

Explore the Bible: February 16

Atonement • Leviticus 16:1-10,29-30

By Wayne VanHorn



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Consequences (Lev. 16:1-2)

The mistake Aaron's sons made was to presume they could burn the incense without any regard to God's instructions. Their judgment served as a divine reprimand against such presumptions. In Leviticus 16:1-2, the LORD gives instructions for Aaron that "he may not come whenever he wants" into the holy of holies.

The veil served as a physical barrier, separating the holy place where all priests could enter from the holy of holies where God presided. Behind the veil was the ark of the covenant topped by the mercy seat.

The mercy seat was composed of two cherubim (angelic images), kneeling, facing each other, with wings extended toward one another. Thus, the Lord is said to be "enthroned above the cherubim" (2 Sam. 6:2, et. al). The emphasis of this section is on the holiness of God and the need to revere His presence.

Personal Responsibility (Lev. 16:3-6)

Aaron receives specific instructions for making the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement. First, he had to bathe his body in water (Lev. 16:4b) before donning the sanctified priestly garments, holy linen signifying purity (Lev. 16:4a).

Next, he had to have a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering (16:3). Aaron would begin the ritual by

sacrificing the bull as a sin offering for himself and his household (Lev. 16:6). The sacrifice took place at the altar outside the tabernacle, but Aaron was to bring the blood into the holy of holies to sprinkle it upon and before the mercy seat. The shedding of blood brought remission from sin.

The ram was for a whole burnt offering, wholly consumed in the fire as "a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD" (Lev. 1:13). In addition to the ram, the entire Israelite community provided two male goats for a sin offering for the congregation (16:5).

Atonement (Lev. 16:7-10)

Aaron utilized the two goats in the atonement for the people's sins (Lev. 16:7). Casting lots over the goats as per God's command, Aaron designated one goat for sacrifice to the Lord; the other goat was designated as the "scapegoat." The CSB has "for Azazel," a name meaning "strong against the Lord," thought by some scholars to be the name of a fallen angel. The KJV and NASB follow a different understanding of the word using "scapegoat" as their interpretation.

Functionally, the goat designated to the Lord is used as a sin offering and is sacrificed (Lev. 16:9). Its blood was taken into the holy of holies and sprinkled by Aaron on and before the mercy seat (Lev. 16:15). The symbolism is powerful. The blood of an unblemished animal is spread on and before the mercy seat to make atonement for the holy place (Lev. 16:16).

In contrast, the goat designated to Azazel is "presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it" (Lev. 16:10). Aaron was then to hold the goat by its horns and confess over it all the iniquities, transgressions, and sins of Israel, before sending it away into the wilderness (Lev. 16:21). Again, the symbolism is powerful. The leading of the scapegoat out of the camp and into the wilderness represented the removal of sin from Israel's camp. Atonement came through the shedding of

blood of the first goat and the symbolic removal of sin with the second goat.

Cleansed (Lev. 16:29-30)

Yom Kippur was to become a statute for the seventh month and the tenth day (Lev. 16:29). In 2025, the Day of Atonement will occur on the evening of October 1 and end the evening of October 2. Now as then, the Israelites are to afflict themselves (fast) and rest from their work. Yom Kippur, is designated a "special Sabbath" even though it occurs on Wednesday-Thursday in 2025.

The result of Yom Kippur is the cleansing of God's people from their sins. The Hebrew is emphatic, "Before the Lord, you all will be clean" (Lev. 16:30).

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