

The Day of Atonement

Are you getting enough rest?" Sister Ethel asked Gelisa. The 24-year-old and young believer bobbed her head up and looked across the metal table at Sister Ethel. The two were part of the sandwich assembly line.

Every Saturday, Grace Fellowship's Benevolence Committee organized "Food Drops" for the unhoused. A sandwich, bag of chips, piece of fruit, sweet snack, a Christian tract and list of area resources for low-income and the unhoused were put in a paper bag. Then, church volunteers went to some of the areas in Chicago where the unhoused typically frequented.

"You seem to be here an awful lot," Sister Ethel said.

Gelisa didn't know exactly what to say. She didn't want to tell anyone about her guilt, let alone share it with 75-year-old Sister Ethel.

Gelisa had stuffed her shame and tried to cover it with a lot of good deeds.

Later, Gelisa found herself in the kitchen alone with Sister Ethel. She told the older woman that she was feeling miserable and was trying to make things right with God.

"Sweetheart," Sister Ethel said. "I'm so glad you are here, but the Lord has already paid for every sin you have committed and ever will commit. His sacrifice paid for the sins of the entire world. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us. Can I help you confess it to Christ and accept His amazing love and grace?"

1. *What is your reaction to your sin?*

2. *What do you do when you sin?*

3. *How would you talk with another believer who was wrestling with sin?*

The Bull Offering

Leviticus 16:11–14 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 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.

Leviticus 16:11–14 NIV

¹¹ “Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering. ¹² He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. ¹³ He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the tablets of the covenant law, so that he will not die. ¹⁴ He is to take some of the bull’s blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover.”

God gives Moses specific instructions to ensure that Aaron and other priests would not die as they entered the most Holy Place—the innermost part of the tabernacle (Lev. 16:2–3)—and sacrificed before “the atonement cover on the ark . . . [where God] will appear in the cloud” (v. 2). Those sacrifices were “to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites” (v. 34). Interestingly, the title, “Day of Atonement,” doesn’t appear until Leviticus 23:27.

In order for Aaron to atone for the people’s sins, he first

has to make atonement for his and his family's sins, since priests were not immune from sin and corruption. The first sacrifice was a bull, which was killed in the courtyard outside the tabernacle, for Aaron "to make atonement for himself and his household" (v. 11). Aaron would then collect some of the bull's blood, a firepot "full of burning coals from the altar before the Lord," and two handfuls of incense. He would "take them behind the curtain" (v. 12). The curtain separated the courtyard from the tabernacle. Once inside the most Holy Place, he would put the incense on the fire; and "smoke of the incense [would] conceal the atonement cover" of the ark of the covenant, "so that [the priest would] not die" (v. 13). Aaron would thereby be cleansed so that he could make the sacrifice for the people.

The priest was to take blood from the sacrifice and sprinkle it over the atonement cover. "Mercy seat" (KJV) and "atonement cover" (NIV) are different names for the golden cover of the ark of the covenant, which held the stone tablets and other symbols of God's miraculous provision and deliverance. Through a sevenfold sprinkling of blood, Aaron would present the lifeblood of the animal sacrifice as a contrast to his own sin, which leads to death.

4. *What did Aaron need to do before making sacrifices for the people's sins?*

5. *What was the first sacrifice, where was it made, and what was its purpose?*

6. *What was Aaron to do with this sacrifice, and why?*

The Goat Offering

Leviticus 16:15–19 KJV

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

Leviticus 16:15–19 NIV

¹⁵ "He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with

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.

the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it.

¹⁶ In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the tent of meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness.

¹⁷ No one is to be in the tent of meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.

18 "Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull's blood and some of the goat's blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. 19 He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites."

Now Aaron would be ready to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. There were two goats used for the offering, each with a different purpose. The first would be the sacrifice; and once the goat was selected, verses 15–19 give

instructions for handling the sacrifice. The priest would slaughter the goat, presumably in the courtyard; then Aaron would reenter the sacred space of the tabernacle. As with the first sacrifice, he would “take its blood behind the curtain . . . [and he] shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it” (v. 15). While the fire and incense are not mentioned, verses 13–14 suggest they might continue to be used to conceal the appearance of God’s holiness.

