

# *The Day of Atonement*

**A Message Offered by  
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*Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.*

*Leviticus 16:21-22 NRSV*

*And the Lord said to Moses: “Now the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you: you shall deny yourselves and present the Lord's offering by fire; and you shall do no work during that entire day; for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement on your behalf before the LORD your God.”*

*Leviticus 23:26-28 NRSV*

In every relationship involving at least one human being there is going to be some tension, wrongdoing, difficulty, misunderstanding, and hurt. It's inevitable. Over time these things drive us away from the one we love. In unhealthy relationships all the crud that comes between the parties just stays there, hardens, and drives them apart forever. In healthy relationships the parties clear the air regularly and reconcile through confession and forgiveness. The Biblical word for this everyday process of restoring a broken relationship is “atonement”—literally, “at-one-ment.” It's about two becoming one again.

It's one thing to reconcile with another person in a marriage or a family, but how do we do that with God? When we have done wrong and hurt God, how do we make things right again? In some religions, ancient Egyptian for example, there's nothing you can do. You can't make things right again. Your sins stayed with you until you died and you hoped that your good deeds outweighed the bad ones and more than made up for your sins. In other religions, ancient Canaanite for example, the only way to appease the gods was by sacrificing your own child as a sign of penitence and demonstration of self-mortification.

The God we worship has never wanted us to live either way, unable able to leave our sin behind or wondering what we will have to give up in order to please him. In fact, the God we worship, known to the ancient Hebrews as *Yahweh*, wants to be at-one with us even more than we want to be at-one with him.

So God has shown us the way to clean the slate. In ancient Israel this was done once a year, on the Holiest day of the year, *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Tishri, according to the Jewish Calendar. Today is the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Tishri. Yom Kippur begins tonight.

Jim Fleming, from the Biblical Resource Center in Israel, describes the ancient observance of Yom Kippur: set out in Leviticus Chapter 16. [Note: the following section comes from a privately published notebook available through the Biblical Resource Center]

*The Day of Atonement starts at sunset with a 24-hour fast from work and food. Hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over Israel are gathered in Jerusalem for the ceremony, which takes place the next morning in the Temple. At dawn, laying aside his elaborate, royal garb, the High priest dons a simple white robe. From a flock of specially raised goats, he chooses two males. Lots are drawn to select one to atone for the temple and one to atone for the people.*

*The High Priest brings the first goat to the altar. There it is sacrificed and its blood is carefully collected and taken into the Holy of Holies. This chamber was entered only once a year, only for this occasion, only by the High Priest. The Holy of Holies was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. On top of the Ark was the Mercy Seat, the seat of judgment, the symbolic seat of God's presence. The priest sprinkled the blood of the goat on the Mercy Seat. This was the method God prescribed to restore the Temple to a holy state, fit for God's presence.*

*After this the second goat is presented. The High Priest and his assistants lead that goat away from the Temple, east across the Kidron Valley to the top of the Mount of Olives. Looking back toward the Temple and the presence of God, the Priest places his hands on the head of the goat and confesses the sins of the people, symbolically putting those sins on the head of the goat. Then he ties a red scarf or ribbon around the goat's neck in keeping with the image in Isaiah 1:18: "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Bearing the sins of the people, the goat is led deep into the desert wilderness and set free, never to return. The goat was called Azazel, that is, "the scapegoat."*

*The symbolism of this system worked well when the Israelites were nomads wandering in the desert: you release the goat one day, you move on the next; the goat and your sins are left behind for good. But once the people lived in cities and became tied to particular locations, there was the real possibility that the scapegoat might come wandering back into town wearing the red scarf the next day. The whole meaning of the rite would be lost. It would be like your sins coming back to haunt you.*

The priests needed to devise a better system. Fleming explains what they did:

*One priest is left standing on top of the Mount of Olives with a white flag while another priest leads the goat away. The people watch expectantly from the Temple. That priest leads the goat a day's journey into the desert. Just before sunset, when he comes to a cliff he blindfolds the goat with the scarf and pushes it backwards over the edge -- eliminating the possibility that the goat -- and the sin that had been laid on him -- could ever return.*

*Lookouts positioned on high points along the goat's wilderness route monitor the goat's progress. When it has finally been sacrificed each spotter in succession raises a white flag. And when the people waiting in the Temple courts look across the valley to the priest atop the Mount of Olives and see his white flag come up, they rejoice with shouting and singing. Their sins have been taken from them for one more year. This Yom Kippur ritual helps us understand the saying, "as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." Ps 103:12*

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to take your sin and guilt, simply tie it up, and get rid of it once a year? Wouldn't it be great to watch your sin wandering off into the desert -- or a corn field -- knowing you were never going to see it again?

