

The Day of Atonement:

Removal of Sin's Cause and Reconciliation to God

Through the symbolism involved in the Passover—Christ's shed blood atones for our past sins. In fact, atonement means reconciliation. The Day of Atonement symbolizes the reconciliation of God and all humanity.

If we are reconciled to God through Christ's sacrifice, why do we need another Holy Day to teach us about reconciliation? If we are already reconciled, why do we need to fast, as commanded on the Day of Atonement? (Leviticus 23:27; Acts 27:9). What is this day's specific significance in God's master plan for the salvation of mankind? The Day of Atonement and Passover both teach us about the forgiveness of sin and our reconciliation with God through Christ's sacrifice. However, although the Passover is personally and (for the time being) individually applied to Christians whom God has called in this age, Atonement carries immediate universal implications. Moreover, the Day of Atonement pictures an essential additional step in God's salvation plan not to be found in the symbolism of the Passover. This step must take place before humanity can experience true peace on earth. All people suffer the tragic consequences of sin. But sin doesn't happen without a cause, and God makes this cause clear in the symbolism associated with the Day of Atonement.

*Happy
Yom Kippur!*

The modern application of this festival

Now notice specific instructions on when and how we are to keep this festival. "Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement," God says. "It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls ..." (Leviticus 23:27).

How do you "afflict your soul" on this day? Afflict comes from the Hebrew anah, which means "to be afflicted, be bowed down, be humbled, be meek" (Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, "To Be Humbled, Afflicted"). The same word is used in connection with fasting in Psalm 35:13 and Ezra 8:21. Fasting means abstaining from food and drink (Esther 4:16).

Why does God tell us to fast during this specific 24 hours? Fasting expresses our humble desire to draw closer to God. The Day of Atonement represents a coming time of reconciliation during which, with Satan banished and the world having been devastated by the horrific events leading up to this time, a humbled and repentant humanity will at last be reconciled to God.

Few understand the proper reasons for fasting. Fasting is not to bend God to our will. We don't fast to receive anything from God except His abundant mercy and forgiveness for our human weaknesses. Fasting helps us remember how temporary our physical existence is. Without food and water, we would soon perish. Fasting helps us realize just how much we need God as the giver and sustainer of life.

We should always fast on the Day of Atonement in a repentant frame of mind. Notice Daniel's exemplary attitude while fasting: "Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession" (Daniel 9:3-4).

The early Church kept the Day of Atonement. More than 30 years after Christ's death, Luke still referred to the time and seasons by mentioning this day, stating that "sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over" (Acts 27:9). Almost all Bible commentaries and dictionaries acknowledge that "the Fast" refers to the Day of Atonement.

Yet another important lesson comes to us through the Day of Atonement. We have already seen that the slain goat represented the sacrifice in our place of Jesus Christ, who took on Himself the death penalty we have earned by sinning. But Jesus Christ did not stay dead; He came back to life. What does the Day of Atonement teach us about Christ's role after His resurrection?

Leviticus 16:15-19 describes a solemn ceremony that was carried out only once each year, on the Day of Atonement. The high priest was to take the blood of the slain goat into the Holy Place—the most sacred part of the tabernacle—and to the mercy seat. The mercy seat was symbolic of the very throne of Almighty God. The high priest acted out the function Christ performs for repentant Christians. Having ascended to the very throne of God by the blood of His sacrifice, Christ intercedes for us—as He has since His resurrection—as our High Priest.

The book of Hebrews makes this symbolism clear. "But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this [physical] creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:11-12).

Because of Christ's sacrifice, we enjoy direct access to the true mercy seat—the throne of our merciful, loving Creator. This was dramatically and miraculously demonstrated at the moment of Christ's death, when "the veil of the temple," covering the entrance to the Holy Place, "was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38). This massive curtain over the entrance to the Holy Place was torn asunder in a dramatic testimony to the access we now have to God's throne.

Many verses in Hebrews mention Christ's role as our High Priest and intercessor. Because of His sacrifice for us, we can "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). The Day of Atonement thus pictures the loving reconciliation we have with God, made possible through Christ's sacrifice. It also shows the remarkable truth that Satan, the author of sin, will eventually be removed so that humanity can at last attain reconciliation with God on a universal basis.

