

## *Scapegoat: Gettin Away with Sin • Leviticus 16*

Most football fans have never read the NFL rulebook. Most taxpayers have never read the Internal Revenue Service code. Most US citizens have never read the Constitution of the United States of America. And, probably, most Christians have never read the Old Testament book of Leviticus.

Leviticus gets its name from Levi. Levi was one of the sons of the great Jewish patriarch Jacob. In adulthood, Jacob's name was changed to Israel, which became the name of the nation of his people as well as the modern state of Israel. Jacob had twelve sons and each one fathered a tribe of descendants that eventually numbered in the hundreds of thousands. When the Hebrew people came to the Promised Land each tribe was given a designated area of land. They became like states in the United States of America. But one tribe didn't get a territory and that was Levi. God said that he would be their inheritance and that he would take care of them.

The people of the tribe of Levi were called Levites. They served in the official religious functions of the nation. The book of Leviticus is the rulebook for how everything was to be done in Jewish religious life and worship. Like any rulebooks, it is very important, but it is not always very interesting.

One of the most interesting chapters in the Old Testament book of Leviticus is chapter 16. It shaped one of the most important religious holidays in the Jewish faith and gave us a popular expression in everyday English conversation. Here is where we meet the "scapegoat". In fact, this is the only place in the entire Bible where this famous animal is mentioned.

Azazel is the scapegoat's name. Az is the Hebrew word for goat; azel is from the verb that means "to go away". Leviticus 16:1-22 tells the story of the goat that got away with sin:

The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord. 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.

*"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. 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. From the Israelite community he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.*

*"Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. 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.*

*"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. He is to take a censor full of burning coals from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. 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. 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.*

*"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*

***Our sins are totally known  
by and exposed to God even  
if nobody else knows.***

*blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. 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. No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make the atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.*

*“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. 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.*

*“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. 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. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.”*

It was a bloody, messy, violent ritual. Bulls, rams and goats were dragged to the tabernacle and their throats were cut. Those who could not see the slaughter heard the pathetic sounds of protesting and dying animals. By the end of the ritual blood was spattered on the ground, the altar, the furniture and all over the priest. He had to change his clothes and take a bath when it was over. Most of us would never want to witness such a sight. We are uncomfortable even thinking about it. If it were filmed, there would be a statement at the end saying that live animals suffered and died in the filming of these events.

Why would God order such a scene? Is not the God of the Bible a God of love and kindness, of gentleness and generosity? Well, the whole point of this entire ritual is that sin is serious stuff. Sin is ugly, violent, painful and always messy. Where there is sin there is death—always and without exception. Sin is never innocent or pleasant or easy.

The simplest definition of sin is that it is missing the mark. Sin is falling short of the standard of God. It is like jumping across a canyon and missing the other side. It is like aiming your gun at a target and hitting yourself in the head. It is doing what is wrong and not doing what is right.

Most of us know what sin is and when we have sinned, although, sometimes we don’t. Sometimes we have to be told that taking what belongs to someone else is sin. Telling a lie is sin. Sex outside of marriage is sin. Dishonoring parents is sin. Murdering another person is sin. Behaving unjustly to the poor is sin. Making idols to worship is sin. Loving anything more than God is sin.

The Hebrew people learned that sin always keeps us from God. Sin always hurts those who do it. Sin always has to be dealt with. In his amazing mercy, God agreed to have sacrificial animals die instead of having the sinners die. The animals took the place of the sinners.

A command to hold this ceremony every year at the same time came in Leviticus 16:34, *“This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.”* It became known by the Hebrew words Yom Kippur—“the Day of Atonement”.

Imagine how the Hebrew people anticipated and experienced this day. For months their sins burdened their souls. They felt distanced from God. The blessing of God was kept away. They constantly thought about the wrong they had done and wanted to be rid of it. They wanted to be forgiven and cleansed. They counted the days until September or October on their calendars waiting for the bloody ceremony that would atone for their sins and let them start all over again.

I would like us to share some of their emotions. Inside your printed program today there is a yellow Post-it Note. I invite you to take it out and take a pen or pencil and write a sin on it. It is to be a sin of your very own that you would like to get rid of. If you didn’t get a Post-It Note, use another scrap of paper or tear off half of the Post-It Note of the person next to you.

Write a specific sin. We’re going to collect the notes. Don’t worry. No one is going to read what you write. This is simply between you and God.

It's like the Day of Atonement when you get forgiveness and get rid of your sin. (When the collection container comes by you in a few minutes just put your sin inside. If you are uncomfortable even writing your sin, make it a mental note and put the blank Post-It Note (with your sin on it) into the container.)

