

Hebrews

Hebrews 3:1 - The importance of a high priest

Part 10 was about how easily the devil can tempt us through the lust of the flesh, eyes and pride of life into loving the things of this world rather than the things our heavenly Father is about. In **Ephesians 6:11, 13** and **16** Paul warns about the wiles of the devil and the fiery darts the evil one can still fire at us to distract us from trusting in “God’s mighty power,” and Peter speaks of the devil prowling like a hungry lion endlessly seeking whom he may devour. We know, therefore, that even though the devil has been defeated by Jesus and he no longer has the power of death, he can still knock us off track, and he uses the power of temptation through every avenue at his disposal to discourage and distract us so he can gleefully accuse us before our heavenly Father that we’re really just fake Christians, or we’re Christian in name only, and we have no claim or right, therefore, to being the Father’s true children deserving of his care and love. And the devil can make us think that of ourselves too, so we drift away or revert back to old ways of coping like the Christians were in Hebrews.

“BUT,” as the author of Hebrews states so clearly in **Hebrews 2:9**, “we see Jesus.” Through the fog of our pain, weakness and failure we see Jesus willingly facing the power and cunning of the devil “in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest” for us, **verse 2:17**. So we’re definitely God’s children all right, because our Father has provided all the help we need in his Son, who “himself suffered when he was tempted, so he’s able now to help us when we’re being tempted,” **verse 18**. Not only does Jesus fulfill the job description of an Old Testament high priest to “atone for the sins of the people,” he also restores our broken relationship with God when we’ve fallen for the devil’s wiles. We have all the help we need, therefore, to recover and plough on through life. And all it takes is confessing and accepting that we need help, because on our own strength we are easy pickings for the devil.

So our loving Father has made sure his children are provided for in his Son, “**Therefore**, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling,” **Hebrews 3:1**, “fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.” Which isn’t easy for us to do, because what does the term “high priest” mean to anyone today? But to Old Testament Israel a High Priest was a familiar sight, because they actually got to watch him in splendid action on the Day of Atonement every year in the “annual reminder of their sins” (Hebrews 10:3).

So, can we look through the eyes of the Israelites and in what **they** saw the high priest do on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 pick up some clues as to what having Jesus as OUR high priest means for us today?

In **Leviticus 16:34** “Atonement was to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites” - to “cleansing them,” **verse 30**. So on the tenth day of the seventh month every year the Israelites “must deny themselves, and not do any work,” treating the day as a “sabbath of rest,” **verse 31**, just like the weekly sabbath. “Denying themselves” meant no eating or drinking or any other typical physical pleasures, as we see in Acts 27:9 where this day was still known as “the Fast.” The original Hebrew meant “afflict (or humble) your souls,” so it was also a voluntary act of grieving for one’s sins over the past year. It was both an outward action of fasting physically and inward sorrow.

It got the point across that sin - caused by physical appetite (lust of eyes and flesh) and inward thoughts (pride of life) - was deadly serious, and only atonement and cleansing could “obtain rest for their souls” and restore “all the glorious liberties of the children of God,” as one commentary phrases it (and as Romans 8:21 phrases it too).

So again, our loving Father made provision for his persistently sinning children to be restored back into happy, anxious-free relationship with him. But what it depended on was the actions of the high priest on the Day of Atonement.

So here they all were, gathered in their Israelite tribes surrounding the tabernacle tent on the Day of Atonement to silently watch the high priest in action. He arrives with “a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering” (Leviticus 16:3), having bathed himself in water already, but dressed only in his linen tunic, sash and turban. He did not come dressed in his decorated outward robe of blue, fringed with small golden bells and pomegranate tassels in blue, purple and scarlet, nor did he wear the Ephod vest with two onyx gemstones on the shoulders engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, nor his priestly breastplate with twelve gems, each engraved with the name of one of the tribes, nor the Urim and Thummim attached to the breastplate in a pouch for determining who was sinning when it wasn’t known otherwise (1 Samuel 14:37-41). He is very plainly dressed in just linen instead.

The first thing he does is have the young bull killed “for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household,” **Leviticus 16:11**, and we assume some of its blood was caught in a bowl, because he’s going to take it with him into the Holy of Holies - or “the Most Holy Place” - later.

He also has with him “two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering” (verse 5). The Israelites then watch him “take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting,” or the entrance to the tabernacle tent. He “casts lots for the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat” (verse 8). Whichever goat gets the Lord’s lot is killed and some of its blood collected in a bowl, because the High Priest will be taking this blood into the Holy of Holies too.

Next he collects “a censer full of burning coals from the Altar (of Burnt Offering) and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense,” and along with the blood of the bull and the goat he “takes them behind the curtain” of the Holy of Holies and into God’s presence (verse 12).

