LEVITICUS

Chapter 16

*The Day of Atonement*

**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 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, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. 3 “This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area: with 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. 7 Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. 8 He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. 9 Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. 10 But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat. 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 Testimony, 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. 16 In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. 17 No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel. 18 “Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull’s blood and some of the goat’s blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. 19 He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites. 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 desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. 22 The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert. 23 “Then Aaron is to go into the Tent of Meeting and take off the linen garments he put on before he entered the Most Holy Place, and he is to leave them there. 24 He shall bathe himself with water in a holy place and put on his regular garments. Then he shall come out and sacrifice the burnt offering for himself and the burnt offering for the people, to make atonement for himself and for the people. 25 He shall also burn the fat of the sin offering on the altar. 26 “The man who releases the goat as a scapegoat must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water; afterward he may come into the camp. 27 The bull and the goat for the sin offerings, whose blood was brought into the Most Holy Place to make atonement, must be taken outside the camp; their hides, flesh and offal are to be burned up. 28 The man who burns them must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water; afterward he may come into the camp. 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 an alien living 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 sabbath of 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 people 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.**

**16:1–34** See 23:26–32; 25:9; Ex 30:10; Nu 29:7–11; Heb 9:7. The order of ritual for the Day of Atonement was as follows: 1. The high priest went to the basin in the courtyard, removed his regular garments, washed himself (v. 4) and went into the Holy Place to put on the special garments for the Day of Atonement (v. 4). 2. He went out to sacrifice a bull at the altar of burnt offering as a sin offering for himself and the other priests (v. 11). 3. He went into the Most Holy Place with some of the bull’s blood, with incense and with coals from the altar of burnt offering (vv. 12–13). The incense was placed on the burning coals, and the smoke of the incense hid the ark from view. 4. He sprinkled some of the bull’s blood on and in front of the cover of the ark (v. 14). 5. He went outside the tabernacle and cast lots for two goats to see which was to be sacrificed and which was to be the scapegoat (vv. 7–8). 6. At the altar of burnt offering the high priest killed the goat for the sin offering for the people, and for a second time he went into the Most Holy Place, this time to sprinkle the goat’s blood in front of and on the atonement cover (vv. 5, 9, 15–16a). 7. He returned to the Holy Place (called “Tent of Meeting” in v. 16) and sprinkled the goat’s blood there (v. 16b). 8. He went outside to the altar of burnt offering and sprinkled it (v. 18) with the blood of the bull (for himself, v. 11) and of the goat (for the people, v. 15). 9. While in the courtyard, he laid both hands on the second goat, thus symbolizing the transfer of Israel’s sin, and sent it out into the desert (vv. 20–22). 10. The man who took the goat away, after he accomplished his task, washed himself and his clothes outside the camp (v. 26) before rejoining the people. 11. The high priest entered the Holy Place to remove his special garments (v. 23). 12. He went out to the basin to wash and put on his regular priestly clothes (v. 24). 13. As a final sacrifice he went out to the great altar and offered a ram (v. 3) as a burnt offering for himself, and another ram (v. 5) for the people (v. 24). 14. The conclusion of the entire day was the removal of the sacrifices for the sin offerings to a place outside the camp, where they were burned, and there the man who performed this ritual bathed and washed his clothes (vv. 27–28) before rejoining the people. (CSB)

**16:1** *sons of Aaron who died.* See 10:1–3. (CSB)

**16:2** *not to come at any time into the Holy Place*. The deaths of Nadab and Abihu necessitated regulations for the protection of those coming into God’s presence. Aaron is not to enter the Most Holy Place indiscriminately (here called just “Holy Place”), but only on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and then only after carefully following God’s prescribed means of cleansing. (TLSB)

*I will appear in the cloud*. Refers to the cloud of smoke from the incense burned by the high priest as he entered God’s presence (v 13). These regulations protected those serving God from defiling themselves and incurring God’s wrath. Cf Ex 19:16–25. (TLSB)

*atonement cover.* See Ex 25:17 and note. Blood sprinkled on the lid of the ark symbolically made atonement for Israel on the Day of Atonement (vv. 15–17). In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) the word for “atonement cover” is the same one used of Christ and translated “sacrifice of atonement” in Ro 3:25 (see NIV text note there). (CSB)

**16:3** *sanctuary area.* The Most Holy Place (see v. 2). (CSB)

*bull.* For Aaron’s cleansing (vv. 6, 11). Before Aaron could minister in the Most Holy Place for the nation, he himself had to be cleansed (Heb 5:1–3); not so Christ, who is our high priest and Aaron’s antitype (Heb 7:26–28). (CSB)

**16:4** Before entering into the Lord’s presence, the high priest prepared himself by washing completely and dressing in the manner God ordained. These are the high priest’s “sacred vestments.” Cf 8:5–9. (TLSB)

**16:5** *two male goats for a sin offering.* One was the usual sin offering (see notes on 4:3, 5) and the other a scapegoat. No single offering could fully typify the atonement of Christ. The one goat was killed, its blood sprinkled in the Most Holy Place and its body burned outside the camp (vv. 15, 27), symbolizing the payment of the price of Christ’s atonement. The other goat, sent away alive and bearing the sins of the nation (v. 21), symbolized the removal of sin and its guilt. (CSB)

On the Day of Atonement, Aaron offered two sacrifices for the entire Israelite community, including resident aliens. (TLSB)

*ram.* For the sins of the people; the one in v. 3 was for the sins of the high priest. Both were sacrificed at the end of the ceremony (v. 24). (CSB)

