

Leviticus – Part 4

The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16-22)

The book of Leviticus has shown us the correct sacrifices and the correct way to offer them (Ch. 1-7), the sanctification of the priests (Ch. 8-10), and has touched lightly on what God describes as clean and unclean (Ch. 11-15). These Laws of Purity give details of cleanliness, purification after childbirth, and skin infections.

Leviticus 16-17 will show us the Day of Atonement and how it relates to the shedding of blood. Next time, we'll digest the feasts and Laws of Holiness that describe necessary behavior to become holy as God is holy. (Ch. 18-25) The final two chapters will remind Israel to be faithful to the covenant (Lev. 26-27).

I. Preparation for the Day of Atonement

"Atonement" is probably *the* major doctrine of the Bible. At its root, it means "to cover," although it is associated with many other words like cleanse, forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation. In the Garden of Eden, God made it clear to Adam that the consequence of sin required the shedding of blood for sinners to be reconciled, or brought into oneness, with Him. (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). All Biblical doctrines hinge on atonement. Without the sacrifice of Christ's death on the cross, there would be no need for any other doctrine.

All the O.T. sacrifices point to the sacrificial death of Jesus for the world's sins because the sacrifices of animals could not effectively cleanse them in a complete sense. Only Jesus could fully pay sin's penalty. "When He had by Himself purged our sins, [Jesus] sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). His work was finished once and for all.

The seven major feasts celebrated each year by the Jewish nation (four in the spring and three in the fall) also point to Jesus. The most widely observed holiday, the Day of Atonement, found in detail in Leviticus 16, is celebrated in the fall, our September/October. It reminded Israel of the seriousness of sin. However, before this day was celebrated the Israelites observed a ten-day Feast of Trumpets to contemplate their sins. Through prayer, repentance, fasting, and pleading for God's mercy, fellowship between the nation and God was renewed and restored.

These ten days, which began with the Feast of Trumpets and ended with the Day of Atonement, are considered High Holy Days. During this time, the entire Jewish nation engaged in moral self-examination, sought forgiveness for harm they had inflicted on others and made amends if possible, and resolved to do better in the future. This entire period was celebrated with great ritual and reverence. The entire Day of Atonement was a series of "visual aids" in which God taught the basic truths of atonement that the people needed to grasp. It was a beautiful picture of what Jesus does with our sins as we repent and confess them to Him.

As in all things, God has a correct way of doing things. To prepare for the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, all the people and priests bathed so they were cleansed outwardly. Aaron, the High Priest, would bring a young bull for a sin offering for unintentional sin for himself and his family and to purify the sanctuary, a ram for a burnt offering, and two goats for a sin offering for the people. (Lev. 4:3; 16:1-6). These

were the *right sacrifices* God had prescribed and would be administered by the High Priest, the *right priesthood*. On this day only, Aaron would enter the Holy of Holies in the sanctuary area, the *right place* where God said He would meet with His people.

Even though he was the high priest, Aaron couldn't enter the Holy of Holies whenever he felt like it. He could enter the Holy of Holies only once a year on the Day of Atonement to meet with God. Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, had just died and God wanted Aaron to understand he must come to God His way, or death will be his fate as well. Aaron would represent the people to God and speak to Him on their behalf at the mercy seat, a place of mercy and judgment, in the Holy of Holies where God had said He would meet with His people "in the cloud" (Ex. 25:22; Lev. 16:2).

The high priest was one of the most important people in the whole nation of Israel. If you weren't aware of this, it would soon become apparent that there was something different about him simply by looking at his clothes. His specially made clothing displayed the dignity of his office with the twelve precious stones, ephod, tunic made of fine linen decorated with gold, blue, purple, and scarlet trim. His importance was obvious, but on this auspicious day, that would change. He must first prepare himself before any sacrifices for the people are made.

The magnificent clothes were discarded. He had observed and repented of any known sin during the 10-day Feast of Trumpets like all of Israel and bathed so he was clean inside and out and now would put on the holy garments God specified: a linen tunic [coat] with linen undergarments [breeches], a linen sash [girdle] tied around him, and a linen turban [mitre]. This is the sort of clothing the lowest servant would wear, but it now reminds the high priest that he must humble himself to come to God. What a sight the crowd must have seen as he walked to the Tabernacle while leading the animals in preparation for his sacred responsibility on the Day of Atonement!

