

The Day of Atonement

Devotional Reading: Psalm 40:9-17
Background Scripture: Leviticus 16
Today's Scripture: Leviticus 16:11-19

I. Atonement for Some Leviticus 16:11-14

¹¹ "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. ¹² He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. ¹³ 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 tablets of the covenant law, so that he will not die. 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.

11. This verse begins to list the sacrificial procedures needed to cleanse the Most Holy Place, starting with the cleansing of the high priest, *Aaron* himself. He had to address his uncleanness before taking the next step of atoning for the people's sins. After doing so, Aaron proceeded to offer the required sacrifices that were part of the day's procedures.

The verb translated *make atonement* is a critical one in the book of Leviticus.

In fact, over half of its appearances in the Bible occur in Leviticus. The popular -level description of atonement is that of "at-one-ment" with God. That is certainly what atonement results in, but the verb translated "make atonement" by itself doesn't reveal to our modern ears how that "at-one-ment" with God is to be achieved.

The challenge involves some technical issues with the nature of the Hebrew language. In the word's various configurations and contexts, it can mean "ransom," "payment," "bribe," or "appease" (Exodus 30:12; Job 31:39; 1 Samuel 12:3; Proverbs 16:14, respectively). These meanings are not mutually exclusive; they can shade into one another depending on context.

12. Aaron (or any high priest who would take part in these proceedings on the Day of Atonement) had to prepare himself carefully and appropriately before entering *behind the curtain* that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place within the tabernacle. The source of the needed *burning coals* was likely the altar of burnt offering, which was located near the front of the courtyard of the tabernacle. Aaron's loss of two sons when they misused censers of fire made clear the necessity of following these instructions with great care and seriousness.

The ingredients for the *fragrant incense* are found in Exodus 30:34-38. Such incense had two purposes. First, it was another kind of sacrificial item showing honor to God. Second, the aroma permeated the area around the tabernacle and highlighted the uniqueness and separateness of the place. It thus served as a perceptible reminder that God was holy and that the precincts of his abode should be respected.

13. The *smoke* created by the burning of *incense* is for Aaron's protection, since no one can see God's face and live. The *atonement cover* refers to the elaborate cover of the ark of the covenant, which was topped with two golden angelic figures (cherubim) facing one another with outstretched wings. The ark represented God's presence among the people. The phrase *tablets of the covenant law* refers to the stone tablets into which Moses chiseled God's law, tablets that were kept inside the ark of the covenant.

14. This action is similar to what was to be done for other sin offerings (Leviticus 4:6-7, 17-18). In those cases, the blood was to be applied to the altar of incense, which was located immediately in front of the curtain that shielded the Most Holy Place. Here, however, the blood was first to be sprinkled on the east side of the ark of the covenant. Since the tabernacle was situated facing east, that is the front side.

II. Atonement for Many

Leviticus 16:15-17

¹⁵ **"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 blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it."** ¹⁶ **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. ¹⁷ **No one is to be in the tent of meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.**

15a. Having provided atonement for himself and his family, the high priest was then to prepare to enter the Most Holy Place a second time on behalf of *the people*, his fellow Israelites. That preparation involved killing one of the two goats *for the sin offering*, mentioned in Leviticus 16:5. The first goat was slaughtered as an atoning sacrifice, cleansing the sacred precincts from the impurity of Israel's sins. The other goat became the scapegoat, which was released into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:8-10, 20-22). The priest would first lay hands on the goat's head and confess the people's sins over it, thus transferring them symbolically to the animal. A person would then be charged with taking the goat into the wilderness and releasing it so that it wouldn't return. The scapegoat and its destination thus represented the complete removal of the sins and impurities of the people.

15b. The high priest was to follow the same procedure that he did in providing atonement for himself and his household. Sin offerings on behalf of the people are described in detail in Leviticus 4:13-21.

16a. We may wonder why *the Most Holy Place* would need atonement. After all, inanimate objects have no consciousness or ability to sin! As pointed out in the comment on verse 11, atonement addressed not only individual sins but also the contamination of places and things closely associated with the holy

God. Therefore, *atonement* was not only for people but also for consecrated things and areas.

