

The Gospel in the Day of Atonement

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the holiest and most solemn day of the year for the practicing Jew, revered with contrition, confession and repentance. But what does this Jewish observance have to do with Christianity? Every year, Yom Kippur pictures man's need for redemption through a substitutionary sacrifice that would one day be ultimately fulfilled in the once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Remembering the Context

Leviticus is often overlooked because of a common misconception that it is an outdated book of arcane rules concerned with moral conformity (see [What are Christians to do With Old Testament Law?](#) on The Village Church website). Though Leviticus does contain law, it is primarily about God's grace to His people.

To set the stage, we must understand that Leviticus finds its place in the context of the Exodus. Enslaved in Egypt, Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites with backbreaking labor reducing their lives to meaningless existence, but God, being rich in love, determined to save His people from slavery that they might be His covenant people (Exod. 1-11). God's people took shelter under the blood of the Passover lamb, and Moses, their mediator, led them out of Egypt, crossing the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land (Exod. 12-19).

While at Mount Sinai, God gave the Law to His people to transform them into a holy nation, blessed in order to be a blessing to all the nations (Exod. 20-24). Their obedience was expected as a response of the gracious initiative God already took to make them His people. They obeyed because they were accepted, not to earn acceptance.

The LORD also gave them the blessing of the tabernacle, which served as God's dwelling place among the Israelites and as a means of grace for His people. God chose the tabernacle and the system of sacrifices as the means for His people to live by grace and forgiveness so that His presence would remain in their midst because people would continually fail to live up to His standard of holiness (Exod. 25-31, 35-40).

The tabernacle consisted of three main areas: the Courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The LORD dwelt in the Most Holy Place to meet with His people. The Courtyard and the Holy Place were used throughout the year for sacrifices, offerings and worship. The Most Holy Place was forbidden,

under the penalty of death, to enter except on Yom Kippur. The priest would enter the Most Holy Place with fear and trembling. Any infraction or misstep in the purification ritual could result in his death.

The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement was the climax of the Old Testament sacrificial system displaying the holiness of God and the depth of humanity's sin. Everything about this day indicated that it was a day of utmost importance. The high priest had unique rituals and special dress with carefully detailed preparation. The whole community abstained from work to reflect on the importance of this day. Leviticus 16 is the main text for understanding the Day of Atonement.

The Imposing Holiness of God

God is majestic, holy, and there is no one like Him. He is to be taken seriously and God's people were to exercise caution to enter His presence. The sons of Aaron, the high priest, treated the Most Holy Place flippantly and died as a result (Lev. 10:1-3), thus Aaron learned the hard way that God had to be approached with care. Aaron was to discard his splendid and ornate garments for this day to wear the clothes of a servant, a simple white linen coat. This stressed the need for humility and reverent posture of the high priest who enters the Most Holy Place.

He was to bathe before putting on the clothes and entering the heart of God's dwelling place. This was an outward sign of the needed inner purity required of the high priest to come into the glorious presence of God. And before he could enter the Most Holy Place, the high priest was to offer a sin offering to atone for himself and his household. All these rituals were to ensure that he was prepared and qualified to minister on behalf of the people.

The curtain of the tabernacle represented a tangible reminder of the separation of God from His people. God would graciously dwell among His people, but there were still restrictions to their interaction. On this day, God chose to take up residence there, and His holy presence was tangible. The High Priest entered as if he had the right to be there. God graciously commanded that the high priest bring coals of fire and sweet incense to create a smoke covering to serve as a

veil between God and himself. Looking on God directly would result in death. The smoke screen made it possible for a sinful man to draw near to the presence of God.

It should be obvious that all the preparation, care and attention to detail were meant to address the problem: A sinful people were offensive to a holy God, which cannot be ignored or wished away; it must be dealt with. Overlooking sin is not possible; it would jeopardize His purity and character.

The Pervasive Destructive Nature of Sin

Scripture uses a wide variety of terms to describe the pervasive, destructive nature of sin. Sin is described as impurity, failure, rebellion, transgressions, missing the mark, trespass, iniquity, wickedness, uncleannesses and unfaithfulness, to name a few. The nature of sin is complex, and it is impossible to capture the entirety of the concept in a single word. In Leviticus 16 four different words are used to describe the sin of God's covenant people: "uncleannesses" (Lev. 16:16, 19), "transgressions" (Lev. 16:16, 21), "iniquities" (Lev. 16:21-22) and "sins" (Lev. 16:16, 21, 30, 34). All four words are plural to show the vastness, frequency and utter depravity of humanity.

"Uncleannesses" speaks to the pollution of sin. Pollution brings together what ought to be kept apart. To pollute soil, air or water is to blend into them foreign materials – like machine oil – so that these natural resources no longer nourish or delight well. Similarly, the introduction of sin into the natural human relation to God adds in a foreign agent; it corrupts by an addition of impurities.

"Transgressions" speaks to the willful, disloyal rebellion of man against God. It is a breaking away from God. It describes the nature of sin where men and women know what is right and good and deliberately choose what is wrong and destructive. God provides law and order to maintain a good, peaceful relationship and transgressors revolt and brazenly break ties with God.

"Iniquities" speaks to the religious and ethical wrongdoing and the wickedness of humanity when we pervert that which is intended for good for our own selfish, manipulative purposes. Iniquities refers to the fact that men and women are not content to just turn their backs on God and walk away – we want to destroy anything in our path on our way out.

