

Homiletics Analysis: Leviticus 16

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — Component of Leviticus as a Whole: Leviticus 16 sits at the structural and theological center of the book. The preceding chapters (1–15) have established the sacrificial system, the consecration of the priesthood, the laws of cleanness and uncleanness, and — with devastating force — the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in chapter 10, which demonstrated that unauthorized approach to a holy God brings death. Those chapters collectively press one question to a crisis point: *given Israel's persistent uncleanness and YHWH's consuming holiness, how can the covenant people continue to dwell with their God at all?* Leviticus 16 is the answer. The chapters that follow (17–27, the Holiness Code) then build on that answer, governing the life of a people whose continued standing before God has been secured by atonement. Chapter 16 is not a legal appendix; it is the hinge on which the entire book turns.

This Text — Content: The LORD speaks to Moses following the deaths of Aaron's sons and gives precise, binding instructions for how Aaron — and every high priest after him — is to enter the Most Holy Place. The passage moves through four interlocking movements: (1) the warning and preparation of the high priest (vv. 1–5), establishing that this event is wholly governed by divine prescription, not human initiative; (2) the elaborate atoning ritual — the bull for Aaron and his household, the lot-casting over the two goats, and the goat offered as a sin offering for the people (vv. 6–19); (3) the scapegoat ritual, in which Aaron lays both hands on the living goat, confesses all the iniquities of Israel over it, and sends it away into the wilderness bearing the sins of the people (vv. 20–22); and (4) the concluding ordinances establishing the Day of Atonement as a permanent annual statute — a day of complete cessation and self-denial, observed perpetually by Israel and the stranger who sojourns among them (vv. 23–34). The repeated refrain is *kaphar* — to atone, to cover, to make propitiation. The blood is the atoning agent; the priest is the sole mediator; and the outcome is that the sanctuary, the altar, the priesthood, and the people are cleansed before the LORD.

This Text — Intent: God is not merely providing a ritual. He is announcing — in the language of blood and flesh, of breath and wilderness — what it costs to dwell with a holy God, and that He Himself has provided the means for guilty sinners to continue in that dwelling. The intent is simultaneously humbling and assuring: humbling, because the elaborate requirements of the Day of Atonement press home the gravity of sin and the absolute inadequacy of self-generated access to God; assuring, because God Himself has prescribed the remedy, provided the priest, and accepted the sacrifice. He is not withholding the means of approach — He is supplying them. The reader is meant to feel the weight of guilt and the reality of removal — sins carried away into a place of no return — and to rest in the fact that this removal is God's doing, not the worshipper's achievement.

Subject Sentence: Once a year, God alone provides the costly means by which guilty Israel may stand before Him.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through the Day of Atonement that the only path into His holy presence runs entirely through the substitute He provides — not through human effort, priestly worthiness, or ritual accumulation — and that in that substitute, sin is not merely managed but removed.

Interpretive Evaluation

The two-goat question — one sacrifice or two distinct acts? A significant interpretive question is whether the two goats together constitute a single sacrifice or whether the scapegoat functions as a distinct, secondary ritual of a lesser order. Some traditions, particularly in older Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox exegesis, have treated the scapegoat as supplementary — a vivid demonstration attached to the primary blood sacrifice, but theologically subordinate. Within evangelical scholarship, some have distinguished the two goats sharply: the slain goat accomplishes propitiation (satisfying divine wrath), while the scapegoat accomplishes expiation (removing the guilt). This is broadly correct and illuminating. However, the text presents both goats as a single unit — both are selected at once (v. 7), both are presented before the LORD (v. 7), and the lot determines their respective roles in what is a single event. The Reformed reading rightly maintains that the two goats together constitute one comprehensive act of atonement: the blood satisfies God's justice (propitiation), and the living goat carries away the sins (expiation and removal). Neither is complete without the other. To preach only the blood and neglect the scapegoat is to miss the full dimensions of what atonement accomplishes.

The Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Christ — typological or merely analogical? A second major interpretive question concerns the relationship of this chapter to Christ's high-priestly work in the New Testament, particularly as expounded in Hebrews 9–10. Some traditions — particularly those influenced by classic dispensationalism — treat the Levitical system as primarily illustrative rather than typologically determinative: the feasts and rituals picture Christ but are not organically connected to Him. The Reformed reading, following Hebrews' own argument, insists on a stronger relationship: the Levitical high priest and the Day of Atonement are genuine types — divinely appointed foreshadowings that derive their meaning from the antitype they anticipate. The very *inadequacy* of the annual repetition (Hebrews 10:1–4 — “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins”) is itself typologically load-bearing: the repetition announces its own incompleteness, and that incompleteness is resolved only in Christ's once-for-all offering. The Reformed reading is to be preferred precisely because Hebrews insists on it: Leviticus 16 is not a freestanding ritual that Christ happens to resemble; it is a

shadow whose substance *is* Christ (Colossians 2:17), and its full meaning cannot be grasped apart from Him.

Arminian and Wesleyan approaches — universal atonement inferred from Leviticus 16?

Some Wesleyan expositors have noted that the Day of Atonement was made “for all the iniquities of the children of Israel” (v. 21) and have used this as a template for arguing unlimited atonement — that Christ’s atonement is equally comprehensive in scope for all humanity. The Reformed reading acknowledges the genuine pastoral force of this observation: the atonement in Leviticus 16 is comprehensive for the covenant community. It covers *all* iniquities, not merely some. This genuine comprehensiveness should not be minimized. However, the text is addressing the covenant people specifically, and the argument that Israel’s national atonement maps directly to unlimited individual atonement imports assumptions the text itself does not make. The text’s comprehensiveness is best understood as covering all sins — not merely ceremonial ones — within the covenant community, which is itself a type of the definite, complete, and effective atonement Christ accomplishes for His people.

The “once a year” character of the ritual — does it diminish ongoing access? Some expositors, particularly in traditions emphasizing continuous sacramental access (Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic), have found the annual structure of Yom Kippur theologically uncomfortable — it seems to imply that Israel lived most of the year without full atonement in force. The text, however, does not present the Day of Atonement as the only means of atonement in Israel’s cultus — the daily sacrifices, the regular sin and guilt offerings of chapters 4–5, and the ongoing priestly ministry all function continuously. The Day of Atonement is distinguished by its comprehensiveness and its unique access to the Most Holy Place — it is the annual summation and renewal of the whole system, not a periodic repair of a system otherwise broken. The Reformed reading sees this annual rhythm as itself part of the typological argument: even the most comprehensive provision of the old covenant required annual repetition, which is precisely what Hebrews 10 presses to show the superiority of Christ’s once-for-all offering.

Key Canonical Support

- **Hebrews 9:1–10:18** — The New Testament’s sustained exposition of Leviticus 16. The author of Hebrews argues directly from the structure and limits of the Day of Atonement to demonstrate that Christ’s high-priestly entry into the true Most Holy Place accomplished what Aaron’s annual ritual could only shadow: a single, unrepeatable, fully effective offering that perfects those who are sanctified. This is the primary canonical lens for reading Leviticus 16.
- **Isaiah 53:4–12** — The Suffering Servant passage anticipates both dimensions of the Day of Atonement: the substitutionary bearing of guilt (“the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all,” v. 6) and the comprehensive removal of sin (“he shall bear

their iniquities,” v. 11). Isaiah 53 is the prophetic bridge between the Levitical shadow and the Christological substance.

- **Romans 3:21–26** — Paul’s declaration that God put Christ forward as a *hilastērion* (propitiation/mercy seat) in His blood grounds the Day of Atonement’s logic in the cross. The mercy seat (*kapporet*) of Leviticus 16 is the location where atonement blood was applied; Paul uses this precise imagery to describe Christ’s atoning work. The connection is not merely verbal — it is theological.
- **John 1:29** — John the Baptist’s declaration, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” compresses both the sacrificial logic of Leviticus 16 (the slain goat) and the scapegoat logic (the sin-bearing removal) into a single announcement. “Takes away” (*airōn*) echoes the scapegoat’s removal — the sin is not merely covered but lifted and carried off.
- **Psalms 103:12** — “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” This Davidic psalm of praise reflects the theology embedded in the scapegoat ritual: sin removed to a place of no return, not merely deferred or managed. The emotional reality the scapegoat enacts becomes the language of worship.

