

**International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
February 21, 2016**

**Lesson Text: Leviticus 16:11-19
Lesson Title: The Day of Atonement**

Introduction

Israel's annual Day of Atonement was unlike any other Jewish feast or event. While many of the other feast days were celebratory in nature, the Day of Atonement was a day of national mourning and repentance. Because of the nature of the Day of Atonement, Israel did not anticipate this day as they did other feasts and festivals. The Day of Atonement was a Sabbath day, which meant no work could be done. Anyone who failed to observe this Sabbath would be put to death (Leviticus 23:29-30). Fasting, mourning, and humility were required on this day (Leviticus 16:31).

Although Israel was God's chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2; Isaiah 41:8) and recipients of His mercy and grace, Israel was made up of sinners; and a holy God cannot condone or overlook sin. Sin must be dealt with. Therefore, this all-encompassing yearly ritual, The Day of Atonement, deals with the ongoing reality of sin.

Leviticus 16:11-19 describes the ceremonial requirements that were part of the Day of Atonement. The first five verses of Leviticus 16 list the requirements of the animals and the clothing to be worn by the priests during the ceremony. Aaron was to take off his normal priestly garments, wash, then put on special garments because he would later enter the holy of holies (Leviticus 16:4). He then secured the required sacrificial animals and killed the bull for his own sin offering (Leviticus 16:3-7). After the sin offering was prepared, lots were cast for the "*two goats*," to determine which would be slaughtered and which would be driven away (Leviticus 16:7-8).

Atonement for the High Priest and His House (Leviticus 16:11-14)

Verse 11

"And Aaron shall bring the bullock of the sin offering, which is for himself, and shall make an atonement for himself, and for his house, and shall kill the bullock of the sin offering which is for himself."

For "himself" and "his house," Aaron killed a young "bullock for a sin offering" and a "*ram for a burnt offering*" (Leviticus 16:3). The purifying of the high priests and his sons was the first major activity of the Day of Atonement. "Aaron" could not perform the ceremonies on behalf of the people if he were

guilty of sin. If “Aaron” or “his house” were impure, then the sacrifices they offered and everything they touched would be contaminated. It is possible for them to make the tabernacle impure. That is an important truth to bear in mind when we think about worship and being in God’s presence.

The “sin offering” Aaron presented was for “atonement.” In the context of what Aaron is doing here, the word “atonement” means “to wipe clean.” For Aaron and his house to be “clean” before God, blood must be shed. The shedding of blood is required for the cleansing of sin (Hebrews 9:22).

Verse 12-13

“And he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the LORD, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the vail: And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony, that he die not.”

Before entering the Holy of Holies with the blood from the slaughtered bull for his own sin offering, Aaron took “a censer full of burning coals from off the altar” and placed “incense” on the fiery coals which resulted in “a cloud” of smoking “incense” to “cover the mercy seat.” The “mercy seat” was the symbol of the presence of God. Aaron brought the sweet smelling, smoking incense, “within the vail.” The purpose of the smoking incense was to create a type of smoke screen, thus dimming the glory of God’s presence and sparing his life. It is serious business to be in God’s presence. Aaron witnessed his two sons, Nadab and Abihu, instantly killed by presuming to enter God’s presence on their own terms (Leviticus 10:1-5).

The “cloud of the incense” symbolized God’s glory and presence. Aaron is not entering the Holy of Holies to make a name for himself or be seen by the people. He puts God’s glory ahead of his. His actions remind us of our Great High Priest, Jesus, when He prayed, *“These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee”* (John 17:1).

Verse 14

“And he shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it with his finger upon the mercy seat eastward; and before the mercy seat shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times.”

Shielded and protected from God’s wrath by the smoking incense, Aaron proceeds to bring the “blood of the bullock” into the Holy of Holies. He dips his finger in some of the bull’s blood and “sprinkled it with his finger upon the mercy seat eastward.” The tabernacle always faced east (Numbers 2:3), so

Aaron is sprinkling the blood toward the front side of the tabernacle. Aaron also sprinkled some of the bull's blood "seven times before the mercy seat" which means on the ground or floor in front of the mercy seat. The number "seven" in Scripture symbolizes "completeness." Aaron's actions symbolize a full and perfect forgiveness is being made for his sins and the sins of his house.

When we read this account of the Day of Atonement we should rejoice that our High Priest, Jesus Christ, was never required to offer sacrifices for His sins. Our High Priest was perfect. *"For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore"* (Hebrews 7:26-28).

