

The Day of Atonement

Devotional Reading: Psalm 40:9-17

Background Scripture: Leviticus 16

Leviticus 16:11-19

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.

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 atone-

ment 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.

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.

Key Text

“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

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 1: Tabernacle, Sacrifices, and Atonement

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Explain the significance of the Day of Atonement.
2. Compare and contrast the Day of Atonement with Jesus' sacrifice.
3. Participate in a debate on the value (or lack thereof) of specifying an annual day for congregational confession of sin or write a prayer confessing sin.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Necessary Barriers
- B. Lesson Context

I. Atonement for Some (Leviticus 16:11-14)

- A. Bull as Sin Offering (v. 11)
- B. Incense for a Cloud (vv. 12-13)
- C. Blood for Sprinkling (v. 14)

II. Atonement for Many (Leviticus 16:15-17)

- A. Goat as Sin Offering (v. 15a)
- B. Blood for Sprinkling (v. 15b)
Typology? Typography?
- C. Result for Places (v. 16)
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- D. Restriction of Entry (v. 17)

III. Atonement for the Altar (Leviticus 16:18-19)

- A. Blood Applied (v. 18)
- B. Blood Sprinkled (v. 19)

Conclusion

- A. What a Day!
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Necessary Barriers

One good principle of life is *Don't tear down a fence until you find out why it was erected in the first place*. Undoubtedly, there was a reason for putting up any given fence in the first place, but the question is whether that reason still exists.

This principle applies all the more regarding divine matters. Within the Old Testament, the world is divided in part between pure and impure things. While God has always desired to dwell with his people, his presence cannot reside in an impure location, so barriers must be erected. Today's lesson text describes how God addressed the problem of sacred space and impurity in the Old Testament era. Next week's lesson will address his permanent solution.

B. Lesson Context

The Lesson Context from last week's lesson, drawn from Leviticus 1, also applies to this lesson, so that information does not need to be repeated here. The lesson at hand will, in turn, be the context for next week's lesson from Hebrews.

In this, our second lesson in Leviticus, we jump from chapter 1 to chapter 16. How these two chapters fit within the whole book is seen in this broad-brush outline:

- I. Sacrificial Worship (1:1–7:38)
- II. Ritual Ceremonies (8:1–10:20)
- III. Purity vs. Impurity (11:1–15:33)
- IV. Day of Atonement (16:1–34)
- V. Holy Sacrifices (17:1–16)
- VI. Community Holiness (18:1–20:27)
- VII. Particularly Holy (21:1–27:34)

God established several feasts and holy days for the new nation of Israel. These are listed in Leviticus 23; Numbers 28–29; Deuteronomy 16; etc. In the book of Leviticus, the Day of Atonement takes center stage among them (compare Numbers 29:7–11). Indeed, the writer of Leviticus devotes more than 4 percent of the entire book to that single day on the calendar of the ancient Israelites—the tenth day of the seventh month (Leviticus 16:29; 23:27). On the modern calendar, this equates to a day in late September or early October. If you've

heard this day referred to as *Yom Kippur*, then you are learning to speak Hebrew!

The sacred space designated “most holy” is the context for the actions taken on that day of every year. Perhaps you have heard that place described as “the holy of holies.” That is a very literal, word-for-word translation of the Hebrew as it is found in Exodus 26:33; 1 Kings 6:16; 7:50; 8:6; and elsewhere. The translation “the holy of holies” does not appear in the *New International Version*, but instead translates to “the Most Holy Place” (Leviticus 16:2). The Most Holy Place was the heart of the tabernacle, the sacred structure that God commanded Moses to build as a site for God’s presence among the people (Exodus 26).

Our printed text picks up with the Lord’s instruction on how Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest (Leviticus 16:2-5), was to discharge his duties when that sacred day came around each year.

I. Atonement for Some

(Leviticus 16:11-14)

A. Bull as Sin Offering (v. 11)

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.”

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



Visual for Lesson 5. Display this visual and lead into the lesson by asking learners to notice how the ancient Hebrews prepared to be in God’s presence.

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.

