

The Day of Atonement



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Leviticus 16, Lev. 23:27–32, Deut. 19:16–21, Matt. 18:23–35, Isa. 6:1–6.

Memory Text: “Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities underfoot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (*Micah 7:18, 19, NASB*).

The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, as revealed in Leviticus 16, is the most solemn Old Testament ritual. It is deliberately placed in the heart of the book of Leviticus, which is itself at the center of the Five Books of Moses, in order to help to illustrate the “most holy” character of this ritual. Also referred to as the Sabbath of Sabbaths (*Lev. 16:31*), the day calls for the cessation of all work, which is unique for an Israelite yearly festival. This fact places the day squarely within the concept of the Sabbath—it is a time to rest in what God, as Creator and Redeemer, has done (and will do) for us.

This week we will study what happened on the Day of Atonement in the earthly sanctuary, specifically the rituals with the two goats, which helps us to better understand deeper truths regarding salvation and the final disposition of sin.

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 9.

The Yearly Cleansing

Read Leviticus 16:16, 30. What is purged on the Day of Atonement?

Throughout the year, all kinds of sins and ritual impurities were transferred to the sanctuary. With the Day of Atonement comes the time for their removal. There are three main parts to the Day of Atonement:

1. *The purification offering for the priest.* The high priest slaughtered a bull for his sins, making sure that he (the priest) would be clean when entering the sanctuary so that he could perform the ritual to cleanse it.

2. *The purification offering of the goat “for the LORD”* (Lev. 16:8, NKJV). During the year, the purification offerings “brought” all the sins of the Israelites into the sanctuary. The Day of Atonement was the time to remove these sins from the sanctuary; this process was done through the blood of the goat “for the LORD.”

3. *The elimination ritual with the live goat for Azazel.* God wanted to get the sins of His people away from the sanctuary and the camp. Therefore, another live goat was sent out into the desert.

Read Leviticus 16:15. What happened to this goat, and what did it symbolize?

Because there was neither confession of sin nor laying on of hands involved with the goat for the Lord, its blood was not a carrier of sin. Thus, it did not defile; rather, it cleansed. The effect is clearly described in verses 16 and 20. The high priest made atonement with the blood of the Lord’s goat, cleansing the entire sanctuary. The same procedure also effected the purification of the people so that, when the sanctuary was cleansed from all the people’s sins, the people themselves were cleansed too. In this sense the Day of Atonement was unique, for only on this day were both the sanctuary and the people cleansed.

The Day of Atonement was the second stage of a two-phase atonement. In the first phase, during the year, the Israelites were forgiven. Their sins were not blotted out but were entrusted to God Himself, who promised to deal with them. The second phase did not have much to do with forgiveness; the people were already forgiven. In fact, the verb *forgive* does not occur at all in Leviticus 16 or in Leviticus 23:27–32. What this shows us is that the entire plan of salvation deals with more than just the forgiveness of our sins, a point that makes even more sense when understood in the wider context of the great controversy.

Beyond Forgiveness

Read Leviticus 16:32–34. What was the main task of the high priest on the Day of Atonement?

The primary function of the high priest was to mediate between God and humankind. Regarding the sanctuary, he administered the system and performed various rituals of sacrifices and offerings (*Heb.* 8:3). His task on the Day of Atonement was enormous. He performed almost every ritual, except for leading the goat for Azazel into the wilderness, though he gave the command to send the goat away.

On the Day of Atonement, the “great” priest, as he was also called, became a living example of Christ. Just as the attention of God’s people was focused on the high priest, Jesus is the exclusive center of our attention. As the activities of the high priest on earth brought cleansing to the people, Jesus’ work in the heavenly sanctuary does the same for us (*Rom.* 8:34, *1 John* 1:9). Just as the only hope of the people on the Day of Atonement was in the high priest, our only hope is in Christ.

“The blood of Christ, while it was to release the repentant sinner from the condemnation of the law, was not to cancel the sin; it would stand on record in the sanctuary until the final atonement; so in the type the blood of the sin offering removed the sin from the penitent, but it rested in the sanctuary until the Day of Atonement.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 357.

