

The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Leviticus

I. Review and Introduction to This Lesson

- a. In **Leviticus 1-7**, we discussed the rules and regulations regarding five different types of sacrificial offerings that the priests would make.
- b. In **Leviticus 8-9**, we learned about the process of ordaining Aaron (the High Priest) and his four sons (the priests), the beginning of their ministry of service, and the consecration of the tabernacle. This culminated with the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle and fire from the Lord consuming the offerings.
- c. While we are no longer under the Levitical rules (which were abolished at the cross, with the death of Christ), all of these things still have significance for us, since they foreshadowed things that were yet to come.
 - i. The High Priest, Aaron, foreshadowed Jesus, as explained in **Hebrews 8-10**.
 - ii. His sons, the priests, foreshadowed us, the Christians. As Peter stated in **1 Peter 2:1-10**, we have become the new priesthood.
 - iii. In **Leviticus 16**, we will look at the instructions for the High Priest and for the people regarding the Day of Atonement.
 1. The things we cover in this lesson are critical to appreciating important things in the New Testament book of **Hebrews**.
 2. **Hebrews** is extremely important for at least two reasons.
 - a. For those who are already Christians:
 - i. **Hebrews** explains why it is so important to remain faithful to the end, to persevere in the faith.
 - b. For those seeking the truth, including those who are not yet following Christ or who may be questioning their faith:
 - i. **Hebrews** explains how the High Priest, the tabernacle/temple, and the blood sacrifices established through Moses all foreshadowed what Christ would accomplish about 1400 years later.

II. The Day of Atonement

- a. When the Lord gave Moses instructions regarding constructing the tabernacle, when Moses was on Mount Sinai, the Lord had said that Aaron, the High Priest, would make atonement for the sins of the people once per year.
 - i. Read **Exodus 30:1-10**.
 - ii. From this passage, we learn:
 1. Aaron would make atonement for the people.
 2. He would do this once each year.
 3. He would do this at the golden altar of incense.
 - a. That altar is before the veil that separates the Most Holy Place (where the ark of the covenant was) from the Holy Place (where the golden altar of incense, table of showbread and lampstand were; and where priests ministered).
 4. The altar would be cleansed or purified with blood.
 5. This practice would continue for generations.
- b. Now the Lord provides the details regarding this. Read **Leviticus 16:1-19**.
 - i. The Lord makes it clear that violating these rules would result in Aaron's death, just as his two oldest sons had died from offering unauthorized fire before the Lord.
 - ii. The detailed requirements for observing the Day of Atonement include:
 1. Only once per year, Aaron the High Priest is to enter into the Most Holy Place, where the ark of the covenant is. No one else can enter, and he cannot go there any other day except the annual *Day of Atonement*.
 - a. Jews also refer to this day as *Yom Kippur*.
 2. The High Priest is to wash his body and then put on the linen garments before entering.
 3. He shall take a sin offering and a whole burnt offering from the congregation.
 - a. The sin offering is two kid goats.

- b. The lot is cast for the two goats. One is to be sacrificed, while the other is to be released into the Wilderness as the “scapegoat”. (We will address the *scapegoat* later.)
- 4. The High Priest shall also give a young bull as a sin offering for the sins of himself and his house (his family).
- 5. The High Priest shall take coals from the golden altar of incense, put the special incense on it, and enter through the veil into the Most Holy Place.
 - a. He is to cover the “mercy seat” with a cloud of incense; otherwise, he will die.
 - i. The “mercy seat” is the cover for the ark of the covenant, a golden cover with two cherubim cast into it, whose outstretched wings cover it.
 - ii. “And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel.” (**Exodus 25:22**, NKJV)
 - iii. “Now when Moses went into the tabernacle of meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice of One speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the Testimony, from between the two cherubim; thus He spoke to him.” (**Numbers 7:89**, NKJV)
 - iv. There are many places in the Old Testament where it speaks of the Lord, “Who dwells between the cherubim”.
 - v. The idea is that the cover of the ark (the mercy seat) represents the throne of God, who “dwells between the cherubim.” (**Psalms 80:1, 99:1; Isaiah 37:16**, etc.) I assume this had to be covered with the fog of incense because “No one has ever seen God at any time”, referring to the Father. (**John 1:18**) He “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see.” (**1 Timothy 6:15-16**)
- b. He had to enter with the blood of the sacrificed animals.