He has the censer of burning coals and incense so that “the smoke conceals the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die” (verse 13). The “atonement cover” was another term for the Mercy Seat, which was the lid placed over the “Testimony,” which was another term for the Ark of the Covenant, a rectangular box roughly four feet wide, and three feet in width and height. The Mercy Seat lid on the box had two cherubim, one at each end, their wings stretched out toward each other, and just above this was the shining presence of the Shekinah glory of God.

But to look upon God’s glory so directly and so clearly would be the death of the high priest, so the smoke was designed to create a fog in that area so God could not be seen and the priest would be protected.

In verses 14-16 the high priest then sprinkles blood from the bull killed for his own sin offering and from the goat for the Israelites’ sin offering seven times on “the atonement cover and in front of it...to make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites.” After leaving the Holy of Holies he sprinkles blood from the bull and goat inside the Tent of Meeting and on the four horns or corners of the Golden Altar of Incense to cleanse both of them too (verses 18-19). The entire community of Israel has now been atoned for (verse 17).

But we’ve still got one goat left, the goat that was cast as the “goat of departure” or scapegoat, which is still alive and waiting at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting while all this has been going on. The high priest now turns to this goat, places both his hands on its head “confessing over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites.” The goat, now laden with all Israel’s sins, is escorted way outside the camp into a solitary place in the desert and released (verses 20-22).

We're also left with the two rams the high priest had brought in earlier for burnt offerings, which are now killed "to make atonement for himself and for the Israelites" (verse 24).

The leftover blood from the bull and the goat are also taken outside the camp and along with their hides, blood, internal organs and entrails are burnt. After all this has been done the Israelites have now been cleansed from all their sins too, as well as being atoned for (verse 30).

But how do WE in 21st century see Jesus in all this ritual, and what might then emerge if we do actually see Jesus in it? It's obvious we're meant to see something, because **Hebrews 3:1** starts off with, "Therefore, holy brothers, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and HIGH PRIEST whom we confess." So he's saying we have a high priest too, in Jesus, and how important it is that we zoom in on him and figure out what he was all about - which is exactly what we're doing by going to Leviticus 16 to help us out.

I'd like to start, then, with why the high priest came dressed in just his priestly linen garments and not his splendid outer garments. Well, the linen garments were normally covered and hidden by the outer garments. These linen garments were like underwear, the bits of clothing you would not normally want to be seen by others. You'd much prefer them to be hidden from sight, but here on the Day of Atonement they were exposed for all to see. And since the whole day was about dealing with the sins of Israel, the linen underwear clearly represented the secret, hidden sins we don't want people to know about. But God wants these sins out in the open too, so they too would be included in the cleansing rituals, which, as we'll see, was hugely important in freeing the Israelites of all guilt and knowing every sin of theirs was being dealt with, both the obvious and the hidden.

And the high priest was the one to picture that, just as Jesus would later. In **Romans 8:3** Jesus came "in the likeness of sinful man," which included the typical sinful inner thoughts, attitudes and reactions we humans have, the ones we'd rather keep hidden and secret, because at best they're embarrassing and at worst they're just plain filthy and evil. And Jesus was tempted on all these inner, secret attitudes too so that nothing was hidden or left untested. And we need to know that, because it makes Jesus into a high priest just like the high priest on the Day of Atonement entering God's presence in his linen garments, with no sins hidden. Every sin in Israel was being cleansed, picturing every sin of ours being cleansed by our high priest too. It means there is no sin of ours, past, present or future, hidden sin or obvious sin, that we need to fret over or keep us from being totally confident in our relationship with God.

It makes the point that God doesn't want us having any anxious thought. The same point is made in **Philippians 4:6-7** too: "Do not be anxious about anything," because "in everything," Paul continues, including the disgust, guilt and shame we feel for the ridiculous, insane and downright secret awful thoughts we have, we can enter God's presence, admit every one of our ghastly hidden thoughts, "and the peace of God will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," because that's what God set up Jesus as our high priest for.

Our loving Father also sent Jesus to be a "sin offering" on our behalf (Romans 8:3), so that by his sacrifice he could cleanse us and purify us from every sin (1 John 1:9), hidden or obvious. When the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to do all that on behalf of Israel, therefore, it was meant to free them from all guilt and shame and leave them feeling clean and conscience free, so instead of worrying about what God thought of them they could step out boldly and in confidence that he was totally with them.

When I enter God's presence in prayer, therefore, I know my high priest is in there with me assuring me that everything about me has been cleansed because of him, including my hidden sins, pictured by the linen undergarments of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. I can now step out free and in total confidence that God is with me, and he's willing to work with me and do some good through me, so get my mind on that.

