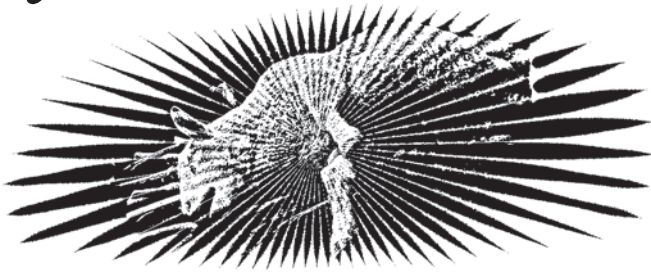


Atonement *in* Symbols: Part 2



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Leviticus 16, Num. 18:1–8, Pss. 28:2, 132:7, 138:2.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Let us go to his [God’s] dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool’ ” (*Psalm 132:7, NIV*).

Key Thought: To look at the atoning work of Christ as revealed particularly in the Day of Atonement sanctuary service.

The Israelite sanctuary was cleansed once a year from the sin and impurities of Israel, which were transferred there through the daily sacrifices. The yearly ritual symbolically represented the time when God, from His heavenly dwelling place, would bring an end to the problem of sin and restore the whole universe to its original harmony.

During this week, we will study not only the symbolic meaning of the Day of Atonement but also how the Israelite sanctuary pointed to God’s heavenly dwelling, the throne room of the universe.

We will also discuss the priests in the Old Testament and how their work of mediation prefigured the work of Christ as our Mediator and Intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 15.*

Sanctuary and Atonement

What do the following verses teach us about the role of the sanctuary in the experience and life of the Israelites? *Exod. 25:8, 22; 29:42, 43; Pss. 28:2; 132:7; 138:2.*

The Israelite sacrificial system was centered on and operated within the sanctuary, the earthly dwelling of God. It was the center of life and of holiness in Israel. Within that unique space God dealt with the problem of sin. He commanded the Israelites to build an altar in the courtyard of the sanctuary, and it was upon this altar that the sacrificial blood was placed in order to make atonement for the people (*Lev. 17:11*). Blood, as a tangible expression of life, belonged to God, and it was to be returned to Him there, on the altar.

In the plan of salvation, the life of the animal stood for the life of the repentant sinner, and God would accept the death of the innocent animal in place of the sinner's death. The altar was a symbol of God's presence (*Ps. 43:4*), and by accepting the sacrifice, God was assuming responsibility for the sin of the person. In other words, the Lord was telling the Israelites, "If you have sinned and want to get rid of this enslaving power, bring it to Me, to My dwelling place, and I will take care of it. Bring it to Me!" The Israelites left the sanctuary blessed by the Lord and justified by His grace (*Pss. 24:3-5, 118:26*).

All this was symbolic of the work of Jesus, our real High Priest. The heavenly sanctuary is the dwelling of God within the cosmos and the place from which He rules as King of the universe; it's also the place in which the sin problem is being resolved. The cross was the altar on which the sacrifice was offered for us. Today God says to us, "If you want freedom from sin, and forgiveness of sin, come to the altar of sacrifice where My Son paid the penalty for your sins!"

Someone asked a friend, "How can I know what God is really like?" The person responded, "Look at Jesus on the cross, dying for the sins of the world." How does the Cross tell us what God is really like? What comfort and hope can you draw for yourself from that revelation of God?

Priestly Work and Atonement

Why was it necessary to have a priesthood who operated in His temple? *Num. 18:1–8*.

The fundamental work of the priests was to mediate between God and the people. The priests represented God before the people in their teaching ministry (*Deut. 33:10*). Closely related to that work was the priestly duty of revealing God's will to those who sought divine guidance (*Num. 27:21*). The priests also functioned as judges in the sanctuary. In fact, the highest tribunal of the land operated at the central sanctuary (*Deut. 17:8–13, 21:5*). They were especially responsible for blessing the people (*Deut. 10:8, 21:5*). They represented the people before God. In their representative role they took the people with them to the presence of the Lord (*Exod. 28:9–12, 29*).

Their role as mediators was particularly visible during the daily services. They were in charge of the altar of the burnt offering and were to keep the sacred fire burning on it, removing the ashes and bringing new wood (*Lev. 6:10–13*). They placed a burnt offering on that altar in the morning and then another in the evening (*Num. 28:3–8*). During daily services the high priest went into the Holy Place to dress the lampstand and to burn incense before the Lord (*Exod. 30:7, 8*). Also, whenever an Israelite brought a sacrifice, the priests sacrificed it on his or her behalf to make atonement for the sinner (*Lev. 1:5–9; 4:25, 26, 34, 35*).

The priest's role of mediator served at least three main purposes. First, it suggested that despite the fundamental distance between God and humans, there was a way to close the gap. Second, it revealed God's desire to be with His people. It manifested God's love seeking a way to become accessible to them, despite their sin. Third, from the perspective of the Israelites, the priesthood gave them access to the Holy One of Israel and the opportunity to be cleansed from sin and impurity. The priestly mediators were always available in order to make it possible for the people to approach God and find grace and mercy.