The Day of Atonement serves as a vital preparatory step in anticipation of the next milestone in God's glorious Holy Day plan, beautifully depicted by the Feast of Tabernacles.

Satan the author of sin

The Day of Atonement involves not only the forgiveness of sin; it pictures the removal of the primary cause of sin—Satan and his demons. Until God removes the original instigator of sin, mankind will simply continue to fall back into disobedience and suffering. Although our human nature has a part to play in our sins, Satan the devil bears great responsibility for influencing mankind to disobey God.

Even though many people doubt the existence of a devil, the Bible reveals Satan as a powerful, invisible being who can sway all mankind. Revelation 12:9 tells us that his influence is so great that he "deceives the whole world."

The devil blinds people to the understanding of God's truth. The apostle Paul explained this to the Corinthians: If "our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

Paul also teaches us that Satan has influenced every human to walk in the ways of disobedience. He notes that those called into God's church "once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2).

Paul warned the Corinthians that Satan can present himself as righteous, "For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works" (2 Corinthians 11:14-15).

Jesus Christ plainly stated that Satan introduced sin and rebellion into the world. In John 8:44 Christ made this plain to those who were antagonistic to His teaching: "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."

Tying these scriptures together lets us see the power and the influence of Satan. Paul warned us to beware of the deceitful methods of the devil: "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3, NIV).

Christians who struggle to resist Satan and stop sinning fight a spiritual battle against the devil and his demons. Paul explains: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12, NASB).

Paul further explains here that Jesus Christ will deliver us from the influence of the devil (verses 13-18). Of course, God is much more powerful than Satan, but we must do our part by actively resisting the devil and the pulls of the flesh. The Day of Atonement looks forward to the time during which Satan's deception will be removed and he will no longer be free to influence and deceive mankind (Revelation 20:1-3).

Old Testament symbolism

Leviticus 16 describes God instructing ancient Israel to observe the Day of Atonement. Although, since the sacrifice of Christ, no need remains for animal sacrifices, this chapter adds significantly to our understanding of God's plan.

Notice that the priest was to select two goats for a sin offering for the people, and he was to present them before the LORD (verses 5, 7). Aaron, the high priest, was to cast lots to select one "for the LORD"; which he was to offer as a sacrifice (verses 8-9). This goat represented Jesus Christ, who would be slain to pay the penalty for our sins.

The other goat served a completely different purpose: "But the goat on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, and to let it go as the scapegoat into the wilderness" (verse 10). Notice that this goat was not to be killed. The high priest was to "lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert" (verses 21, 22, NIV).

The priest chose by lot the "scapegoat," or Azazel, as the word appears in the original Hebrew. Many scholars identify Azazel as the name of a demon inhabiting the wilderness (Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 1, p. 326). The Azazel goat represents Satan, who bears the responsibility for the sins of humanity (verse 22) because of the deception he has foisted upon mankind.

The high priest laid hands on this goat and confessed over it the wickedness, rebellion and sins of the people. Why did he do that? As present ruler of the world, the devil bears responsibility for his perversity in beguiling and coercing humanity to sin. "The sending of the sin-laden goat ... signified the complete removal of the sins of the people and the handing them over, as it were, to the evil spirit to whom they belonged" (The One Volume Bible Commentary, p. 95).

A scapegoat, in modern usage, is someone unfairly held responsible for the mistakes of others. However, the modern English word scapegoat cannot properly be applied to Satan; the devil is not a scapegoat in the modern sense of the term. (Although some Bible versions use the word "scapegoat," Green's Literal Translation more accurately calls it the "goat of departure.") Rather than unfairly bearing the blame for sin, Satan will be held justly accountable for his own deliberate actions by which he has led humanity into sin for thousands of years.

The symbolism of the live goat parallels the fate of Satan and his demons, whom God will remove before Jesus Christ's millennial rule is established. The book of Revelation describes this event: "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished ..." (Revelation 20:1-3).

Thus the devil and his demons, who for thousands of years have led mankind into every evil deed imaginable, will be removed to a place of restraint (verse 4). Complete global reconciliation to God cannot occur until the source of so much sin and suffering—Satan—is removed.