It was that kind of confidence God wanted for Israel, not fretting about their hidden sins. Yes, they needed to take all their sin seriously, because it required the death of innocent animals, and their own death too if their sins weren't atoned for by the high priest's actions on the Day of Atonement. So, yes, there was grieving for their wretchedness and stupidity, but never fretting. It was a day for freeing them of all that.

What we're seeing in Leviticus 16, therefore, is a loving God giving Israel amazing confidence even when they often failed him and failed him at times miserably, because here was God allowing the high priest right into his presence, without any fear whatsoever, even making provision for the high priest's protection by having the smoke of the coals fog over God's Shekinah glory enough to stop him being burnt to a crisp. Entering the Holy of Holies was not a scary moment for the high priest or for Israel, therefore, Quite the opposite; it was a wonderful moment that would leave the consciences of every Israelite completely clear, and their relationship with God solidly intact for another year, with continued free access any time to him, so that his peace could fill their minds and free them up to be of service to him.

The idea, then, that the Israelites were on tenterhooks as the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, wondering if he'd come out alive or not, is rubbish, because this whole episode was designed to remove their anxiety, not create it. And the other idea that the high priest had to wear bells on the hem of his robe so the Israelites could hear if God had struck him down, is rubbish too, because Leviticus 16:4 clearly states the high priest only wore his linen clothing and not his outer robe with the bells on it. And the silly notion that a rope was tied round the high priest's ankle to drag him out of the Holy of Holies in case God struck him dead isn't true either. There was no fear of God striking him dead, because God had made provision for the high priest's safety, and there was nothing complicated or difficult he'd given the high priest to do on the Day of Atonement either.

Instead it was extremely comforting for both the high priest and the Israelites, because it meant that all their shameful habits, rebellion and their weakness had not cut them off from God. Instead of worrying, therefore, if God still loved them after all the stupid things they'd thought and done, they could happily enter another year experiencing God's love, peace, joy, forgiveness, companionship, understanding and guidance. They could concentrate on their relationships with each other and get their lives back into good order, unfettered by guilt and anxiety about the past. And what human doesn't want that?

But it's knowing HOW God has provided it that we need to know. It's through his high priest, not through our own efforts to be better people, or through the companionship and help of people, because no human effort or human being can provide for us what only God's high priest can.

And can I add something really radical here, because even God couldn't forgive us or free us from all our anxiety and guilt without the actions of the high priest either. That's because God could not compromise with sin. His holiness won't let him. Nor does his sense of justice. When a human sins God's justice and holiness demand that the person die, and God can't back down from that. He can't just say, "I love you so much I forgive you, now run along and be a good chap, OK?" - because God hates sin. He can't help it. It makes him extremely angry. "Wrathful" is the word used in John 3:36, and "God's wrath remains" on a sinner too.

So God is stuck with being angry at a sinner and hating his sin, and even his love can't change that. His justice and holiness won't allow it. Imagine how difficult that must be for God, then, not being able to have a loving and open relationship with us because of our sin.

But here in Leviticus 16 we see how God solved his dilemma. We see it in the actions of the high priest. The high priest brought innocent animals to be sacrificed that substituted for the death of the Israelites, picturing, of course, the death of the totally innocent Jesus on the cross substituting his death for ours. The necessary death for our sins, therefore, had been fulfilled, which satisfied the demands of God's justice and holiness. The sinner must die for his sin, and Jesus representing all humanity did that, pictured by the sacrifices of the bull and goat for the sins of both the human high priest and the sins of the Israelites on the Day of Atonement.

The blood of those two innocent animals was then taken into God's presence by the high priest, picturing Jesus presenting his blood to the Father to atone for our sins. And in so doing justice was done. So the actions of the high priest not only freed Israel of all their grief, guilt and anxiety caused by their sins, it also freed up God from having to exclude Israel from his presence, and best of all it freed up the flow of his love for them, which had been roadblocked and jammed up by his justice.

Now he was free to show his mercy, compassion and tenderness to them, and they would now see and experience just how much he loved them, which is exactly what he yearned for too.

And we see all this pictured by the goat which the lots cast on the two goats earlier had marked this one "for the Lord," because a sin offering of this goat had to be made to satisfy God's justice. It was sacrificed, therefore, on God's behalf, to free him up to forgive Israel and enable his love to flow freely for them, now that justice had been done.

Which naturally brings us to the meaning of the other goat which the lots cast had made it the "scapegoat." The scapegoat was God's solution to the dilemma of what do with the sins that had been atoned for and forgiven but still existed, as all sin does even after it's forgiven. Forgiveness doesn't magically remove sin or make it disappear. Forgiveness takes away the anxiety and the guilt and grief of our sins, oh yes, but our sins still exist like a great ugly lump of rotting garbage piled up on the sidewalk. And just because a substitute death by Jesus freed us up from God having to kill us and freed us up from his wrath at our sin, our sin remains just as real as it ever was. It remains like a stinking pile of rottenness, blocking our relationship with God and our love for him. It is the roadblock in OUR lives now holding up the free flow of love between us and God. And God doesn't just magically poof it away, anymore than he poofed away the roadblock blocking his love for us.