In ancient Israel the high priest was the one who represented the people to God. He was always a Levite. Aaron, the brother of Moses, was the first high priest and all later high priests had to be descendents of Aaron.

What is really interesting in Leviticus 16 is that the high priest had to first atone for his own sin. He had to offer a sacrifice and get right with God before he could represent the rest of the nation to God. In his case, he had to sacrifice a bull. Leviticus 16:11 says, *"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."*

Imagine the emotions of Aaron as he confessed his own sins and the sins of his family over a bull that he then had to kill, knowing all the time that the bull's death was because of the sin he had just confessed. What went through his mind as he saw the bull die? How did he feel when he took the blood to God? Sense his emotions as you look at Leviticus 16:14: *"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."*

To "atone" means to cover up. The idea is that our sins are totally known by and exposed to God even if nobody else knows. Even if our family and friends don't know the sins deep in our souls, God does. When atonement is made, those sins are covered up with the blood of a sacrificial animal. The animal gave its life. The sins are covered. We are made right with God.

One more thing—there were collective sins as well as individual sins. The nation sinned against God as a group, not just one-at-a-time. Yom Kippur was the day when the nation's sins were confessed and forgiven. Even sins they didn't know they had

committed were confessed and forgiven that day. It was like starting all over again.

But there was a problem with this ceremony. It was all in private. Yom Kippur was the only day of the year that the high priest went into the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. This was the place on earth that God chose to most powerfully be present. The high priest had to be very cautious. He was required to fill the area with smoke from incense so that he wouldn't see anything so overwhelm-

ingly supernatural that he would die. While it was wonderful to stand in the presence of God, it was also frightening and awesome.

On that one day in that sacred place he offered the blood of the animal to atone for the sins of the people. When he came out it was over. It was done. Their sins were gone. But the people never saw anything because they weren't there. Some must have felt as if their sins were still on their souls. (We have the same experience when we confess our sins and God forgives our sins but we still feel like the sins haven't gone away.) This is where the goats come in!

Two goats were chosen from the herds of Israel. One was chosen to die and one was chosen to live. The selection of which one lived and which one died was made by casting lots to determine God's choice.

The hearts of the people beat faster as they saw the one selected for sacrifice. They knew that live goat would be slaughtered because of their sins. It was led away and sacrificed. Then, according to Leviticus 16:20-22:

*"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. 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. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place, and the man shall release it in the desert."*

***Jesus was our sacrifice. He died to take away our sin once and for all.***

This they could hear and see. The high priest held the goat's head and spoke the specific sins of the people. Each one listened for her sin and for his sin as the priest said: "Abusing a child. Stealing money. Cheating an employee. Prejudice. Discrimination. Hatred. Greed. Drunkenness. Lying. Pride. Gossip. Lust. Adultery. Murder."

When the priest had finished naming all the sins they saw a sight they could never forget. Not hidden behind the canvas and the smoke of the tabernacle but out where everyone could watch. The goat was led away into the wilderness. They would never see the goat again. It was forever gone and so were their sins.

I've been there in those Middle Eastern Judean deserts. They are desolate, uninhabited and dangerous. That goat would never come back again.

Let's experience what they experienced. Bring in the goat. We're going to call this goat Ozzie for the Hebrew word for goat. (Actually, part of this goat's story is that it was taken here in the Twin Cities to be slaughtered and was rescued like the scapegoat.) They took the sins, like our sins, and gave them to the goat and then the priest came and prayed over the head of the goat and said something like this:

God, you know all the sins of your people. Now these sins are confessed, Lord, sins that we have written down. Some of them are so private that we've never told anyone else. Some of them are constant reminders in our hearts. Some of us are so embarrassed by our sins that we wouldn't even write them down for fear somebody else would see what we wrote. And there are some sins that we don't even want to think about and so we didn't even participate in this because we don't want to get that close.

And so, Father, symbolically, as those ancient Hebrew people gave their sins to the goat, we now put our sins on the scapegoat. As we see it go into the distance, make us aware that our sins are taken away as far as the east is from the west.

Amen.

When the sins had been prayed onto the goat, the goat was taken out to the wilderness. It was beautiful. It was powerful. But it never fully worked. They

sinned again. Another year brought another ceremony, more dead animals and another scapegoat.

So God came up with someone and something far better. His name is Jesus and here is what the New Testament says in Hebrews 10:1-5 and 8-10:

*The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

*Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:*

*"Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them (although the law required them to be made). Then (Jesus) said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

Jesus was our sacrifice. He died to take away our sin once and for all. There is no more tabernacle, no more high priest, no more bulls or goats. Jesus did the real thing. Jesus became our sacrificial goat and Scapegoat all in one. 1 John 1:9, 7 says, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness . . . the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."*

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
www.faithmatters.fm  
©Leith Anderson