

Leviticus 16:2-34 • Into the Holy of Holies

Introduction

Few businesses these days let you through their employees' entrance without an identification badge. "Authorized Personnel Only" signs quickly inform us that access is restricted. In the government and military branches, some places are "Top Secret" or "Restricted Access." The penalties for violating such restrictions are often severe.

The tabernacle of the Israelites was a highly restricted area. Only Aaron and his descendants were allowed inside the tabernacle to offer sacrifices. (Aaron was a Levite—that is, a descendant of Jacob's son Levi. To be a priest, one must be a Levite. On the other hand, not all Levites were priests. Only a particular family of Levites, the Kohathites, could become priests. Other Levites, however, were involved in the maintenance and transport of the tabernacle.) Penalties for violating access to the tabernacle and its contents were so severe as to result in leprosy or death. Certain rituals inside the tabernacle were so specific that improper administration likewise resulted in death (Leviticus 10:1-7).

The tabernacle was a restricted area for the Israelites because God's presence was there. God's presence is one of holiness. Man's presence is one of unholiness. For man to approach God, it must take place on God's terms. Thus, the severe restrictions for entering into the presence of God.

Chapter 16 focuses on the nature and condition of entering into the presence of the Holy One, and establishes the pattern which would ultimately be fulfilled through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

²The 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. ³Aaron shall enter the holy place with this: with a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ⁴He 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.

⁵He shall take from the congregation of the sons of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering. ⁶Then Aaron shall offer the bull for the sin offering which is for himself, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household. ⁷He shall take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the doorway of the tent of meeting. ⁸Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat. ⁹Then Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the LORD fell, and make it a sin offering. ¹⁰But 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.

[Read v.2-10]

Q: To what part of the tabernacle is verse 2 referring?

A: Verse 2 is referring to the most restricted place in the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies. The tabernacle itself enclosed a courtyard with the laver for washing and the altar for offerings. An inner set of curtains enclosed "the holy place" in which there were three items: the golden candlestick, the table of showbread and the altar of incense. Behind the altar of incense was a thick veil that separated off a small area called the Holy of Holies. Inside the Holy of Holies was the ark of the covenant, upon which rested the mercy seat and the cherubim. God's presence rested on the mercy seat.

Q: Why do you think God called the covering on the ark "the mercy seat" if the penalty for unauthorized entry into the Holy of Holies was so severe?

A: Because the attribute of God's mercy does not mean the absence of His holiness. Sin is a deadly serious matter to God, for it is what separates man from God. Therefore, sin is an issue that man must acknowledge about himself and reckon with. The mercy seat represented where sins were acknowledged and forgiven, not ignored and appeased.

Q: In verse 3, in what order are Aaron's offerings made, and why?

A: The sin offering is made first, then the burnt, or trespass offering. The sin offering is made first because it acknowledges that mankind is by nature sinful. The burnt offering acknowledges his willful sins.

Q: In verse 4, is there a difference in how Aaron is dressed as opposed to the description in Exodus 39?

A: Very much so. The extremely ornate, formal priestly garments described in Exodus 39 are not worn on this occasion. Instead, the garments, though still remaining holy, are common dress.

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Q: How does Aaron's garments in verse 4 represent the person of Jesus Christ?

A: Christ was the Holy One "dressed" as a common man

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:5-8

Application

- *When you come before God in worship or prayer, what is the proper attitude to take?*
- *Why is it so easy to forget that when we come before God, we are coming into His holy presence?*

Q: Why are two goats brought for a sin offering?

A: One would be sacrificed, the other would be set free. Which goat was set free was determined by casting lots.

Q: In verse 6, what is significant about Aaron making an offering "for himself"?

A: In order to make a worthy offering, Aaron must himself be made clean, for to enter into the Holy of Holies with sin or guilt would result in immediate death. (In later years, the High Priest had a rope tied around his ankle in case of his death, for no one could go in and retrieve the body without himself dying. With a rope, they could pull out the body of the High Priest.)

Q: Based upon what you know about Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, how does He fulfill the various aspects of this sacrifice?

A: Christ Himself represents (1) the High Priest making the sacrifice, a common man without sin; (2) the sacrifice itself (the goat and the ram whose blood is shed for a sacrifice for sins); and (3) a scapegoat for which the sins are removed from the camp (mankind). (For further description of how Christ fulfills these roles, read Hebrews 9:1 – 10:10.)

Application: *How does the picture of the High Priest entering into the Holy of Holies affect your view of the person of Jesus Christ?*

¹¹“Then Aaron shall offer the bull of the sin offering which is for himself and make atonement for himself and for his household, and he shall slaughter the bull of the sin offering which is for himself.

¹²He shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring it inside the veil. ¹³He shall put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, otherwise he will die.

¹⁴Moreover, he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.

¹⁵“Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. ¹⁶He shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and thus he shall do for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their impurities. ¹⁷When he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, no one shall be in the tent of meeting until he comes out, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household and for all the assembly of Israel. ¹⁸Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat and put it on the horns of the altar on all sides. ¹⁹With his finger he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it seven times and cleanse it, and from the impurities of the sons of Israel consecrate it.

²⁰“When he finishes atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall offer the live goat. ²¹Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness. ²²The goat shall bear

[Read v.11-28]

Application: Aren't you glad you don't have to go through all this tortuous ritual today? Why do you think God designed it to be so specific and complicated?

Q: In verses 15-17, atonement is being made for what reason and for whom?

A: Aaron is making atonement for his own sins, his family's, and the sins of “*all the assembly of Israel.*” The previous sacrifices were much more specific in nature. This sacrifice, the law of atonement, was meant to cover **all** sins; that is, sins unknown, sins committed inadvertently, and sins that were individual as well as national in nature.

Q: What is uniquely different about Aaron's actions in verse 21?

A: He is to openly confess **all** the sins of the people. The key words are “confess” and “all.”

Q: How does the scapegoat represent the person of Jesus Christ?

A: Through Him, all our sins are removed and “sent away.”

on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.

²³“Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting and take off the linen garments which he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. ²⁴He shall bathe his body with water in a holy place and put on his clothes, and come forth and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people and make atonement for himself and for the people. ²⁵Then he shall offer up in smoke the fat of the sin offering on the altar.

²⁶“The one who released the goat as the scapegoat shall wash his clothes and bathe his body with water; then afterward he shall come into the camp. ²⁷But the bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp, and they shall burn their hides, their flesh, and their refuse in the fire. ²⁸Then the one who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body with water, then afterward he shall come into the camp.

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; ³⁰for 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. ³¹It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute.

³²“So the priest who is anointed and ordained to serve as priest in his father’s place shall make atonement: he shall thus put on the linen garments, the holy garments, ³³and make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar. He shall also make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. ³⁴Now you shall have this as a permanent statute, to make atonement for the sons of Israel for all their sins once every year.”

And just as the LORD had commanded Moses, so he did.

[Read v.29-34]

Q: What is unique about this offering?

A: It is to be done once a year, and therefore called the “Day of Atonement.” Today, this holy event is called *Yom Kippur*. It is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, and the only one that requires fasting. Its purpose is to acknowledge and confess personal as well as national sins. It occurs in September-October.

Application

- *Why do you think the Jews do not currently celebrate the Day of Atonement as they did in Moses’ day?*
- *Why do we Christians not officially recognize the Day of Atonement...or do we?*
- *Why do you think God established the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament?*
- *How has this study helped you appreciate God’s plan through the ages?*

Final Application

When you pray, into what part of the tabernacle are you entering, and why are you allowed to enter?