Justice had to be done before that roadblock was removed, but now attention turns to the roadblock jamming up the free flow of our love back to God. And our roadblock is this gigantic pile of our sins which we created and brought into existence and still remain. And while they remain they're like nuclear waste: they're deadly, dangerous, and while they remain in us they can and will do all sorts of further damage.

So how does God solve this dilemma? Again, it's through the high priest. The high priest now lays his hands on the head of this second goat loading all Israel's sins on it, and he has a man then escort this goat, loaded up with all Israel's sins, obvious sins and hidden sins, outside the camp and into a solitary place in the desert far, far away. The man then releases the goat and walks back to the camp, leaving the goat behind in the desert, never to return.

And what a picture that is of how God deals with our sins. He has them all dumped in Satan's world, which, of course, is where they belong, because Satan was the source of them. It was Satan who caused humans to sin in the first place, so God sends our sins right back to him. And since Satan relishes sin so much, then he also becomes the obvious dump site for it.

But that is what **1 John 1:9** is getting at too, that "If we confess our sins (both obvious and secret sins) God is faithful and just and he will forgive us our sins AND, (take note, he will also) purify us from all unrighteousness." Purify means to clean out, or sweep clean, meaning get rid of them in the garbage never to return. It means we are totally free of our sins, thanks again to the actions of OUR high priest, who not only died to forgive our sins but clear them out of our heads and consciences as well, and as **Psalm 103:12** says, "As far as the east is from the west, that's how far he's removed our sins from us." Jewish tradition has the man taking the goat on a five sabbath's days' journey and at the end of it he pushes the goat off a cliff too.

And to God this has us smelling like we've been in a bath filled with perfume, pictured by the "two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense" in **Leviticus 16:12** which filled the smoke from the burning coals of the altar and wafted into God's very presence over the Mercy Seat. Not only are we purified or scrubbed clean of a sin, then, we're also soaked in God's favourite smelly stuff, making us totally acceptable in his presence. And it's God who thought all this up too, to get the point across how much he made provision for us, his beloved children, to have our conscience cleared, our anxieties removed, and to help us feel absolutely clean and loveable in his presence. And with all that done it's not surprising at this point too that two rams had been brought along at the beginning for a burnt offering (verses 3 and 5).

That's because the burnt offering in Leviticus pictured "making atonement for yourself (the high priest) and for the people" (verse 24). It's like a final act recognizing your relationship with God has been totally restored and we're totally accepted by him (which is what the burnt offering was designed for), so we're now free and ready to get back to serving him.

It's like David in **Psalm 51:12** saying, "Restore to me" - or in our case, "Now that you've restored to me" - "the joy of your salvation and granted me a willing spirit, now I can teach transgressors your way and sinners will turn back to you," which was exactly what the author of Hebrews was hoping for with those in his congregation, that they'd realize what their high priest had done for them so they could get back to becoming instruments of good in God's hands again. The way had now been freed from them to do that, now that their consciences had been cleared and they knew they were acceptable and lovely to God, and he'd want to put them to work again having an impact on others.

And this was exactly the purpose of the Day of Atonement, that God has dealt with everything that is wrong and embarrassing in our lives, and therefore he's ready, without any hesitation whatsoever, to make us a blessing to others. I can rightly wonder every day, then, what good he might do through me, or where he's taking me for the sake of others.

We can now, because of "the mercies of God," **Romans 12:1**, "present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God," and we can do that boldly with total confidence too, because of our high priest making that relationship with God possible by his sacrifice, by purifying us, and by making us smell awfully nice.

No wonder the Day of Atonement was a "sabbath of rest" (Leviticus 16:31), because it was a real rejuvenator, a battery charger. But we get to experience it every day, because Jesus' sacrifice has been done to cleanse us of all our sin, all day, every day, not just once a year, and he's our high priest every day too, ready to lift us up and revive us, so that we become really useful instruments in his hands in a world that has no idea all this exists.

We also have the advantage of experiencing this every time we take the bread and wine, because we enter it mourning and in linen garments. We know how much we still sin, and we probably have sins that are really beginning to bother us, and no amount of effort or desire to make changes on our part is making a dent in them. And that can be downright depressing, because it seems like God isn't answering us, or he isn't interested, or he doesn't really like us that much.

But we see Jesus whose job as a high priest, just as it was back in Leviticus 16, is to turn mourning into comfort and joy. So can we “chew on that and drink to it” whenever we take the bread and wine....