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The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16-1:34

Intro: After all of the regulations and ceremonies surrounding ritual impurity in the previous 5 chapters, it's somewhat of a relief to finally be able to study a different topic, a more theologically exciting topic – the Day of Atonement. This day was the most solemn of all OT rituals, “Yom Kippur”. This event was so significant in Israel, a nation with an already extensive religious calendar, that in later Jewish tradition it came to be called just that, “The Day.” Our text doesn't actually refer to it with this well-known title, that will come later in ch23. What our text does is describe in detail what is to occur on that Day, both in the sanctuary, in the community of Israel and a small blurb concerning something in the wilderness. Every arrangement of this ceremony was intended to impress the Israelite mind with the seriousness of approaching their covenant King and to emphasize the fact that man as a sinner has no right of access to God except to approach Him through the offering of a proper and approved sacrifice.

Since we've seen ceremony and sacrifice for atonement time and again throughout Leviticus, why did they need a Day of Atonement? By this point in our study of the book, it's should be clear that the sins and impurities of Israel not only defiled themselves but the Lord's sanctuary as well. This created a serious problem because defiling a king's home was viewed as a treasonous act to be met with swift justice. Ideally, such defilement would have been handled by observing the various rites and sacrifices of the previous chapters but in reality, some would have been unaware of their sin or impurity, while others may have been aware but defiantly refused to address it. As a result, the Lord's sanctuary remained defiled and His righteous justice was an imminent threat.

However, the Lord wasn't just Israel's holy King, He was also her redeeming King, a King who always desired to continue in covenant fellowship with His people. As such, He provided this day – the Day of Atonement – to make full atonement for all of Israel's sin and impurity, thus removing the threat of His judgment and assuring Israel that they could continue in covenant fellowship with Him. Ch16 has 4 major sections: the 1st is an overview of Aaron's duties (1-10); 2nd is a detailed description of the day's rites (11-28); 3rd

shows how Israel is to observe the day (29-31); 4th is a command to celebrate this day in perpetuity (32-34).

The rituals of this Day focus specifically on 3 entities that require atonement and cleansing: Aaron and the priests, the tabernacle itself and the people of Israel. Granted, there will still be a lot of regulations and obscure activities in our text but there will also be many correlations between the events in this passage and the work of Jesus Christ in the NT. Some will be very obvious and some will not be readily apparent but may be surprising nonetheless.

1-10 – In order to cleanse the entire sanctuary, Aaron needs to enter the Most Holy Place (Holy of Holies) where the Lord sat enthroned over the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the Covenant. Since entering an earthly king's throne room had to be done with the utmost respect, entering the heavenly King's throne room required even more care. The Lord warns Aaron against entering wrongly (1-2) and then instructs him on how to do it correctly (3-10). The text begins by referring to Aaron's 2 sons: Nadab and Abihu, who died in their attempted "unauthorized" approach to the Lord (10:1-2). If Aaron wanted to avoid a similar fate, he would need to follow the Lord's instructions very carefully.

Vs1 seems to imply that this speech in ch16 came immediately after the events of 10:1-2. If that's the case, then ch11-15 were likely placed in between because they describe the various impurities that ch16 will help to address. This ominous beginning is followed by a strong warning (2). Aaron just can't enter the Most Holy Place whenever he chooses. This was the Lord's throne room, symbolically guarded by the angelic beings woven into the curtain that hung in front of it. The Lord's presence was directly manifested here, appearing in the cloud, His cloud of glory, over the ark. Aaron was only to enter at the Lord's invitation and at the appointed time. For Aaron to barge into this room – as his sons had tried to do – would have been a sign of great disrespect, resulting in the same fate: he would die.

With the warning in place, v3-10 identify the conditions Aaron must fulfill to enter the Most Holy Place. For starters, Aaron must have the necessary animals and clothing (3-5). Instead of his normally ornate high-priestly clothing, he was to wear a simpler set of plain linen clothes. The reason for this is not stated but it's likely because his ornate clothing had kingly overtones that would have been inappropriate when coming into the

heavenly King's presence while the linen clothes seem to represent a special humility more appropriate for the ritual he was about to perform. The linen clothes made him look more like a slave and the simplicity of them suggests humility. As Aaron was about to offer sacrifices for his own sins, it was necessary that he appear in an outfit more suited for the occasion.

Of course, before putting on these humble clothes, Aaron was to cleanse himself, not just ritually but literally. He wasn't just to wash his hands and feet, but his entire body; an act that underscored the complete purity required when coming before the heavenly King. With the ritual materials identified, v6-10 provide instructions on what Aaron must do with bull and the goats. He was to offer the bull as a purification offering for himself and the priests, proving that all priests needed atonement. He then determined the fate of both goats by casting lots (Urim and Thummim). The lots would select one goat for the Lord; it was to be sacrificed as a purification offering. The other goat was "for aza'zel" – often translated as the scapegoat; it was to be sent into the wilderness.