- i. The blood from the bull (for sins of himself and his family) and from the kid goat (for the sins of the people) was sprinkled on the east side of the mercy seat.
 6. Aaron would make atonement at the mercy seat (in the Most Holy Place) and at the golden altar of incense, with blood in both places. This would be for the sins of himself, his household and the nation of Israel.
 - a. The blood would be sprinkled *seven* times.
 - i. In the Scriptures, the number 'seven' is associated with *completion (or perfection)*
 1. For example, in the Creation account of **Genesis 1**.
 2. Also, consider all the 'sevens' associated with the destruction of Jericho in **Joshua 6** (which may be foreshadowing the final Day of Judgment).
 - b. The atonement is described as a cleansing process. The people would be cleansed from the impurity of their sins.
 7. When Aaron enters the tabernacle to do this, *all the other priests must clear out*. They cannot remain even in the Holy Place, where they normally minister.
 - a. "There shall be no man in the tabernacle of testimony when he goes in to make atonement." (**Leviticus 16:17**)
- c. Requirements regarding the scapegoat.
 - i. Read **Leviticus 16:20-28**.
 1. Of the two kid goats brought before the Lord, the one that is not killed becomes the "*scapegoat*".
 - a. The decision of which goat is to be killed (of the two brought forward) is decided by drawing lots.
 2. Aaron is to place his hands on this goat, confess all the sins of himself, his household and the nation, *and put those sins on the head of that kid goat!*
 - a. The kid is described as being "set apart for remission".

3. That goat is to be led into the desert and then released there to wander.
 4. Aaron then washes his body again, reclothes himself with the sacred garments, and makes animal sacrifice offerings for himself, his family, and the nation.
- ii. We use the term 'scapegoat' to refer to a person upon whom all the blame for a failure is placed.
1. For example, in the recent departure of the US military forces from Afghanistan (August 2021), virtually everyone agrees that this was a disastrous failure.
 2. People in the media and government have been trying to determine who to lay the blame for this failure upon (for example, blaming the President, the Secretary of State, a top general in the military, or the head of military intelligence).
 - a. The person who took the blame for the failure then would become the 'scapegoat'. The idea would be to put all the blame for the failure on that one person, who then might be fired, disciplined or reprimanded, or who might resign in disgrace.
 - b. Everyone else (those other than the scapegoat) involved in the failure then would be officially absolved of any guilt or responsibility in the matter!
- iii. **Question:** Why were there two goats?
1. At least one early Christian writer saw the fact that there were *two* goats as foreshadowing the fact that there would be *two comings of Christ*.
 2. From Justin Martyr, an early Christian writer originally from Samaria, writing c. 160 AD:
 - a. "And that it was declared by symbol, even in the time of Moses, that there would be two advents of this Christ, as I have mentioned previously, [is manifest] from the symbol of the goats presented for sacrifice during the fast."
 - i. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapter 111; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 254)

3. There would be *two* comings of Christ.
 - a. The first time Christ would come, it would be to suffer and die.
 - b. The second coming of Christ would be His glorious coming on the Last Day.
- d. The Day of Atonement was to be observed every year in this manner.
 - i. Read **Leviticus 16:29-34** and **Leviticus 23:26-32**.
 - ii. This special day was referred to as “The Day of Atonement”.
 1. This was to take place each year on the tenth day of the seventh month, with significant responsibilities for the High Priest.
 2. The congregation (the people) also had important responsibilities:
 - a. Gather together in a holy convocation.
 - b. Bring the animals that are to be offered on their behalf.
 - c. Humble themselves before the Lord (a day of fasting).
 - i. To my knowledge, this is the only day of required fasting in all the Law of Moses.
 - ii. Luke refers to this day in **Acts 27** as “the Fast”.
 1. “Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, ‘Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives.’” (**Acts 27:9-10**, NKJV)
- d. Refrain from working on that day (a Sabbath day of rest).
 - i. This continues from sundown on the 9th day of the month through sundown on the 10th day.
- e. Observe this event in the same way, every year.
 - i. Anyone in the community who refused to fast or who worked this day was to be destroyed!

- ii. It seems to me that a somewhat comparable holiday to Yom Kippur/ Day of Atonement on the Christian calendar might be 'Good Friday' (for those familiar with churches where that day was observed with similar solemn fasting and other special spiritual observances).

III. The Significance of the Day of Atonement for Us

- a. This is a detailed foreshadowing of what Christ did in offering Himself as a sacrifice for us.
 - i. Meaning of the term: "*atonement*".
 - 1. The meaning includes the sense of a cleansing, reconciliation, and making peace.
 - 2. This Greek word is first use in the LXX in **Genesis 32:20**, when Jacob is approaching his brother Esau (after cheating him out of his inheritance 20 years earlier).
 - a. Jacob sends several waves of gifts ahead of himself, in an effort to reconcile with his brother for his former transgressions against him (deception, stealing the birthright from his brother, etc.).
 - b. There Jacob says, "I will *appease* him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me."
 - c. That word translated "appease" in the OSB translation of the LXX is the same word translated in other places as "atone".
- b. Read **Zechariah 3:1-10**.
 - i. *Joshua* (name in the Greek of the LXX is the same as *Jesus*) the High Priest.
 - ii. The dirty garments would be taken away.
 - iii. *In one day*, all the wrongdoing of the land would be "searched out".
 - 1. From the NKJV: "And I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day." (**Zechariah 3:9**, NKJV)
- c. Read from Hebrews
 - i. **Hebrews 3:1**,

