

Bible Nerd Guide

Leviticus 16 The Day of Atonement

Holiness, Cleansing, Access, and the Road to Jesus

Big Idea

Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement, the annual ritual by which Israel's high priest entered the Most Holy Place and made atonement for the sanctuary, the priests, and the people. The passage may feel strange to modern readers because it operates with categories many of us do not naturally use: holiness, uncleanness, sacred space, sacrifice, priesthood, blood, and atonement. But those categories are not random. They form one of the Bible's most important theological frameworks for understanding sin, access to God, and the saving work of Jesus.

1. Literary Context: Why Leviticus 16 Matters

Leviticus 16 sits near the center of the book of Leviticus and functions as one of its theological high points.

The larger movement looks something like this:

- **Leviticus 1-7** sacrifices and offerings
- **Leviticus 8-10** priesthood, ordination, and the death of Nadab and Abihu
- **Leviticus 11-15** clean and unclean categories
- **Leviticus 16** the Day of Atonement
- **Leviticus 17-27** holiness in the life of the covenant people

Leviticus 16 is not randomly placed. It follows chapters dealing with priesthood, holiness, and uncleanness. It also directly follows the memory of Nadab and Abihu's death in Leviticus 10, which is explicitly recalled in Leviticus 16:1.

That opening matters:

“The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron...”

The chapter begins with a warning: drawing near to God is not casual. Aaron's sons died when they approached the Lord wrongly, and now Aaron is told he may not enter the Most Holy Place "at any time" or "whenever he wants."

The issue is not that God does not want to dwell with His people. The issue is that God really does dwell with His people, and His holy presence must not be treated lightly.

2. The Big Question Behind Leviticus

Leviticus is answering one of the Bible's most important questions:

How can a holy God dwell among sinful and unclean people?

That question grows out of the story so far.

In **Genesis**, God creates a good world and places humanity in Eden, a garden sanctuary where God dwells with His image-bearers. Sin leads to exile from God's presence, and cherubim guard the way to the tree of life.

In **Exodus**, God rescues Israel from slavery and comes to dwell among them in the tabernacle. The end of Exodus climaxes with God's glory filling the tabernacle.

That is good news, but it raises a serious problem.

If God is holy and Israel is sinful, how can God remain among them without His holiness consuming them?

Leviticus answers: through sacrifice, priesthood, cleansing, atonement, and God-given mediation.

3. Structure of Leviticus 16

Leviticus 16 can be outlined in several ways, but the basic movement is clear:

1. Warning and Preparation

Leviticus 16:1-10

Aaron may not enter the Most Holy Place casually. He must come with proper sacrifices, garments, washing, and ritual preparation.

2. Atonement for Aaron and His House

Leviticus 16:11-14

Aaron offers a bull as a purification offering for himself and his household before he can act on behalf of the people.

3. Atonement for the Sanctuary and the People

Leviticus 16:15-19

The blood of the goat is brought inside the veil and applied to the sanctuary because of Israel's uncleanness, transgressions, and sins.

4. The Scapegoat Carries Away Sin

Leviticus 16:20-22

Aaron lays hands on the live goat, confesses Israel's sins over it, and sends it into the wilderness.

5. Concluding Ritual Instructions

Leviticus 16:23-34

The chapter ends with washing, burnt offerings, disposal of remains, and the instruction that this is to be a yearly statute.

The movement is important: the priest must be cleansed, the sanctuary must be cleansed, the people's sins must be dealt with, and the community must be restored to life before God.

4. Key Hebrew Terms

כִּפֵּר *kipper* “to make atonement”

The central verb in Leviticus 16 is **kipper**, often translated “make atonement.” It can carry the sense of purging, cleansing, ransoming, or making reconciliation depending on context.

In Leviticus 16, atonement is not merely about individual guilt. It also involves cleansing sacred space from the pollution caused by Israel's uncleanness, rebellion, and sin.

