Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

What is your favourite day of the year? Birthday? Christmas? Well, for God’s Old Testament people the most important day of the year was the day described in our text – the Day of Atonement. And this was not just because they really liked the ceremony but because it was obvious to them that God wanted them to understand the importance of this day. You see, the first five books of the Bible are God’s law for His people. And Leviticus is in the middle of these books. And while all the other annual festivals are explained in Leviticus 23, the Day of Atonement gets a whole chapter to itself. And in terms of how the Book of Leviticus is structured, chapter 16 is in the centre of the book. So at the centre of the centre of the law of God is the instruction about the Day of Atonement. It really is the literary equivalent of a flashing neon sign! And as we are going to see, this ceremony plainly pointed the people forward to the coming of Messiah Jesus and forgiveness of sins in His name.

But before we see how it did this, it is fair to ask **why this ceremony was necessary**. After all, the first seven chapters of Leviticus gave the people all the offerings they needed to cover every situation of sin. And it says there that these offerings made atonement for the sinner. And chapters 11-15 gave them the regulations about how to deal with all ritual uncleanness so that they could present offerings at the tabernacle. So why was this annual Day of Atonement necessary?

Well, a bit later on in November we are going to have a **church working bee**. And you could ask the same question about the working bee. If any of us use the church facilities, we know that we have to tidy up after our meeting or activity. We even have cleaners who come in every week and vacuum and dust and wipe down. So why do we need a church working bee? Well, the fact is that despite everyone’s best efforts, dirt and rubbish and stuff just builds up, doesn’t it. So we schedule a massive spring clean to comprehensively deal with the accumulated dirt and rubbish. And the function of the Day of Atonement was similar. Yes, the Lord gave specific regulations about offerings for each individual, but the Day of Atonement dealt with the accumulated sin of the whole nation over the past year. And in doing so it painted a powerful picture about the holiness of God and the need of sinners to be cleansed. But as we shall see, the very fact that it was an *annual* ceremony made it plain that they needed a cleansing that not even this ceremony could provide. And that cleansing has come in the person and work of Jesus Christ. So today we want to see that **the Day of Atonement demonstrates the Sinner’s Need of a Saviour’s Blood**.

And our three points will be the **context** of the ceremony, the **content** of the ceremony, and the **continuity** of the ceremony.