The whole system, of course, pointed to the ultimate Mediator between God and humans, the Servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Through the work of Christ we are part of the "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9). What is your role in that priesthood? How can you function as "priest" for other people?

Day of Atonement: Part 1

The Day of Atonement ritual illustrated the final resolution of the sin problem, the consummation of the salvation as experienced through the daily services. The whole tabernacle was to be cleansed, the Holy and Most Holy Places. They needed cleansing because of the “uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been” (*Lev. 16:16, NIV*). These sins had been transferred to the divine dwelling through the sacrifices brought by repentant sinners. During the Day of Atonement the tabernacle was restored to its original pristine cleanliness and holiness. On that day, once a year, there was a fragment of space that, like the Garden of Eden, was free from the presence of sin and impurity. This “return” to Eden, celebrated at the end of the year, provided a fresh beginning for the people of Israel. It pointed to a new beginning of cosmic proportions (*compare Dan. 8:14*).

Read specifically **Leviticus 16:16, 17, 21, 30, 33, 34**. What specific emphasis can you find there? Whose sins are being dealt with on that day, in contrast to the daily ritual? *Lev. 1:1–4*.

The texts indicate the all-encompassing nature of the cleansing, because *all* the sins of *all* the people were dealt with. It was a corporate act, dealing with Israel as a whole. This was God’s final disposition of the sin problem in Israel for that year, and it prefigured the final disposition of sin at the end of time (*Heb. 9:28*).

What did God expect from His people during that day? *Lev. 23:26–31*.

However much the Day of Atonement was a corporate event, involving the whole nation, each individual had a role to play in giving himself or herself over to the Lord completely. Those who were not found resting in the Lord and humbling themselves before Him were to be “cut off from his people” (*Lev. 23:29, NIV*). However harsh that sounds, the point is to emphasize how solemn the work of salvation was. The passage is, among other things, promoting perseverance in one’s walk with the Lord.

How, in a sense, are we to “afflict” our souls on a daily basis? What does that mean? See *Matt. 16:24, 25; Rom. 6:1–13; Heb. 12:4*.

Day of Atonement: Part 2

Read the scapegoat ritual as found in Leviticus 16:20–22. What is taught by this ritual? Focus especially on the fate of that animal as compared to all the others used in the service.

The “scapegoat” (Heb. *azazel*) is not a means of atonement but a vehicle through which sin and impurity are carried to the wilderness. How do we know this?

First, the transfer of sin and impurity to this animal takes place after the high priest finished the work of atonement in the sanctuary. Second, the goat is not offered as a sacrifice; it is not slaughtered, and therefore no blood is available for atonement. Third, although it “carries/bears” the sins of the people, that does not mean that it carries them vicariously, as in the sense of a substitute, like Jesus. In this case the context shows that the verb means “to carry” to another place, i.e., “the wilderness” (*Lev. 16:22, NASB*). When the same verb is used to describe the work of the Servant of the Lord, it stands alone: “he bare the sins of many” (*Isa. 53:12*). He is not carrying them anywhere, but assuming responsibility for them Himself and, through that act, forgiving us. That is what atonement is, and that’s not what the scapegoat does.

Instead, the scapegoat ritual is an elimination rite; in other words, the scapegoat is a means of eliminating or removing from the camp of Israel something that should not be there—sin and impurity.

During the Day of Atonement there was a confrontation between the Lord and another power. The goat for the Lord represented God; the goat for *azazel* represented the opposing power, a demon, the ultimate source of sin and impurity. By sending the sins of the people to *azazel* through the goat, this power was being named as the originator of sin. God had accepted the sin and impurity of His people in order to atone for them and to forgive their sins, but that did not mean that He was the originator of evil. The Day of Atonement announced in symbols the final victory of holiness and purity over the forces of sin, impurity, and evil. It anticipated the moment when the charges raised by Lucifer in heaven will be once and for all resolved, and Lucifer will have to assume responsibility for originating sin. Through this ritual God was instilling hope in His people by pointing to a future in which, through the power of Christ, a new creation will come into existence, one free from death and pain, free from the power of sin (*Rev. 21:3, 4*).

Atonement: What Is It?

Which ideas are associated with the verb “to make atonement” in the following passages? *Lev. 4:31; 16:18, 19, 30; 17:11.*

In Leviticus, though the priests officiate in the atoning rituals as mediators, they are not the ones who atone for sin. After the ritual is performed, God grants the forgiveness (*Lev. 4:26*; the passive form of the verb implies that God is the One who forgives). Atonement is something that God performs for His people. He is the One who “make[s] atonement for his land and people” (*Deut. 32:43, NIV*; also *Pss. 65:3, 79:9*). Through atonement, God allows His love to flow to sinners.

The Hebrew verb translated “to make atonement” in Leviticus (Heb. *kipper*) expresses the idea of wiping off or purging. Atonement is made for the tabernacle, the altar, the horns of the altar, meaning that they are purged, cleansed from the defilement of sin and impurity. The implication is that through atonement they are restored to the original condition, one free from defilement. When applied to repentant sinners, the verb still retains the idea of cleansing from sin or impurity.