This Hebrew word aza'zel has stumped translators, scholars and commentators from the beginning. It's meaning is uncertain so, as per usual, where there is no clear definition in the text, theories abound. This word is no different; in fact, there are 4 possible meanings that vary between the mundane and the fantastic. The 1st says the term refers to the goat itself and is a compound word made up of "goat" and "go away." Thus, it means the "go-away-goat;" which is its exact job. 2nd, the word by itself is a term that means "removal" and as such, it means "the goat that removes." 3rd, the term refers to a specific location in the wilderness or a general geological formation like a cliff, mountain or rocky ground. 4th, the term is a name for a wilderness-dwelling supernatural being, most likely a demon.

What's that all about? Those that hold this last view see a parallel of proper names in v8: one...for the Lord and the other for Aza'zel. They state that the live goat is not being sent to Aza'zel as an offering or an appeasement. Instead, the picture is that of the live goat bearing the impurities and sins of the Israelites back to where they come from in the first place. Aza'zel is not being presented an offering; he's being forced to receive back the impurities and sins for which he himself was responsible, in effect: reaping what he has sown. On this Day, his evil returns to him.

Is this view plausible? Some reject it out of hand stating it's odd that the Lord would involve a demon in this most solemn of religious rituals. I cannot confirm nor deny its validity but I will say there is a curious parallel to this view presented in the NT in relation to the baptism of Jesus. The first 3 Gospels each record the Lord's baptism by John the Baptist, whose ministry emphasized baptism for the remission of sins. Since Jesus had no sins for which He needed to repent, His submission to the rite of baptism should be seen as an act of vicarious repentance for sinners. His submission to baptism was a foreshadowing of His anticipated death as a vicarious sacrifice for sinners. Still, His baptism by John is one in which He is washed by water, just as the High Priest did on the Day of Atonement.

Next, after going through a ritual that corresponds to the sacrifice of the one goat on the Day of Atonement, each baptism story states that Jesus is either led or driven into the wilderness where, even as the scapegoat encountered Aza'zel, Jesus now encounters Satan. Having provided purification for sins, He now returns those sins to Satan, the author of them; He withstands all his temptations and defeats the demon in the wilderness. Is this plausible? I'm not sure, but it is very intriguing! But, regardless of which view you hold, the overall function of the goat is clear: to make atonement on the Israelites' behalf by bearing their sins far away.

11-28 – The atonement ceremony consisted of 3 atoning rites: a purification offering (11-19); the aza'zel goat (20-22) and the burnt offering (23-24). As we've seen, performing an action 3 times was a way of underscoring it. It assured Israel that the atonement accomplished on this Day was full and complete. Since Israel's sins and impurities defiled the sanctuary, the initial rites focused cleansing it, starting at its heart in the Most Holy Place, then working outwards to the Holy Place and then to the altar of burnt offering.

Aaron began by making atonement to purify the Most Holy Place of his and the priests' sins and impurities. To do this he performed 3 separate activities. 1st, he brought blood from the bull, collected in a vessel, to make atonement for himself and his household (the priests). 2nd, he entered the Most Holy Place and used incense to create a cloud of smoke to conceal the mercy seat. This cloud protected him from death, either by shielding him from direct exposure to the Lord's glory or by serving as a type of atonement gesture as he approached the Lord's throne – or both. 3rd, he performed 2 sprinkling rites with the bull's blood: some on top of the mercy

seat and then 7 times before the ark.

Why here? The priests' sins were rebellion against the Lord's kingly rule and their impurities were incompatible with His holy rule. It makes sense that these sins and impurities would defile the very object that represented His rule, namely; the mercy seat where the Lord symbolically sat enthroned as King. The mercy seat was thus sprinkled with blood, both to cleanse and to consecrate it. The sprinkling 7 times before the ark underscored what was done on the mercy seat, as well as to purify the entire room (11-14).

Aaron then repeated this procedure on the people's behalf with the blood of the goat selected as the purification offering (15-16). This made atonement for their uncleanness (impurities) and their sins, including any unintentional sins they be unaware of having committed, like eating sacrificial meat while unknowingly being ritually unclean. It also included sins against the Lord (rebellion), for which sacrificial atonement wasn't normally an option. V16 says, all their sins. This would've encouraged the Israelites that, if one had committed such a sin, the Lord wouldn't hold it against the entire nation, even if the offender remained defiant. They would suffer for their sin but the nation wouldn't. At most, this encouraged the repentant sinner that the sin had been atoned for; it no longer hung over their head.

Just as he had cleansed the Most Holy Place, Aaron now cleansed the Holy Place (tent of meeting) by placing blood on the incense altar and 7 times before it. Since only priests were allowed in the tent, v17 is a warning to them in particular. Aaron was to go into the tent alone, as representative of the entire nation, to make atonement for himself and all Israel. Normally, the tabernacle was a busy place, with many priests and Levites and those bringing their offerings and many people about. But on this day, the tabernacle was empty, except for 1 man doing his work.