- ii. **Hebrews 4:14-5:4,**
- iii. **Hebrews 7:11-28,**
- iv. **Hebrews 8:1-6,**
 - 1. The articles of the tabernacle, as well as the priestly service, were *a copy and shadow of heavenly things*.
- v. **Hebrews 9:1-14,**
- vi. **Hebrews 9:22-28** and
- vii. **Hebrews 10:1-25.**
- d. What we learn from these passages in **Hebrews** regarding the significance of the Day of Atonement:
 - i. The High Priest (originally Aaron) foreshadowed Christ.
 - ii. The Most Holy Place foreshadowed heaven itself (the presence or throne room of God Almighty).
 - iii. The High Priest alone would enter the Most Holy Place only once per year, on the Day of Atonement, with the blood of animals.
 - 1. Christ (our High Priest), alone, would enter heaven itself with the perfect sacrifice of His own blood.
 - 2. Christ would do this once for all time.
 - 3. The fact that the old High Priests had to do this year after year indicated that their sacrifice was imperfect (and therefore had to be repeated annually).
 - iv. The veil of the temple that separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place foreshadowed the body of Christ.
 - 1. It was torn in two at the moment Jesus died on the cross (**Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45**).
 - 2. This opened direct access for us to the presence of God.
- e. A few closing comments regarding "*the Fast*" (the Day of Atonement being the one day of each year when all faithful Jews were called to fast).
 - i. Most Christians today rarely or never engage in *fasting* (voluntarily abstain from food for religious reasons).

1. Several years ago, I asked a group of Christians I was teaching in Boston: “Which of the following groups (Jews, Muslims and Christians) do you most associate with the practice of fasting? How would you rank them?”
 - a. Most thought of Muslims first (since they fast from sunup to sundown each day during the month of Ramadan).
 - b. Most thought of Jews second, perhaps in connection with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is one day each year that is set apart for fasting.
 - c. For most, the group that they LEAST associated with fasting was *Christians!*
2. However, among the early Christians, it was common to fast regularly, twice each week (therefore, over 100 days per year)!
 - a. A practice attested to very early was to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.
 - i. See *The Didache*, chapter 8; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, p. 379.
 - ii. Also, from *Apostolic Constitutions*, book 5, section 3, chapter 15; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, page 445:
 1. “... He commanded us to fast on the fourth and sixth days of the week [*Wednesday and Friday*]; the former on account of His being betrayed, and the latter on account of His passion.”
 - b. The practice of Christian fasting varied somewhat.
 - i. Some only drank water; some also ate plain bread during their fast.
 - ii. Some fasted until 3 pm, the time when Christ died on the cross, referred to in Scripture as “the ninth hour” (**Matthew 27:45-46, Mark 15:33-34, Luke 23:44-46**). Others fasted all day or until the evening meal.
 - iii. For information on early Christian practices related to fasting, see *Dictionary of Early*

Christian Beliefs, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Fasting'.

- ii. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his disciples, "When you fast..." (**Matthew 6:16**). He did NOT say, "*If* you fast...". Similarly, Jesus said, "When you pray", and "when you give gifts to the poor".
 1. Jesus assumed that his disciples would be fasting, just as he assumed that his followers would be praying and giving to the poor.
- iii. Jesus said that after He was taken away, His disciples would be fasting.
 1. "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and *then they will fast in those days.*" (**Mark 2:20**, NKJV)
 2. Read **Luke 5:33-35**.
- iv. Jesus said that *His disciples would be fasting* after He departed.
 1. With this statement in mind, it is easy to see how the ancient custom of fasting on Fridays came about. That was the day that Jesus was taken away from us (being crucified on that day).
- v. Fasting was an important part of the spiritual life of Christians in the beginning. For more New Testament Scriptures related to fasting, see:
 1. **Matthew 6:16-18**
 2. **Acts 10:30**, regarding Cornelius
 3. **Acts 13:2-3**
 4. **Acts 14:23**
 5. **1 Corinthians 7:5**
- vi. **Question:** Why is the modern Christian church in such a weak state generally, lacking the power it had in the beginning?
 1. Could one of the reasons be that we have largely abandoned fasting, a spiritual bulwark of the church in earlier times?
 2. **Challenge:** Jesus expected that his disciples would be fasting after His departure. The early church clearly took that very seriously. As you consider the Day of Atonement, also known as "the Fast", this may be a good time to consider adding the practice of regular fasting to your own spiritual life!