

YOM KIPPUR – THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Selected Scripture

Introduction:

This morning – Yom Kippur. Much material is taken from RBC booklet, *The Holidays of God: Fall Feasts*.

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the LORD.” (Le 23:26-27 ESV)

Yom Kippur (literally "day of covering") falls on the tenth day of the month of Tishri and brings to a close the period of repentance begun on Rosh Hashanah. On this national Day of Atonement, the high priest of Israel used compelling rituals to show God's willingness to forgive the sins of the previous year.

For several days before Yom Kippur, every effort was taken to ensure that the high priest was kept in a state of ritual purity. On this day of days, he would undergo five immersions and have an entourage of about 500 Levites with him everywhere he went, to help guard him from anything that might render him "unclean."

On every other day of the year, the high priest would be dressed in his formal uniform, which included the golden crown, colorful robes, a breastplate, and jewels inscribed with the names of the tribes of Israel. On the Day of Atonement, however, he would set aside his normal splendor and wear only a white linen robe, symbolic of purity.

Because the Day of Atonement was a day of sacrifice, the high priest's white linen robe was soon spattered with blood. To atone for his own sins, he sacrificed a bull before the Lord. Then, to atone for the sins of the nation, he took two goats and cast lots to determine their fate. One of the goats was sacrificed as a sin offering for the nation. When this goat was sacrificed, the high priest pronounced, "For Jehovah," and the people would fall on their faces and call out, "Blessed be the Name; the glory of His kingdom is forever and ever." Then the goat was slain.

The other goat, known as the Azazel, or scapegoat, became a second picture of national atonement. First the high priest symbolically placed the sins of the nation on the head of the live goat. He did this by laying both of his hands on the goat's head while confessing the sins of the people. Then, with the sins of the people on the head of the goat, the high priest sent the Azazel off into the wilderness. It was a dramatic picture of God's willingness to separate His people from their sins. In the second temple period (515 BC to AD 70), the scapegoat was led to a cliff and forced over the brink to make sure it didn't return.

Then, only on this one day of the year, the high priest would carry the blood of the sacrificed animal into the Most Holy Place of the Lord's house of worship. Going behind the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, the high priest entered the presence of God to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the golden Mercy Seat that covered the Ark of the Covenant. If any aspect of the ritual was not fulfilled according to God's instructions (Lev. 16), the high priest could be struck dead. Only when the high priest came out alive did the nation rejoice that for one more year God had accepted the sacrifice for their sins.

There is another interesting note about the scapegoat. In the second temple period, the Talmud records that the Levites tied a scarlet thread of wool around a horn of the Azazel. After the goat was driven off a cliff, witnesses were sent to examine the thread. For centuries, this thread is reported to have miraculously turned white, indicating that God had accepted their sacrifice and forgiven the nation of Israel. It was believed that this was in fulfillment of Isaiah 1:18, *"...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.."*

But... the Jewish Talmud also records that 40 years before the destruction of the second temple, the thread ceased to turn white. Is it a mere coincidence that at the same time as the death and resurrection of Jesus, around AD 30, the rabbis themselves took note of the fact that the Most High began rejecting the Azazel sacrifice?

At this point we want to consider some of the significance of the celebration of Yom Kippur. We are going to look at how it is a call to look back, look within and look ahead.

Yom Kippur: Looking Back

One of the questions that has often troubled me is how the Old Testament saints were saved. It is clear from the book of Hebrews that the blood of goats and calves can never remove sin. So what was the purpose of the sacrifices and what was it that saved them? I recently read something that helped me to understand the answer to these questions. The truth is that they are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, just as we are.

Mark Hitchcock, in his book, *"Blood Moons Rising"*, talks about the feasts of Israel. He answers that question this way:

The death of Jesus paid the price once for all for sin. On the Day of Atonement the sins of the people were covered every year by the blood of a goat. To put it in our language today, the line of credit for sin was extended for another year. All the sins under the Old Covenant were put on credit and carried forward year after year. But at the Cross, Jesus didn't just cover sin for another year—He paid the full price to permanently remove our sin. At the Cross, Jesus paid it all. Heb. 9:11-12 says, *"...when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."* Lewis Sperry Chaffer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, used to say, "Old Testament saints were saved on credit, but all the bills came due at Calvary."

As believers, we see in the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement a clear foreshadowing of the Messiah who would come to make atonement for our sins. Isaiah 53 speaks of this suffering Savior when it says, *"... it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand."* (v. 10). The message is that our Messiah, Jesus, is pictured as both the sin offering and the scapegoat, offering his blood as a sacrificial payment for our sin, and then carrying our sins off into the wilderness. Because of this, we can stand forgiven and cleansed before the Judge of all the earth.