According to Leviticus 16:16–20, the high priest had to enter the Most Holy Place and purge it from the ritual impurities, transgressions, and sins. He then transferred all the iniquities, all the transgressions, and all the sins of Israel onto the live goat and sent them away, through the goat, into the desert. Thus, all the moral faults of Israel were gone. This achieved the unique goal of the Day of Atonement: a moral purification that went beyond forgiveness. There was no new forgiveness necessary on this day. God had already forgiven their sins.

As we struggle with all our God-given strength to put away all sin, how can we learn to lean totally on Christ’s merits as our only hope of salvation?

Azazel

Read Leviticus 16:20–22. What happened to the live goat?

The ritual with the live goat was not an offering. After the lot decided which of the two goats was to be for Yahweh and which one was for Azazel (often translated as “scapegoat”), only the goat for Yahweh is referred to as a purification offering (*vss. 9, 15*). By contrast, the goat for Azazel is called the “live goat.” It was never slain, probably to avoid any idea that the ritual constituted a sacrifice. The live goat came into play *only after* the high priest had finished the atonement of the entire sanctuary (*vs. 20*). This point cannot be overemphasized: the ensuing ritual with the live goat had nothing to do with the actual cleansing of the sanctuary or of the people. They already had been cleansed.

Who or what is Azazel? Early Jewish interpreters identified Azazel as the original angelic sinner and the primary author of evil, even as the leader of evil angels. We know him, of course, as a symbol of Lucifer himself.

The ritual with the live goat was a rite of elimination that accomplished the final disposal of sin. Sin would be brought upon the one responsible for it in the first place and then carried away from the people forever. “Atonement” was made upon it in a punitive sense (*Lev. 16:10*), as the goat carried the ultimate responsibility for sin.

Does Satan then play a role in our salvation, as some falsely charge we teach? Of course not. Satan never, in any way, bears sin for us as a substitute. Jesus alone has done that, and it is blasphemy to think that Satan had any part in our redemption.

The ritual with the live goat finds a parallel in the law of the malicious witness (*Deut. 19:16–21*). The accuser and the accused stand before the Lord, represented by the priests and judges. An investigation is held; and if the accuser is found to be a malicious witness, he shall receive the punishment he intended for the innocent (for example, vicious Haman who put up a gallows for loyal Mordecai).

Thank God again for His merciful forgiveness and the fact that He will remember our sin no more (*Jer. 31:34*). How can we learn not to remember our sins once they are forgiven? Why is it so important for us to do this?

On the Day of Atonement

“Thus in the ministration of the tabernacle, and of the temple that afterward took its place, the people were taught each day the great truths relative to Christ’s death and ministration, and once each year their minds were carried forward to the closing events of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, the final purification of the universe from sin and sinners.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 358.

Read Leviticus 16:29–31 and 23:27–32. What did God expect the Israelites to do on Yom Kippur? How do these principles apply to us today, living as we are in the “antitypical Day of Atonement”?

If someone in ancient Israel did not follow these instructions, he was to be cut off and destroyed (*Lev. 23:29, 30*). The Day of Atonement was truly about nothing less than life and death. It demanded the believer’s complete loyalty to God.

Imagine that someone had confessed his sins during the first phase of atonement during the year (that is, the daily sacrifices), but then did not take the Day of Atonement seriously. By his disregard of what God had planned to demonstrate on this day, such a person proved himself to be disloyal to God.

What this means is that a person who professes faith in God can still lose salvation. As Seventh-day Adventists, we do not believe in once-saved-always-saved, because the Bible does not teach it. We are secure in Christ just as long as we live in faith and surrender to Him, claiming His power for victory when tempted and His forgiveness when we fall.

Read Matthew 18:23–35. What lesson should we take away from this powerful parable?

Isaiah's Personal Yom Kippur

In Isaiah 6:1, Isaiah sees the heavenly King sitting on a throne in the temple, “high and exalted.” The vision is a judgment scene that presents God as coming for judgment (*Isa. 5:16*). Isaiah beholds the true King, identified in the Gospel of John as Jesus Christ (*John 12:41*).

Even though Isaiah was God’s prophet and he called others to repentance, he understood that in God’s presence he was doomed. Confronted with God’s holiness and glory, Isaiah perceived his own sinfulness and also the uncleanness of his people. Holiness and sin are incompatible. Like Isaiah, we all need to come to the conclusion that we cannot pass through the divine judgment on our own. Our only hope is to have a Substitute.

What parallels to the Day of Atonement appear in Isaiah 6:1–6?