Aim: To demonstrate that the Day of Atonement confronts every reader with the gravity of their sin and the sufficiency of God’s provision — and that this provision finds its definitive fulfillment in Christ, in whom entry into God’s presence is not annual but permanent.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The LORD speaks to Moses after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu; Aaron is warned not to enter the Most Holy Place at any time, lest he die — God appears in the cloud over the mercy seat	The deaths of Aaron’s sons anchor the chapter’s governing anxiety: unauthorized approach to God kills; even the high priest enters only by divine prescription
3–5	Prescribed materials for Aaron’s entry: a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering for himself; two male goats and a ram from the congregation for sin and burnt offerings	The high priest must atone for himself before atoning for others; the materials are entirely prescribed — no substitutions, no innovations

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6	Aaron presents the bull as a sin offering for himself and his household	The priest's own sinfulness is not incidental — it is the starting point; the mediator himself requires atonement
7–10	The two goats are brought before the LORD at the entrance of the tent; lots are cast — one goat designated for the LORD, one for Azazel; the LORD's goat is for a sin offering, the Azazel goat is presented alive before the LORD for atonement and then sent away	The lot — a means of divine determination — establishes that the assignment of roles belongs to God, not human choice; "Azazel" is most plausibly understood as a reference to removal into a desolate region (the wilderness)
11–14	Aaron slaughters the bull for his own sin offering; takes coals from the altar and incense behind the veil; the cloud of incense covers the mercy seat so he does not die; he sprinkles the blood of the bull before the mercy seat seven times	The incense cloud is a protective measure — even the high priest cannot behold the naked glory of God; the blood is applied in the place where God's presence dwells
15–17	Aaron slaughters the goat of the people's sin offering; brings its blood behind the veil; sprinkles it on and before the mercy seat as he did with the bull; atonement is thus made for the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting, and the altar; no one is to be in the tent during this ritual	The entire sanctuary is defiled by Israel's sins and requires cleansing; the mediation is exclusive — <i>no one</i> may be present; the high priest stands alone before God on behalf of the people
18–19	Aaron goes out to the altar and makes atonement for it with the blood of both the bull and the goat; sprinkles blood on it seven times	The altar itself — the place of ongoing sacrifice — has been contaminated; even the instruments of worship require purification
20–22	Aaron lays both hands on the living goat; confesses	The double-hand laying denotes full identification

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	over it <i>all</i> the iniquities, transgressions, and sins of Israel; the goat is sent away into the wilderness by a designated man; it carries all their sins to a remote area	and complete transference; “all iniquities, all transgressions, all sins” — the text is exhaustive; the goat departs and does not return
23–25	Aaron re-enters the tent, removes the linen garments, bathes, puts on his regular garments, and offers the burnt offerings for himself and the people; the fat of the sin offering is burned on the altar	The transition from special linen vestments back to regular garments; the burnt offerings seal the atonement; the fat — the richest portion — goes to God
26–28	The man who released the scapegoat washes his clothes and bathes before returning to camp; the sin offerings are taken outside the camp and burned entirely; the person who burns them also washes	Contact with the sin-laden offering renders unclean; the burning outside the camp reinforces the complete removal — nothing of the sin offering remains within Israel’s midst
29–31	A permanent statute: on the tenth day of the seventh month, Israel is to afflict themselves and do no work — both native and sojourner; it is a Sabbath of complete rest; atonement is made for them once in the year	The day is given a permanent calendar location (Tishri 10) and a distinctive character: <i>affliction</i> (fasting, self-denial) and <i>complete cessation</i> ; the sojourner is included — this is not ethnically exclusive
32–34	The anointed priest who succeeds Aaron shall perform this ritual; he too wears the holy linen garments; this is an everlasting statute — atonement made for Israel once a year	The ritual is not tied to Aaron personally but to the office; its perpetual character (“everlasting statute”) underlines its theological weight while also implying — in Hebrews’ logic — its ultimate fulfillment and supersession

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Warning and the Preparation: Access Governs by God’s Terms Alone
2	6–19	The Atoning Ritual: Blood Applied, Sanctuary Cleansed, People Covered
3	20–22	The Scapegoat: Sin Transferred, Confessed, and Removed Without Return
4	23–28	The Completion and the Defilement: Finishing the Work, Bearing the Residue
5	29–34	The Perpetual Statute: Once a Year, for All, Forever — Until It Is Finished

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim *(restated)*

Subject Sentence: Once a year, God alone provides the costly means by which guilty Israel may stand before Him.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through the Day of Atonement that the only path into His holy presence runs entirely through the substitute He provides — not through human effort, priestly worthiness, or ritual accumulation — and that in that substitute, sin is not merely managed but removed.