This is why Jacob Milgrom famously describes sacrificial blood as a “**ritual detergent**” in his discussion of the purification offering. The phrase captures the idea that the blood is applied not

because God needs blood, but because the sanctuary has been defiled and must be cleansed. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, Anchor Bible 3, discussion of the purification offering.

חַטָּאת *ḥaṭṭā't* “sin offering” or “purification offering”

The offering often translated “sin offering” is better understood in many Levitical contexts as a **purification offering**. It addresses sin, but it also purges impurity from sacred space.

This matters because Leviticus 16 is not only about forgiving individual Israelites. It is also about cleansing the sanctuary so that God’s presence can continue dwelling among the people.

טָהוֹר / טָמֵא *tame’ / tahor* “unclean / clean”

“Clean” and “unclean” are not always simple moral categories.

A person may become unclean through bodily conditions, contact with death, disease, childbirth, or other realities of embodied life. This does not necessarily mean the person has sinned.

Uncleanness often symbolizes mortality, disorder, contact with death, or conditions incompatible with sacred space.

קֹדֶשׁ *qodesh* “holy”

Holiness in Leviticus is not simply moral niceness. It refers to what is set apart for God and belongs to the sphere of His presence.

God is holy.

The sanctuary is holy.

Priests are holy.

Certain times, objects, and practices are holy.

The closer one comes to the center of God’s presence, the more carefully holiness must be honored.

כַּפֹּרֶת *kapporet* “mercy seat” / “atonement cover”

The **kapporet** is the cover of the ark in the Most Holy Place. It is the place where God says He will appear in the cloud. It is also where blood is sprinkled on the Day of Atonement.

The term is related to the same root as **kipper**, “to make atonement.” The “mercy seat” is therefore closely connected to the atoning work of the ritual.

5. Why the Sanctuary Needs Atonement

One of the most important verses in the chapter is Leviticus 16:16:

“Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel...”

Modern readers often assume atonement is only about individuals being forgiven. But Leviticus 16 says the **Holy Place** itself needs atonement because of the uncleannesses, transgressions, and sins of Israel.

That means Israel’s sin and uncleanness affect more than individual conscience. They pollute the community’s sacred space.

This is foreign to many modern readers because we tend to think in individualistic terms. Leviticus thinks covenantally, communally, spatially, and ritually.

Sin is not merely “breaking a rule.”
Sin contaminates.
Sin disrupts life with God.
Sin affects the community.
Sin invades sacred space.

The Day of Atonement cleanses the sanctuary so God’s presence can remain among His people.

6. The Two Goats

Leviticus 16 uses two goats for the people.

The First Goat: Sacrifice and Cleansing

The first goat is sacrificed, and its blood is brought inside the veil. This blood is applied to the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting, and the altar.

This goat emphasizes cleansing or purification. The sanctuary is cleansed from the pollution caused by Israel’s sin and uncleanness.

The Second Goat: The Scapegoat

The second goat is kept alive. Aaron lays both hands on its head and confesses over it:

- all the iniquities of Israel

- all their transgressions
- all their sins

Then the goat is sent into the wilderness.

Leviticus 16:22 says:

“The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area...”

This goat emphasizes removal. Sin is not only cleansed; it is carried away.

Together, the two goats offer a powerful theological picture:

- sin must be cleansed
- sin must be removed
- sin must be dealt with
- God provides the way

7. The Scapegoat and “Azazel”

The Hebrew term often translated “scapegoat” is connected with ‘**azazel**. There is significant scholarly discussion about what this means.

Major views include:

1. **A remote place** — the goat is sent away to a desolate region.
2. **A symbolic name for removal** — the goat represents sin being sent away.
3. **A wilderness/demonic figure** — the goat is sent away from sacred space into the realm associated with chaos, death, or demonic powers.

The passage itself is more concerned with the function than with satisfying every curiosity about the term. The live goat bears Israel’s sins away from the camp and away from God’s sanctuary.