II. *The Sacrifices*

Aaron, the first high priest, knows that he is sinful. Is he worthy of such a responsibility? He had led the people to worship the golden calf, so he knew he was far from perfect. He tried to honor God and live by His commandments, but he had his faults like everyone else. He must deal with his sins first, so he places his hand on the young bull's head that he has purchased. This transfers his sin to the animal. Then, he sacrifices the young bull on the brazen altar in front of the people for a sin offering.

In one hand, he carries a censor with burning coals from his sin offering and in the other hand, he carries hands full of incense into the Holy of Holies. The high priest goes in alone; no other person is allowed in the Tabernacle during this time. (Lev. 16:15-17). There, he drops the coals on the ground and pours the incense over them, creating a sweet fog of fragrance that covers the mercy seat (the flat surface between the two golden cherubim). This is where God promised to appear and meet with the high priest: "For I will appear in the cloud above the mercy seat" (Lev. 16:2).

From this cloud of fragrance, God will see the blood of the bullock that Aaron sprinkles on the mercy seat and judge his heart. Judgment will demand death as the penalty for sin; mercy will demand forgiveness for the sinner. When God sees the blood shed for the payment of sin, mercy is given in place of judgment. Only after this sacrifice of atonement has been made will Aaron be able to offer a sacrifice for Israel.

God allowed the death sentence to be placed on an animal to cover the sins of the sinner, but full atonement could only come through a death that would satisfy God's justice. That was found only in Jesus. But this atonement is far greater than just escaping a death sentence; it is an act of infinite love given to us.

After his atonement, Aaron returns to the courtyard to begin the sacrifice for the people. The two goats he has brought each have a special purpose. One will be sacrificed as a sin offering for the people and the other will be the "scapegoat." (Lev. 16:9-10). He presents them to the Lord by "casting lots" to choose which goat is to be used for each purpose.

Casting lots consisted of two small tablets made of boxwood or ebony that were kept in a wooden chest. On one tablet, the words "For Jehovah" was engraved and on the other "For Azazel," translated scapegoat. After shaking the chest with the tablets, the high priest would put his hands into the chest and bring out both tablets at the same time, one in each hand. The goat standing on the side of the hand holding the inscription "For Jehovah" would be sacrificed as the sin offering for the people. If the inscription read, "For Azazel" it would become the scapegoat.

Aaron sacrificed the goat "For Jehovah" and took its blood into the Holy of Holies. Like the bull's blood, he sprinkled it on the mercy seat to atone for the people's sin, and to cleanse the Holy of Holies. Since the Tabernacle was in the center of the camp, it was in the middle of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites; it needed to be cleansed. The shed blood cleansed *all* unholiness and allowed God to come among His people. When we confess our sin, "the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7; Rom. 10:9-10).

III. The Scapegoat

The High Priest returns to the courtyard for the goat "For Azazel." As the scapegoat, it will bear the blame for the people's sins. The high priest lays both hands on the goat's head and the crowd becomes hushed. (Lev. 16:20-22). His voice booms out their sins of wickedness and rebellion that they have been thinking about for the last ten days: adultery (a married person having sex with someone other than their mate), fornication (any sexual activity outside of marriage), immorality (doing things against God's standards), uncleanness, impurity, theft, profanity, greed, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, pride... "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). They were no different than us!

The scapegoat was not sacrificed but would be released into the wilderness. Symbolically, he is taking the nation's sins into the place where evil dwells. (Lev. 16:9-10, 20-22). When God removes or pardons sin, it is often said to be banished "as far as East is from the West" (Ps. 103:12). God will "cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19, also Isa. 38:17; 44:22). Nothing gives us a better, more striking picture of absolute forgiveness than this scapegoat who carried the sins of the nation away. "And he [Aaron] did as the LORD commanded Moses" (Lev. 16:34). After the sin offerings were offered, the ram is sacrificed as a symbol of their complete dedication to God.

IV. Blood

While "atonement" dominates Leviticus 16, "blood" dominates Leviticus 17. Unlike today, blood was a common sight in the lives of those in the Old Testament. The blood

was everywhere in the Tabernacle—all over the altar, running down its side, dripping on the ground. Priests collected blood from hundreds of sacrifices a day. At festivals, it was even worse! Individuals brought many different sacrifices: burnt offerings, peace offerings, sin, and trespass offerings. Almost all required the sacrifice of an animal; these priests were busy!