The bull had been sacrificed for the sins of the priests, but the goat would be sacrificed “because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been” (v. 16). Some wrongdoings might be clear, but others might be hidden. In this ceremony, any sins would be covered, whether the community had discovered them or not.

Even the tabernacle was to be purified from sin, since it was in the midst of the people (v. 16). no one else was allowed to enter until Aaron had fully “made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel” (v. 17). Afterward, the priest would exit the tabernacle and make atonement for the bronze altar where the sacrifices were burned. Aaron would use blood of both sacrifices to cleanse the altar, sprinkling seven times with his finger “to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites” (v. 19). This sacrifice was thorough, even cleansing the holy instruments used for sacrifices.

Once the first goat was killed, the other goat would be brought to Aaron. With hands on the goat, Aaron would confess the sins of the community. This would symbolically transfer the things that separate humans from God onto the goat. The goat would carry the sins out to the wilderness, from where they would never return.

7. *What was the purpose of the goat offering?*

8. *What was done with the blood, both inside and outside the tabernacle, and why?*

9. *What’s your reaction to today’s passage? Was this kind of sacrifice really necessary?*

Cleansing through Atonement

God's detailed instructions to Aaron for cleansing from sin sound completely foreign today. The word *atonement* is not part of our vocabulary and everyday speech. What does it mean to "make atonement for sin"? God wanted Aaron—and His later worshipers, like us—to repent and take account of wrongdoing. God created people with free choice, which Adam and Eve exercised when they made a choice to disobey God. All people are born with this tendency to do what is wrong, to want their own way. And they fall short of following God's perfect plan for how they should live. Therefore, they cannot make right the wrongs committed against God. God's ultimate plan to deal with sin requires a righteous sacrifice to make amends and to reconcile His people to Himself.

Today's text doesn't list all the specific wrongs people might do. In fact, it implies that our listing would be inadequate. It's easy to allow unholy things of the world—thoughts, words, and actions—to creep into my life. I oppose God whenever I turn away from Him in rebellion, intent on doing things my way instead of God's way.

The difference between the sacrificial system in the Old Testament and the new covenant is that Jesus offered a sacrifice for sins, once and for all. As one who did not sin, He was able to completely take humanity's sins upon Himself and fully become the perfect sacrifice. When Jesus, God's righteous Son, died on the cross, the curtain concealing the most Holy Place ripped in two. When I accept and trust in Jesus' sacrificial death to cover my sins, God sees me as righteous; and I have access to the presence of the Holy God.

10. *What does it mean to make atonement?*

11. *How has God made a way to deal with sin today?*

12. *When have you experienced reconciliation, and how did it impact your life?*

Into God's Presence

God has a plan to deal with sin so we might be reconciled to Him. The sacrificial system illustrates that blood from an unblemished life can cover over sin. Jesus, the righteous Son of God, offered a perfect sacrifice that fully satisfies the requirements.

► *God offers forgiveness and reconciliation to those who acknowledge and deal with their sin. Commit to spending time with God this week to discuss this important topic.*

I will meet with God on _____ at _____.
(day of week) (time)

KEY VERSE

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. —Leviticus 16:16 KJV

In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the tent of meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness.

—Leviticus 16:16 NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of March 30 through April 6

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Psalm 96—Enter God's Courts with an Offering.
- Tues.** 1 Peter 3:18–22—Christ's Suffering and Exaltation.
- Wed.** Isaiah 52:13–53:3—The Suffering Servant.
- Thurs.** Isaiah 53:4–12—Light out of Anguish.
- Fri.** Mark 10:35–45—A Ransom for Many.
- Sat.** Hebrews 9:23–10:4—Christ in Heaven on Our Behalf.
- Sun.** Hebrews 10:11–14, 19–25—Confidence in God's Presence.