The combination of a temple filled with smoke, an altar, judgment, and atonement for sin and uncleanness recalls strongly the Day of Atonement. Isaiah experienced his own “personal Day of Atonement,” as it were.

Functioning like a priest, a seraph (literally “burning one”) took a burning coal from the altar, presupposing some kind of offering, to purge the prophet’s sin. This is an apt image for the cleansing from sin that is possible through the sacrifice of Jesus and His priestly ministry of mediation. Isaiah recognized this as a cleansing ritual, and he kept still as the coal touched his lips. Thereby his “iniquity is taken away” and his “sin is forgiven” (*Isa. 6:7, NASB*). The passive voice in verse 7 shows that forgiveness is granted by the One sitting on the throne. The Judge is also the Savior.

God’s work of cleansing brings us from “Woe is me” to “Here am I, send me.” In other words, understanding the heavenly work on the Day of Atonement leads to a readiness for proclamation because a true understanding leads to assurance and surety. This is because we know that in judgment we have a Substitute, Jesus Christ, whose righteousness alone (symbolized by the blood) will enable us to stand without fear of condemnation (*Rom. 8:1*). Gratitude motivates mission. Acquitted sinners are God’s best ambassadors (*2 Cor. 5:18–20*) because they know what God has delivered them from.

Further Study: "Now the event takes place foreshadowed in the last solemn service of the Day of Atonement. When the ministration in the holy of holies had been completed, and the sins of Israel had been removed from the sanctuary by virtue of the blood of the sin offering, then the scapegoat was presented alive before the Lord; and in the presence of the congregation the high priest confessed over him 'all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat.' Leviticus 16:21. In like manner, when the work of atonement in the heavenly sanctuary has been completed, then in the presence of God and heavenly angels and the hosts of the redeemed the sins of God's people will be placed upon Satan; he will be declared guilty of all the evil which he has caused them to commit."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 657, 658.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Why would any understanding of the plan of salvation be incomplete if it leaves out or minimizes the work of Christ as our High Priest? What does the sanctuary teach us about just how central the work of intercession in the sanctuary is to the plan of salvation? The bulk of an entire New Testament book, Hebrews, is dedicated to the work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. In view of this, just how important is that work?
- ② Someone once wrote that the work of Christ, from His death to His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, is simply part of "God's orderly method" of dealing with the sin problem in a way that will help to answer all questions regarding His justice, fairness, and love. Dwell on the implications of that thought, especially in light of the great controversy and what it teaches us about the grand issues involved in the sordid tragedy of sin.
- ③ Many Seventh-day Adventists were taught about the Day of Atonement in a way that has left them without assurance of salvation. Such a view comes from a false understanding of the purpose of the Day of Atonement. Think about the word *atonement*. What does it mean? How is atonement achieved? Who does the work of atonement? How is it accomplished? How should these answers help us understand why the Day of Atonement is actually good news?

The Lesson in Brief

►Key Text: *Leviticus 16*

►The Student Will:

Know: Grasp the essentials of Day of Atonement typology.

Feel: Sense the importance of the Day of Atonement message.

Do: Choose to participate in the special privileges of God's people on the antitypical Day of Atonement.

►Learning Outline:

I. Know: The Day of Atonement Activities (*Leviticus 16, 23:26–32*)

- Ⓐ The “continual” (*tamid*) sacrifice burned on the altar throughout the Day of Atonement (*Num. 29:11*). What does this teach us about the basis of our acceptance with God during the investigative judgment?
- Ⓑ The blood of the Lord’s goat cleansed the sanctuary from the accumulated record of confessed sins (*Lev. 16:3–19*). How does the antitypical Day of Atonement go beyond forgiveness?
- Ⓒ The scapegoat (or Azazel) represents Satan (*Lev. 16:5–10, 20–23*). Is Satan our “sin-bearer”? Explain. (*See Deut. 19:15–19, Rev. 12:10, 20:10*.)
- Ⓓ Congregational activities were required of ancient Israel during the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16:30, 23:26–32*). How do these apply to the antitypical Day of Atonement?

II. Feel: Assurance in the Judgment

- Ⓐ The Day of Atonement involves repentance, cleansing, and investigative judgment. How can one have joyous assurance of salvation throughout this process?

III. Do: Eyes on Jesus!

- Ⓐ Choose to participate in the privileges of spiritual Israel as you “turn your eyes upon Jesus” during the investigative judgment.