Three words underline the seriousness of the spiritual state of *the Israelites: uncleanness, rebellion, and sins*. The Hebrew word rendered *rebellion* is the most serious word in Hebrew for disobedience toward God; it implies deliberate and willful defiance.

16b. When Moses set apart the nation of Israel as God's covenant people, he did so by sprinkling blood on an altar, on the Book of the Covenant, and on the people (Exodus 24:6-8; Hebrews 9:19-20). And when *the tent of meeting* (tabernacle) was completed, it too (and everything within it) was sprinkled with blood. The tabernacle remained *among* the people, even in their state of *uncleanness*, but atonement by means of blood needed to be provided for the tabernacle each year.

17. This verse might be summed up with just three words: Keep your distance! To do so would prevent the high priest's being distracted from his duties. The absolutely vital nature of the high priest's actions for *atonement* is seen in the all-encompassing applications to *himself, his household and the whole community of Israel*. Such a restriction echoes what the Israelites were told when God's presence came to them at Mount Sinai. No one, not even an animal, was allowed to cross the sacred boundaries except for Moses and Aaron; whoever did so would die. On the Day of Atonement, no one could reenter the tabernacle until atonement had been made for priest, places, and people.

III. Atonement for the Altar

Leviticus 16:18-19

18 "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. ¹⁹ 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.

18. After the purification of the Most Holy Place, the cleansing regimen progresses outward. The tabernacle featured two altars: the altar of burnt offering and the altar of incense. We wonder which of the two altars is being referred to here. The statement that the high priest is to *put [blood] on all the horns of the altar* doesn't help us decide, since both altars were to be treated that way.

Favoring the subject to be the altar of burnt offering is the fact that it was used for so many offerings to address the sins of the people that the need for its own atonement was much greater than that of the altar of incense. Favoring the altar of incense, however, is the phrase *the altar that is before the Lord*. The altar of incense was located very close to the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, whereas the altar of burnt offering was located at the entrance to the tabernacle (Exodus 40:5-6, 26-29). Given its proximity to God's abode, however, the position of the altar of burnt offering could also merit its description as *before the Lord*. Moreover, the fact that the priest is told to *come out* suggests that he is leaving the tabernacle, in which case the altar of burnt offering would be in view.

19. *Blood* is not the only substance to be sprinkled *seven times* under the Law of Moses. Oil and water were also used ceremonially in this manner. Such sprinklings could be done for the physical healing of someone's body. But blood sprinklings were for cleansing the sacred space of the tabernacles and its objects. The term *consecrate* means "to make holy."

Involvement Learning

The Day of Atonement

Into the Lesson

Describe how your family celebrates annual traditions (birthdays, anniversaries, etc.) in ways other families may not. Elaborate on the particulars of why and how regarding those traditions.

It is good for us to celebrate the people, things, and events that are important to us. The celebrations of the Old Testament were something of a double-edged sword in this regard: they could simultaneously be times of celebration and solemn reflection. Today's lesson has us consider one such day.

Into the Word

Read Leviticus 16:11-19. For the following elements, detail the physical descriptions and purposes, according to the respective texts.

Curtain

(Exodus 26:31-35; Leviticus 16:12-15)

Physical Description: _____

Purpose: _____

Incense

(Exodus 30:34-38; Leviticus 16:12-13)

Physical Description: _____

Purpose: _____

Atonement Cover

(Exodus 25:17-22; Leviticus 16:13-15)

Physical Description: _____

Purpose: _____

Blood

(Leviticus 16:14-19; Hebrews 9:22)

Physical Description: _____

Purpose: _____

Sin Offering

(Leviticus 4:1-12; 16:11-15)

Physical Description: _____

Purpose: _____

Key Verse

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.

—Leviticus 16:16

Into Life

Agree or disagree with the following statement, and write your argument for your side in the space below.

Our congregation should have an annual day for confessing sin together.

Thought to Remember

Praise God for his provisions of atonement!