I had to laugh when I first learned about the problem the Israelites had with the goat wandering back into the city, bringing the sins of the people back. Isn't that the way sin works with us? When we've done something wrong and hope it will just go away, or when we try to cover it up or make it right on our own, the sin and guilt keeps coming back, doesn't it? It's never gone for good.

St. Paul talks about laying aside "the sin that clings so close." (Heb 12:1). Sin reminds me of the little balls of rubber cement I'd make in elementary school. Do you remember that stuff? I'd flick and flick and couldn't get the little balls off my hands. I had to ask someone else to pick them off. Do you ever struggle with anything like that? Something that you did long ago, that keeps sticking with you, no matter what you do? That's what happens when we try to deal with sin on our

own: we find that we can't get rid of it. There's nothing we can do on our own to make it go away. We have to get God involved, to *take away* our sin.

We shouldn't be shocked that blood was shed as part of the process of atonement. Reconciliation always involves sacrifice. Walls don't come down without effort. Bridges aren't built without commitment. Forgiveness comes at a price. God was merciful in setting the price so low. He said, "You've been lying, cheating, stealing, and sinning against me all year, here's what you're going to do: take two goats...." *Two goats*, what a deal! Do two goats make up for a year of sin for one person, much less an entire nation? Of course not. But in God's mercy, he accepted it, because the last thing God would want is us walking around thinking there is no way we can get right with him.

So put yourself in the place of the people gathered in the temple in Jerusalem on Yom Kippur. You've traveled many miles to be there. You've been fasting and praying all night and day. You've been recounting your sin and asking God for forgiveness. And then just as the sun is fading and your spirit is growing weak, you see the white flag go up. It's like a sign that your year-long battle with God is over. Peace has been declared. Imagine the joy you feel knowing that you and God are on the same side once again.

That was the ancient Day of Atonement. Jesus, of course, changed everything.

In mercy for a fallen world, God said, "Here's what I'm going to do to make our relationship right again, *once and for all time*." Instead of requiring a sacrifice from you, I'll pay it with my own blood. Remember what Caiaphas, the High Priest, the one who had put the sins of the people on the scapegoat year after year, said of Jesus, "it is better that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." (Jn 11:50). On Good Friday Caiaphas made Jesus the scapegoat for our sin. As Isaiah says, "On him was laid the iniquity of us all." (Is 53:6)

For Christians the Day of Atonement isn't the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Tishri, but the Friday before Easter. And because of what Christ did on that day, we can confess our sin any day any time and any place and be restored to wholeness through a blessed combination of God's blood and God's mercy.

St. Paul – explained what Christ did in our second lesson of the day:

*[W]hen Christ came as a high priest... .. he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats ..., but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats ...sanctifies those*

*who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, ... purify our conscience .... to worship the living God!*  
*Hebrews 9:11-14 NRSV (excerpts)*

God could have required us to sacrifice our children in order to atone for our sin. God could have said, "Show me your body, broken for me. Instead he gave his own child once and for all time, saying, "This is my body, broken for you." Because of Christ we no longer need to kill goats or anything else to restore our relationship with God. We can stop beating ourselves up for sins committed long ago or last week. We don't have to scapegoat others for our sin either.

Have you ever noticed that in the church some sins get a lot more attention than others? And those sins are usually the ones that we aren't personally involved with at the moment. We single out certain groups, selectively enforce God's laws, and conveniently ignore our own sins. When was the last time you heard of a church member being disciplined for working on the Sabbath or coveting their neighbor's car or house? I think we focus so much on certain sins as a way of distracting us from our own sin. It's a modern form of scapegoating, isn't it, when we blame others for our problems and deny our own responsibilities.

Christians don't do well to point the finger of blame at others. We should point to the cross. And Christians don't have to tie our sins to the head of a goat. We can lay them at the foot of the cross. What sin would you lay there today? Offer it to God and leave it. And know that if it's up to God, you will never see it again. It's gone forever, never to return. Amen.

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