►Summary:

The Day of Atonement services point forward to Christ’s work of investigative judgment in the heavenly sanctuary and reveal the special activities of God’s people during this time.

Learning Cycle

► STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Leviticus 16:29, 30*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Old Testament Day of Atonement rituals prefigure the work of Christ and the responsibilities of His people during the antitypical Day of Atonement.

Just for Teachers: Have you ever wondered or been asked: “Why do Seventh-day Adventists spend so much time studying the Day of Atonement, a topic whose main biblical support is tucked away in a single chapter of an obscure part of the Pentateuch, Leviticus 16?” Consider this observation: Moses organized the entire Pentateuch into a beautiful symmetrical structure and placed Leviticus at the very high point of that structure!

Why was this chapter placed at the center of the Pentateuch? The Day of Atonement was the holiest day of all the year, during which time the holiest person of all Israel (the high priest) went into the holiest place on earth (the Most Holy Place) to perform the holiest work of all (the cleansing of the sanctuary, the work of final atonement). The name “Day of Atonement” in Hebrew is actually *Yom Hakippurim* [plural of intensification of *kippur*], the “Day of [ultimate] Atonement” (*Lev. 23:27*).

Opening Activity: Share with the class the symmetrical structure of the Pentateuch and then ask: What makes the Day of Atonement so central for spiritual Israel during the antitypical Day of Atonement?

Consider This: The antitypical Day of Atonement comprises the climactic period of salvation history (the time of the end). During this period, Christ, the High Priest of the universe, goes into the holiest place in all the universe (the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary) to do the holiest work of all time (the final work of atonement)!

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In this lesson we will look at the typology of the Day of Atonement and its antitypical fulfillment.

I. The Main Rituals of the Day of Atonement

A. The “Daily” Offering (*Review Numbers 29:11 with your class.*)

The “daily” (*tamid*) ministry of the priests was not suspended on the Day of Atonement (*Num. 29:11; see Exod. 30:8, 10*). The people were still constantly dependent upon the blood of the sacrifice and the priestly intercession of incense. The basis of acceptance before God during the antitypical Day of Atonement remains the same as before: the blood of Christ our Substitute and His righteousness imputed to us.

B. The Lord’s Goat (*Review Leviticus 16:3–19 with your class.*)

A number of important truths emerge from the offering of the “Lord’s goat.”

1. Sin-free blood. No hands were laid on the head of the Lord’s goat (vss. 9, 15), and hence, no sin was transferred to it; its blood was “sin-free.” As “sin-free” blood, its function when applied to the sanctuary was not to defile but to cleanse it.

2. Outward movement. The atoning work on the Day of Atonement moved outward, from the Most Holy Place to the courtyard (vss. 15–18), symbolically showing that the blood of the Lord’s goat did not defile the sanctuary but cleansed it.

3. Investigative judgment. The Day of Atonement implied a day of divine investigative judgment. Those who did not “afflict their souls” (literally, “humble themselves” in repentance) on the Day of Atonement would be “cut off,” i.e., come under divine investigative judgment concerning their afterlife (*Lev. 16:29, 31; 23:27, 29, 32*). Modern Jewish theologians recognize this function of the Day of Atonement.

4. Atonement beyond forgiveness. There is no mention of forgiveness (Hebrew *salach*) in Leviticus 16 (or any other passage referring to the Day of Atonement). During the year, God had taken responsibility for the forgiven sins upon Himself, as it were, in the sanctuary. On the Day of Atonement He was able to cleanse the sanctuary as He demonstrated His justice in having forgiven sinners throughout the year.

5. Cleansing. The Day of Atonement involved a work of corporate cleansing for God’s people. (*See Lev. 16:30; Ezek. 36:25–27; Mal. 3:2, 3.*) But note that it is God who takes responsibility for the cleansing of those who allow Him to do this work in their lives.

C. The Scapegoat (Azazel) Ritual (*Review Leviticus 16:5–10, 20–23 with your class.*)

Many lines of biblical evidence support the conclusion that the “scapegoat” (Azazel) ritual points to Satan and not to Christ.