The emphasis here is that Aaron was to do all this by himself. Not until the very end of the ritual was any assistance given to him. This was also a preview of the perfect work of atonement made by Jesus Christ. As Charles Spurgeon put it, "There was none with our Lord: He trod the winepress alone. He His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree. He alone went in where the thick darkness covered the throne of God, and none stood by to comfort Him."

Now that Aaron and the priests and the tabernacle had been cleansed, it was time to purify the camp. That was the purpose of the scapegoat. Aaron began by confessing all Israel's sins and placing them on the head of the goat. This is in keeping with the biblical principle that confession is the necessary first step when seeking atonement. This act removed the lethal substance of sin from the camp very publicly as it was performed in full view of all the Israelites, who could watch the goat – laden with their sins – disappear into the wilderness, never to return.

The final atonement ritual was the burnt offering. In order to perform the previous ritual of 11-22, Aaron entered into a higher ritual state by removing his normal priestly garb, washing his body with water and donning linen garments. He now returns to his regular ritual state by reversing the actions: removing linen clothes, bathing himself and donning his normal high-priestly uniform. He then offered the burnt offering for himself and for the people, illustrating the atonement that had already taken place and, as with all burnt offerings, expressing praise and thanksgiving for the Lord's gracious provision of such atonement.

Finally, there are a few directives given that relate to the previous rites (25-28). The fat of the purification offering was to be burned on the altar as it belonged to the Lord. The one who handled the aza'zel goat had to wash his clothes and bath his body and then he could enter the camp. Apparently, close proximity to that goat brought about a minor impurity. 3rd, all the hides, meat and "offal" of the purification offerings were to be burned in a pure place outside the camp. Since they were sacrificed for their own sin and impurities, neither priest nor people could profit by eating its meat. Finally, the one doing the roasting also had to change clothes and bath before re-entering the camp, implying he had contracted ritual impurity by this event and emphasizing the need for purity within the camp.

29-31 – This passage is addressed to all Israel and gives them 3 instructions on how to observe this solemn day. 1st, they were to observe it perpetually, every year during the Fall harvest. 2nd, they were to humble themselves. This, at least, refers to fasting but it might also refer to other forms of self-denial. Such acts of self-denial often accompanied repentance as an outward sign of a humble, repentant heart. This was of the utmost importance because the rites and ceremonies of the day mattered not at all if the Israelites did not acknowledge and turn from their sin. The rites that

Aaron performed were theologically wonderful but ultimately, the full atonement for sin and impurity they were meant to secure was powerless if not accompanied by faith on Israel's part. Clearly, the NT principle of, "without faith, it is impossible to please God" is not just for the NT era.

Finally, this day was to be a Sabbath of complete rest for Israel in which no work could be done. This emphasized the holiness of the day and allowed for a focused time of prayer and honest petition to the Lord. This day was to be observed by both the native-born Israelite as well as the resident alien, who were expected to participate since all those dwelling in the Lord's land were to repent before Him for their wrongs.

32-34 – Since this was to be a lasting ordinance, all future high priests were to carry on the atoning rites of this Day once a year. This passage stresses the centrality of making atonement by mentioning it 5 times. Clearly, atonement was necessary for an impure and sinful people to continue in relationship with the pure and holy Lord.

Each of the 3 rites that formed the heart of this Day's ceremony made atonement in its own way. The purification offering focused on cleansing the Lord's home of defilement caused by the sins of Israel, as well as Aaron and the priests. The purpose of the aza'zel goat was to bear the lethal burden of Israel's sins and to carry them far away, never to be seen again. The burnt offer served as a physical illustration of the spiritual atonement being made. Taken together, these 3 rites fully atoned for Israel; their sins and impurities no longer remained; their spiritual slate was now completely clean. The holy God who is offended by sin and impurity is also the compassionate and gracious God who delights to cleanse and forgive it.

Of course, it was necessary for Israel to accompany these rites with repentant hearts. The Lord's not interested in His people's ability to perform rituals, but in whether they embrace Him from the heart. As with a wedding, a ceremony is an empty event if the participants are not fully committed to one another.

The NT describes the day of Jesus' crucifixion as the ultimate Day of Atonement, where He entered into the heavenly throne room itself to atone for sin (**Heb 9:24**). Unlike Aaron, Jesus had no need to atone for Himself, because He is a perfect high priest. In fact, it's because of this perfection

that He can bear away other's sins, offering His own blood to cleanse these sins fully and finally away ([Heb 9:12, 14, 28](#)). If Israelite believers felt the burden of their sin lifted because of Aaron's ministry on the Day of Atonement, how much more relief from the guilt and burden of sin does the believer today experience because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross!

But, His sacrifice doesn't do anyone any good if it is not received by faith. You must apply His atoning work to your life personally. 😊