

Leviticus: Be Holy, For I the Lord Your God Am Holy

In Exodus God fashioned from the descendants of Abraham a people of His own choosing. In the first half of Leviticus, He goes to great lengths to establish the point that sin is serious; blood is life and, therefore, sacred; and blood is required for atonement for sin. Simply stated, Israel is taught that sin calls life into account. Leviticus records the complex structure which God provided Israel to deal with their sins. The reader should also note that the Old Testament methodology had to deal with sin perpetually; it was never a finished process. Nevertheless, the reality of sin, the seriousness of sin, and a temporary remedy for it was revealed to this unruly body of people that God gathered to Himself out of Egypt.

In addition to all the daily offerings and various irregular offerings that kept the Tabernacle busy, one day was set aside for all of Israel to reflect upon their sins and their relationship to God, the Day of Atonement. On that day the text reveals that "the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord (Lev. 16:30)." Furthermore, on that day the people were to do no work and were to "afflict their souls" (to fast and, perhaps, to reflect). The importance of observing this Sabbath-like rite is clear, "For any person who is not afflicted in soul on that same day shall be cut off from his people (Lev. 23:29)."

Chapter 16 records the complex ritual that the priest went through to make atonement. It involved, among other things, body washing for the priest, holy garments, blood, and a scapegoat. Each of these elements, like so many other Old Testament figures, is a shadow of true realities to come in the New Testament. The full body washing is a foreshadow of New Testament baptism that washes away sins (Acts 2:38), the holy garments can be seen as alluding to putting on Christ when the sinner is baptized (Galatians 3:27), the sacrificial blood is a precursor for the blood of Christ which will cleanse the human soul (Hebrews 9:11-14), and the scapegoat symbolizes Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by whom the sins of the world are carried away (John 1:29).

The Day of Atonement was to take care of any sins that all the other sacrifices may have failed to remedy. It taught Israel his sin was a particularly thorny problem that could not be remedied easily and it focused them to a single day each year for the sole purpose of dealing with it. It would prepare them for that great day when God would deal with sin in a complete and permanent way, Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

All these facets of the Old Covenant were about a great deal more than rules to follow or rituals to perform when Israel when they failed to follow those rules. It promised them unimaginable and, we might add, underserved blessings. God declared to Israel, "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments... then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees... their fruit. ... You shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. I will give peace in the land... and none will make you afraid. ... The sword will not go through your land... Your enemies... shall fall by the sword before you (Lev. 26:3-

8)." And, of course, above all else, they would receive forgiveness of sins. But, the Lord also said, "... if you do not obey Me... and if you despise my statutes... I will appoint terror over you, wasting disease and fever shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart... You shall sow your seed in vain... and you shall be defeated by your enemies... And after all this, if you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins (Lev. 26:15-17)." Israel was called to trust God in both His promises and His warnings.

What was the purpose of all these commands and rituals, all these promises of untold blessings and warnings of grave punishments? Was God capricious in His pronouncements, toying with Israel like a cat toys with a mouse? Was He trying to set up arbitrary rules to see if He could bully a group of people to follow them? Of course not. He was trying to give to man the best that could be given, an image of Himself. Obeying God's laws would help Israel to be more like Him. Under the New Covenant, God will create a new man out of the old (Ephesians 4:20-24) and transform him into His own image (2 Corinthians 3:18), just as it was supposed to be from the beginning (Genesis 1:26). For now Israel would have to be content with the explanation and admonition, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy (Lev. 18:2)." Unfortunately, as we shall soon see, this generation would have none of it.