Because the cleansing takes place through the blood of a sacrificial animal, atonement also can express the idea of ransoming. Freeing a person from sin is done at the cost of the blood/life of the sacrificial victim (*Lev. 17:11*). It was offered in place of the sinner, substituting for him or her, and therefore it ransomed the life of the person (*see Matt. 20:28, 1 Tim. 2:6*).

The verb *to make atonement* also is employed in Leviticus in a variety of rituals, making it impossible to conclude that it designates a single act. That is, atonement is a process rather than something that happens at a single point in time. The whole sanctuary activity throughout the year was understood as atonement; from the daily sacrifices (*Lev. 5:10*) to the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16:34*), and all the rituals in between. In other words, atonement was the totality of the cleansing action of God for Israel all year, including the sacrificial act, the mediation of the priest, and the final disposal of sin and impurity during the Day of Atonement. Thus was typified as the all-inclusive nature of the work of atonement that Christ is doing for us.

Only God could atone for sin, and it took the life of Christ to do it. What should that tell us about how bad sin must be? Why, then, don't we abhor sin more than we do? How does the practice of sin deaden our abhorrence of it?

Further Study: “Since Satan is the originator of sin, the direct instigator of all the sins that caused the death of the Son of God, justice demands that Satan shall suffer the final punishment. Christ’s work for the redemption of men and the purification of the universe from sin will be closed by the removal of sin from the heavenly sanctuary and the placing of these sins upon Satan, who will bear the final penalty. So in the typical service, the yearly round of ministration closed with the purification of the sanctuary, and the confessing of the sins on the head of the scapegoat.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 358.

“Blood and life are associated as lexical pairs and thus understood as parallel in meaning in . . . Hebrew. Because of this close association blood is considered the source of life, and because blood represents life (Gen. 9:4, Deut. 12:23), it may expiate for life. Because the life of a creature is in the blood, blood makes atonement for one’s life. One life is sacrificed for another. The shedding of substitutionary blood on the altar makes atonement, since the blood of the innocent victim was given for the life of the one who has sinned.”—Mark F. Rooker, *The New American Commentary: Leviticus*, vol. 3A (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2000), p. 236.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Review the process of atonement and cleansing in the earthly sanctuary and then compare it to how, in reality, Christ destroys our sin without destroying us, as well.
- 2 Many people find it hard to understand why innocent animals had to die in order to make a point about sin. What’s the important lesson from these deaths for us? What should it tell us about the nature of sin?
- 3 All during the week we talked about “cleansing” from sin. What does that mean on a practical level; that is, in the life of someone who claims the blood of Christ? *1 John 1:7*. What does it mean to be cleansed of sin?
- 4 Take your answer to Monday’s final question and bring it to class on Sabbath. Compare responses. How can we, both as individuals and as a church, better fulfill our role as “priests”?

Summary: The Day of Atonement was the consummation of the daily cleansing of the Israelites from sin. It illustrated the time the cleansing power of the sacrificial death of Christ would be consummated through a work of judgment.

Stubborn Daughter

by SAYORN HENG

I live in Cambodia. We were very poor; our house had a plastic tarp for a roof. Then in 2001 my family became Christians. But I refused. I wouldn't listen to them talk about this Jesus.

I needed to work to help support my family, so I applied at a garment factory. But I was told I was too young. I asked a Christian missionary how to find a job, and he told me I should ask Jesus to help me. I didn't believe in Jesus, so I prayed to God instead. God answered my prayer, and I got a job. The man who worked next to me in the garment factory talked to me about Jesus. It seemed that I was surrounded by Christians!

During my family's evening worships, I sat outside. But I could hear them singing and reading the Bible. One night I heard my mother and sister pray for me. Then I heard them read from the Bible that those who are not born again shall not see the kingdom of God (John 3:3, NIV). I didn't want to be the only one in my family who didn't go to heaven. I told my mother that I wanted to be a Christian, and she prayed with me as I gave my heart to God.

After that I joined the family worship. When I learned about tithing, I struggled. I worked long hours but earned only \$15 a month. How could I return tithe on that? I prayed that God would help me find a better job, one that paid by the piece instead of by the day. I promised to return tithe if God found me a better job, and He did!

I began returning tithe and was offered a better job with better pay. My wages continued to increase as I faithfully returned tithe. When I realized the importance of Sabbath, God gave me a job where I could have Sabbaths off—in an industry that works seven days a week. This is a weekly miracle!

I am amazed that God has been so good to me. One Sabbath I was afraid for my job, so I went to work. But every few minutes the needle broke, and I earned nothing that day. I think God was trying to tell me that He couldn't bless me if I didn't honor His Sabbath.



My faith is growing, and God is blessing. Now we have enough to eat. I thank God that He is so patient with me, His stubborn daughter. We must tell everyone that our God is great and good! Our mission offerings help do that.

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