death and His removal of sins were not two choices among alternatives; they were one Person fulfilling two divinely-appointed roles in a single act. The casting of lots shows the assignments come from God.

IV

IN THE HOLY OF HOLIES

The Bull's Blood Before the Mercy Seat

Leviticus 16:12–14

The high priest takes a censer full of coals from the altar of incense, with two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense. He carries them past the veil, into the Holy of Holies, and places the incense on the fire so that *the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, otherwise he will die.*

Then he returns with the blood of the bull. He sprinkles it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side, and seven times in front of the mercy seat. The blood applied to the very seat of God in the midst of His people.

THE CLOUD AND THE BLOOD

The incense rises continually before the Lord: the prayers of the saints (Rev 8:3–4) and the perpetual intercession of Christ (Heb 7:25). The blood on the mercy seat is the propitiation, Greek *hilastērion*, the very word Paul uses of Christ in Romans 3:25: *Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*

V

IN THE HOLY OF HOLIES

The Lord's Goat Slain: Blood Sprinkled Seven Times

Leviticus 16:15–16

The high priest comes out, slaughters the Lord's goat, takes its blood, and returns past the veil. He does with the goat's blood what he did with the bull's blood: sprinkles on the mercy seat and seven times before it.

> *He shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins.*
>
> Leviticus 16:16

The blood is for the sins of the people, applied at the seat of God's presence in the midst of them. *This is the high point of the day.* The veil is open. The blood is offered. The Most Holy is approached.

WHEN THE VEIL TORE

The veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, opened once a year by the high priest with blood, was *torn in two from top to bottom* at the moment of Christ's death (Matt 27:51). The way into the holiest is open: not annually, not by one man with one bowl of animal blood, but for everyone who comes through Christ (Heb 10:19–22).

VI

IN THE HOLY PLACE · THEN THE COURTYARD

Blood on the Altars: Cleansing the Sanctuary Itself

Leviticus 16:18–19

The high priest goes out to the altar of incense (in the Holy Place) and puts blood on its horns. Then to the bronze altar (in the courtyard), the great altar where the daily sacrifices burned. He puts blood from the bull and the goat on its horns. Seven times he sprinkles it with his finger.

> *Thus he shall cleanse it and consecrate it from the impurities of the sons of Israel.*
>
> Leviticus 16:19

Even the altars, the places where sin was atoned for all year, needed atonement themselves. The sanctuary itself bore the residue of a year's worth of sin offerings. The Day of Atonement cleansed not only the people but the very means of their cleansing.

CLEANSING THE MEANS

Hebrews 9:23 picks this up directly: *it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these things; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.* The earthly sanctuary was cleansed with goat's blood; the heavenly sanctuary, the very place Christ entered, with His own.

VII

IN THE COURTYARD

Confession Over the Scapegoat

Leviticus 16:20–22

The atonement for the holy place complete, the high priest now turns to the live goat. He lays *both his hands* on its head (not one, but both) and confesses over it

> *all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness.*
>
> Leviticus 16:21

The Hebrew is emphatic: *all the iniquities … all their transgressions … all their sins.* Nothing is left behind. Every accumulated sin of every Israelite for that whole year is transferred, by the priest's confession and laying on of hands, onto the head of the live goat.

Then the goat is led by an appointed man into the wilderness, into a solitary place, and released. *The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land* (Lev 16:22).

THE BEARING AWAY OF SINS

Isaiah 53:6 (already in the canon centuries before the New Testament): *all of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.* John the Baptist names Christ as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). Hebrews 9:28: *Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation, without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.* The scapegoat in the wilderness is the picture; Christ outside the gate is the substance.

VIII

IN THE COURTYARD

The Priest's Bathing and the Burnt Offerings

Leviticus 16:23–28

The high priest goes into the tent of meeting, removes the linen garments he wore for the atonement, and leaves them there. He bathes his body in water in a holy place. Then he puts on his usual high-priestly garments and comes out. He offers his own burnt offering and the people's burnt offering, making atonement for himself and for the people. The fat of the sin offerings is burned on the altar. The bull and the goat carcasses are carried *outside the camp* and burned.