God considered the blood to be incredibly valuable because it represented life. It wasn't to be taken lightly. All flesh had to be drained of blood; it was holy and had a specific purpose. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul" (Lev. 17:11). Blood was meant for only two purposes: to give life and to make atonement for our sins so we could have fellowship with God.

People who rebel and live contrary to God are guilty of sinning. God demands a just punishment for their sin—death! This death is a spiritual death, separation from God for all eternity. Since life is contained in our blood, blood must be shed to bring us back to God. This may seem horrible, even barbaric, to us, but in God's eyes, sin is serious. God instituted this way for us to have access to Him.

Taking an animal's life showed Israel how serious it was. They couldn't rebel and think it was no big deal! It had to cost something to remind them to think before they sinned. It had to be expensive enough to stop them in their tracks. To the animal, of course, it cost everything; it gave its very life. Blood from the sacrifices made restitution with God, allowing Him to show mercy and forgiveness for sin and allowing us to become one with Him again. But, since it doesn't take long before we sin again, the sacrifice must be offered again. Imagine how frequent this could be!

Similar to the way blood rids our body of waste and toxins, the shedding of blood cleanses the waste and toxin of sin that paralyzes and prevents a relationship with God. It blocks us from being all God intended us to be. But when blood is shed, sin is cleared away.

Even today, blood is still the only means of atonement because sin will always require death as payment. God doesn't change and neither do His requirements. Animals no longer need to be sacrificed, though, because Jesus paid the ultimate penalty when He allowed Himself to be placed on the cross in our place. (Heb. 9:11-14).

IV. Thou Shalt Not

For the next few chapters, Leviticus 18-22, we see a lot of rules and regulations concerning the moral standards of the day. But do these still apply to us? In the N.T., we read that we are no longer under the Law, but under grace. (Rom. 6:14-23). As we look at these, we must ask ourselves, what was the intent of these laws? Are we to obey the letter of the law or the intent of the law?

God has given to Israel the reason for this list. He does not want them doing the things that were done in the land of Egypt where they came from, nor does He want them doing the things that the Canaanites do where He is taking them. Instead, He wants them to do His judgments and keep His laws and walk in them because He is their Lord and God. (Lev. 18:1-5).

From verse 6 through verse 23, we see a list of "thou shalt nots." Most of us would agree that having sex with your family members or other married people not married

to you or with an animal is not okay. There is one thing in this list, however, that unbelievers want to debate. It is found in verse 22: “Thou shalt not lie [as a man] with mankind as with womankind; it is abomination.” Homosexuality is highly contested among certain groups today. Let’s look closer and see what God is saying.

“Do not *defile* yourselves in any of these things, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus, the land became defiled; and I *punished it for its iniquity*, and *the land vomited out its inhabitants*. But you shall keep My statutes and My ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you (for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled); otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For, whoever commits any of these abominations shall be *cut off* from their people. So, keep My charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 18:24-30).

Do those who practice homosexuality or adultery or any of these practices have the right to live how they choose because they are living under grace and not the Law? No. God wants His people to live in a manner that pleases Him, not according to the lifestyles that are being practiced around them. God did not stop these other nations from doing what they chose to do, but His silence did not mean He was unaware of it, nor that He was okay with it.

God’s rules had a specific intent. He did not want *His people* to defile themselves in the same manner as unbelievers. Why? Both Leviticus 19:2 and I Pet. 1:17 say, “Ye shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy.” Also, “Sanctify yourselves [Set yourselves apart] therefore, and be ye holy: for I AM the LORD your God. And ye shall keep My statutes and do them; I AM the LORD which sanctify you.” (Lev. 20:7-8).

How would Jesus have answered this question? Let His words pierce our thinking process. Before His arrest, when Jesus was praying in the Garden, He was torn between doing His will and that of His Father, so torn that He perspired blood, Jesus prayed that if there was another way to accomplish His task without having to suffer, “let it be done,” BUT “nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” (Matt. 26:39).

Does this mean we can pray for an exemption or exclusion so we can do what we want rather than what God requires for holiness? Do we want to use God’s grace and forgiveness to justify living in a manner that pleases ourselves rather than pleasing God? Are the things we want to do going to bring glory to God or are we just trying to use “grace” as an excuse to have our own way? Ultimately, as His child, we should echo Christ’s prayer by saying, “Not my will, but thine.”