"Sins" is the catchall word for any attitude or action, whether trivial or paramount, unintentional or intentional, commission or omission, that is offensive to a holy God. Essentially, if anything is left out of uncleanness, transgression or iniquity, the term "sins" covers it.

The use of multiple words to describe sin shows the comprehensive fallen nature of man and the serious nature of our problem, which heighten the grace of God's provision. The pollution of man needs cleansing; the rebellion needs peace; wickedness needs pardoning; and our utter failure needs forgiveness. The solution will not come without great cost.

The Sacrifice

God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exod. 34:6). It is important to see that God initiated the gracious provision of Yom Kippur. He came and used Moses to give instruction to His covenant people on how to make amends for their sin. The sacrifice offered was substitutionary, atoning and comprehensive.

For the Day of Atonement, two healthy and valuable goats without defect were chosen – to show the necessity of perfection in the sacrifice and the seriousness of sin – for the sin offering on behalf of the people. These goats were actually one sin offering with two aspects (Lev. 16:5). One goat was to be slaughtered as a sacrifice, and the other goat was to be cast out into the wilderness. Leviticus 17:11 says that "the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life." The blood was drained and sprinkled on the mercy seat to make atonement for God's people and then throughout the tabernacle to cleanse it. The sin of the people was such that it even polluted the house of God (Lev. 16:16).

The sacrificial goat was significant because it was the bloody victim, a life given in exchange for another, that made atonement for the sin of the people. "Atonement" is a rich word that means to fully pay the necessary price, and in God's economy, blood is the price to be paid for cleansing and forgiveness. Thus, the slaughtered goat died so that the people could live. This sacrifice highlights theologically man's need for propitiation, the sacrifice that satisfies God's just wrath against sin. Humanity deserved to die a violent death, but the goat was a substitute. The penalty for sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and the sacrificed goat absorbed the just penalty due God's people.

One of the unique elements about the Day of Atonement was the role of the scapegoat. The high priest was instructed to take two goats, and lots were cast to determine which goat was to be slaughtered and which was to be cast out into the wilderness. After the first goat was slaughtered, the high priest laid both hands on the head of the second goat. He confessed all the sins of Israel over it, and then the scapegoat was cast out of the camp and into the wilderness. The sanctuary was cleansed;

the sacrifice was offered to pay the penalty for the people; and now the sins of the people were symbolically carried away. The scapegoat never returned and likely died in the wilderness. Psalm 103:11-12 says that God is so loving that for those who trust in Him, He removes our sin and transgression as far as the east is from the west. The scapegoat highlights theologically man's need for expiation, the removal of guilt and impurity.

The Fall left humanity with two grave problems. Because of sin, men and women are guilty before a holy God and deserving of God's wrath and punishment, and humanity became polluted with the taint of sin. The Day of Atonement both propitiated and expiated God's covenant people, the sacrificial goat paying the price of death in place of God's people and the scapegoat removing the tarnishing effects of sin.

The Ultimate Day of Atonement

Yom Kippur was a temporary, partial solution until the fullness of time had come. The Day of Atonement was a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. The high priest, the slaughtered goat and the scapegoat were shadows to point to the ultimate Day of Atonement when Jesus Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for us on the cross. Jesus is the Great High Priest who offered on behalf of His people the perfect once for all sacrifice, the Slaughtered Lamb whose blood was poured to pay the penalty of death and the Scapegoat who died outside the city taking away the sin of the world (Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10; 13:12). Jesus the perfect, spotless and precious Lamb, who knew no sin, God made to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21).

Hebrews 9:11-10:18 teaches that:

- Jesus entered the Most Holy Place not by the blood of goats or bulls but by His own blood securing eternal redemption (Heb. 9:11-12)
- Jesus is without blemish and therefore able to purify our conscience to serve God (Heb. 9:14)
- Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance (Heb. 9:15)
- Redemption and forgiveness come at the price of blood (Heb. 9:18-22)
- Christ is offered as the perfect sacrifice once for all (Heb. 9:23-28)
- The former system of sacrifice was a shadow pointing to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 10:1-18).

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were the climax in the story of atonement, achieving for God's covenant people a permanent forgiveness. Christ paid the penalty for sin, turned away God's wrath (Rom. 3:25-26; Gal. 3:13) and set us free (1 Cor. 6:20; Gal. 5:1). Believers have been reconciled to God,

and we can be forgiven and cleansed of all unrighteousness (Eph. 2:16; 1 John 1:9). At His death, the curtain of the temple, which represented the separation and restrictions of God from His people, was torn in two, from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45).

With the perfect sacrifice of Christ, once for all, the real curtain and the metaphorical curtain are ripped open. Every believer in Christ has direct and unhindered access to the presence of God. This should cause our hearts to rejoice because now we can boldly come to the Father, enter the Most Holy Place, where Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are interceding on our behalf (Heb. 10:19; Rom. 8:26, 34). The encounter of the presence of God was limited to the high priest once a year with fear and trembling, and now it is offered daily to all God's children with joy and eager anticipation.

Jesus is both the high priest and the sacrifice on the altar, both the lamb that pours out its blood and the scapegoat that carries the sin of the people far away from the camp. He lived a perfect life to offer the perfect death, and by His stripes we are healed, forgiven and made clean. He tore down the dividing wall to give us intimate access to the Father and achieved for us redemption, reconciliation and restoration.

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