

ATONEMENT

Leviticus 16:1-10; 29-30

Sometimes things seem to be so intertwined and complex that we are ready to just “start over.” We may be trying to repair an appliance or even a relationship and it seems that fixing one thing just opens up a “new opportunity” (problem) in another area. After a while, we are literally ready to start over. Wouldn’t be great at certain times to have a fresh start and get everything reset?

We sort of half-heartedly do that each year with New Year’s resolutions and recommitting to exercise, to eat healthily and any number of other things that we should be doing.

God saw a need for his people to just “stop” every now and then (once a year) and “reset” their direction and “clean out” all the forgotten clutter that had accumulated in their lives and have a fresh start. The “reboot” was an annual happening that would occur ten days after the start of the “civil” new year. Jews still observe this 3400 years after it was first initiated for the Israelites. They call it Yom Kippur which literally means Day of Atonement.

In ancient Israel this day was observed in conjunction with their new year’s celebration and the feast that celebrated the gathering in of the crops in the fall. The first month of the “civil” new year was involved in many rituals and celebrations. The month started out with the **first** day being observed as a Sabbath observance in which no ordinary work was to be done. There was also a “memorial blowing of rams’ horns” from sunup to sunset. There is no clear understanding of what they were remembering in this memorial. Some have suggested that this was the season when God created the heavens and the earth. Others say it was the time when Abraham was offering Isaac and found a ram caught by his horns in a thicket and offered the ram instead. Some Hebrew traditions included cooking and eating the head of a ram in observance of this event. Prolonged sounds of blowing trumpets (shofars) were certainly a part of the events that occurred at Mt. Sinai when God gave Israel the law. There were also “fire offerings” to be made on the first day of the civil new year.

The Atonement Day was on the tenth day and that was followed on the fifteenth day with the beginning of Sukkot or Feast of Tabernacles that took up a total of eight days. The fifteenth day was exactly six months after the anniversary of the start of the exodus from Egypt.

We can see some carryover of these “new years’ day” observances in our culture. A notable exception is that our new year calendar reflects the influence of the pagan Druid religion rather than the proclamations that God had given to Moses regarding the calendar for Israel.

The Atonement Day was to be a national time of humility and fasting for everyone (except young children) and sacrifices made on behalf of the people and the Tabernacle to restore purity.

The details of the Day of Atonement observance for Israel are found in Leviticus chapter sixteen. Additional information is found in chapter twenty-three where we find mention of many other observances of holy times such as the Sabbath, Passover, Pentecost, Feast of Booths, etc.

Consequences – 16:1-2

¹ Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they had approached the presence of the LORD and died. ² The LORD said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron that he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die; for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. Leviticus 16:1–2 (NASB95)

Most of us think of the Day of Atonement being associated with forgiveness of sins we

have committed. According to Michael Heiser, that idea is not the way it is presented in Leviticus 16. The blood of those sacrifices was used to purify the sanctuary, the tabernacle, and the most holy place. The steps involved in the purification ritual would require that the high priest (Aaron) go behind the curtain that separated the holy place and the most holy place. Six months earlier two of Aaron's sons brought "strange fire" into the sanctuary and they defiled the holy place. Their defilement was caused by a disregard of the "holiness" or reverential respect that was deserved. Apparently, less-significant defilements happened throughout the year as priest carried out their duties in the holy place.

On the Day of Atonement in the process of purifying the place associated with where God was present, Aaron (as high priest) would enter the most holy place. Because of the danger associated with being behind the curtain, a reminder was given to Moses to warn Aaron to carefully follow the prescribed way of carrying out the purification process. These two verses were a message to Aaron that he was limited to a specific day when he could come into the Holy Place inside the veil and not die. There was a general understanding that for mortals to look upon the face of God they would die. This was part of the fearfulness of the people when they were encamped at Mt. Sinai and the presence of YHWH was strongly evident on the mountain.

