

The Day God Makes a Way

Leviticus 16:1-34

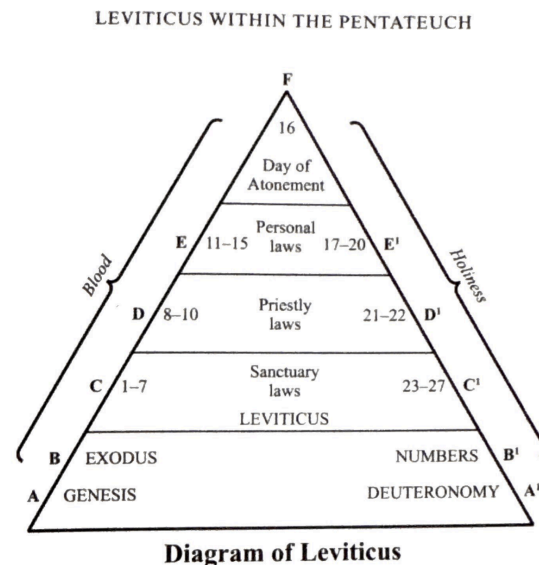
Introduction

The Day: If I say, “Think about ‘the day.’” What comes to mind?

- The day someone serves kale, you realize you're eating the salad bar decoration.
- The day your kid sleeps through the night (and you wake up in a panic because you think something is wrong).
- Is it your wedding day, when love felt eternal? The day your child was born, and joy overflowed? Maybe it's the day someone close to you passed away, leaving a lasting ache. Or the day the music died, when a generation mourned? Perhaps it's the day you achieved a lifelong dream or the day your life changed forever—good or bad.
- We all have ‘the day’ etched in our memories, shaping who we are. Today's text looks at *the day* that shaped God's people.
- **The Day of Atonement** (*Yom Kippur*), Israel's high holy day, is spelled out in Leviticus 16. It is so important, that later rabbis refer to it simply as “*the day*.”¹ It is *the day*.
 - It is the only day in the OT where **fasting** is explicitly prescribed for an Israelite (there were lots of times you *could* fast but only one time you *had* to fast).
 - It was the *only* day each year that the high priest could enter the **Holy of Holies** (the innermost sacred space where the Ark of the Covenant, which symbolized the throne of God and the manifestation of God's presence).
 - It is called a “Sabbath of Sabbaths.”²
 - “Without question, the Day of Atonement was at the heart of Israel's calendar and life” (Morales).
- Even today, *Yom Kippur* draws the largest synagogue attendance annually.

Peak of the Mountain: “It is also... the structural and thematic center of the Pentateuch, the literary summit to which and from which the narrative drama ascends and descends” (Morales).

- The first 15 chapters of Leviticus describe the **ascent** up the mountain of God.³
 - The bloody sacrifice, the holy mediator, and the necessary cleansing to enter the presence of God.



¹ *Ha-yom* (cf. *Mishnah Yoma*)

² Lev 16:31 — שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּבוֹתוֹן (*shabbat shabbaton*); Σάββατα σαββάτων

³ L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 37, edited by D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

- What a journey it's been: "All fat belongs to the Lord," insect cookbooks, priestly casting call, etc.
- At the **peak** of the mountain is the Day of Atonement, where the people's sin is paid for.
- The last 10 chapters show the **descent** down the mountain as the people learn how to live in light of the forgiveness they have received.
 - Now that God has granted them access and they are able to **draw near**, what does it look like to live life before God, in his presence?

Context: The problem remains: the people are separated from the presence of the Lord.

- The story of **Nadab** and **Abihu** looms large over this passage. The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died (16:1).
- Two of Aaron's sons (also priests) were killed when they tried to offer an "unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them" (Lev 10:1). Older translations call this "unauthorized sacrifice" a "strange fire."⁴
- The text doesn't exactly tell us what made it improper other than it was not commanded by God. They may have used an improper source, entered with an irreverent attitude, or at a time when God did not prescribe.⁵ Some even suggest they were drunk at the time, because only a few verses later it says: And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, "Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations" (Lev 10:8-9)
- They failed to approach God according to His instructions. They wanted to worship him on their terms rather than his. The essence of sin is doing what I want instead of what God wants. As a result, rather than their sacrifice being consumed, they were.
 - **We should be cognizant of our attitude when we come to God.** We dare not approach him flippantly. "Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:28-29).⁶ The presence of God isn't conjured through particularly emotional music or the right ambiance. We do not enter the presence of God because of our morality, or effort. Acceptable worship is only possible through Jesus, who enables us to draw near. We can experience the presence of God because Jesus has made a way.