The Sin Offering for the People and the Tabernacle (Leviticus 16:15-17)

At this point, Aaron has entered the Holy of Holies twice. First, he entered with the incense, then he entered the second time with the bull's blood for a sin offering for himself and his sons. Now, he will enter the third time with blood shed for the people.

Verse 15

"Then shall he kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people, and bring his blood within the vail, and do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat."

"Then shall he kill the goat of the sin offering" emphasizes Aaron must be the one to slay the goat. He "killed the goat of the sin offering" and brought "his blood within the vail." This particular sin offering is "for the people." The particular "goat" is one of "two goats" used on the Day of Atonement for the people's forgiveness of sin (Leviticus 16:5-10). The "blood" of the slain goat was taken by Aaron and "sprinkled upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat" in the same manner he had sprinkled the bull's blood for his own atonement.

Verse 16

"And he shall make an atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions in all their sins: and so shall he do for the tabernacle of the congregation, that remaineth among them in the midst of their uncleanness."

"He," speaking of Aaron, "shall make an atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions

in all their sins..." The "uncleanness of the children of Israel" was that which contaminated every Israelite by virtue of living in a sinful world. "Their transgressions" was a result of their disobedience to the commandments of God. The Day of Atonement cleansed from both types of impurities.

The Day of Atonement was not only for the forgiveness of the sins of the High Priest, his sons, and the people, it was also for the cleansing of the tabernacle, the place where God manifested His presence. Aaron made "atonement" or "wiped clean," the "holy place." Although the "holy place" was holy, it was located in the midst of sinful people and needed cleansing. After making atonement for the "holy place," Aaron was to do the same for the "tabernacle of the congregation." That is a reference to the outside the veil or outside the "holy place." Both *inside* and *outside* must be cleansed by the blood.

The message is God wanted a holy priest, a holy people, and a holy place. That for which "atonement" is made is that with which God came in contact, that which had become defiled over the past year, due to the sins of the people and their priests.

Verse 17

"And there shall be no man in the tabernacle of the congregation when he goeth in to make an atonement in the holy place, until he come out, and have made an atonement for himself, and for his household, and for all the congregation of Israel."

God prohibited anyone but the High Priest from entering "in the tabernacle of the congregation" while he was "in the holy place" making "atonement" for "himself, his household, and for all the congregation." Why? Because the work of "atonement" was for the High Priest alone. *"But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"* (Hebrews 9:11-14).

The High Priest could do no more than enter the Holy of Holies himself. He could not take anyone with him. The people must forever be content with God's plan for atonement through the work of the High Priest. You and I must also be content, even rejoice in God's plan for our atonement. *"For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy*

in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement” (Romans 5:10-11).

Atonement for the Altar (Leviticus 18-19)

Verse 18-19

“And he shall go out unto the altar that is before the LORD, and make an atonement for it; and shall take of the blood of the bullock, and of the blood of the goat, and put it upon the horns of the altar round about. And he shall sprinkle of the blood upon it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it, and hallow it from the uncleanness of the children of Israel.”

When Aaron’s work inside the holy place was completed, he walked outside to the courtyard of the tabernacle and “made atonement for the altar.” He took some “of the blood of the bullock” and “of the blood of the goat” and sprinkled it “seven times upon the horns of the altar.”

The “altar” is the “altar of burnt sacrifice” where the blood of sacrifices was to be placed (Leviticus 4:7). The mixing of the “blood of the bullock” and “the blood of the goat” symbolized both priest and people equally needed an “atonement” for their sins.

Conclusion

Modern Jews call the Day of Atonement “Yom Kippur” and regard it as the holiest day of their calendar. In Moses’ day, the Day of Atonement was observed in the seventh month, on the tenth day. The day was important then and now because it symbolized holiness, purity, and forgiveness of sin.

Sin affects everyone and everything. Sin cannot be tolerated or overlooked by a holy God. Therefore, something must be done to purify and make clean everyone and everything sin has defiled. For Israel, it was a blood sacrifice offered to God through the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. For sinners today, it is the shed blood of the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who gave His life on the cross of Calvary for the sins of the whole world.

Why do Christians not observe the Jewish Day of Atonement? Because Hebrews 9 and 10 teaches us that Jesus Christ work on the cross accomplished everything the Day of Atonement symbolized. The finality and superiority of Jesus’ sacrifice made the Day of Atonement obsolete, unnecessary, never to be returned to again. So what should believers do? We should hold fast our profession of faith, knowing our sins, past, present, and future, are all washed away.

“Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:19-25).

Amen.