Applications (Five)

1. Reckon honestly with the gravity of what your sin requires. *(Mind/Belief)* The Day of Atonement is not a ceremony invented to give Israel something to do — it is God’s enacted teaching about what sin costs. A bull dies. A goat is slaughtered. Blood is carried into the most restricted place on earth. Another animal is loaded with the weight of every sin the nation has committed and driven out into the wilderness to die. Before anyone approaches the mercy seat with confidence, they must reckon with this: access to a holy God is not cheap, not casual, and not self-generated. The modern habit of treating sin as a minor

inconvenience to be quickly managed — a quiet “I’m sorry, God” before moving on — has not reckoned seriously with what Leviticus 16 is teaching. If it cost this much, your sin is not minor. Let the chapter do its work of pressing home the weight before you rush to the comfort.

2. Rest in the fact that God, not you, has provided every element of your atonement.

(Affections/Worship) Notice who prescribes the ritual, who provides the animals, who designates the roles, who casts the lots, and who determines the acceptability of the offering — God does. Aaron brings nothing of his own innovation. The worshippers contribute nothing of their own merit. The entire event is God’s provision for God’s people to stand before God. This is the emotional and devotional center of the chapter, and it should produce worship: the God who could rightly have remained unapproachable is the same God who opened the door and told His people exactly how to walk through it. The proper response to Leviticus 16 is not self-examination leading to despair but self-examination leading to gratitude — because the remedy is already prescribed and already provided. Stop trying to supplement what God has already completely supplied.

3. Understand that in Christ, the access the scapegoat pictured is now permanent and personal.

(Mind/Belief) The scapegoat carried sins “to a remote area” (*eretz gezera* — a land of separation and cutting off). It was a vivid, embodied statement: those sins are gone, no longer in the camp, no longer counted against the people. But the ritual had to be repeated annually, which announced its own incompleteness. In Christ, the scapegoat’s logic reaches its terminus: He who knew no sin was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21); He bore our sins in His body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24); and that bearing was final, unrepeatable, and complete. Hebrews 10:17 quotes God’s own declaration: “Their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more.” The wilderness the scapegoat walked into pictures a disposal that in Christ has become permanent removal — not merely covered until next Yom Kippur, but forgiven, forgotten by the one against whom they were committed.

4. Confess sin with the specificity that the scapegoat ritual requires.

(Will/Behavior) Aaron did not wave his hand vaguely over the goat and acknowledge Israel’s general unworthiness. He confessed “all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins” — the text uses three distinct Hebrew terms covering the full range of moral failure: *avon* (iniquity, twisted character), *pasha* (transgression, willful rebellion), and *chatta’at* (sin, falling short of the standard). This specificity is not accidental. The atonement ritual models a kind of confession that names what is being put on the substitute — not a vague acknowledgment of being imperfect, but a specific, verbal, comprehensive reckoning with actual sins. The application is direct: stop confessing in generalities. Bring specific sins to the one who bore them specifically, and confess them with the same honesty the high priest was required to demonstrate before the whole community.

5. Live as people whose sins have been removed, not merely recorded differently.

(Affections/Worship) The scapegoat leaves the camp. It does not circle back. The

designated man watches it disappear into the wilderness and returns to camp without it. This enacted theology is meant to produce a particular kind of people: people who do not live as if their sins are still tallied against them, hovering overhead, always at risk of returning. Psalm 103:12 — “as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” — is the worshipper’s response to exactly this reality. The application is not “feel better about yourself” — it is “live in the freedom that the removal of sin actually creates.” Christians who are constantly paralyzed by guilt over confessed sin, Christians who cannot receive forgiveness as real and operative, Christians who functionally live as if God is still keeping score — these are people who have not yet let the scapegoat’s departure do its work in their daily lives.

Theological Importance: Leviticus 16 establishes the most fundamental theological reality in Israel’s worship: a holy God and a sinful people cannot simply coexist without cost, and that cost is borne by a substitute provided by God Himself. The chapter teaches that sin is not a trivial inconvenience but a comprehensive defilement — it touches the people, the priests, the sanctuary, and even the altar. It teaches that atonement requires blood, because the life is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11) and sin against a living God requires a life in payment. And it teaches the two dimensions that together constitute full atonement: *propitiation* (the blood that satisfies God’s justice, applied at the mercy seat) and *expiation* (the scapegoat that removes guilt from the community entirely). No account of the character of God is complete that does not reckon with both His holiness — which makes Leviticus 16 necessary — and His grace — which is the reason He prescribed it rather than simply withdrawing from Israel.