1. So first of all, from verses 1-2, the **context** of the ceremony.
   1. And verses 1-2 take us back to chapter 10 and the shocking death of **Nadab and Abihu**, the sons of Aaron. You will remember that they attempted to offer unauthorized fire to the Lord and the fire of the Lord came out of the tabernacle and they were destroyed on the spot. So with that recent episode in mind, the Lord warned Aaron, through Moses, that he was not allowed to enter the very rear room of the Tabernacle, which was called the Most Holy Place and which was separated off by a veil or curtain, lest he also die. You see, the Most Holy Place was where the Ark of the Covenant stood. And the cover of the Ark was called the “mercy seat.” It was a slab of gold with two cherubim angels at either end. And above the mercy seat was where the glory cloud of God’s holy presence lived among His people. But one day a year, this Day of Atonement, Aaron was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place. But as we shall see, there were very specific rules about how Aaron was to enter the Most Holy Place.
      1. I remember hiking around a walking track down near Christchurch that had some caves along the way. And there were signs that said ‘Danger! Beware of falling rocks!’ Well, verses 1-2 were a warning sign for Aaron and every High Priest after him; if they went into the Most Holy Place when it was not the Day of Atonement, or in the wrong way on the Day of Atonement, they could expect the same fate as Nadab and Abihu - death.
      2. And two points flow out of this:
         1. First, approaching God is not a natural right for sinful and unclean humans. You and me, because we have a sinful nature and because of the sins we commit, do not deserve fellowship and friendship with God; in fact, we deserve death and eternal condemnation. But as we shall see, just as God made it possible for Aaron to enter His presence, once a year, by way of blood sacrifice, so God has made it possible for us to enter God’s presence, now and in eternity, by the blood of Jesus.
         2. And the second point is one we have seen throughout this sermon series, which is that because God is still a holy God, we must still worship Him only as He has commanded. We don’t make up how we worship Him; we study His word to see how He requires us to worship Him.
2. So that’s the **context** of the ceremony. Let’s turn our attention, secondly, to the **content** of the ceremony, as it is explained in verses 3-28. And I want to return to the illustration of the Day of Atonement being a kind of **spiritual ‘working bee.’**  You see, with a church working bee, the first bulletin notice just states that the place needs a cleanup, but when it comes to the actual day there are detailed lists of all the jobs that need to be done and how to do them. And it was similar with the Day of Atonement – the spiritual ‘working bee.’ Look at **verse 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*.” So the Day of Atonement was about **cleansing** the priests and the tabernacle itself and the people from the stain of sin. But verses 3-28 go into great detail about how the cleansing of the priests, the tabernacle, and the people was accomplished.
   1. So let’s look at the three parts of this spiritual ‘working bee,’ beginning with what Aaron had to do to cleanse **himself and the rest of his priestly household**.
      1. In **verse 4** we see that Aaron first had to bathe in water and then put on the holy uniform that is described there. And this very simple linen uniform kept Aaron cool and minimized sweat as he performed his duties.
      2. **Verses 3 and 6 and 11-14** explain what Aaron had to do with the bull and the ram. He had to kill them. The ram was a burnt offering that was offered on the altar. The bull was a sin offering for himself and for his house. After it was killed, Aaron had to take some of its blood, together with some of the coals for the altar, and some incense, and go into the Most Holy place. But He couldn’t just waltz in; he had to do it in a set way.
         1. You see, in **Exodus 33:20**, God said to Moses, “*You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live*.” So Aaron was not allowed to see the glory cloud of God’s presence above the Ark of the Covenant. If he did, he would die. So that’s what the warning of **verse 13** is about: Aaron had to put the incense on the fire so that it would get all smokey inside the Most holy place. And in this way he could perform his duties but not see God.
         2. And his duties were to sprinkle blood *once* on the front of the mercy seat and *seven* *times* in front of the mercy seat.
         3. And in this way, as we see in **verse 11**, Aaron made atonement “*for Himself and for his house*.”
      3. So Aaron and his house were now clean in the sight of the Lord.
   2. And that brings us, secondly, to **the cleansing of the tabernacle itself**. A term that we have all become familiar with in recent months is ‘**deep cleaning**.’ When a person with Covid visits a pub or a gym or a supermarket, we are told that those places shut down in order for deep cleaning to take place. And that is because the Covid virus can linger on surfaces and be passed on to others who touch those surfaces. Well, in a similar way, sin contaminated the tabernacle and its furniture. And so, because of the sinful acts of the people of Israel, and the consequences of sin that affect every molecule of creation, the tabernacle itself needed a ‘deep cleaning.’ And that is what we read about in **verses 15-19**.
      1. In **verse 15** we see that Aaron had to kill one of the goats and go back into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle some of its blood over the mercy seat and in front of it. And **verse 16** explains that this was to “*make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and their transgressions, all their sins*.”
      2. And then he had to sprinkle more blood in the other areas and on the other furniture of the rest of the tent of meeting. And then he had to go out to the altar and sprinkle some of the blood of the bull and the goat on the horns of the altar and all around, “*to cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleanness of the people of Israel*.”
      3. And **verse 17** is very clear: No one was allowed to be inside the tabernacle area while Aaron was cleansing the tabernacle with the blood. It was to be just Aaron, who was ritually clean himself now, and the cleansing blood.
      4. And so, only after this deep clean was finished was the tabernacle clean in the sight of the Lord.
   3. And that brings us thirdly to the cleansing of the people. If you look at verse 5, you will see that Aaron was told to select **two goats** from the Israelite community. And in v7, both goats were to be presented before the Lord and the lot was to be cast which would make one goat a goat ‘*for the Lord’* and the other goat the goat ‘*for Azazel*.’ And we don’t know exactly what Azazel means – it could refer to the place it was taken or just mean ‘a scapegoat,’ which is a term that describes someone who takes the blame for the wrongdoing of someone else.
      1. And in **verses 15-19**, we see that Aaron was first to slaughter the ‘for the Lord’ goat. And as we have seen, Aaron was to sprinkle some of its blood into the Most Holy Place and some in the rest of the tent of meeting and on the horns of the altar. And this was “*because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and their transgressions, all their sins*.”
         1. And there was a double message in this blood:
            1. First, **sin kills**. Do you remember what God said to Adam about eating the fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil? He said, “*On the day you eat it, you shall surely die*.” And so, “*the wages of sin is death*.” The message is very hard to miss here. God paints it in blood. God is *very* angry at sin! Blood must flow. There has to be death to atone for sin. And we do well to remember that when we are faced with temptation.
            2. But note secondly and also that **blood cleanses**! As the blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat and throughout the tabernacle, the people were cleansed of their sin.
         2. And this double message, that sin kills and that blood cleanses, is like a massive spotlight that shines on the cross of Jesus Christ!
            1. You see, while the people sinned, God accepted the death of this goat as payment for their sin. So the message here is that sin’s debt can be paid by another. And the Bible tells us who that other is – the Lord Jesus. Do you remember how John the Baptist described Jesus? “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*!” So instead of you dying and suffering the eternal agony of hell, Jesus took your place. So your sin killed Jesus; His blood was shed to pay the price for your sin.
            2. But the blood of Jesus also cleanses us from sin and guilt:

In **Isaiah 1:18**, God says, “*Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool*.”

**Revelation 1:5**, “*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood*.”

**Colossians 1:20**, “*Making peace by the blood of his cross*.”

**Romans 5:9**, “*We have now been justified by his blood*.”

It is by the blood of Jesus that we are made clean!

