

Exposition of the Book of Leviticus

Sunset Bible Church Adult Sunday School 2021

Week 5: The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)

For it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD. (Lev. 16:30)

Preliminary Observations¹

The sacrifices and offerings that Moses described thus far in the law were not sufficient to cleanse all the defilements of the people. Much sinfulness and uncleanness still needed removing. Therefore God appointed a yearly sacrifice that cleansed all the sins and impurities not covered by other means that the Israelites committed ignorantly (Heb. 9:7). *The sacrifice of the Day of Atonement was the highest and most comprehensive of the Mosaic sacrifices.*

This chapter is a theological pivot on which the whole Book of Leviticus turns. It is the climax of the first part of the book that deals with the public worship of the Israelites (chs. 1—16). The second major part of Leviticus begins at the end of this chapter and reveals the private worship of the Israelites (chs. 17—27).

The chapter begins with a reference back to chapter 10, the judgment of Nadab and Abihu (v. 1). The material in chapter 16 is legislation that God prescribed shortly after and in view of that apostasy. Chapter 10 showed how important it was for priests to approach God with due care and self-preparation; those who did not do so, died. Chapter 16 contains information about how the high priest must behave to preserve himself from a similar fate. There is this tie to the narrative of Israel's history, but chapter 16 is also a continuation of the legislation designed to differentiate between clean and unclean contained in chapters 11—15. It is another block of legal material.

The Day of Atonement took place six months after the Passover. Whereas the Passover was a day of great rejoicing, the Day of Atonement was a time of great solemnity in Israel.

1. Introductory Information (16:1-10)

• Introduction to the Day of Atonement Legislation (16:1-2)

We learn from verse 1 that Moses received instructions regarding the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, immediately after the judgment of Nadab and Abihu (ch. 10). Consequently he must have inserted chapters 11—15 in the chronological narrative for a purpose. He probably did so because of the connection between the clean and unclean distinctions in these chapters and the emphasis on priestly purity that ended with the judgment of Nadab and Abihu (ch. 10). There is also continuity in the emphasis on the importance of holiness when entering the presence of Yahweh.

As usual, God revealed these laws to Moses, not directly to the priests or even the high priest, Aaron (v. 2). Moses was the great mediator between God and the Israelites, superior even to the high priest. Moses served in the role of a prophet when he did this. Later in Israel's history, the prophets continued to communicate instructions from God, not only to the priests but also to the kings.

Even the high priest was not to enter the presence of God in the holy of holies, symbolized by the cloud over the mercy seat, at any time. If he did, he would die, as Nadab and Abihu had died. What follows is instruction about when and how he could enter. The only way anyone could approach God when He manifested Himself on Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19) was also as He specified. God was just as holy and demanded just as much reverence when He was dwelling among His people as when He dwelt away from them.

¹ The primary source of these notes is Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Leviticus," 2004 edition, 59-64.

- **Basic Requirements for the Ceremonies (16:3-5)**

The high priest had to make elaborate preparations for entering the Holy of Holies by cleansing himself spiritually and physically. The offerings he made were a bull as a sin offering and a ram as a burnt offering, both to cover his own sins (cf. Heb. 5:3). He also had to wear a special uniform, not the ornate garments that he usually wore to carry out his regular duties. This uniform consisted of four white garments and made him appear more as a slave than as a king. This dress was even simpler than that worn by the other priests (cf. Exod. 39:27-29).

Among his [Aaron's] fellow men his dignity as the great mediator between man and God is unsurpassed, and his splendid clothes draw attention to the glory of his office. But in the presence of God even the high priest is stripped of all honor: he becomes simply the servant of the King of kings, whose true status is portrayed in the simplicity of his dress.²

Aaron had to wash his body, symbolizing his cleanness. He also offered two goats as a sin offering and another ram as a burnt offering for the Israelites. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies only once each year on the Day of Atonement to make these special sacrifices (cf. Heb. 9:7).

- **An Outline of the Ceremonies (16:6-10)**

Aaron first offered the bull as a sin (purification) offering to cover his sins and the sins of the other priests (v. 6). Then he cast lots to decide which of the two goats would die as a sin offering for the people and which one would be sent into the wilderness (vv. 7-8). Then he sacrificed the goat that was to die (v. 9). Finally he brought the other goat before the Lord and then dispatched it into the wilderness (v. 10).

