

The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16:3-34; Hebrews 9:1-14 (text)

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Beloved congregation of Christ: On October 6, 1973, as I was looking forward to the last few days of my college years, news broke out that Egypt and Syria attacked Israel simultaneously on two fronts: the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. Egypt and Syria chose that day because it was the holiest day of the year for Jews, the Day of Atonement. Also, since it was a holiday, Israel was caught by surprise. Since the Hebrew name for the Day of Atonement is *yom kippur*, this war came to be known as The Yom Kippur War.

In Leviticus 23, we read that God appointed the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of the seventh month. On this day of Sabbath solemn rest, no work is done, and there is a holy assembly, one of the reasons why the Egyptians and Syrians chose to mount a surprise attack on this day. Sacrifices and offerings are commanded to atone for the sins of all the people, including the sins of the priests throughout the past year. The details regarding the service, especially the sacrifices and offerings, are written in Leviticus 16. This chapter ends by repeating God's commandment, *"And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins"* (Lv 16:34).

Our text in Hebrews 9:1-14 serves as a commentary on the Day of Atonement. In verses 1-10, the writer explains the various rituals and offerings made by the high priest to cleanse the tabernacle and all that is in it, and also himself, the priests and all the people. But in verse 10, he concludes this part by saying that all of these rituals *"cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper... until the time of reformation."* Obviously, the writer was not referring to the 16th century Protestant Reformation. This *reformation* he was talking about is a "process leading to a new order, as something yet to be realized" (BGAD, *Greek Lexicon*, 250).

When the writer says that the veil of separation is "symbolic for the present age," he was referring to the old covenant. Then why would he say that they were still living in "the present age" when he lived decades after Christ had already died for all their sins? Shouldn't he say that the "time of reformation" had already started then?

The reason was his audience was Christian Jews who were still at that time involved with the old covenant Temple, priesthood, and ceremonies. The writer wanted to wean them away from these practices that they were still practicing. This is what he says back in Hebrews 8:13, *"In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."*

For Jewish believers, the "present age" was not completely done away with as yet. For them, the full reality of forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Christ has not really set in. Perhaps this reality finally set in when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Without the Temple, the great symbol of the old covenant, there would be no more priesthood and animal sacrifices.

When this “time of reformation” came when Jesus shed his blood on the cross 1,500 years later, Jesus became “*the High Priest of the good things that have come... securing an eternal redemption*” (verses 11-12). This eternal redemption in turn serves “*to purify the conscience from dead works*” and compels the worshiper “*to serve the living God*” (verse 14).

So our theme this Lord's Day is “**The Day of Atonement**” under three headings: (1) **In the First Covenant: “Cannot Perfect the Conscience”**; (2) **In the New Covenant: “Secured an Eternal Redemption”**; and (3) **“To Purify the Conscience to Serve the Living God.”**

IN THE FIRST COVENANT: “CANNOT PERFECT THE CONSCIENCE”

The rituals of the Day of Atonement as detailed in Leviticus 16 are elaborate. There are rituals for purifying the priests, the people and the tabernacle and all its structure and furnishings.

The LORD intended these complex rituals to demonstrate his utmost holiness before his people. When the people see his perfect holiness, they will see their own sinfulness. Every aspect of their lives, everything they touch, is defiled by sin, and needed cleansing.

First, the priests themselves have to be cleansed by a total water bath, beginning with Aaron the high priest, who himself was involved in the idolatrous worship of the golden calf. After all, he bears an inscription on a golden plate that says, “*Holy to the LORD*” (Ex 28:36). Then, the whole tabernacle has to be cleansed—the various rooms, curtains, and structures of the Tent of Meeting, the Most Holy Place, and the altar. But how are they purified from the pollution of sin? By the blood of sacrificial animals.

Before the high priest could perform his duties for the Day of Atonement, he had to be cleansed by a sin offering, a bull that was sacrificed to atone for his sins, he “*shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house*” (Lv 16:6). But even after he was cleansed by the blood of the bull, the high priest still needed one more thing before he could enter the Most Holy Place: a fire with incense to create a cloud. The cloud would hide the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat, where God was seated. As a sinner, he is not allowed to see God and live. Then, he took the blood of the bull and sprinkled it on the cover and on the front of the cover of the Ark. The cover of the Ark is known in Hebrew as *kippur*, and this is why the Day of Atonement is also known as Yom Kippur. Our sins are *atoned* for when they are *covered* by the sacrificial blood.