Blessed Danger: Aaron is keenly aware of the **blessed danger** of YHWH's presence. And the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die" For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat (Lev 16:2).

- Aaron is given specific instructions of what to wear (linen outfit), what to do (bathe), and what to bring (bull, ram, two goats).⁷
- Even Aaron, the high priest, needs to be cleansed to enter the presence of God.

⁴ KJV, NASB, ASV

⁵ Some suggest they were drunk because of the following prohibition against drinking alcohol in the Tabernacle in Lev 10:9.

⁶ Deut 4:24

⁷ Lev 16:3-6

Roadmap: The Day of Atonement stands at the center of God’s plan. God has a plan to deal with sin and bring His people into His holy presence. It is the day when God’s people are “at one” with God (literally “at-one-ment”). It shows us how God **covers sin, removes sin,** and **gives** His people **rest**—ultimately pointing to the work of Jesus Christ.

1. Covering Our Sin

¹⁵ “Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. ¹⁶ Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses (Lev 16:15-16).

Mercy Seat: One of the two goats was killed, and its blood was sprinkled over the **mercy seat**.

- The mercy seat was the golden cover on top of the Ark of the Covenant (cf. Ex 25:17-22). Positioned between two golden cherubim, the mercy seat represented God’s earthly throne, where his presence dwelled (Ex 25:22).

Rebellion: Underneath this seat, inside the Ark, was (1) manna, (2) Aaron’s staff, and (3) the Ten Commandments (cf. Heb 9:4). Each of the stories in the Pentateuch about the origins of items are stories of rebellion.

- (1) The people grumble and don’t trust God will provide in the desert, so God provides food.⁸
- (2) God chooses leaders, and the people rebel against them, rejecting God’s appointed mediator.⁹
- (3) God gives the people a law to live by, but they turn to idolatry.¹⁰
 - “The cherubim [guarding] the mercy seat saw only the evidence of Israel’s unfaithfulness” (Rooker).
 - In some way, when God looks at his people, he sees their **uncleannesses, transgressions, and sins**.
- The Hebrew Word translated “mercy seat”¹¹ comes from the root meaning “to cover.”¹²
 - The idea of “covering” lies behind the meaning of “atone.” “To atone is to cover... God screens sins and confers glory” (Leithart)
 - The blood sprinkled on the mercy seat covers these sins. The substitutionary death of the sacrifice covers the brokenness, uncleanness, and rebellion of the people so they can meet with God.
 - On this **mercy seat**, this lid of the ark, this throne for the presence of the Holy God, the very place where God’s presence touches down on earth, is also the very place God himself has provided a substitute.

⁸ Cf. Ex 16, Num 11

⁹ Cf. Korah, Num 16-17

¹⁰ Cf. golden calf, Ex 32

¹¹ כַּפֹּרֶת *kapporet*

¹² כָּפַר *kaphar*

- On what basis does the priest enter God's throne room? The blood of the sacrifice.
 - When God looks down on the Ark, he no longer sees the symbols of sin because the blood has covered the mercy seat. He sees the righteous blood of the substitutionary sacrifice.

Covered: In the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, the word used for "mercy seat" is "atoning sacrifice" or "propitiation."¹³ It is the word used of Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Rom 3:25).¹⁴

- In Jesus Christ, we find the ultimate atonement
 - But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:13).
 - You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Pet 1:18-19).
- If you have placed your faith in Jesus, when God looks at you, he no longer sees your sin; he sees his son. You are covered by the blood of Jesus. God sees the righteousness of Christ. Your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3).
 - I have no righteousness of my own, no right to draw near your throne.¹⁵ Yet you made a way.

In Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning movie, *Schindler's List*, the story is told of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman rescuing over a thousand Jewish men, women, and children from deportation to Nazi death camps. He doesn't save them because of their abilities or because they've earned his favor. In fact, most of the names on his list were chosen for no other reason than compassion. To secure their safety, Schindler uses his wealth and influence, even creating false documentation that claims they are "essential workers." When the Nazis look at these individuals, they don't see their true status or vulnerability—they see the identity Schindler gave them.