The old Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, helps us here. The words it uses are picked up in the New Testament to explain the sacrifice of Christ in terms of Romans 3:25; and 1 John 2:2; 4:10. That meaning also fits with what the Day of Atonement provided: a means of escaping the penalty for one’s sin by the offering of a substitutionary sacrifice. Sin offerings are explained in Leviticus 4:1–5:13.

B. Incense for a Cloud (vv. 12-13)

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.”

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 (compare Exodus 26:33; Hebrews 6:19; 9:2-5). 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 (Exodus 27:1-8). Aaron's loss of two sons when they misused censers of fire (Leviticus 10:1-2) 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. “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.

The *smoke* created by the burning of *incense* is for Aaron's protection (compare Exodus 28:43), since no one can see God's face and live (33:20). 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 (25:10-22). 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 (34:1-4, 29), tablets that were kept inside the ark of the covenant (16:34; 25:21; 40:20).

The presence of the Lord in this Most Holy Place is what made it “most holy.” That was why the high priest could not enter it carelessly or casually. God must be approached on his terms, not ours.

What Do You Think?

Considering Revelation 8:3-4, how will you adjust your prayer life to be more of a fragrant incense before God?

Digging Deeper

Which is more important in that regard: quantity or quality? Why?

C. Blood for Sprinkling (v. 14)

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.

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 (Numbers 2:3), that is the front side.

The high priest was also to sprinkle some of the blood *seven times* on the ground directly in front of the atonement cover. This represented the entirety of the Most Holy Place being brought into contact with the blood of the sin offering. The number seven often represents completeness or perfection (examples: Revelation 5:6; 15:1, 8). See Hebrews 9:7-8 for further explanation.

II. Atonement for Many

(Leviticus 16:15-17)

A. Goat as Sin Offering (v. 15a)

15a. “He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people

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 (16:21). A person would then be charged with taking the goat into the wilderness and releasing it so that it wouldn't return (16:22, 26-28). The scapegoat and its destination thus represented the complete removal of the sins and impurities of the people.

B. Blood for Sprinkling (v. 15b)

15b. “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.

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.

What Do You Think?

What do the meticulous instructions regarding the ministry work for and on the Day of Atonement have to say about providing ministry today, if anything?

Digging Deeper

In what ways do you see the spiritual, mental, and physical preparations for ministry tasks to be interrelated?

Typology? Typography?

Here’s an advanced Bible comprehension quiz:

1. What’s the difference between *typology* and *typography*?
2. Which of those two terms is more important for today’s study? Why?

Answers: 1. *Typology* is the study of how one thing serves as a pattern for another thing; *typography* deals with the style and arrangement of typeset matter. 2. Although you may admire the pleasing layout of the book you are now reading due to excellent typography, it’s typology that really counts in Bible study.

You may have heard typology referred to by the more familiar description of *type* and *antitype*. These two words express how Old Testament things (the “types”) foreshadow New Testament things (the “antitypes”). Multiple New Testament texts highlight these typological relationships: Adam was a “pattern” of Christ (Romans 5:14), and God’s provision of water and bread and deliverance of his people through the Red Sea foreshadowed communion and baptism under the new covenant (1 Corinthians 10:6-12).

A treasure trove of types and antitypes is found in comparing the book of Leviticus with the book of Hebrews. Start by re-studying last week’s and this week’s lessons from Leviticus in light of next week’s lesson from Hebrews. But do so only if you’re interested in moving from the “milk” of the Word of God to the “solid food” (Hebrews 5:12-13). Are you?
—R. L. N.

C. Result for Places (v. 16)

16a. “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.

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. It occurs twice in Leviticus 16 (see 16:21) and nowhere else in the book.

Chapters 11 through 15 of Leviticus address various sources of uncleanness and impurity in greater detail. Certain prescribed sacrifices and purifications provide atonement for these. God foresaw that the Israelites would pollute the places of worship to the degree that they, too, needed to be cleansed.

What Do You Think?

What are some spiritual guardrails you can erect to ensure you are not in rebellion against God?

Digging Deeper

How do you decide which guardrails are your responsibility and which belong to the Holy Spirit?

