

# Scripture Lesson Text

**LEV. 16:11** 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 veil:

**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 veil, 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** 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.

## NOTES

# Obedience on the Day of Atonement

Lesson Text: Leviticus 16:11-19

Related Scriptures: *Leviticus 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7-11; Hebrews 9:1-28; 10:1-18*

TIME: 1445 B.C.

PLACE: Mount Sinai

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—"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" (Leviticus 16:16).

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## *Lesson Exposition*

### **ATONEMENT FOR THE HIGH PRIEST—Lev. 16:11-14**

The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), observed on the tenth day of the seventh month (Tishri), was the only fast day among Israel's annual festivals. The high priest played the central role in the tabernacle services prescribed for this day, and an awesome responsibility rested on him.

**The sin offering killed (Lev. 16:11).** The high priest, having washed his body and put on special linen clothing, had to approach the sanctuary with the designated sacrifices (vss. 3-10). One of these was a bull to be offered as a sin offering for himself and his household (vs. 11). Being a mediator between God and a sinful people, he first had to be cleansed from sin's pollution. So his first act was to kill a bull and offer it on the altar of sacrifice.

**The incense offered (Lev. 16:12-13).** Next, the priest was to "take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord." Censers

were fire pans—usually made of copper or bronze but sometimes of gold (Exod. 27:3; II Chron. 4:22)—and no doubt attached to a long handle.

The priest also was to take handfuls of "sweet incense beaten small" (Lev. 16:12)—that is, finely ground. Incense was an aromatic compound of gums and spices made to be burned, especially in religious services.

The high priest was commanded to burn incense daily, morning and evening, on the altar of incense located in front of the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (Exod. 30:1-8). But on the Day of Atonement, he was to carry the incense, along with the hot embers, into the Most Holy Place itself.

There, setting the fire pan with the hot embers on the floor, he would "put the incense upon the fire before the Lord" (Lev. 16:13). This not only released the aroma but also caused a cloud of smoke to fill the inner sanctuary. It covered "the mercy seat that is upon the testimony."

The references here are to aspects of the ark of the covenant, the sole piece of furniture in the Most Holy Place (Exod. 25:10-12). It was a wooden chest overlaid with gold inside and out. The cover of the ark was made of pure gold (vs. 17) and was called the "mercy seat" (Lev. 16:13). This is not a literal translation; the Hebrew term is related to the word "atonement" and really means "place of atonement."

"The testimony" in Leviticus 16:13 refers to the tablets of the Ten Commandments that were placed in the ark of the covenant. The tablets were the heart of God's covenant with Israel and His testimony against them if they should prove disobedient.

The purpose for covering the mercy seat with smoke from the incense was to prevent the high priest's death. The glory of the Lord is so overwhelming that no one can look upon it and live. The cloud of incense covered the area where God's presence resided, and this mercifully shielded the high priest.

**The blood sprinkled (Lev. 16:14).** Having offered the incense in the Most Holy Place, the high priest returned to the courtyard and the altar of sacrifice. From there he took some of the blood of the bull he had offered as a sin offering for himself. He brought it into the Most Holy Place, where he sprinkled some "upon the mercy seat eastward"—that is, toward the front of it. Then he sprinkled more onto the ground seven times in front of the mercy seat.

Since this was the only time in the year when the high priest was permitted to enter the Most Holy Place, it was the only occasion when blood was sprinkled in it (cf. Heb. 9:6-7). At all other times, the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled in front of the veil, not inside it (Lev. 4:6, 17). But on this day, the blood of the sacrifice was brought into direct contact with God's presence. This atoned for the sins of

the priest, an act unnecessary for the sacrifice of Christ, the perfect High Priest (Heb. 7:26-28).

### **ATONEMENT FOR THE PEOPLE— Lev. 16:15-17**

**The sin offering presented (Lev. 16:15).** Having atoned for his own sins, the high priest was to "kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people." He initially was to set aside "two kids of the goats for a sin offering" (vs. 5). Bringing both of them to the door of the tabernacle, he was to cast lots upon them. The goat on which the Lord's lot fell was to be sacrificed as a sin offering; the other was to be sent into the wilderness (vss. 9-10).

**The tabernacle cleansed (Lev. 16:16).** The sin offering did more than atone for the people. It was to "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." Even the divine sanctuary had been polluted by the sins of those who worshipped there; so it had to be cleansed. The transgressions and sins here mentioned included only those committed unintentionally or inadvertently; no atonement existed for defiant sin (Num. 15:27-31).

**The high priest isolated (Lev. 16:17).** During the entire procedure, only the high priest was permitted inside the tabernacle. He was the one solitary individual who could represent Israel before God on this day. Only he had been washed and properly attired. Only he had the proper sacrifices, incense, and blood. And once the holy places had been cleansed, the entrance of an unqualified person would only have polluted them again.

No doubt this was a lonely task for the high priest, who bore the full weight of responsibility that day. There was no room for error as he mediated between his people and God. Yet it was his to

do; no one else could share his burden.