2. Instructions Concerning the Ritual (16:11-28)

- **The Blood-sprinkling Rites (16:11-19)**

Verses 11-14 describe the purification offering that Aaron was to offer for himself and the other priests. The act of offering incense represented the act of offering prayer that God would mercifully accept the sacrifices offered to cover the nation's sins and uncleanness.

The second stage of the ceremony, the casting of lots over the goats, was rather simple and apparently required little explanation. The third stage was the sacrificing of one of the goats as a sin offering for the people (vv. 15-19). This sacrifice cleansed the sanctuary of the defilement that the sins of the people caused, making it possible for a holy God to continue to dwell among sinful people (vv. 16, 19-20).

Sprinkling of the blood on the mercy seat once (v. 15) was for the expiation of the sins of the people.³ Sprinkling of blood before the mercy seat seven times (v. 19) was for expiation of the sanctuary from the people's sins. The high priest then sprinkled blood on and before the altar of burnt offerings (vv. 18-19).

- **The Scapegoat (16:20-22)**

These verses describe the fourth and most striking phase of this day's ceremony. The second goat symbolically bore the sins of the people taking them to an unclean place far from God. There is a difference of opinion among the authorities about what "Azazel" means (vv. 8, 10, 26). The etymology of this Hebrew word is obscure. Some believe it means a rocky precipice or some other place where the goat died or that it refers to the goat's function. Others think it refers to a demon to whom the Israelites' sins were returned so it would not accuse them. Whatever its exact meaning, the symbolism is clear enough. The live goat symbolically removed the sins of the Israelites from God's presence.

² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, in New International Commentary on the Old Testament series (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 230.

³ See Douglass Judisch, "Propitiation in the Language and Typology of the Old Testament," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48:2-3 (April-July 1984):221-43, which deals with the Hebrew words translated "cover."

The two goats used in the ritual represented two aspects of the atonement that God provided. Both of the animals taught the Israelites that a sinless agent was removing their sins by vicarious atonement. The goat slain represented the judgment on sin that resulted in the death necessary for atonement. The goat sent off into the wilderness, with the sinner's guilt imputed to it, symbolized the removal of guilt (cf. 14:4-7).⁴

There were two forms of the laying on of hands in the Old Testament. One was performed by placing two hands on persons in nonsacrificial contexts. They performed the other by placing one hand on animals when they sacrificed them (v. 21). The two-handed form emphasized the recipient of the ritual action. The one-handed form drew attention to the person who put his hand on the animal.⁵ Another view is that the imposition of two hands intensified the idea of transferring guilt, specifically for intentional sins.⁶

• The Cleansing of the Participants (16:23-28)

The rituals for cleansing those who had contact with the sacrifices concludes this section. This entire ceremony pointed out very clearly the holiness of God as well as the sinfulness of man. Those involved in procuring atonement had to follow scrupulously the directions God gave for approaching Him in worship.

3. Instructions Concerning the Duty of the People (16:29-34)

These verses also contain instructions for the yearly celebration of the Day of Atonement. Its annual repetition points to the incompleteness of the atonement that animal sacrifices made (cf. Heb. 9:7-12).

All the Israelites were to humble their souls (fast and repent) and refrain from work in preparation for this event. This self-affliction included spiritual humbling as well as going without food (cf. Isa. 58:3). Fasting was an indication that the practitioner regarded his need to seek God as more pressing than his need to feed his body. It often accompanied prayer (cf. Ps. 35:13). Refraining from work resulted from the same sense of priority. No human activity was necessary, nor did God permit it, in addition to the sacrifice that He provided to atone for sin.

The promise of God in verse 30 is one that the Israelite was to believe and by which he could enjoy assurance of his fellowship with God. It is very clear from this verse and similar statements (cf. vv. 16, 22) that God promised forgiveness and cleansing to all who trusted in the efficacy of the sacrifices that He provided and prescribed.⁷

The writer of the Book of Hebrews saw the Day of Atonement as prefiguring Jesus' crucifixion (Heb. 9). Though the Day of Atonement is not something Christians observe, we can learn the nature of sin, the need for atonement, and the superiority of Christ's sacrifice by reflecting on this Jewish ritual in the light of Calvary (cf. Heb. 10:22-25).