Preparing to Sacrifice – 16:3-6

³ "Aaron shall enter the holy place with this: with a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ⁴ "He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and the linen undergarments shall be next to his body, and he shall be girded with the linen sash and attired with the linen turban (these are holy garments). Then he shall bathe his body in water and put them on. ⁵ "He shall take from the congregation of the sons of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering. ⁶ "Then Aaron shall offer the bull for the sin offering which is for himself, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household. Leviticus 16:3-6 (NASB95)

Here we learn the specifics of what the high priest was to do on that special day which he was allowed to go into the Holy of Holies. The first step was to obtain the animals that were to be offered to the Lord in conjunction with this one-day event when he could go behind the veil to present the blood of the atonement before the presence of the Lord. As with all sacrifices to the Lord these animals needed to be without defects.

In addition to having the proper animals to sacrifice for his sins (sin offering) and for himself (burnt offering), he was to wear special clothing that was specific for the events of this day in which he was to make atonement for himself and his household. Normally, the high priest wore an elaborate robe and other clothing that were designed to show the significance of the office of high priest as he ministered to the people. On this special day, he laid aside the trappings of his position and dressed in the clothing of an ordinary priest and some have suggested that he dressed in the clothing of a slave. In his regal attire, he ministered to the people but in these special clothes he was serving the Lord. Here we see the dual role of the priest that they minister to people and serve God.

Before Aaron put on the special clothing, he was to bathe in the laver to provide cleansing for himself. Since this step was for him and his house (the other priests who were his sons), this was both practical and symbolic of cleansing from the contact that they had from the world around them. Clearly, the atonement was related to cleansing and purification.

There are several things already mentioned in this process that point to what God was doing in and through Christ Jesus. Just as Aaron laid aside his elaborate high priest clothing, Christ laid aside His mighty power and glory and took on the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men. Aaron left his glorious robe and other articles of clothing in the Holy Place and would return later to put them on again. The same can be said of Christ.

We can take this a step further and look at what happened at the Last Supper in which Jesus demonstrated in a living parable the actions that were called for in this ancient ritual that Aaron did. Jesus took off his outer garment and wrapped a towel around His waist and washed the feet of His disciples. Again, we see the laying aside of one garment and appearing in the garb of a servant. The linen sash that Aaron wore could be related to the towel that Jesus used. The act of washing the feet of disciples was symbolic of removing the contamination of contact with the world which Aaron did before he took on the role of a servant priest before God. We could argue that Jesus did this to send a message to His disciples that, in their role as priests unto God, that they would need to regularly remove the influence of the world before serving the Lord and ministering to people. Since this applied to the disciples, then it should also apply to us today since we are a holy nation and a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9).

There were also animals to be offered for the people to make atonement (purification) for them. These animals were two goats (for a sin offering) and a ram (for a burnt offering). Before these were offered, Aaron needed to go through the process for himself and his household using the bull for the sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. This process also involved Aaron taking a censer of fire from the altar and two hands full of incense and taking these behind the curtain. The fire was placed before the mercy seat and the incense added to the fire to fill the Holy of Holies with a cloud. He then left the Holy of Holies and returned to the altar area to get the blood of the bull and then went back behind the veil and sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. Some of this blood was used later to ceremonially cleanse other parts of the sanctuary.

Having completed the ceremonial part which focused on the priests, the high priest could then proceed to make sacrifices on behalf of the people.

The Chosen Goat – 16:7-10

⁷ “He shall take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the doorway of the tent of meeting. ⁸ “Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat. ⁹ “Then Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the LORD fell, and make it a sin offering. ¹⁰ “But the goat on which the lot for the scapegoat fell shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat. Leviticus 16:7–10 (NASB95)

Just as there was an offering for sin and a burnt offering for the priests, the sacrifices for the people were the same in their names but had some significant differences in the actions that were carried out. A major difference is that Aaron’s sin offering was a bull and the offering for the people involved two goats. The two goats constituted one offering that had two parts. The first part was that one goat (chosen by casting lots) was used as a traditional sin offering and the other one was used to carry away the sins of the nation that were symbolically placed upon the head of the goat.