* + 1. So that’s the gospel as seen in the first goat. But we see the gospel also in what happened to the second goat, the **scapegoat**. Once all of the blood had been sprinkled, we see in verse 20 that Aaron was to lay both hands on the goat’s head and “*confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins.*” And then it was someone else’s task to lead the goat out of the camp and far away into the wilderness. And we see the same sorts of salvation images that we saw in connection with the first goat:
       1. First of all, it is possible for a **substitute** to take the place of the sinner. As the sins were transferred to this goat, God was teaching us that our sins can be transferred to another.
       2. And secondly, we see also that **sin and guilt can be removed from the sinner**. As one commentator puts it, “This ‘rite of riddance,’ … had the powerful and visible impact of assuring Israel that her guilt was removed, the atoning sacrifice having taken it away so that its power and lasting effect among the people of God was broken.” As the people heard their sins confessed over the goat and saw it being led out of the camp and into the wilderness, they had certainty that they were cleansed and set free to serve the Lord again.
       3. Now, we know that the goat was only a symbol of a greater substitute. **Hebrews 9:12** says that eternal redemption is secured not “*by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of [Jesus’] blood*.” And so, the goat for Azazel pointed the people to the promised Messiah who would come and truly take away their sins. And if they confessed their sins and believed that God would send Messiah, then their sins were forgiven. And we know that Jesus has come. And I read out a moment ago those verses that tell us that our sins are forgiven by Jesus’ blood. And so, **1 John 1:9** says, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.”
       4. So you and me have something much better than a goat that is led out into the wilderness every year; we have the once for all sacrifice of Jesus!
          1. The hymn writer wrote these words, which we shall sing soon:

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blest assurance control: that Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and has shed His own blood for my soul. My sin oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more; praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

Is that what you believe?

1. Well, that brings us, thirdly and lastly, to the **continuity** of this ceremony, which is explained in verses 29-34.
   1. Returning to our church working bee analogy, when we are finished on November 21, will that be it? Will the church never need to be cleaned again? Of course, not. Dust will begin to settle on surfaces one second after they have been wiped clean! And it was the same with God’s Old Testament people and the Day of Atonement ceremony. No sooner did Aaron declare them cleansed than sin and guilt and uncleanness began to accumulate among them again. And so, we see in **verse 29** that this Day of Atonement was a statute forever – something that was done every year from that day on. And in **verse 32** we see that when Aaron died, the next High Priest was to perform this ceremony. And then **verse 34** repeats the, this is a “statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins.” So this was not a one off ceremony, it had to be performed every year.
      1. And what this means is that the sin and guilt of the people was not *fully* paid for, God’s wrath was not *fully* satisfied, and the people were not *fully* reconciled to God, because all of this was necessary again the *next* year, and the year after that, and every year after that, until the Lord Jesus came to do what the bulls and goats could not.
      2. But **things actually got worse for the people of Israel**. For pick any year during the life of Jesus and the Day of Atonement would roll around. And the High Priest bathed and dressed as required and went into the temple with some of the bull’s blood. And he put the incense on the coals so that the smoke would fill the Most Holy Place, and then He would walk into the Most Holy Place … but the Ark of the covenant was gone. It had been carried away to Babylon together with all of the other temple treasures some 600 years previously. And so, for around 600 years this ceremony took place *without the Ark of the covenant*. The very item at the centre of the Festival was missing!
      3. And you will remember that when Jesus died on the cross, **the temple veil** was torn in two from top to bottom, symbolizing the end of the Old Testament ceremonies. And if the Jewish people still didn’t see the significance of these things, soon the temple itself was destroyed and the priesthood ceased to exist. And if they still didn’t understand why all this had happened, God spelled it out in the Book of Hebrews:
         1. In terms of the **sacrifices**, He said, “*For this reason [the law] can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship … [But God] abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And … we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*.”
         2. In terms of the **tabernacle**, as we read earlier, Jesus is the “*greater and more perfect tent*.”
         3. And in terms of the **High Priest**, “*The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but [Jesus] holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever … For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens*. *He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for His own sins and then for those of the people, since He did this once for all when He offered up Himself*.”
         4. *Everything* that the Day of Atonement pointed forward to had its fulfillment in Jesus.

So let’s end with a story I read in a commentary that illustrates what we have learned: A hunter in the Canadian wilderness came out of the forest and found a frozen pond. It was his first time there and he was not sure how thick the ice was so he did the right thing and got down and spread himself out and slowly began to move across the ice. When he was about halfway he heard a tremendous noise coming from the forest, so he turned around and saw a stage coach that was full of people and being pulled by a team of horses come roaring from the forest’s edge and down onto the pond and all the way across and then back into the forest on the other side. And the people of the Old Testament were like that hunter – they didn’t have the basis for confidence that we have. Every year, they wondered if God would accept the offerings? Was the priest cleansed of his own sins? Did he carry out the ritual properly? Did the man who took the scapegoat away do it properly so that the goat didn’t wander back into the camp? And every year, it all had to be done again. But we can like the stagecoach – we do have the basis for confidence. And it’s not about us; it’s all about the Lord Jesus. And we have this in black and white in the Book of Hebrews: Jesus has secured “*an eternal redemption … we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ* *once for all*.”

Praise God for the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. By His blood, our sins are forgiven. He truly is the perfect Saviour that we need. Amen.