

SESSION FOURTEEN

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Leviticus 11:1—16:34

I. INTRODUCTION

Chapters 11—16 of Leviticus contain two lines of thought: the first concerning the various regulations governing "uncleanness" (11—15), and the second establishing the order for the "Day of Atonement." Following a few brief comments about chapters 11—15, most of the discussion will focus on chapter 16.

RITUAL UNCLEANNESS AND PURIFICATION RITES							DAY OF ATONEMENT
Clean and Unclean	Childbirth and Purification	Skin Diseases	Mildew	Cleansing Skin Diseases	Cleansing Mildew	Discharges	
11:1-47	12:1-8	13:1-46	13:47-59	14:1-32	14:33-57	15:1-33	16:1-34

II. RITUAL UNCLEANNESS AND PURIFICATION RITES (LEV 11—15)

Chapter 11 deals with clean and unclean foods. The passage was fundamental to the concept of holiness, particularly the idea of separation. The Israelites were not permitted to eat anything and everything as were their pagan neighbors. Rather, the Israelites were to be distinct, even to the point of their diet. There are several **reasons for these dietary restrictions**: (1) some of the unclean foods are **polemical**; (2) others would create problems for diet in the wilderness and God was preserving them from **disease**; and (3) they illustrate the essence of **holiness** (God's people must be scrupulous in what they choose—does it please God?). As believers in Christ, we are free from the bondage of the dietary laws. Christ has set us free to a higher law, i.e., we should do nothing that would defile our lives with the corrupt world in which we live. We should do all to the glory of God.

Chapters 12—15 extend the same basic principle of holiness to the LORD in every aspect of physical life. Great care must be taken to point out that these principles are not suggesting sin on the part of the Israelite involved, e.g., the woman giving childbirth was not "in sin," nor is the text implicating the child. The whole issue deals with the presence of the glory of God in Israel's midst. The tabernacle was restricted in regard to all that was common, dirty, diseased, foreign or unclean, because the presence of the glory of God was there. This was especially true in regard to blood; only one kind of blood could be brought into the temple, namely, sacrificial blood. So the stress is on God's holiness and His separateness. "Unclean" Israelites could still worship, pray, praise, and study Torah. There is a corresponding truth in chapters 12—15 in regard to heaven. The glory of God resides in heaven, and nothing that harms or defiles may enter in, only that which is holy. All corruptions will be barred (compare "New Jerusalem"). One final comment should be made about "leprosy" (Lev 13—14). This should not be restricted to the disease known as "leprosy" but would include other kinds of skin disease.

III. THE DAY OF ATONEMENT (LEV 16)

The Day of Atonement was one of the most solemn and significant occasions for Israelite worship. The feast fell on the tenth day of the seventh month, i.e., Tishri (Sept-Oct). "Yom Kippur was the day above all others on which Israel, as a nation, sought the propitiation of the God against whom they had sinned, together with the consequent blessing of His forgiveness and of reconciliation to Him."¹ The Day of Atonement was conducted once each year, and was the only time that the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies. The "exodus" marked the redemption of the nation, as a nation, from bondage; the Day of Atonement served to atone for the "collective" sin of all the people in the nation. This Day provided a basis by which God could deal with the nation in spite of their sinfulness.

A. The Structure

- 1-2 Introduction
- 3-6 Preparations: Animals and priestly dress needed for the ceremonies
- 7-10 Presentation of the Two Goats: Scapegoat Chosen
- 11-28 Detailed description of the ceremonies
 - 11-14 Sin offering (bull) for Aaron and his household
 - 15-19 Sin offering (goat) for the sins of the people
 - 20-22 The scapegoat
 - 23-28 Cleansing of the participants
- 29-34 The charge to the people for the perpetuation of the Day

B. The Introductory Verses (vv 1-2)

When vs 2 is taken into account with the rest of the chapter, the restriction is clear for Aaron (and every high priest that followed): no one may enter the Holy of Holies except the high priest, and he may do so only once a year on the Day of Atonement. Since the Shekinah glory of God dwelt above the mercy seat, the text suggests that access to God's presence is very restricted. "Mercy seat" is the translation of כַּפֹּרֶת (*kappōret*), from the root כָּפַר meaning "to atone." This referred to the lid of the ark, which functioned as the place of expiation. The LXX renders this by the Greek "*hilasterion*," i.e., a place of propitiation.

C. Animals and the Priestly Dress Needed

On this occasion, the high priest had to lay aside his elaborate wardrobe and adorn himself in a much simpler dress. Such garments were in keeping with a more contrite, reflective approach by the high priest who was about to enter the Holy of Holies.

D. The Ceremony

The order of events would probably go something like this:

¹Bromiley, Geoffrey W., ed., *ISBE* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979-1988), s.v. "Atonement, Day of," by W. Möller and J. B. Payne, 1:360.

