

Leviticus Chapter 16

The Day of Atonement



Ryrie writes:

“The Day of Atonement, described in this chapter, was the most important of all the ordinances given to Israel because on that day atonement was made for all the sins of the entire congregation (vv. 16, 21, 30, 33), as well as for the sanctuary (vv. 16, 33). It took place on the tenth day of the seventh month (Tishri, v. 29), and fasting was required from the evening of the ninth day to the evening of the tenth day” (*Ryrie Study Bible*, p. 184) ... The required public fasts were only three in number: the Day of Atonement; the day before Purim; and the ninth of Ab, commemorating the fall of Jerusalem (*ibid.* p. 1527). [Picture from www.prophecyunlocked.com/lesson8.html.]

Leviticus 16: 1-2 *Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they had approached the presence of the LORD and died. The LORD said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron that he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die; for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.*

The context of the Day of Atonement for Aaron was the death of his sons. And the biblical text makes sure we notice that. This was no celebration. It was a time of mourning the dead, fasting, and the need to pay for sin.

Then Aaron is warned that he, too, will die if he enters the Holy Place. The Hebrew literally says Aaron shall not enter the holy place: *בְּכָל־עֵת* *in all time*. Many suggest that this means, as the NIV translates it: *whenever he chooses*. But Aaron’s choices have nothing to do with it. The command is that he is to avoid the Holy of Holies *in all time*.

The next verse begins with the command: *Aaron shall enter the holy place ...* This is not an exception but part of the explanation of the Day of Atonement. Now, within that context, we have an arrangement whereby Aaron is commanded to do that, not one where he may do that, or can choose to do that.

The Holy Place is the Holy of Holies (Hebrews 9:3) *inside the veil* (Hebrews 9:7). The veil is the curtain separating the two parts of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, which was torn in half from top to bottom when Christ died on the cross (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:54). It is not that today there is no veil separating us from God, rather it is Christ who is the veil separating us from God. We come to God *through the veil, that is, His flesh* (Hebrews 10:20).

Leviticus 16:3-5 Preparations for the Day of Atonement

The preparation sequence was apparently in two stages:

1. The sacrifice animals were somehow selected from the people and brought to the Tabernacle, *a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, and two male goats.*

- Then Aaron would bathe in water and put on linen clothing, underwear, a tunic, a sash, and a turban.

Leviticus 16:6-10 The Ceremony Presenting The Two Goats

Verse 6 mentions the bull Aaron will sacrifice for himself. But that comes later. First, he performs the ceremony of the two goats outside the Tabernacle, *at the doorway of the tent of meeting* (16:7).

The ceremony proceeds as follows:

- First, *Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat.*
- Second, *Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the LORD fell, and make it a sin offering.*
- Third, *the goat on which the lot for the scapegoat fell shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat.* But this was not done at this time. This goat was set aside until the cleansing ceremony was completed.



[Scapegoat picture from [icbaptist.com/blog.](http://icbaptist.com/blog/)]

Leviticus 16: 11-15 Aaron Enters the Holy of Holies

After the scapegoat ceremony, Aaron was to enter the most holy place in the following manner:

- First, Aaron was to offer the bull as a sin offering to *make atonement for himself and for his household.*
- Next, *he shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring it inside the veil.*
- Then, *he shall put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, otherwise he will die.* [The remaining pictures from [www.coface.org.](http://www.coface.org/)]



- Then, *he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.*
- Then *he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat.*

Leviticus 16:16-17 The Theological Explanation for Entering the Holy of Holies

He shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and thus he shall do for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their impurities.

The Tabernacle and its furniture needed to be cleansed because they were going to be used as symbols for the forgiveness of sin. The author of Hebrews tells us:

... when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11-12).

In the Apocalypse, the Apostle John tells us about this heavenly Temple (Revelation 11:19; 14:17; 15:5). But this Temple is in heaven, it is pure and clean and holy and accessed by the angels. So why would Christ have to enter that heavenly Temple with His blood? The answer is: not because it was dirty but because, for the first time, it was going to be available to sinners saved by the grace of God. Angels needed no blood atonement, but humans did. Now that humans were going to have access to the heavenly realm, the Temple needed to be cleansed, in the sense of prepared, by the blood of Christ. In a similar way, the Tabernacle of Moses, an earthly model of the one in heaven, needed to be cleansed in the sense of prepared to receive the sacrifices of sinners. The problem is, the blood of animals cannot take away sin, so this was just a symbol, a sign, an object lesson, a reminder every year that sin required a blood sacrifice.