The point is clear: sin is removed from the community.

8. Clean and Unclean Are Not the Same as Good and Bad

One of the biggest mistakes modern readers make is assuming:

- clean = morally good
- unclean = morally bad

Sometimes uncleanness is connected to sin, but not always.

Touching a corpse made someone unclean, but burying the dead was not morally evil. Childbirth brought uncleanness, but childbirth was not sinful. Bodily discharges brought uncleanness, but not necessarily guilt.

Leviticus uses ritual categories to teach Israel about life, death, order, disorder, holiness, and the presence of God.

The clean/unclean system teaches Israel to see the world symbolically.

God is the God of life.

Death does not belong in His presence.

Sin defiles.

Holiness matters.

Access requires cleansing.

That symbolic world may feel strange, but it is deeply theological.

9. The Day of Atonement and Eden

Leviticus 16 echoes Eden in important ways.

In Genesis 3, sin leads to exile from God's presence. Cherubim guard the way to the tree of life. Access to sacred space is blocked.

In the tabernacle, cherubim are embroidered on the veil guarding entrance to the Most Holy Place. The high priest's entrance behind the veil on the Day of Atonement is therefore loaded with symbolic meaning.

The way back into God's presence is not open casually. It requires God-given mediation.

This Eden-tabernacle connection is explored in depth by scholars such as G.K. Beale in *The Temple and the Church's Mission* and L. Michael Morales in *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?* Both emphasize that the tabernacle and temple are deeply connected to Eden imagery and the larger biblical theme of dwelling with God.

The Day of Atonement is therefore not merely ritual procedure. It belongs to the Bible's larger story of lost access and restored presence.

10. The Day of Atonement and Passover

Leviticus 16 also resonates with Passover, though the rituals are distinct.

In Exodus 12, the blood of the lamb marks Israel's homes, and God delivers His people from judgment and slavery.

In Leviticus 16, blood is brought into the sanctuary to cleanse and make atonement.

Both rituals teach Israel that life with God is costly and gracious. Blood is associated with life, deliverance, protection, and restored relationship with God.

These patterns help prepare readers for New Testament language about Jesus as the Lamb, His blood, and redemption.

11. The Day of Atonement and Isaiah 53

Isaiah 53 is not a direct commentary on Leviticus 16, but the connections are strong.

The Servant:

- bears griefs
- carries sorrows
- is pierced for transgressions
- is crushed for iniquities
- bears the sin of many

Leviticus 16 gives ritual imagery for sin being placed on another and carried away. Isaiah 53 gives prophetic imagery of a Servant who bears sin and suffers on behalf of others.

Both prepare the theological imagination for Jesus.

The New Testament sees Jesus as the One who bears sin, carries it away, suffers on behalf of many, and brings cleansing and access to God.

12. Leviticus 16 and John 1:29

John the Baptist sees Jesus and says:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

This statement is rich with biblical echoes.

It may evoke:

- Passover lamb imagery
- sacrificial lamb imagery
- the Servant who bears sin
- the Day of Atonement theme of sin being taken away

John does not fully explain the phrase, but the biblical background fills it with meaning.

Jesus is not merely “gentle like a lamb.” He is the Lamb whose mission involves sin being dealt with and carried away.

Leviticus helps us hear the depth of that claim.

13. Leviticus 16 and Mark 5

In Mark 5, a woman with a chronic flow of blood touches Jesus.

In Levitical categories, her condition would make her ritually unclean. Contact with her would normally communicate uncleanness.

But when she touches Jesus, Jesus is not made unclean. Instead, she is healed.

This is one of the most powerful ways the Gospels show the holiness of Jesus.

In Leviticus, uncleanness spreads through contact.

In Jesus, cleansing spreads through contact.

Jesus does not ignore purity. He fulfills and transforms it. He brings the cleansing presence of God directly to the unclean.

