

The Day of Atonement

Lesson Scripture: Leviticus 16

Focus Scripture: Leviticus 16: 11-19

Key Verse: He shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the Israelites, and because of their transgressions, all their sins, and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleanness. Leviticus 16:16

LEVITICUS 16:11-19 (NRSV UE)

11 "Aaron shall present the bull as a purification offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house; he shall slaughter the bull as a purification offering for himself.

12 He shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain

13 and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may shroud the cover that is upon the covenant, or he will die.

14 He shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the cover, and before the cover he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.

15 He shall slaughter the goat of the purification offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the cover and before the cover.

16 Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the Israelites and because of their transgressions, all their sins, and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleanness.

17 No one shall be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the sanctuary until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel.

LEVITICUS 16:11-19 (KJV)

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:

12 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:

13 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:

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.

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:

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.

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.

18 Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement on its behalf and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat and put it on each of the horns of the altar.

19 He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times and cleanse it and sanctify it from the uncleannesses of the Israelites.”

18 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.

19 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.

KEY TERMS

- **Atonement** – Known as *Kippur* (in Hebrew), meaning “to repay a debt” and “to purify.”
- **Azazel** – An evil spirit in the wilderness to which a *scapegoat* symbolically carried the sins of the ancient Hebrews in a ritual on the Day of Atonement.
- **Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)** – Regarded as the most solemn day on the Hebrew calendar. On this day, the people, individually and as a nation, confessed their sins and the high priest entered into the holiest place to atone for his sins as well as those of the people.
- **Purification** – The process of making something spiritually or ceremonially clean.

Today’s scriptures reflect events that took place on the Day of Atonement, an annual event on which the nation sought atonement and reconciliation with God.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s scriptures reflect events that took place on the Day of Atonement, an annual event on which the nation sought atonement and reconciliation with God. Aaron, Israel’s first high priest, must enter into the Holy Place to precisely apply God’s instructions, as an intercessor, to seek reconciliation between the Hebrew nation and God. Aaron was well aware of the seriousness of this assignment (Leviticus 16:1-2). His

two oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, had been “put to death” (Leviticus 10:1) for flagrantly disrespecting God’s instructions.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Atonement for Aaron and His Household, Leviticus 16:11-14

Aaron initiated the atonement ceremonies

with rituals for his own atonement and for his household. Only as they were cleansed would Aaron be in a position to lead others to atone for their sins. Therefore, for purification of his household and himself, Aaron was required to offer a young bull as a sin offering. The bull was slaughtered, and his blood was taken into the Holy of Holies.

The next phase of the rituals required Aaron to take a censer that was filled with burning coals from the altar and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense into the Holy of Holies. Verses 13-14 give detailed accountings of how Aaron placed the incense on the coals before the mercy seat. In doing so, a cloud of incense covered the mercy seat, thereby shielding Aaron from the Ark of the Covenant and the direct presence of God. Without this covering, Aaron could not survive this experience as he had entered the

Holy of Holies and had to conduct himself with strict compliance to God's instructions. Purification and atonement were symbolized by Aaron's sprinkling blood from the bull "on the front of the atonement cover and seven times before the atonement cover." However, it is important to remember that the Hebrew

word, *Kippur*, connotes "covering up instead of removing" sins. It is also important to note that Jesus Christ, our high priest and sacrificial lamb, took our sins upon himself, shed his blood for us, and provided eternal redemption and forgiveness for those who believe in him.

Atonement for the People and the Holy Place, Leviticus 16:15-19

Verses 13-14 give detailed accountings of how Aaron placed the incense on the coals before the mercy seat. In doing so, a cloud of incense covered the mercy seat, thereby shielding Aaron from the Ark of the Covenant and the direct presence of God.

Two goats were among the animals Aaron was required to sacrifice. By casting lots, one goat was slain as a sin offering for purification of the people, and its blood was taken into the Holy of Holies. The other was kept alive and outside of the Holy of Holies to ceremoniously take the sins of the people upon himself (a scapegoat) and carry them through the wilderness to Azazel (Leviticus 16:20-22).

Atonement rituals for the goat that was killed for purification closely paralleled the previously discussed atonement procedures for sacrificing the bull. However, the goat for purification was offered to make atonement for the tabernacle and the people. The blood of the killed goat was handled like the blood of the bull, including the fact some of it was

sprinkled on and before the mercy seat for the same reasons. Aaron was also ordered “to make atonement for the sanctuary because of the uncleanness of the Israelites and because of their transgressions, all their sins”...and for the tent of meetings, which was always with them (v. 17) as well as the altar. Blood from the bull and the goat were used to atone the altar. Afterwards, Aaron was again required to make atonement for himself and his household as well as for the nation. As God required of the Hebrew people, holiness is required of us. What steps do you take to obey?