This aloneness prefigured the isolation that would be Jesus' lot as He faced the task of atoning for the sins of the world. He was the High Priest who offered Himself as the sin offering for all mankind. He felt this isolation keenly as He neared the time of His death (Matt. 26:36-46) and on the cross (27:46).

### **ATONEMENT FOR THE ALTAR— Lev. 16:18-19**

**The horns purified (Lev. 16:18).** The priest was to take some of the blood from both the bull and the goat and place it on the horns of the altar. Horns were symbols of strength and honor. The two altars in the tabernacle had horns on their four corners, signifying God's power. The altar of sacrifice, itself a symbol of both God's justice and His grace, culminated in four horns, indicating the divine power to forgive sins. Blood placed there invoked this saving power.

**The blood sprinkled (Lev. 16:19).** The high priest also took some of the sacrificial blood and sprinkled the altar with it seven times. The sevenfold sprinkling no doubt symbolizes the completeness of the purification.

This was not the end of the ceremony. Even though our lesson text does not include reference to the second goat, we should comment on what was done to it. After the high priest finished purifying the holy things, he placed his hands on the live goat's head, confessing over it Israel's sins. He then sent it away into the wilderness with someone who was specially chosen to take it. This symbolized the removal of Israel's sins from God's sight (Lev. 16:20-22).

Thus, the Day of Atonement beautifully portrayed the grace of God toward His people, not only cleansing them through shed blood but also

removing sin from His sight. But as striking as this picture is, it was imperfect and temporary, only prefiguring a complete and final atonement.

The writer of Hebrews stated this truth clearly when he contrasted the yearly sacrifices with the final sacrifice of Christ for our sins (9:24-28). The fact that the ceremony had to be repeated annually proved that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins (10:1-4). They just postponed God's judgment—a judgment that eventually fell upon Jesus and ended the annual cycles (vss. 11-14). Those who trust His saving work enjoy an access to God that Israel never knew (vss. 19-22).

—Robert E. Wenger.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. How did the Day of Atonement differ from Israel's other feasts?
2. How did the high priest prepare for his duties this day? How did he atone for his own sin?
3. Describe how and where the high priest offered incense.
4. What were the mercy seat and the testimony?
5. How did the incense save the high priest's life?
6. What sin offering was required for the people of Israel?
7. Why did the tabernacle require purification?
8. Why did the high priest carry out his duties alone? How did this prefigure the work of Christ?
9. What was signified by the four horns of the altar?
10. Of what New Testament truth was the Day of Atonement a picture?

—Robert E. Wenger.

## PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Sinners are responsible for seeking God for forgiveness of their sins (Lev. 16:11-12).
2. Sin always leads to death; atonement for it must be made (Lev. 16:13; Rom. 6:23).
3. Sin is so serious that it required the shedding of blood for its remission (Lev. 16:14-15; Heb. 9:22).
4. Sin taints everything it touches (Lev. 16:16).
5. Only the one designated by God could enter into His presence to make intercession (vs. 17).
6. An imperfect system required continual observance; a better way has been made (Lev. 16:18-19; Heb. 10:1, 11-12).

—Barbara A. Edwards.

## RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Why was it necessary for Aaron to offer a sacrifice for himself when he offered the sacrifice of atonement for the entire nation (Lev. 16:11; cf. Heb. 7:27; 9:7-10)?
2. Why did Aaron need to make an atonement for the holy place and the altar (Lev. 16:16, 18-19; cf. Heb. 9:21-22)? What does this suggest about the modern secular view that mankind is inherently good?
3. What is suggested by the fact that the atonement was to be made every year (Heb. 10:1-4)? How is Jesus' sacrifice superior (7:26-27)?
4. Why was no one to be in the tabernacle when the atonement was made (cf. 13:12)?

—Barbara A. Edwards.

## Golden Text Illuminated

**“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” (Leviticus 16:16).**

The Day of Atonement was the day when all Israel accounted for the sins of the past year. Everyone underwent a complete fast and other acts of self-denial. This day was the end of a period of penitence for the people.

At the temple, elaborate ceremonies took place. Numerous sacrifices were made, including a calf for an offering. The main ceremony, however, involved the sacrificial goats. The high priest performed this ritual to purge the people and temple of the year's sins.

In this ritual, the high priest selected two suitable goats. One goat he sacrificed as a sin offering for the people and then entered the Holy of Holies to sprinkle its blood on the mercy seat. This goat was the one designated by God for the atonement of sin. Only the Levites among the people could enter the temple. The high priest alone was permitted to enter the most holy place, and only on this day of the year.

The high priest then laid his hand on the second goat. He confessed the sins of himself and all the people, transferring these to the goat. After this, the goat was released into the wilderness. This represented Israel's sins being cast away.

Christians do not need to partake in this ritual. Because of Christ's work, we are freed from it. Instead, Christ became our sacrifice.

—Jennifer Lautermilch.