This is not a rejection of Leviticus. It is the arrival of the Holy One to whom Leviticus pointed.

14. Leviticus 16 and Matthew 27

When Jesus dies, Matthew says the temple veil is torn in two from top to bottom.

That detail becomes much more powerful when read against Leviticus 16.

The veil guarded the entrance to the Most Holy Place. Only the high priest could enter, and only on the Day of Atonement, and not without blood.

The torn veil symbolizes opened access to God through the death of Jesus.

The barrier is not torn because God stopped being holy. It is torn because Jesus has made atonement.

Access is opened through sacrifice.

15. Leviticus 16 and Hebrews 9-10

Hebrews is the New Testament text that most explicitly interprets Jesus through the categories of Leviticus and the Day of Atonement.

Hebrews teaches that Jesus is:

- the Great High Priest
- the One who enters the true heavenly sanctuary
- the One who offers His own blood
- the once-for-all sacrifice
- the One who opens the way into God's presence

Hebrews contrasts the repeated sacrifices of the old covenant with the once-for-all offering of Christ.

The Day of Atonement had to happen year after year. Jesus' sacrifice does not.

The high priest entered an earthly sanctuary. Jesus enters the heavenly reality.

The high priest brought the blood of animals. Jesus offers Himself.

Hebrews does not treat Leviticus as useless. Hebrews treats Leviticus as preparatory. The old system is a shadow; Christ is the substance.

16. Major Theological Themes

Holiness

God's holiness is not a vague religious quality. It is the blazing reality of God's set-apart life, purity, and presence. Leviticus teaches Israel that God's presence is both gift and danger.

Sin

Sin is more than private guilt. It damages communion with God, pollutes the community, and disrupts sacred space.

Cleansing

God provides a way for uncleanness and sin to be cleansed. Cleansing is not human self-improvement. It is divine provision.

Mediation

The high priest stands between God and the people. Access to God is mediated by one appointed to enter holy space on behalf of others.

Removal

The scapegoat shows that sin must not only be forgiven in an abstract sense; it must be carried away.

Access

The goal is not ritual for ritual's sake. The goal is continued life with God.

17. Reading Leviticus 16 Well

A faithful reading of Leviticus 16 should avoid two errors.

Error 1: Treating the Rituals as Random Religious Bureaucracy

The details may feel strange, but they are not meaningless. They teach Israel how to live near a holy God.

Error 2: Treating Fulfillment as Disposal

Jesus fulfills the sacrificial system, but fulfillment does not mean Leviticus becomes worthless. It means Leviticus has done its job.

Leviticus gives us the categories that help us understand the depth of Christ's work.

Jesus is:

- the Priest
- the Sacrifice
- the Lamb
- the Sin-bearer
- the One whose blood cleanses
- the One who opens access to God

Jesus does not make Leviticus irrelevant. He makes it glow.

18. Key Takeaways

1. Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement, the annual cleansing of sanctuary, priesthood, and people.
2. The central question is: How can a holy God dwell among sinful and unclean people?
3. Clean and unclean are not always moral categories; they often symbolize life, death, disorder, and fitness for sacred space.
4. The sanctuary needs atonement because sin and uncleanness affect Israel's life with God.
5. The two goats show two dimensions of atonement: cleansing and removal.
6. The scapegoat bears Israel's sins away from the community.
7. Leviticus 16 echoes Eden's problem of lost access to God's presence.
8. Passover, Isaiah 53, John 1, Mark 5, Matthew 27, and Hebrews 9–10 all become richer when read with Levitical categories in mind.
9. Hebrews uses Day of Atonement language to explain Jesus' once-for-all priestly sacrifice.
10. Leviticus teaches the biblical language of sacrifice, priesthood, blood, cleansing, holiness, atonement, and access.
11. Jesus fulfills Leviticus not by making it meaningless, but by bringing its patterns to completion.
12. The good news is not that God stopped being holy, but that Jesus has made a way for sinners to draw near.