**16:6–10** An outline of vv. 11–22. (CSB)

**16:8** *cast lots*. One male goat was designated as belonging to God; the second was assigned to Azazel. (TLSB)

*Azazel*. Commonly translated as “a departing goat” or “[e]scapegoat.” In modern Hbr, the words *lekh la-azazel* correspond to Eng “go to hell,” which is exactly what the Israelite community wanted to happen to their sins before sending it off into the wilderness to die (vv 21–22). The death of this goat atoned for Israel’s sins. (TLSB)

**16:10** *make atonement over it*. The high priest placed his hands on the scapegoat and confessed Israel’s sins over it

**16:11** *make atonement for himself.* See note on v. 3. (CSB)

**16:12** *beaten small*. Finely ground. (TLSB)

**16:13** The smoke of the incense covered the ark so that the high priest would not see the glorious presence of God (v. 2) and thus die. (CSB)

*cloud*. Provided a screen between the high priest and the mercy seat. The mercy seat is where God dwells; His presence was often marked by a cloud or theophany. God was present whether or not the cloud/theophany was visible. (TLSB)

*so that he does not die*. The incense cloud protected the high priest from seeing the Lord and dying. (TLSB)

**16:14** See Ro 3:25. *seven times.* See note on 4:6. (CSB)

**16:15–16** *atonement for the Holy Place*. The blood sprinkled on the mercy seat and on the ground cleansed the Most Holy Place of Israel’s sins. (TLSB)

**16:16** *Tent of Meeting.* Here and in vv. 17, 20, 33 the term means the Holy Place. (CSB)

**16:18–19** Leaving the Most Holy Place, the high priest carried the sacrificial blood and cleansed the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard of the tent of meeting. Over the course of the year, this altar had become defiled by the sins brought before it. Through ritual cleansing, blood was sprinkled seven times, symbolizing God’s perfection in this act. (TLSB)

**16:21** *lay* *both his hands on the head*. With the laying on of hands, the priest offers a corporate confession of the acts of rebellion and sin the Israelites had committed against God. In so doing, the high priest transferred their sin to the scapegoat, which would take their sins away from them and into the wilderness. (TLSB)

*confess* … *the iniquities*. Wicked acts performed against God; sin. (TLSB)

**16:20–22** A summary description of substitutionary atonement. The sin of the worshipers was confessed and symbolically transferred to the sacrificial animal, on which hands were laid (see notes on 1:3; Ex 29:10; see also Lev 1:4; 3:8; 4:4). (CSB)

**16:23** *leave them there*. The high priest’s garments are holy and must stay inside the tent of meeting. Removing them would defile God’s holiness. (TLSB)

**16:24** *holy place.* Cf. 6:26. (CSB)

*burnt offering … burnt offering.* The two rams mentioned in vv. 3, 5. (CSB)

Final act of cleansing for the altar of burnt offerings. (TLSB)

**16:25** *fat of the sin offering.* See 4:8–10. (CSB)

**16:27** *outside the camp.* See note on 4:12. (CSB)

**16:29, 31** *deny yourselves.* See NIV text note; more lit. “humble (or afflict) yourselves.” The expression came to be used of fasting (Ps 35:13). The Day of Atonement was the only regular fast day stipulated in the OT (see 23:27, 29, 32 and NIV text note), though tradition later added other fast days to the Jewish calendar (see Zec 7:5; 8:19). (CSB)

**16:29** *seventh month.* Tishri, the seventh month, begins with the Feast of Trumpets (see note on 23:24). The Day of Atonement follows on the 10th day, and on the 15th day the Feast of Tabernacles begins (see 23:23–36). (CSB)

The Day of Atonement was celebrated annually on the 10th day of the seventh month. Included in the self-denial practiced by the Israelites was a 24-hour abstention from food, drink, bathing, anointing, and sexual intercourse. The Israelites often wore sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning over the sins they had committed. (TLSB)

**16:30** *clean from all your sins.* On the Day of Atonement the repentant Israelite was assured of sins forgiven. (CSB)

**16:31** *Sabbath of solemn rest*. God connected the cessation of work on the seventh day of the week (Ex 31:15), the cessation of work in the seventh month on the Day of Atonement, and the complete cessation of cultivation of the land in the seventh year (Lv 25:4).(TLSB)

*you shall afflict yourselves*. By showing penitence before God. See note, v 29. “There are monstrous debates about changing the law, ceremonies of the new law, and changing the Sabbath Day. They have all sprung from the false belief that in the Church there must be something similar to the services set forth in Leviticus [1–7], and that Christ had commissioned the apostles and bishops to come up with new ceremonies necessary to salvation salvation. These errors crept into the Church when the righteousness that comes through faith was not taught clearly enough. Some debate whether or not keeping the Lord’s Day is not a divine right, but similar to it. They prescribe the extent to which it is lawful to work on holy days. What else are such disputes except traps for the conscience?” (AC XXVIII 61–64). (TLSB)

**16:34** *once a year.* Heb 9:11–10:14 repeatedly points out this contrast with Christ’s “once for all” sacrifice. (CSB)

**Ch 16** Once a year, on the 10th day of the seventh month, God implemented a mandatory Day of Atonement. Ritual sacrifices cleansed the sanctuary, tent of meeting, altar, priests, and entire congregation of their sins. The chief cleansing agent was blood, which pointed forward to Jesus’ sacrifice. By His death, Jesus offered the perfect sacrifice and entered the heavenly sanctuary with His blood (Heb 9:11–14), opening the way for believers to enter into God’s presence (Heb 6:20). • We give You thanks, Lord, for Your abundant mercy. You heard Your people’s prayers of repentance and sent Your precious Son to die for all. By His blood, we are made clean and enter into eternal life with You. Amen. (TLSB)