The blood of the sin-offering goat (for the sins of all the people) was taken behind the curtain and sprinkled once on the mercy seat and seven times in front of the mercy seat. This was the third time the high priest went behind the curtain on this Day of Atonement.

Following the sprinkling of blood of the sin offering for himself (bull) and for the people (goat) in separate acts behind the curtain, the high priest then combined the blood of the bull and the goat and applied it to the horns of the altar and sprinkled this combination inside the Holy Place (that is in front of the curtain) to make atonement for the priests and the community of Israel. The *Bible Knowledge Commentary* notes that “the purpose of the sin offering was to provide an atonement for Israel by cleansing the place of God’s dwelling from the pollution of the people’s sins. Alternately, it may be that the animal was slaughtered to make atonement for

them and the blood was sprinkled to purify the sanctuary. God's dwelling place needed to be cleansed because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been."

While these activities were being done in the Tabernacle, the other part of the offering for sin (the second goat) was waiting near the entrance of the tent of meeting. The sins of the priest and the people and the cleaning of the Tabernacle had been accomplished and one more step was needed to complete the process. That step was to remove the sins from the nation to a place where they could not be found and would never come back to cause problems. Psalm 103:12 says "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us."

The Day of Atonement – 16:29-30

²⁹ "This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; ³⁰ for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD. Leviticus 16:29-30 (NASB95)

Sacrifices were carried out throughout the year by the priests and by the people for sins and other reasons. In these cases of blood sacrifices, it was usually mentioned that these offerings were to make atonement for their sins. In Leviticus 4:27-28, we see that the sin offering was for sins that were done unwittingly and were made known to the person. That provision left a lot of sins that were not addressed by the routine sin offerings. The sacrifices on the Day of Atonement were to cover those unknown and even willful sins. As we see in verse thirty, it was "all your sins before the Lord." This was the only way the holy God could continue to dwell among a sinful and sinning community.

Preparation for this special time involved recognizing the significance of the need and a time of examination of their lives (especially over the past year). To help them do this, it was treated like a Sabbath day (no work) and a time of fasting and humility. Apparently, the ceremonies were considered ineffective in themselves if they were not accompanied by genuine penitence on the part of the people, who were to deny themselves (usually understood to include fasting). Part of the humiliation was dressing in plain clothing illustrated by Aaron in taking off his high-priest garments.

A New Testament parallel to having a time of examination before taking part in a sacred ceremony is found in 1 Corinthians 11:28 where Paul wrote "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup."

The national observance of the Day of Atonement for Israel was to continue until the end of the age so that when Jesus finally came to lay down His life for us, we would realize just what He was doing. In the repeated sacrifices of the Old Testament we are led to understand that, to God, death has always been the price of life for sinful men.

The closest observance that has been done on a national scale for us started in the seventeenth century. In the New England Colonies under British rule, there was an observance in late autumn for prayer and thanksgiving and in the late spring there was a call for prayer and fasting. Prior to the American Revolution in 1776 some cities and colonies proclaimed a day of fasting and prayer. The Continental Congress in 1775 issued a proclamation recommending "a day of public humiliation, fasting, and prayer" be observed by the English Colonies on July 20, 1775. In 1779, George Washington as Commander of the Continental Army called for a day of "fasting, humiliation and prayer" and to observe that day Washington ordered a one-day stop of recreation and unnecessary labor. In March 1780, Congress announced a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer be held that year. In January 1952, Billy Graham observed that the

leaders of our country needed to kneel before Almighty God in prayer to renew the hope of our nation during a time of national peril and in April of that year, Truman signed a bill proclaiming a National Day of Prayer must be declared by each subsequent president at an appropriate date of his choice. Proclamations have been issued each year since that time.

You may have noticed that we went from fasting, humiliation and prayer (in the early days) to simply prayer. Just going through the motions of a “national ritual” will not accomplish real repentance and atonement for our national sins which are many.

As we realize how unlikely it is that something on a national scale will occur today, it is incumbent upon us as the church to carry out “spiritual sacrifices” and pray for ourselves and our nation that we can “stop and reset” and get back to the basic foundations of trust and reliance upon God who is the Source of all blessings.