SANKOFA


Having given detailed attention to the atonement rituals God required of the Hebrews, a laudable progression of this discussion leads to an exploration of atonement rituals in our own worship traditions. As we do so, it is important to remember that because of Jesus’ atoning work for our sins and forgiveness, we have no need to sacrifice animals and birds as the Hebrew people were required. However, sin is still unacceptable to God! So, what is required of us?

Baptism and atonement are intricately connected concepts that significantly impact

the spiritual journeys and salvation of believers. Therefore, careful attention to the role of baptism can continuously lead to new revelations about the meaningfulness of our relationship with Jesus.

Acts 2:38 and 22:16 tell us that baptism is for the “remission of sins,” and “to wash your sins away.” *The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church* (2021) identifies baptism as one of two sacraments historically practiced

in our church (Holy Communion is the other). Baptism is defined as “a sign of new life through Jesus Christ and unites the one baptized with Christ and his people as members of the church” (p. 886). In summary, baptism is symbolic of each believer’s decision to denounce sinful life and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, who paved the way to salvation and eternal life for us.



As God required of the Hebrew people, holiness is required of us. What steps do you take to obey?

One of the most powerful testaments to the significance of baptism is found in Matthew 28:19. This scripture contains the Great Commission, wherein Jesus commanded his disciples (including us) to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them

to obey everything that I have commanded you.” As were the atonement ceremonies for the Hebrews, so is baptism to symbolize death to carnal life and commitment to new life as disciples of Jesus Christ, committed to serving and pleasing God. Baptism is a “once in a lifetime event.” However, confession, repentance, and forgiveness require daily actions. We are privileged to learn and practice holy living as new creatures in Christ Jesus (see 2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

CASE STUDY

Since this lesson is focused on rituals relating to atonement, let's continue by looking at *The Apostle's Creed* (Affirmation of Faith). As you repeat it, how much of your participation is simply routine action stemming from rote memory? As with other rituals, we can become so familiar with this component of our worship we miss the symbolism and spiritual blessings it offers. It is printed here for immediate reference and sharing as a group.

The Apostle's Creed: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born

of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.”

LIFE APPLICATION

This lesson has poignantly portrayed the purpose and necessity of atonement, as well as the pertinent role of sacrifice, in effecting reconciliation between humankind and God. The attainment of reconciliation is critical to our relationship with God. Deeper understandings about why God sent Jesus to redeem humankind is one of the greatest assets and benefits to us. Why did God send

Jesus? While we can never know the mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:16), certain facts revealed in this lesson can help us answer this question. For example, only Jesus' blood was pure enough! Also, only Jesus was capable of living among humankind and facing the same temptations without

This lesson has poignantly portrayed the purpose and necessity of atonement, as well as the pertinent role of sacrifice, in effecting reconciliation between humankind and God.

sinning, while also demonstrating holiness that derives from daily devotion to prayer, communion, and obedience to God.

A central theme in this lesson has been the fact that God's people must receive forgiveness and be reconciled to him. This is a truth that prevails throughout the scriptures, from the Old to the New Testament. Beginning with our text today, which is situated in the Old Testament, we have been privileged to see that God's demands for atonement have not waived. However, we can also see the mercy extended to us with the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus has provided us with means of direct access to God, whereby we can pray, commune with him, and repent for ourselves every day.

QUESTIONS

1. How would you answer if someone asked you: "What is the value of my learning about the Day of Atonement?"
2. What new revelations do you have about

the word "scapegoat?"

3. What changes do you feel you should make regarding how you approach God?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Song: "Is Your All on the Altar?"
(AME Hymnal #333)

Closing Prayer: Father God, we come to you in deepest humility and hearts filled with gratitude. We ask you to forgive our sins and bless us with reconciliation so that we may please and serve you. We give you glory, honor, and praise for all of your blessings, especially for sending Jesus Christ to enable us to enter your presence on our own behalf as well as to intercede for others. Thank you for the blood that he willingly shed for us and the life he lived to show us how to live according to your will. Please bless us with obedient spirits and undying commitments to seek holiness in our lives. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

March 31–April 6

Monday	Psalm 96 (Enter God's Courts With an Offering)
Tuesday	1 Peter 3:18-22 (Christ's Suffering and Exaltation)
Wednesday	Isaiah 52:13–53:3 (Suffering Servant)
Thursday	Isaiah 53:4-12 (Light Out of Anguish)
Friday	Mark 10:41-45 (A Ransom for Many)
Saturday	Hebrews 9:23–10:4 (Christ in Heaven on Our Behalf)
Sunday	Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25 (Confidence in God's Presence)