1. Aaron would sacrifice the bull (sin offering) for himself and his household. Even the priesthood (including the high priest) was not exempt from the need of a blood cleansing for sin.
2. Aaron would receive the animals of the offering of the people, including the two goats. He would then cast lots to see which goat would be "for YHWH" and which would be "for the scapegoat" (vs 8). The latter translation (used by both the *NIV* and *NASB*) has been the subject of some dispute. The Hebrew expression is לְאַזָּזֵל, "for 'āzā'zēl." Some scholars have taken the term 'āzā'zēl as a proper name "Azazel," being that of a demon or the devil (as though the sins were being returned to their source; cf. I Enoch 8:1; 9:6). Others have suggested that it means "rocky, craggy" (depicting the terrain of the goat's destination).²

The idea of "scapegoat," however, stems from the LXX rendering of the term. The LXX translated 'āzā'zēl by the Greek word τῷ ἀποπομπαίῳ. This Greek compound comes from the word πομπαίος (*pompaios*), meaning "to escort, convey." Hence, the compound form would suggest the sense "carrying away" or "sending away," i.e., a goat for sending away.³ If this is correct, then the point of the goat "for 'āzā'zēl" would be that of a goat *gone away*, thus taking the sins of the people with him into the wilderness. This would speak of sins being removed once for all (the reality of which only Christ would accomplish).

3. Aaron would leave the blood of the bull and goat at the altar and take a firepan of coals into the tabernacle. As he parted the veil, he would throw incense on the coals so that the room would immediately fill with smoke. Wenham explains,

To protect himself from the wrath of God, the high priest has to prepare a censer full of hot charcoal taken from the altar of burnt offering in the outer court and put in it fine incense. The smoke of the incense was to cover the mercy seat, so that the high priest would not be killed (vv. 12-13). The most obvious explanation is given by Hertz: 'the purpose of the incense smoke was to create a screen which would prevent the High Priest from gazing upon the Holy Presence.'⁴

Thus the smoke served as a protective veil so that Aaron would not be consumed by God's glory.

4. Returning to the altar in the courtyard, Aaron would get the blood of the bull and take it within the veil. The blood would be sprinkled on the "mercy seat" and "in front," i.e., on the ground. The blood-sprinkled ground was a way of signifying that a way of approach to the presence of God was being provided. The blood on the "mercy seat" was also important: since the Law (contained under the mercy seat) condemned those who transgressed it, blood had to be sprinkled on the mercy seat so that the guilt and sin of the people would not be judged by the Law.

² Those who argue for this option claim that the first part of the word 'āzā'zēl comes from the Hebrew word 'zz (זָז), meaning "be strong" (the adj. זָז means "strong, mighty, fierce").

³ Some scholars have suggested that 'āzā'zēl is a compound, made up of the words זָז (goat) and the verb לָזַח (go away), with the meaning "the goat that departs." Note, however, that the LXX did not include a specific word for "goat." The Hebrew lexicon *BDB* (736d) suggested that לָזַח was a masculine noun meaning "entire removal" (the ceremony in Lev 16 being symbolic of entire forgiveness).

⁴G. J. Wenham, *Leviticus*, NICOT, 231.

5. Aaron would exit again and get the blood from the goat of the sin offering of the people and bring it within the veil. This blood was also sprinkled on the mercy seat and on the ground. According to vs 16, this included atonement for the tent of meeting (see Lev 15:31). Their own impurities, sins, and transgressions were a defilement of the sanctuary, and by cleansing the sanctuary they were permitting the holy God to dwell among an unholy people. This atonement, both for the sins of the people and the tabernacle, was a climax, being an atonement of all the transgressions of the congregation since the last Day of Atonement.
6. As he exited again, even the altar had to be sprinkled with the goat's blood. The altar was defiled by the transferred sins, as the people would have their sins identified with the altar and their offerings.
7. The live goat (the scapegoat) would then be brought forward and Aaron would lay his hands on the head of the goat confessing the sins of the nation (vs 21). This action was a way of symbolizing that the sins of the nation were being transferred to the goat (for the concept of substitution, see 2 Corin 5:21).
8. The scapegoat would then be led away into the wilderness. Ross notes, "The Mishnah (*Yoma*) says that they led it three and a half miles into the wilderness and pushed it over a rocky cliff so that it would die."⁵
9. Aaron would then bathe again and offer the burnt offerings for thanksgiving and gratitude for God's provision of atonement.
10. The final ceremonies would include the removal of the bull and goat of the sin offering outside the camp where they would be completely burned with fire (cf. Heb 13:11-13).

