

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 12 LEVITICUS

I. BACKGROUND

Leviticus is considered the "Third Book of Moses." It comprises many of the laws given by God to Moses during the Israelites one year encampment at Sinai. The title "Leviticus" comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew book (the "Septuagint"). The word means "relating to the Levites." The Levites were the tribe of Israel that constituted the priesthood. In Hebrew the book is called "Vayyiqra" which is the first word in the Book. The word is translated "And he called."

The book covers the five main Hebrew offerings (Ch 1-7), details of the office of priest (Ch 8-10), laws of cleanliness (Ch 11-15), the day of atonement and worship (Ch 16-17), various moral laws (Ch 18-20), regulations for priests and feasts (Ch 21-24:9), punishments for sins/crimes (Ch 24:10-24:23), timing laws for jubilee, land, etc. (Ch 25), blessings and curses (Ch 26), and regulations for offerings (Ch 27).

In the midst of this book are two chapters that we single out for particular focus: chapter ten, with the story of Nadab and Abihu and chapter sixteen, with instructions on the Day of Atonement.

II. Nadab and Abihu (Ch 10)

The story of Nadab and Abihu is worth extra focus and attention because some have used it in Christian circles to teach a legalism. ("Legalism" as a theological term references a salvation/satisfaction as something resulting from what you do/earn as opposed to faith alone.) The story is found in Leviticus 10.

The story in the first two verses sets the stage for the legalistic argument:

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD).

From this many have taught that it is what you do that determines your standing before God. This teaching flies in the face of clear biblical doctrine and teaching. Additionally, it is not a full and fair rendering of the Nadab and Abihu story itself. Let's look deeper.

As an initial note, Moses addresses Aaron and the two remaining brothers of Nadab and Abihu in verses 6 and following. In those we read an indication that Nadab and Abihu may have been drunk when working before God. As Moses comments on the proper way for the remaining brothers to behave, he adds in verse nine that "You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the Tent of Meeting, or you will die." This indication shows us the attitudes behind the actions were in play, and not merely a zapping of the boys for an error before the Lord.

Further indication of this is found in the remainder of the chapter. The two remaining brothers (Eleazar and Ithamar) are given very clear instructions about how they are to consume the sacrifices. The brothers fail to do so as directed. The brothers, however, are not zapped. Rather the text shows that their hearts were seeking to please God even though their actions did not.

III. Day of Atonement

Once a year, the Hebrews were to have a day of atonement. This was a day when the sins of the people were to be atoned for before the Lord by certain animal sacrifices. The Hebrew for this is Yom (day) Kippur (of atonement). It is still celebrated among Jews today, though in a different fashion, today. The reason most often given for why the Jews do not celebrate with sacrifices as instructed in Leviticus today is because there is no Temple (nor for that matter, Tabernacle) for the sacrifices.

As Christians, we believe that the real sacrifice that atoned for our sins was the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. Hence we no longer celebrate this commanded sacrifice. Instead we see in it a foreshadowing of the truly effective sacrifice of Christ.

Both Old and New Testament writers are clear that the blood of animals would never in itself atone for the sins of man. In other words, when I sin and mar the image of God in me, it is never adequate to kill an innocent animal and claim that the death cleanses me of my sin. The cleansing for my sin comes from the death of a human substitute (Jesus), not an animal. With that in mind, let's look at how God foreshadows the atoning death of Christ with the required Hebrew Day of Atonement.

A. This was the one day each year when Aaron (or after Aaron, the High Priest) was to enter the Holy of Holies (the dwelling place of God Most High). The atonement for the people must come before God himself as High Priest on behalf of the people (16:1-2).

B. Aaron is instructed to wear special garments and wash himself before entering into God's presence. To enter God's presence dressed as an ordinary man or in an unclean status would make a High Priest unfit for being before the presence of the almighty (16:3-4).

C. Aaron was to see to two sets of sacrifices, one for himself/household and one for the people. The sacrifice for Aaron and his household was for a

ceremonial cleansing for Aaron before Aaron could seek cleansing for the people (16:5-6).

D. Aaron was to have two goats to atone for the Israelites. After casting lots, Aaron was to slaughter one goat as an atoning sacrifice for the people (16:15-16). Aaron was then to take the second goat and place his hands on it, symbolically placing the sins of the people onto the goat himself. The goat was then driven out from the midst of the people to die alone outside the camp in a solitary place in the desert (16:20-22). From this we get the term "scapegoat."

E. The blood from the sacrifices was sprinkled on the ark of the covenant's cover. This was to be blood in the very presence of God himself.

F. In essence, the day of atonement flows as follows:

1. God made man to be in fellowship with God.
2. Man sinned and fell from this fellowship.
3. The correct and just result of sin is death.
4. Rather than kill man outright, God worked out a redemption plan.
5. In this redemption plan, God himself would suffer the death that man was to die.
6. For this death by God to be successful (i.e. to meet an unchanging God's justice) the death must be a human death with the human's sins in play.
7. God brought this about by becoming human and taking on the sins of the world at Calvary.
8. The resurrection was possible because of Jesus' perfection and divinity.
9. In setting up an earthly example of God's divine kingdom, God instituted symbolic examples of what would later be a reality in Christ.(Heb 8:5).

G. So consider the symbolism that finds its reality in Christ. Like the Day of Atonement's activities, we see in the life and death of Christ, true atonement for sins:

10. Christ is our High Priest (Heb. 4:24).
11. Christ goes behind the curtain separating the Holy of Holies and goes into the ACTUAL presence of God (not just an earthly image) (Heb. 6:19-20).
12. Christ himself is pure and clean before he approaches God (Heb. 7:26).
13. Christ needs no sacrifice to purify himself, and Christ himself is the sacrifice for the people (Heb. 7:27).
14. Christ is the scapegoat who has the sins of the people on his head and is driven out from the camp and the people.
15. Christ's blood goes before the very throne of God. (Heb. 9:12).
16. God's justice is met fully once and for all by the death of Christ (Heb. 9:23-28; 10:10).
17. The curtain secluding the Holy of Holies is ripped in Jesus (Heb. 10:19-20; Mk 15:38).
18. Our fellowship with God is fully restored by the death of Christ. (Heb. 10:22-23).