1. Parallelism of personal beings. According to Leviticus 16:8, one of the two goats designated by lots was *leYHWH* “[standing] for [or belonging to] Yahweh,” and the other was *la’aza’zel* “[standing] for [or belonging to]

to] Azazel.” If the first expression “for the Lord” refers to a personal being, Yahweh, then in natural parallelism the second expression “for Azazel” would refer to a personal being in contradistinction to Yahweh, i.e., Satan.

2. Timing. The Azazel ritual takes place after the work of atonement for the sanctuary is already completed (*Lev. 16:20*).

3. Nonsacrificial. Unlike the Lord’s goat, Azazel’s goat is not slain; rather, it is led out alive into the wilderness (*vss. 20–22*). Azazel’s goat is not part of, nor linked with, the sacrifice of the sin offering.

4. Elimination rite. The Azazel ritual is not a sacrificial ritual but an elimination rite. Azazel is the “tote goat”—a “garbage truck,” as it were—to ritually carry the moral “garbage” out of the camp after it has been atoned for.

5. Azazel and the goat demons. Leviticus 17:7 warns the Israelites not to offer sacrifices to the “goat demons” (*ESV, RSV*, Hebrew *se’irim*). Elsewhere in Scripture these “goat demons” are associated with the wilderness (*Isa. 13:21, 34:14, RSV*). Azazel’s goat being led out into the wilderness is thus associated with the demonic powers represented by hairy goats.

6. Revelation 20. The typology of Azazel finds a striking fulfillment in the fate of Satan during the millennium. In a clear allusion to Leviticus 16, John the revelator in Revelation 20:1–3 describes Satan being “bound” (by a chain of circumstances) to the desolate earth (Greek *abyssos*, the same word used for the desolate earth in Jeremiah 4:23).

7. Malicious witness. Satan bears the iniquities of the righteous, not in the sense of being their Savior but as the “accuser of our brothers” (*Rev. 12:10, NIV*). He receives just retribution according to the principle of the malicious witness (*Deut. 19:15–19, Rev. 20:10*).

II. The Activities of the Congregation on the Day of Atonement (*Review Leviticus 23:26–32 with your class.*)

The five activities of the congregation of Israel on the Day of Atonement each have antitypical application for spiritual Israel today:

A. Gather at the Sanctuary for a Holy Convocation (*vs. 27*). “God’s people are now to have their eyes fixed on the heavenly sanctuary” (Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches*, p. 278; compare *Heb. 4:16; 10:19, 20*).

B. Identify With the Offering Made by the Priest (*vs. 27*). See *Heb. 12:22–24*. “One interest will prevail, one subject will swallow up every other—Christ our righteousness.”—Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 259.

C. Refrain From Work (*vss. 28, 30, 31*). See *Heb. 4:3, 9*; Ellen G. White speaks of the “rest of grace.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 928.

D. Afflict (Humble) One’s Soul (*vss. 27, 29, 32*). See *Isa. 58:5–11*. “It is the work of God in laying the glory of man in the dust.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 456.

E. Undergo a Work of Cleansing (*Lev. 16:30*). See *Mal. 3:2, 3; Ezek. 36:25–27*.

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The word for “cleanse” in Daniel 8:14 is *nitsdag*, which has a broad range of meanings, including “cleanse,” “restore,” and “vindicate.” How do each of these meanings match the activities of the high priest on the Day of Atonement?

Thought Questions:

- ① If people living in the antitypical Day of Atonement are not saved on a different basis from those living before this time, why is there a special work of cleansing?
- ② What is the importance of having “atonement” beyond forgiveness, as typified in the Day of Atonement?
- ③ Why is it necessary for Satan to bear the punishment of the sins of the saints whom he has falsely accused?

Application Questions:

- ① What practical application of the five activities of the congregation on the Day of Atonement can be made to our personal lives in the antitypical Day of Atonement?
- ② How does the Day of Atonement judgment message help to give us assurance of salvation?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Look again at the symmetrical structure of the Pentateuch in the introduction of the Learning Cycle for this lesson. Notice how in this structure the key word of Leviticus building up to Leviticus 16 is “blood,” and flowing forth from Leviticus 16 is “holiness.”

Activity: Ask the class to discuss the placement of the Day of Atonement (*Leviticus 16*) right in the heart of the Pentateuch, with blood (“justification”) as its basis and holiness (“sanctification”) as its fruit. How does this illustrate the balanced gospel of assurance in the judgment (saved completely by grace but judged according to works/fruit)?