E. Theological and Christological Significance

1. The Reconciliation of the Nation

There are many implications arising from the Day of Atonement. However, one must first see what significance this had to the OT Israelite. The main importance of this occasion was for reconciliation of the nation as a nation with God. When blood was put on the mercy seat, a provision was thereby made by which a holy righteous God could deal with the nation as a nation. This was a reconciliation, a bringing into harmony. The blood of the Day of Atonement reconciled the people who had been out of harmony with God [illustration: bringing of a check book into harmony with a bank account statement]. The Day of Atonement was a day on which the debt of the nation became due. The sins of the nation amounted to a debt due to God, i.e., a note. The Day of Atonement did not actually provide a final payment of the "note," but only a prolonging of the due date. In effect, the nation was postponing the day of indebtedness, although the observance of the Day provided a basis by which God could continue to deal with them as a nation (cf. Rom 3:25). The full and final payment for sin would come through Christ's death on the cross (recall the words of our Lord, "*tetelestai*," meaning "paid in full").

2. Propitiation

The blood on the mercy seat was very significant. When the blood of the bull (for the priest) and the blood of the goat (for the people) was placed on the mercy seat, God was

⁵Allen Ross, "Leviticus" (unpublished class notes in Old Testament 117, Dallas Seminary, Fall 1981), 102.

propitiated, i.e., His holy demands were satisfied. Since this was only the blood of animals and since the sacrifice had to be observed year after year, it was clear that this did not represent a final dealing with sin. However, Christ was the final mercy seat. In Rom 3:25, the word propitiation may mean the "place of propitiation," i.e., the mercy seat:⁶

"Christ Jesus . . . whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation (ἰλαστήριον) in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed."

Thus the blood on the Day of Atonement provided no individual salvation, but only provided a basis for God to continue dwelling in the midst of the nation. There was individual benefit, however, by the mercy seat blood (cf. Ps 51:7; Lk 18:13).

3. Significance of the Two Goats

The two goats looked at two different aspects by which God dealt with sin. The goat that was slain represented sins covered. The goat that was sent away into the wilderness "bearing the sins of the nation" represented sins removed, a vivid portrayal of the need for the nation as a whole to be purged of sin. Obviously, this would picture two aspects of Christ's work (cf. Isa 53:5-6). His death provides a covering of blood for sins (this would even go beyond the Israelites).

4. The Future Day of Atonement for the Nation

There will also be a future time when the sins of Israel as a nation are "removed." Upon Christ's return, He removes the iniquity of the nation of Israel (Zech 13:1ff.). This will follow the moment the nation humbles itself and looks to the Messiah in faith. Thus, there will be an "eschatological Day of Atonement" for Israel, as anticipated by each annual Day of Atonement. The annual Day was one of humility—"humble your soul" (Lev 16:29; 23:11). There is a day coming when Israel, as a nation, will truly humble herself (see Zech 12:10-11).

5. The High Priest as a Type of Christ

The Day of Atonement must be compared to the work of Christ on the cross, and here the student should consult Hebrews 9—10. In contrast to the high priest who went in to the Holy of Holies once a year to make a yearly payment by the blood of animals, Jesus was the Great High Priest going into the heavenly Holy of Holies (the very presence of God) once and for all presenting His own blood as a perfect payment. The work of Christ did more than provide for the need of one nation. Whereas the Day of Atonement brought a temporal reconciliation between Israel and God, Christ reconciled the whole world to God, i.e., rendered it savable (2 Corin 5:19).

Although Jesus was typified by the High Priest, He is far superior and His work infinitely more significant (this is the argument of the book of Hebrews). Christ, being righteous, did not have to offer a sacrifice for Himself before making a sacrifice for the people. Since our High Priest is superior to Aaron, one must rely totally on Christ (the author of

⁶ In the only other instance of the word ἰλαστήριον in the NT (namely, Heb 9:5), it is translated "mercy seat." The *NIV* translated Rom 3:25, "God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood."

Hebrews would argue). Wenham provides this summary contrasting the OT High Priest with Christ as the greater High Priest:⁷

- a. Aaron was a sinner who needed to offer sacrifice for himself before making atonement for the people. Christ is pure and sinless and needs to offer no sacrifices for Himself (Heb 7:26ff.).
 - b. Aaron had to repeat the sacrifices regularly. Christ secured an eternal redemption by His own death (9:6-14, 25ff.).
 - c. Aaron's rituals secured him entry into the earthly sanctuary; Christ's death led Him into the heavenly (9:24).
 - d. The repetition of Aaron's sacrifices was a constant reminder of the persistence of sin. Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice secured permanent forgiveness of sin (10:1-18).
6. Burning the Animals Outside the Camp

Finally, a comment should be made about the burning of the bull and goat outside the camp. As the bodies of these animals were burned outside the camp, so also Christ suffered outside the gate (cf. Heb 13:10-14). The animals were a reproach within the camp, and Christ was considered a reproach within the confines of the Jewish nation. As Christians, we must likewise be willing to bear His reproach!

⁷Wenham, 237-38.