Yom Kippur: Looking Within

What can Yom Kippur mean for us today? For those who see that the sacrifice for our sins has been made by God's Messiah once and for all, the truth of Yom Kippur has great meaning. We don't look back fearfully at the comment of the Talmud that the scarlet thread no longer turned white as proof of God's forgiveness. Instead, we can reflect back on an empty tomb and on the compelling testimonies of the appearances of Jesus Christ, whose bodily resurrection proved that the price for our sins has been paid in full and that we have been accepted by God. Now we can confess, "Yes, I have gossiped. Yes, I have had lust in my heart. Yes, I have been angry with my brother. Yes, I have been arrogant. Yes, I withheld love from God and sinned against Him in countless ways. Yes, I have withheld love from my neighbors, and sinned against God by not giving others the consideration I want for myself. Yes, I have sinned, but by the blood of His own Messiah, the Father has paid the penalty." As we have trusted Him, so He has forgiven us.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a day to be mindful of our sin and the offering that was made on our behalf. It is a day to be mindful—and grateful—for the grace that is offered through the perfect, everlasting sacrifice, Messiah Jesus.

Yom Kippur: Looking Ahead

The Day of Atonement also points us to the future. On the heels of a last-days call to repentance there will be a day of final reckoning for all who have not repented of their sins. According to Hebrew prophets, in the last days there will be a great and awesome Day of the Lord that will reveal the judgment that awaits those who have not taken advantage of the atonement of God. Here we can let the Scriptures speak for themselves.

"The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it? ... The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes." (Joel 2:11,31 ESV)

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." (Mal 4:1 ESV)

No one can afford to be "uncovered" or "unatoned for" on the final Yom Kippur. That day will be inexpressibly hopeless for all those who have spent the days of their lives resisting the evidence and claims of God's Messiah! It will be the kind of regret anticipated by the prophet Zechariah when he wrote:

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself..." (Zech. 12:10-12 ESV)

What is the future hope of those who—rejecting Jesus as Messiah—still have no temple, no priest, and no Yom Kippur sacrifice to assure them of God's mercy and forgiveness? Can they find assurance in their repentance, prayer, and good deeds, hoping that God will forgive? Moses said:

"For 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." (Lev. 17:11 ESV)

After the temple was destroyed in AD 70, the rabbis from the known world gathered for a council—the Yavneh Council. Their purpose was to decide the future of Jewish worship without priesthood or sacrifices. The religious customs established at Yavneh are the basis of modern rabbinic Judaism and have remained relatively unchanged for over nearly 2,000 years. Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai, the most influential member of the council and still a widely studied commentator, appears to have shown little confidence in the new synagogue system's ability to save his soul from judgment. On his deathbed, the rabbi is quoted as saying, *"Now I am being led before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be lie, who lives and endures for ever and ever. If He is an-*

gry with me, He is angry forever. If He imprisons me, He imprisons me forever. If He puts me to death, He puts me to death forever. I cannot persuade Him with words or bribe Him with money. Moreover, there are two ways ahead of me: one leads to Paradise and the other to Hell, and I do not know which one will take me. How can I do anything but weep?"

Conclusion

Yet, in fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, there is evidence declaring that God has not left us without hope or atonement. He has not left us devoid of hope, without sacrifice, or without a way of gaining His mercy. In the pictures of the sin offering of Yom Kippur, we can see the character and foreshadowing of God's Messiah, our assurance of salvation. These pictures are not just remarkable parallels or coincidences. They are God's revelation to Israel—and to all nations.

Nor has God left the Jewish nation without hope. The final fulfillment of the Day of Atonement is seen in the national repentance and salvation of the Jewish remnant in the end times. In Zechariah 12, after the mourning of the families of Israel we read about a few moments ago in vss. 10-12, we find these comforting words in 13:1...

"On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness."

It is then that the words of the Apostle Paul will come to pass, as he says, *"In this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob; and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'" (Rom. 11:26-27)* Warren Wiersbe says it well: *'After Israel is gathered to her land, the Jews will see their rejected Messiah, repent of their sins (Zech. 12:10-13:1), and be cleansed. The scattered nation will be gathered and the sinful nation will be cleansed. What a glorious day that will be!'*

Yes, there is hope. When Jesus died, the veil in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom, symbolizing that a new and living way was now open to God and available to all people. There is a way back to God ... hope ... forgiveness... through Jesus death and resurrection. Jesus himself is the way. That, my friends, is the good news of Yom Kippur.