

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

A Meditation on Leviticus 16

The Day of Atonement was the most important day of the year for Israel. It was the day in which God's wrath was averted for all the sins of all the people that were committed the previous year, so that God's presence and blessing would remain with his covenant people.

Instructions for the Day of Atonement began when "The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died" (Lev. 16:1). This is a sober reminder that entering the presence of God is something that needed to be done "with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:18-29). The reference to God being a "consuming fire" is not to be understood metaphorically, but literally, as we'll see shortly.

If you read Leviticus 8-9, you will see again and again that God specifically commands how all Israel, including Aaron and his sons, were to approach His holy presence. Detailed instructions for consecration and offerings were to be followed to the letter "as the LORD commanded." This phrase is repeated in various forms for obvious emphasis (see Lev. 8:4, 9, 13, 17, 21, 29, 36; 9:7, 10, 21).

These commands were meticulously followed. "Then Aaron came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings... and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces" (9:22-24). What a glorious sight! What a terrifying sight!

Juxtaposed to this account is the death of Aaron's two sons. "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD" (10:1-2). Aaron's sons offered "unauthorized fire" which the LORD "had not commanded them." This presumption cost the brothers their lives. Notice that in both accounts "fire" came out from before the LORD (9:24; 10:2). In the first account it consumed the offerings, in the second it consumed the sons. It behooves us to remember that our God is a consuming fire. Therefore, we must worship Him in spirit and truth, *as He commands*. Any other worship is simply unacceptable.

In light of this context, is it any wonder that Aaron's instructions for the Day of Atonement begin with a warning? "The LORD said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron your brother *not* to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat" (vs.2). If God manifests His presence and Aaron is not ready he too will be consumed.

Only the High Priest could represent the people on this day. But before he can represent the people, he needs to be ceremonially clean himself. Aaron did this by taking a bath and then dressing in humble attire (vs. 4), rather than the beautiful garments that the priest usually wore. Then "Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house" (vs. 6). Some of the blood of the bull was to be sprinkled on the front of the mercy seat with his finger seven times (vs. 14).

For the sins of the people, two male goats were chosen. Aaron cast lots to determine which would be killed as a sin offering, and which would be presented alive as the scapegoat (Azazel, ESV). The goat for the sin offering was to be killed and its blood sprinkled before the mercy seat, like the blood of the bull was. With this blood, Aaron would also make atonement for the Holy Place, the tent of meeting (vs. 16) and the altar (vs. 18). As the author of Hebrews observed "under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22).

Next, Aaron would present the live goat. He would "lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness" (Lev. 16:21-22).

The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur in Hebrew) is a drama which illustrates who Jesus is and what he has done for us. He is our High Priest, who entered the Holy Place with his *own* blood to atone for our sins. Like the scapegoat, all our sins were placed on His head. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

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