Reformed Theological Significance: Leviticus 16 is the Old Testament’s most concentrated display of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, and its New Testament exposition in Hebrews 9–10 makes it the canonical foundation for understanding why Christ’s death achieves what it achieves. The Reformed doctrine of the atonement — that Christ as the divine-human Mediator bore the full penalty of His people’s sin (propitiation), completely removed their guilt (expiation), and opened permanent access to God through His own blood — is not imported onto Leviticus 16 from outside; it is what Leviticus 16 is about, in shadow form. The chapter also displays the Reformed emphasis on *monergistic grace* in salvation: every element of the Day of Atonement is prescribed and provided by God — the worshipper contributes nothing but the sins the goat carries away. This is the gospel in ritual form: the sinner’s role is to be represented; the substitute’s role is to bear and remove; and the outcome — acceptance before God — belongs entirely to the grace of the one who designed and provided the whole event. The “once for all” logic of Christ’s atonement (Hebrews 10:10) is the fulfillment of what the annual repetition of Leviticus 16 was crying out for: a sacrifice that does not need to be repeated because it is finally, perfectly, and permanently effective.

Main Takeaway: The Day of Atonement teaches one thing with unmistakable clarity: you cannot get to God on your own terms, but God has provided every single thing needed to get there on His. Your sins are not managed by this — they are removed. In Christ, the high priest has entered the Most Holy Place once, the blood has been applied, the scapegoat has departed, and the door is open. Stop living like it is still closed.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Leviticus 16 as merely antiquarian — interesting ritual, no direct claim.** The most common failure in preaching Leviticus is implicitly treating it as background material for the New Testament rather than as Scripture making its own claim on the reader. The chapter is not a museum exhibit — it is God’s enacted announcement of the gospel’s deepest logic. If the sermon does not produce in the hearer both a reckoning with the weight of sin and a resting in the sufficiency of the substitute, the passage has not been preached — it has been explained. Explanation without effect is not exposition.
- **Rushing to Hebrews without letting Leviticus 16 do its own work first.** The typological connections to Christ are real, essential, and should be made — but they should arrive as the answer to a question Leviticus 16 itself has pressed home. If the preacher jumps to Hebrews 9 in the first five minutes, the congregation never feels the weight that makes the fulfillment good news. Let the Day of Atonement do its humbling work before the fulfillment is announced. The shadow must create the longing that the substance satisfies.
- **Preaching only the blood (propitiation) and neglecting the scapegoat (expiation).** The two-goat structure is not decorative. God designed two animals to capture two dimensions of atonement that together constitute the whole. A sermon that covers the slain goat and treats the scapegoat as an appendix has preached half an atonement. The removal dimension — that sins are carried away to a place of no return — is practically and pastorally essential for the congregation member who cannot receive forgiveness as real, who continues to live under guilt that has already been removed.
- **Moralistic application — reading Aaron’s careful obedience as a model for our careful religious performance.** Aaron’s meticulous compliance with the divine prescription is not primarily a model for careful worship preparation (though such application is not entirely wrong). Its primary function is to establish that approach to God is entirely governed by God’s terms, not human initiative. The application is not “be more careful and reverent in your worship practices” — it is “the means of access are entirely God’s gift, not your achievement.” Clowney’s anti-moralism principle applies directly here: the text is not asking the reader to be like Aaron; it is showing what a mediator must do on behalf of a people who cannot do it themselves.

- **Failing to address the “once a year” repetition and what it implies.** The annual repetition is not an embarrassment to be explained away — it is a built-in theological argument. The very fact that Yom Kippur had to be repeated every year is Hebrews’ own point: it was not finished. A sermon that treats the Day of Atonement as simply “effective for Israel” without pressing the inadequacy of its repetition misses the reason Hebrews spends four chapters on this chapter. The annual repetition is the Old Testament’s own way of crying out for what it could not yet accomplish — a permanent, unrepeatable, fully effective atonement.
- **Decontextualizing the scapegoat as a symbol of “sending your problems away.”** Popular culture has absorbed the word “scapegoat” with essentially no reference to its theological content — someone blamed for others’ failures. Within Christian exposition, there is a danger of treating the scapegoat primarily as a psychological symbol (release your burdens, let go of guilt) rather than as a legal and covenantal reality (guilt is objectively transferred to a substitute who bears it away). The scapegoat ritual is not an emotional exercise — it is a declaration about the objective status of sin before God. The comfort it produces should flow from the objective reality, not from the subjective experience of release.