Sunday School Commentary Lesson

By

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Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16: 11-19

Many who try to read through the Bible hit a roadblock at Leviticus. Most preachers and teachers avoid the book too, making Leviticus one of the most overlooked books in the Bible. That is, until you get to know it better and its theme of holiness.

It's helpful to know that the background of this book. In the sunbaked wilderness of Sinai, Moses wanted to tell the children of Israel why they were there and how they should live. His explanation began in Exodus and continued into Leviticus, where the heart of the matter was revealed. God had chosen Israel as a distinct people to bless the nations, but they were required to be holy.

Leviticus addresses the responsibilities and duties of the Levities in their role as bridges between the people and God. The necessary instructions on how to worship - ceremonies, rituals, sacrifices, washings, offerings, and festivals - are all here, all of them symbols, items, occasions, and events portraying aspects of God's holiness, of human holiness, and of the Holy One to come - the Lord Jesus. The theme of Leviticus is striving to perfect a life of holiness in the fear of God.

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Leviticus 16 represents the climatic and pivotal point of the whole book. The event described would be known later on in Israel as Yom Kippur, the Day Atonement. Here, then, is the single most important day, and most characteristic ritual, in all of the legislation of the Pentateuch. Such a central place did this day hold in the sacred calendar of events that rabbis referred to it simply as Yoma; it was "the day."

The reason this day was esteemed so highly was that it depicted the sacrificial requirements for all sin, as well as the consequent removal of the guilt and remembrance of sins against individuals. For devout Jews, it remains to this day the climax, indeed the crowning event, of the religious year.

Here on the holiest of days, the Day of Atonement, Aaron is to exchange his high priestly clothes for the vestments of an ordinary priest. At the moment when his duties are the most urgent, his garments are the most humble, pointing to the fact that leadership in the community of faith is, at its heart, servant leadership.

All acts of ministry - whether they are performed by ordained clergy or laypeople, whether they are preaching a sermon, officiating at Holy Communion, handing a bowl of soup to a homeless person, teaching Sunday School, listening to a worried friend or standing up for the right in a difficult situation - are acts of service done by people who know what it means to suffer, to fail,
to struggle, to live as less than perfect people. Deeds of mercy are done, in the words of Henri Nouwen, by "wounded healers."

Aaron had to proceed carefully behind the veil or curtain that divided the holy place from the most holy place, but that veil was split from top to bottom when Christ gave the final sacrifice, Matt. 27:51, Mark 15:38. This rending of the veil was interpreted by the author of Hebrews as God's announcement of human freedom now to enter into the divine presence, the way being opened by our Lord's death on the cross, Heb. 10:19-22.

Aaron, also a sinner, had to make atonement for himself first before making atonement for the people. But Christ, being pure and sinless, did not need to offer a sacrifice for himself, Heb. 7:26-28. Thus, mortals, even in the office of high priest, are weak; but how fortunate we are to have One, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who is not affected!

The annual nature of the Day of Atonement with its repetition of the sacrificial ritual is in strong contrast to our Lord's once-for-all sacrifice, Heb. 9:24. By one act of giving his life in death for all people, he has permanently secured forgiveness of sin for all who will claim it.

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