Conclusion:

Satan loves to remind us of our sins, taunt us, and tell us we aren’t good enough for God. But God inspired Moses to write this book about holiness and coming to God as He desires. Make no mistake, sin is repulsive and detestable to God and the Day of Atonement was to remind the people of how serious He took it. In our study, we’ve seen words like “profane,” “common,” and “holy” but we need to take a closer look at their meaning with some familiar items to see how they pertain to us.

If we have dirty dishes in our sink, they are profane. They are unacceptable to use until they have been cleaned. Profane things, things that are neither Biblical nor sacred, in our lives are completely unacceptable to God because they bring dirt before Him. The common dishes, by contrast, are those we use every day. There is nothing wrong with them; they just aren't special. When we treat God as merely common, Someone that we don't hold in high regard but just another of many things that we accept, we are not giving Him the honor that His holiness deserves and demands.

Think about the good china and crystal dishes that you keep behind glass doors. You know, the ones that you only bring out on special occasions or for honored guests. They are treasured and treated with care. Leviticus teaches us that we are to treat God, the Holy One, like no other being. We are to relate to Him and worship Him as our unique, one-of-a-kind Lord and King. He deserves only the best treatment.

If we treat God in this way, how will we look at our own lives differently? "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are" (I Cor. 3:16-17). Christ says we are His temple, forgiven and holy because He has cleansed us. We might say, "The goat has left the building" to think of our sins in light given to the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement.

God doesn't take us lightly, and He doesn't expect us to treat Him lightly either. Our attitude of worship is in proportion to how we view God. Would we have prepared ourselves differently before coming to church if we had approached in the manner He deserves? Would we have skipped over a day of reading His Word or rushed through it carelessly if we desired to draw closer to Him and learn how to be more holy?

If you have unconfessed sin, ask forgiveness for it, turn away from it, and move on. Give God the place in your life He desires. "There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1-2). What a happy thought that is!

Feasting on God's Promises (Leviticus Part 5)

1) Leviticus 23-27. As you read, continue to highlight the phrase, “And the Lord spake unto Moses.” In a different color, highlight the phrases that deal with, “For I AM the LORD your God.” What does the emphasis on this, “I AM...” phrase cause you to think about?

2) In Leviticus 23, there are 8 holy convocations (assemblies) that God requires of the Israelites. Fill in the yearly one on the “7 Feasts of the Lord” chart. Which does God want them to do most frequently? Why is it important?

3) In Leviticus 26, highlight the polysyndeton “and” as used in verses 3-12. What is its purpose in this passage?

In verses 14-44, what does the polysyndeton show in these verses?

4) In this chapter, what blessings would Israel expect for obedience? For disobedience?

5) Is all blessing and cursing a direct result of obedience or disobedience? Why or why not? (See also John 9:1-3; Job 4, 8, 11; 42:7-8).

Conclusion:

God loves us, for no reason other than He Himself is love. It is not because of anything we do, how talented we are, how great a personality or kindness or bubbly personality we have. His love is about Who He is! Over and over, Israel disobeyed. They turned to other gods. They looked at their sin and decided it was no big deal because they were God's chosen people. The people, even though they heard the blessings they could have and the cursings they would receive, still chose to please themselves again and again. Deuteronomy 29:19-20 tells us, “And it come to pass, when he heard the words

of this curse, that he blessed himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall have peace, though I walk in the imaginations of mine heart'...The Lord will not spare him..."

But, like a good father to his children who have sinned over and over, God responds in love. God tells His children, "For though art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love upon you, nor choose you because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were fewest of all people, but because the LORD loved you..." (Deut. 7:7-8).

We all sin. Some sin may be great in our estimation while some may seem like a small infraction, but ... sin is sin in God's eyes. And yet, like a good parent, He continues to love us and desire that we return to Him. Sometimes we wonder, in all our sin, why God cares about us, why He relentlessly seems to pursue us. It sure doesn't seem like we are worthy...and we're not. But God is. God chooses to love us because God is love.

Again, like a good parent, He also chooses to discipline us, because without discipline, we would think that God didn't care how we lived. We would never come to the holiness that God has repeated in Leviticus over and over. He wants us to be holy because He is holy. He loves you more than we can ever repay.

Take time to examine your life. Are you living for God in all your ways? Do you have unconfessed sin that needs to be dealt with? Have you thanked Him for His love and told Him how much you love Him?

"But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Rom. 5:8-9).