Leviticus 16:18-19 The Cleansing of the Altar

The altar was then cleansed in a similar manner. Some say this is the altar of incense in the Holy Place outside the Holy of Holies. But it seems more likely that *go out to the altar* (16:18) refers to the brass altar for burning offerings.

Leviticus 16:20-22 The Release of the Scapegoat

Now Aaron comes back to the goat kept alive at the beginning of the ceremony. He lays his hands on it, confesses the sins of the people, then releases it with this explanation:

The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness (16:22).



The Hebrew word usually translated *scapegoat* is אָזָזִים (*aza'zel*). It is a combination of the word *goat* and *depart*. This is the only time this word is used in the Old Testament (16:8, 10, 26). The English translation *scapegoat* was first used by Tyndale in his English translation of the Bible. It means *the one who takes the blame for others*. The Greek translates it as *the goat for sending away*. The Latin Vulgate calls it *the goat that departs*. The significance of the word has been debated. There are many opinions, but they fall into two general categories:

1. The word refers to the goat as a symbol for the removal of sin – which seems most likely.
2. The word refers to the goat as a symbol for the devil, or a demon, or just evil – this comes from using the word *aza'zel* as a proper name instead of translating it as “a goat.”

At any rate, the process seems to symbolize that the removal of Israel’s sins had been accomplished by the day’s sacrifices, at least for another year. But we are reminded of Isaiah’s reference to a coming Messiah who would take away sin permanently. He wrote: *All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him* (Isaiah 53:6).

Leviticus 16:23-28 The Concluding Ceremony

Finally, Aaron was to bathe again and change back to his regular high priest clothes. Then he should offer a burnt offering on the altar, burn the fat, and make sure the remains of the animal were burned up outside the camp.

Leviticus 16:29-34 The Day of Atonement is to be a Permanent Statute

In this last section of the chapter, God gives 3 concluding directives:

1. This was not to be done at just any time but *in the seventh month* (Tishri, October-November), *on the tenth day of the month*.
2. This was not just for the priests but for all the people: *It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls*.
3. This was to be *a permanent statute, to make atonement for the sons of Israel for all their sins once every year*.

Verse 30 is similar to verse 16 in that it gives a theological explanation for the ceremony, namely: *that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD*. So this was not just for unknown sin or sin done in ignorance, but for *all* their sins. This tells us that the sins punished by the Law (say, the death penalty for Sabbath-breaking) were not atoned for by the punishment. Atonement required a blood sacrifice.

THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

When Christ died on the cross, the veil closing off the Holy of Holies in the Temple was torn in two (Matthew 27:51). But that does not mean there is no longer a veil separating the world from God. Today, the veil is Christ Himself. We come to God *through the veil, that is, His flesh* (Hebrews 10:20). This means people cannot come to God as Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Buddhists. There is an access to God, but only through Jesus (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

The only theological explanation given here for the scapegoat ceremony is: *The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities*. At the beginning of the day, the two goats are separated by lot. Then after the sacrificial day is finished, the scapegoat is released into the wilderness. When Christ died for the sins of the world, that sin was paid for (Galatians 3:13; 1 John 2:2). If we ask: “Why is an unbeliever lost?” It is because he is a sinner (Romans 3:23). But if we ask: “Why is an unbeliever not saved?” It has nothing to do with his sin. It is because he has not received Christ (Romans 6:23). That’s why works have no part in salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). Salvation is about receiving the finished work of Christ.

The current Jewish festival called Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) is almost nothing like the day commanded here in Leviticus. There are no Levitical priests of the descendent of Aaron, there are no animal sacrifices, no application of blood to the Tabernacle, no high priest of any kind, no scapegoat, no burning of fat, or the bodies of animals. The only similarities are: it is a day of fasting, and the sins of the people are confessed. The modern Yom Kippur generally begins and ends with a liturgy carried out in a synagogue by a rabbi. The liturgy is basically a time of prayer, reading, and confession of the sins of the people. For the people, there are five prohibitions given in the Mishnah (Jewish oral tradition):

1. Eating and drinking
2. Wearing leather shoes
3. Bathing/washing
4. Anointing oneself with perfumes or lotions
5. Sexual relations

[Exceptions are made for special needs – for example, a pregnant woman is not to fast.]

Of course, it is impossible for the Jews to keep the Levitical Day of Atonement. Since 70 AD, they have had no Temple, and the whole day depends on that. They also have replaced the Levitical/

Temple priesthood with a rabbinical/synagogue clergy, which is contrary to the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 14:23). The real problem is, they have rejected their Messiah, so now they are lost in a maze of traditions with no scriptural basis. They have raked together what the rabbis call their oral tradition in the Talmud. So they have replaced the revelation of God with their traditions.