Any violation made by the high priest in the strict performance of his duties would result in his death, just as the two sons of Aaron died because they offered “*unauthorized fire*” (Lv 10:1-2). This is why, later in Israel's history, bells were attached on the priest's garment and a rope attached to his ankle. Since no one else was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place, if the LORD struck him dead inside it, his body could be pulled out by the other priests.

After this sin offering of the bull, the priest would take two male goats chosen by the people by lot. One goat was “*for the LORD*,” and the other one “*for Azazel*.” The goat “*for the LORD*” was slaughtered by the priest on behalf of the people, and its blood also sprinkled on the cover and

the front of the mercy seat. This sin offering was to make atonement for the people, *“Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins... in the midst of their uncleannesses”* (Lv 16:16).

But the goat selected “for Azazel” was kept alive for another purpose. The high priest would place his hands on its head and say a prayer to *“confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins... The goat shall bear all their iniquities...”* Then another priest would lead the goat into the wilderness and set free there (Lv 16:21-22). This ritual signified the sins and uncleannesses of the people throughout the past year were now placed on the goat, and their sins are removed from their midst. This is the origin of the word “scapegoat,” someone who takes the blame for an offense that he did not commit.

But why was this goat “for Azazel”? The ancients also believed that the uninhabited desert was the abode of demons and evil spirits, so Azazel might refer to these evil forces in the world. The scapegoat therefore took the sins of the people to a place where it belongs: the abode of demons. But others say that “Azazel” means the “goat that goes away.” In any case, the scapegoat symbolically expelled the sins of God's people from their midst.

Our text in Hebrews tells us that the priests go into the tabernacle regularly to perform their ritual duties for the people. But only the high priest could go into the Most Holy Place, and only once a year, every year. And the blood that he sprinkles repeatedly is to atone for his own sins and for the people's sins, and also for purifying the whole tabernacle itself (verses 7-8).

By this, the Holy Spirit is teaching us that the animal sacrifices in the old covenant in no way could have done away with the problem of sin. Every year, the people have to repeat the same rituals to atone for their past year's sins. And only the priests have direct access to God's throne of grace because of the veil of separation. All of these things are for external, outward purification, but it could not purify the conscience, the hearts and minds of God's people. Something much more, much better was needed to truly cleanse the people of their sins. These sacrificial rituals only pointed to that something better, *“... how much more will the blood of Christ... purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God”* (verse 14).

This is why the writer says that all these rituals *“cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper”* (verse 9). The old covenant tabernacle, priesthood and ceremonial laws are not the LORD's final plan, but merely a milestone in his overall redemption plan.

How then can the conscience of the worshiper be perfected?

IN THE NEW COVENANT: “SECURED AN ETERNAL REDEMPTION”

God has in fact a redemption plan from all eternity, choosing to save some from the whole human race before the creation of the world *“according to the purpose of his will”* (Ep 1:4-5). The *“present age,”* the age during the early apostolic days, was giving way to the *“time of reformation”* (verses 9-10).

The old covenant only “*deal[t] only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body.*” The old covenant tabernacle, priesthood, rituals and sacrifices were only foreshadows of “*the good things that have come*” in the new covenant that was ushered in when Christ came into the world. The tabernacle was only made with hands, while the new tabernacle—the church—is “*the greater and more perfect tent.*”

As well, Christ the high priest is a priest who does not die, but lives forever. His offering was not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood sprinkled on the cross. And he did not have to offer himself every year on the Day of Atonement, but only *once for all*, because it was sufficient to “*secur[e] an eternal redemption.*” Furthermore, his offering was “*without blemish,*” for he committed no sin, even though he was subjected to all human sufferings and temptations just like all human beings (verses 11-14a). He was able to do so because of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, when he died on the cross, the veil that separates the Most Holy Place from the rest of the tabernacle was torn apart from top to bottom, exposing the throne-room of God. This is why verse 8 says that as long as there is a veil separating the two sections, the way into the Most Holy Place is not yet revealed, “*By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing.*” Christ actually opened the way for true forgiveness of sins and purification of our hearts. The symbol, the foreshadow has ceased, and the reality of forgiveness of sins has come and has actually been accomplished by Christ. This is what Jesus explained to the Twelve when he instituted the Lord's Supper, “*this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*” (Mt 26:28).