Hijacked Words

Think of some Bible words or phrases adopted by culture to use in other contexts. One that comes to my mind is “he saw the handwriting on the wall” (adopted from Daniel 5) to describe an inevitable negative outcome. Another example is the word *holy*, which occurs often in irreverent expressions.

The word *sanctified* is one in particular that catches my attention. I heard it as part of the lyrics to the song “All Down the Line” performed by the Rolling Stones and others. It’s a song about a lonely person waiting for a train. As he waits and thinks, he decides that what he needs is a girlfriend who has a “sanctified” mind.

Christians know that the word *sanctified* means “to be holy” or “consecrated,” signifying distance from spiritual uncleanness. The song, however, seems to use the word *sanctified* merely as a three-syllable filler to coordinate the meter of two lines of lyrics. This makes me wonder if Christians do something similar personally. Is your sanctification just a casual, filler concept, or is it something you pursue deliberately and daily? Before answering, read John 17:17-19; 1 Corinthians 6:10-11; and 1 Thessalonians 5:23. —R. L. N.

16b. “He is to do the same for the tent of meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness.

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 (9:21). 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 (compare Exodus 30:10).

D. Restriction of Entry (v. 17)

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.

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 (Exodus 19:10-13, 24). On the Day of Atonement, no one could reenter the tabernacle until atonement had been made for priest, places, and people.

What Do You Think?

What modern ministry tasks would you be better at working alone, if any?

Digging Deeper

How do Matthew 6:6 and Luke 5:16 inform your answer?

III. Atonement for the Altar

(Leviticus 16:18-19)

A. Blood Applied (v. 18)

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.

After the purification of the Most Holy Place, the cleansing regimen progresses outward. The tabernacle featured two altars: the altar of burnt offering (Exodus 27:1-3) and the altar of incense (30:1-10). 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 (Leviticus 4:7, 25).

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 (Exodus 29:36-37; compare Ezekiel 43:20). 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.

B. Blood Sprinkled (v. 19)

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.

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 (examples: Leviticus 8:10-11; 14:5). 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."

What Do You Think?

In what ways can the corporate aspects of the Day of Atonement be applied to the church, if any?

Digging Deeper

How do Nehemiah 9 and Acts 19:18-20 influence your response?

Conclusion

A. What a Day!

The phrase *What a Day!* can convey very different messages. It can be used to characterize joy or distress, depending on the demeanor and tone of voice of the speaker.

The Day of Atonement was one of the most important days of the Israelite calendar. Some students see a fivefold purpose for the Day of Atonement. First, it highlights God's hatred of sin. Second, it underlines the requirement for blood to

be shed for the forgiveness of sin. Third, it reveals how "contagious" sin is—even inanimate objects needed atonement. Fourth, it uses "types" to foreshadow the death of Christ. Fifth, its yearly repetition was a self-demonstration of the need for a permanent remedy for sin.

On the cross, Jesus achieved in one day what Aaron and the high priests of the old covenant who followed him could never accomplish. The effectiveness and finality of Jesus' sacrifice was demonstrated visually by the tearing of the temple curtain that set apart the Most Holy Place (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38). The writer of Hebrews refers to Jesus' flesh as the "curtain" that was "opened" to give every Christian access to the presence of God. Jesus is now our high priest, the only one necessary under the new covenant (Hebrews 10:19-21). But we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves—that's next week's lesson.

B. Prayer

Our Father, you created us to be at one with you, in your presence. But sin has shattered that oneness, bringing division and chaos. Thank you for your grace and mercy in providing ways for that oneness to be restored—first, through a Day of Atonement designed for the ancient Israelites and now, through a superior Day of Atonement designed for the entire world and accomplished through Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice. We praise you in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Praise God for his provisions of atonement!

How to Say It

Corinthians	Ko- <i>rin</i> -thee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Deuteronomy	Due-ter- <i>ahn</i> -uh-me.
Leviticus	Leh- <i>vit</i> -ih-kus.
Septuagint	Se-p- <i>too</i> -ih-jent.
Thessalonians	Thess-uh- <i>lo</i> -nee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
typography	tie- <i>paw</i> -gruh-fee.
typology	tie- <i>paw</i> -luh-gee.
Yom Kippur (Hebrew)	Yohm Kih- <i>purr</i> .