- When God looks at us, He doesn't see our sin, failure, or unworthiness. Instead, He sees the righteousness of His Son. We have access to God's presence and eternal life—not because of who we are, but because of who he declares us to be.

On what basis do we enter God's presence? The blood of Jesus. "He became what we are so that He might make us what He is" (Athanasius).

- This should radically shape our approach to God and our view of ourselves.
- This should give me **humble confidence**.
 - Humble (not arrogant) because it's not my strength, effort, or righteousness, but Christ's.
 - Confident (not despair) because Christ's righteousness is perfect, complete, and secure.
- If God looks at me and sees the righteousness of Christ and the love He has for His Son, why do I define myself by my sin, shame, or failures?

¹³ ἱλαστήριον *hilastērion*

¹⁴ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Rom 3:23-25).

¹⁵ HT "Grace Alone"

- My identity isn't in my mistakes but in being a beloved child of God, fully covered by Jesus' blood. He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness (Is 61:10).

2. Removing Our Sin

²⁰ “And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. 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, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. ²² The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness (Lev 16:20-22).

Geography of Holiness: There's a geography of holiness in these accounts.

- The Tabernacle is structured with increasing levels of holiness (from the entrance to the outer court to the Holy Place to the Holy of Holies).
- The Tabernacle is the dwelling place of God. The wilderness is the chaos and desolation of the sinful world, the absence of God's presence.¹⁶
- The Holy of Holies represents the most intimate presence of God, and the wilderness the furthest distance from God
 - A /a Adam and Eve are sent from Eden to the east (the Tabernacle/Temple faces east).
 - The priest moves toward God as the sacrifice moves away.

Scapegoat: At the heart of the ceremony was the time the high priest laid his hands on a live goat and confessed all the sins of the nation.

- The goat then “carried” away the sins of the nation to the wilderness.¹⁷
- The sin is removed, never to be visited again

All Sin: All the components of Israel's sin, wickedness, guilt, and transgressions are transferred to this substitute. The text clearly indicates the totality of sin is confessed by repeating the term “all” multiple times (e.g., **all** the iniquities of the people of Israel, and **all** their transgressions, **all** their sins).¹⁸

- The three terms—iniquity, transgression, and sin—describe the full extent of humanity's rebellion against God.¹⁹
 - **Iniquity** refers to the corruption or guilt caused by sin.

¹⁶ And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times (Lev 16:14).

¹⁷ The term Azazel can be broken down as “Ez” (goat) and “Azal” (to go away or disappear), meaning “the goat that goes away.” Book of Enoch interprets Azazel as a fallen angel, a supernatural being or demon associated with the wilderness.

¹⁸ all, πάσας, ἅς

¹⁹ The three terms reflect the breadth of sin in biblical theology. Iniquity (*יָמַשׁ, avon, ἀδικία*) – Twisted or perverse moral corruption, often emphasizing guilt or consequences. Transgression (*עָשָׂה, pasha, παράπτωμα*) – Rebellion or deliberate disobedience against God. Sin (*חָטָא, chatta'ah, ἁμαρτία*) – Missing the mark or failing to meet God's standard of righteousness, encompassing both intentional and unintentional wrongdoing.

- **Transgression** highlights willful rebellion against God's authority.
- **Sin** is the general failure to meet God's holy standard.

Dealing with Sin: It's all well that sin is forgiven, but forgiveness isn't simply avoidance. For God to be just, sin can't be ignored. Sin must be dealt with (*someone has to pay the price*). It's one thing for sin to be "forgiven," another for it to be "paid for."

- Imagine you wreck someone's car. You don't have the money to repair it, and you go to the owner, asking for forgiveness. The owner graciously forgives you, saying you don't need to worry about the damage. But the car is still wrecked, and the repairs cost thousands of dollars. For the situation to truly be resolved, someone has to pay for the damage—either the owner absorbs the cost, or someone else steps in to cover it.
- This is what God does for us through Jesus. He doesn't just say, "Your sin is forgiven." He pays the price Himself. Jesus takes the full cost of our sin, absorbing it through His death on the cross, so that forgiveness is not only offered but also justly secured.