But now, those who have been purified of sin by the sacrifice of Christ can now enter into the Most Holy Place with confidence, without fear of being consumed by God's holy wrath. Since “*we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,*” “*let us draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*” (Hb 10:19; 4:16).

In this time of need after the big earthquake and the most powerful typhoon to hit land, let us draw near in prayer to our God as we did in our congregational prayer. He is ever and always sovereign over all things, and who provides all good things to those who are suffering – food, water, clothing, shelter, and medicine. But most of all, forgiveness of sins and purification of conscience.

Our present age then is the new “*time of reformation*” that Christ inaugurated when he first came. By his own bloody sacrifice, he secured our eternal redemption and made “*perfect the conscience*” of all those who believe in him (verses 9-10).

“TO PURIFY THE CONSCIENCE TO SERVE THE LIVING GOD”

The old covenant sacrifices were unable to purify and perfect the conscience of the worshiper. This is why they were offered every year, because the people knew that they cleansed only the sins of the past year, but not after that. But because of the sacrifice of Christ, “*our hearts [are] sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*” (Hb 10:22).

And when our conscience is purified, we are set free from slavery to sin. Without faith in Christ who offered himself as our sacrifice, all our good works are “*dead works*.” They are as filthy as dirty diapers and cannot please God, because they are always stained by sin. Sin brings death, and so even good works of unrepentant sinners are condemned to death.

But being in Christ is diametrically opposed to death. Those whose conscience have been purified have been forgiven of their sins to “*serve the living God*.” Christians have been set free from sin not to boast about it, not to sit idly by waiting to hear God's whispers, not to live a life of sin, but to serve and worship God. Doing God's will by obeying God's Word is serving and worshiping him. We are to offer the sacrifice of praise (Hb 13:15). We are to offer our whole lives as living sacrifices (Rm 12:1). We were chosen by God to be holy and blameless (Ep 1:4) priests serving God's temple, the church (1Pt 2:5).

When Christ returns, he will judge all people based on how they treated his brothers and sisters. God is pleased with those in his church who respond with good works towards those who lost loved ones, homes and fields in the aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda. The ones who share food, water, clothes, medicine and homes—even how little they are—and who give comfort to the sick and to prisoners, will be blessed by his Father in heaven.

The word *serve* is a common synonym for *worship*. Our conscience is purified by Christ's atoning sacrifice so we can come to worship God, drawing near to the Father in heaven. But since we are still sinful people, we confess our sins in order that our conscience is cleansed as we worship. We can now worship without fear of being consumed by God's wrath, but we also worship with joy and reverence at the same time. Our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving through prayers, songs and Scriptures are made perfect by Christ. In this way, are worship is acceptable to God.

Salvation purifies our conscience from “*dead works*” so we can serve “*the living God*.”

Brothers and sisters, the Feast of Trumpets that we studied last Sunday announced the good news of the coming of a new year—of salvation in Christ. How does Christ save? He offered himself as our scapegoat, our sin offering on the cross. He was taken outside the city gates to be offered as our Substitute who would bear all our sins.

On the Day of Atonement, we see that no one is exempted from sin—the people, the priests, and everything that man touches are unclean. The whole tabernacle is stained by sin and has to be purified by blood. And sin is what makes us and the whole creation groan. Earthquakes and typhoons are not brought about by God as a punishment on unbelievers. All kinds of people suffer and die from these disasters. We must not be like Job's friends who judged the suffering Job to be a sinner. Or the Pharisees who condemned the man with the withered hand or his father as a sinner.

No, all of these disasters are reminders of God's mighty power over the universe. They come so that we may glorify God through our good deeds in helping those in need. And God also sends them as a reminder that he can bring down sinful man within a few seconds or a few hours.

But the Day of Atonement also reminds us that God is gracious to sinners. The LORD could have destroyed his disobedient people many times all throughout their history, but he is always *“merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”* (Ps 103:8). He always provided a bloody substitute for his people in order not to destroy them. Let us then be grateful to God for giving us Christ our Perfect Substitute by worshiping him every Lord's Day, and then leaving the tabernacle to serve the living God as light and salt of the world.