And the man who released the scapegoat must wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; only then may he re-enter the camp. The handler is sin-touched and must be cleansed.

SUFFERED OUTSIDE THE CAMP

Hebrews 13:11–12: *the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate.* Christ was crucified outside Jerusalem, outside the camp, in the precise pattern the Day of Atonement laid down.

One Day a Year: Until It Was Done Once for All

Hebrews 9–10 reads the whole ritual in light of what Christ accomplished

The Day of Atonement was Israel's holiest day. The whole year's sins were dealt with on this one day. The high priest stood, briefly, in the immediate presence of God. The sanctuary was cleansed. The veil was opened.

And it was never enough. The same priest, the same bull, the same two goats, the same blood, every year, year after year, century after century, for fifteen hundred years. Hebrews 10:1–3 names the limitation directly:

> *The Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*
>
> Hebrews 10:1–4

The Day of Atonement's annual repetition was not its failure. It was its design. The picture had to be performed yearly to keep before Israel's eyes the truth that someone would come who would do this *once for all*:

> *By this will [of God] we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.*
>
> Hebrews 10:10–12

Every high priest of every year of every century of the Day of Atonement *stood*. The work was never finished. Christ *sat down*. The work is done.

The Day of Atonement	Christ's Atonement
Once a year	Once for all (Heb 7:27; 9:12; 10:10)
	Christ, sinless, atoned only for others (Heb 7:26–27)

The priest atoned for himself first	
The blood of bulls and goats	His own blood (Heb 9:12)
Earthly Holy of Holies	Heavenly sanctuary itself (Heb 9:24)
Sins covered, not removed	Sins taken away forever (Heb 10:11–14; Ps 103:12)
The priest stood, ministering	Christ sat down (Heb 10:12)
A yearly reminder of sins (Heb 10:3)	God remembers our sins no more (Heb 10:17)

The Day of Atonement was a shadow. The substance has come. The high priest no longer enters once a year through the veil with animal blood; the Great High Priest has entered the true Holy of Holies, once for all, with His own blood. And He sat down.

Notes on the ritual: what Scripture names, what tradition adds

The text of Leviticus 16 is the entire authority for the ritual. Later Jewish tradition (Mishnah Yoma, the Talmud) preserves additional customs and practices that grew up around the day: the scarlet thread tied to the scapegoat, the priest's practice of immersing five times, etc. These traditions are interesting but not Scripture. This study follows Leviticus 16 directly.

What is "Azazel"?

The Hebrew word *azazel* in Leviticus 16:8, 10, 26 has been read three ways: (1) a compound meaning *the goat that goes away*, hence the English "scapegoat" (William Tyndale's 1530 coinage), still the most common reading; (2) a desolate place name; (3) the name of a desert demon, against whom the goat is sent. The first reading is supported by the parallel structure of Lev 16:8 (*one lot for the Lord, the other lot for Azazel*) and by the goat's function in the ritual. This study takes the first.

Were Old Testament saints really forgiven?

Yes, but the basis was always Christ's coming atonement, not the goats and bulls of the Day. Romans 3:25 says God displayed Christ as a propitiation *to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed.* The Day of Atonement kept the books open until the books could be settled at the cross.

Today

The Day of Atonement is still observed in Judaism as Yom Kippur. But since AD 70, when the temple was destroyed, there has been no high priest, no Holy of Holies, no two goats, no blood. The yearly observance that Leviticus 16 commanded has not been possible for nearly two thousand years, because the substance has come and the shadow is no longer needed.

Companion spokes

The **Tabernacle** spoke shows the floor plan and the furniture used on this day. The **Lamb God Provides** traces the parallel arc through the lamb image. The **Covenants** spoke places the Mosaic system in its full covenantal context as a temporary picture, the system inside which the Day of Atonement operated.

Primary Source: The Holy Bible, Leviticus 16; Hebrews 7–10; Romans 3:25; Isaiah 53; Psalm 103:12; Matthew 27:51; John 1:29

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