Jesus Carries It: This all points to Jesus! He carries our sin away.²⁰ Jesus goes "outside the camp"²¹

- ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? (Is 53:4-8).
- **Because Jesus went out, we can come in.** He left the glory of God's presence so we could enter. He bore our sin, so we could enjoy his righteousness. Jesus died the death you deserved to die, paid the price you were unable to pay, and provided access to God that was impossible for you to attain. As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us (Ps 103:12).
- For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).
- Have you ever felt like your sin still lingers, even after you've asked for forgiveness? Jesus, as the scapegoat, has carried your sin away completely.
- Because He bore your rebellion, failure, and brokenness, you now have access to God's life-giving presence. The question is: will you move toward Him or stay in the wilderness?

3. Giving Us Rest

²⁰ Cf. Epistle of Barnabas

²¹ Cf. Lev 16:27, Heb 13:12

²⁹ “And 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. ³⁰ For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins. ³¹ It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever (Lev 16:29-31).

Sabbath of Sabbaths: A Sabbath of solemn rest to you (is a “Sabbath of sabbaths”).

Jesus is our ultimate sabbath rest.

- Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Col 2:16-17).
- So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his (Heb 4:9-10)
 - Just as the Israelites were commanded to cease their work on the Day of Atonement, we rest from our works because **the work is done**—Jesus completed it.
 - Salvation is not an accomplishment to be earned but a gift to be received.

Fasting: After the temple was destroyed, *Yom Kippur* changed in Jewish culture. There was no longer a high priest, Ark of the Covenant, or a Holy of Holies. There was no opportunity for sacrifice, blood on the mercy seat, or the mechanism of atonement in Leviticus 16.

- Everything became spiritualized around prayer, fasting, and repentance. And as good and important as those things are, they are insufficient. How much prayer is enough? How much repentance is enough? How much fasting is enough?
- You see, the command to fast (i.e., afflict yourselves) in this season of “rest” was not about *earning* God’s favor but about preparing your heart to receive his gift. Fasting was an act of humility, dependence, and repentance, not a way to manipulate God to act.
- Fasting is not a burden to prove our commitment to God; it’s an invitation to depend on God. It’s not about proving ourselves to God, but positioning our hearts to receive his provision with thankfulness and joy.²²
- We pray and fast not to get him to work but because he has worked and is working.
- Jesus says to put down the weight of striving and let him carry us (e.g., Matt 11:29-30: take my yoke... for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light).
- It is actually possible to turn these opportunities for rest (e.g., prayer and fasting) obligatory burdens when we see them as hurdles to clear for entrance rather than invitations to fellowship with God (cf. John Piper; fasting is “feasting on God”).²³

Conclusion

Hebrews: Spoiler alert: “The fulfillment of the Day of Atonement in Christ is the theme of the Book of Hebrews” (Rooker).

- The Tabernacle is an earthly microcosm of the eternal reality.

²² Col 4:2

²³ Piper, *A Hunger for God*

- Jesus offers the once-for-all atoning sacrifice that doesn't have to be reenacted annually but can be received *permanently*.
- Through his death, he provides a **covering** for your sin. He **removes** it permanently so you can enter into the presence of God and receive the **rest** your soul desires.

Unbeliever Invitation: Will you come to Jesus and receive the forgiveness he offers.

- Freedom, forgiveness, and rest are not achievements to be earned, but gifts to be received. "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (Augustine).
- You are invited to give him the full weight of your sin, shame, guilt, and weakness. Stop carrying it around!
 - One of the greatest unkindness you can do to God is to not believe that he has done enough to save you and that you, somehow, have to finish the job.²⁴
- You are not strong enough to bear the weight of your sin or achieve your righteousness. You can't atone for your own sins. You can't beat yourself up enough. You don't have enough willpower or hustle. You need a substitute.
- The weight of your sin and striving will crush you—it will crucify you. But Jesus has already been sacrificed for you! He carried your sin outside the camp so you could be brought into God's presence, free from shame and guilt.

Believer Invitation: Once you've experienced this salvation, the way you live will be transformed.

- Your attitude becomes one of thankfulness rather than entitlement.
- Your heart overflows with praise instead of bitterness.
- You can't get enough of the presence of God because you know what it is like to be estranged from it.
- Worship, prayer, fellowship, evangelism, love, and holiness are no longer obligations to prove yourself but opportunities to delight in God and reflect his grace.

²⁴ HT John Owen