The only way of access into the presence of the LORD was by the application of the atoning blood on the mercy seat and the removal of the sins of the penitent by placing them on a

4 See Lester L. Grabbe, "The Scapegoat Tradition: A Study in Early Jewish Interpretation," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 18:2 (December 1987):152-67. The word "scapegoat" comes from the AV description of the goat that "escaped" into the wilderness. In Hebrew "scapegoat" is *azazel*.

5 See Rene Peter, "L'Imposition des Mains dans L'Ancien Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 27:1 (1977):48-55; David P. Wright, "The Gesture of Hand Placement in the Hebrew Bible and Hittite Literature," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106:3 (July-September 1986):433-46; M. C. Sansom, "Laying on of Hands in the Old Testament," *Expository Times* 94:11 (August 1983):323-26.

6 Noam Zohar, "Repentance and Purification: The Significance and Semantics of *ht't* in the Pentateuch," *Journal of Biblical Studies* 107:4 (1988):615, n. 31.

7 For a survey of the attitudes of American Jews over the last century regarding the meaning of the Day of Atonement and regarding death and the afterlife, see Eric Friedland, "The Atonement Memorial Service in the American Mahzor," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 55 (1984):243-82.

Concluding Thoughts⁹

The ceremonies of the Day of Atonement made abundantly clear God's detestation of sin which, if it was continued, resulted in defilement and death (cf. Rom. 6:23). The chosen people were required to reflect the holiness of their covenant God, and the Day of Atonement provided a new beginning each year for the fulfillment of that ideal. It also demonstrated the universality and omnipresence of sin. High priest and layman alike had offended God's holiness, and therefore atonement was needed by everybody. Not even the material objects of worship could escape suspicion of being tainted by communal sin; hence the emphasis in the rituals on the cleansing of the whole tabernacle area. The entire ceremony was conducted with solemnity and attention to detail that was characteristic of the levitical sacrificial system, with the knowledge that the slightest violation of divine propriety could result in instant death for the offender.

As well as stressing the contagion and dissemination of sin, the rituals demonstrate that no person can make atonement for his own sins. Blood was to be shed (Heb. 9:22) by a substitute, for which under the old dispensation a variety of animals sufficed. The offering of two goats for the sins of the community was obviously out of all proportion to the need for atonement. This, however, appears to have been a deliberate indication of the temporary and typical nature of the ceremony. One of the weaknesses of the levitical sacrificial system was that it could make no provision for full and final forgiveness of the sinner. The various rituals had to be repeated periodically, and a human mediator, who himself needed atonement, was required to declare God's absolving grace.

For the Christian, the solemn day looked forward to the time when a representative human being would bear the sins of the world (Isa. 53:6) as the Lamb of God (John 1:29). This was necessary since the blood of bulls and goats could not possibly remove sin (Heb. 10:4). Only God as manifested in the person of Jesus Christ could reconcile the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19). The blood is the life of the flesh (Lev. 17:11), and it is through the atoning blood of Christ that the believer receives redemption (1 Peter 1:18-19), forgiveness (Eph. 1:7), justification (Rom. 5:9), spiritual peace (Col. 1:20), and sanctification (Heb. 13:12).

As Christ was dying on the cross, the highly embroidered veil of the temple was torn in half, signifying that mankind was living under the new covenant of grace from that time forward. Its institution by the perfect sin-bearer has made it evident that the ceremonies of the old covenant were but symbols, types and shadows (cf. Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1). The way into the most holy presence of God has been opened for the sinner by the shed blood of Christ (Heb. 10:20). The Savior is now the great High Priest over the household of faith, the Christian church, and it is through Him alone that we approach God in penitence and trust for the forgiveness of our sins. The Christian looks back to the events of Calvary as the one great occasion (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12) when the Day of Atonement was celebrated. Unlike the Israelite high priests who were subject to human mortality, Jesus continues forever as our High Priest (Heb. 7:24) because of His eternal nature. Being sinless, Jesus Christ had an immense moral advantage over the priests of the old dispensation, who first had to atone for themselves before being able to atone for the people. The covenant of grace which Christ introduced means that the individual no longer has to relate to God on the basis of legalism (Heb. 7:18-19), for now man can have unhampered access to God. Unlike the Hebrew priests who presented animal sacrifices as a means of atoning for sin, Jesus made the supreme sacrifice by offering Himself (Heb. 7:27), making a once-for-all-time atonement for human wickedness. By contrast with the work of the Israelite high priests, the priesthood which Christ exercised is supreme.

⁸ Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, Baker Book House, 2002), 323.

⁹ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 175-177.

