

The Day of Atonement

Perhaps you have asked someone the question, “If you were to die today, where would you go?” Sometimes you get the answer, “Well, I will go to God, and just hope He will be merciful.” When people say that sort of thing, they show they do not understand the biblical truth of atonement. Acceptance with God is not based on wishing. It is based on atonement. You either have it or you don't.

On the Day of Atonement – all work was to stop. Israel was to come to a standstill and gather together at the Tabernacle, or at the Temple in later times. This was the day of all days when they were to focus all their attention on the matter of atonement.

The yearly Day of Atonement continues to teach us at least three lessons:

I. Israel Were Not to Take a Relationship with God for Granted – Nor Should We

Not every religion has, or had, the concept of atonement. In fact, very few did.

The Hebrew word for atonement actually means to cover. It carries more than one idea. On the one hand, it suggests payment is made. There is satisfaction made to the party who has been offended. On the other hand, there is a bringing together – a reconciliation and a pardon. In fact, English had no such word. So when John Wycliffe made the first English translation of the Bible, he invented the word. He took the two words 'at one', and made a new word – 'at-onement' (In Wycliffe's time, 'one' was pronounced 'ohn').

This is atonement – two parties, hostile to one another; the offended party receives payment and is satisfied; the offending party is pardoned. The two parties are fully reconciled and made one.

Now every year as Israel would gather and watch as Aaron or the High priest would go about His solemn duties, they realised – we are not naturally 'at one' with God. They realised that God is unlike us. That is the meaning of 'holy' - God is other. God is unique. God is apart from sin. Man on the other hand is the offender. Man has sinned. Man has broken faith and obedience with God. Man is in the wrong. The relationship is breached. Unless something happens, we will experience the wrath of God.

Even the fact that they were Israel – the people set apart to God, did not guarantee them acceptance. They still needed to have atonement. Being in church, growing up in a Christian culture or country does not take away the need for you individually to experience atonement.

God was saying to Israel in the strongest terms: the way you are now puts you at odds with me. Unless something stands in the gap, covers the breach, satisfies me, there can be no relationship between you and Me.

Today the situation is almost the opposite. The difficulty in evangelism is convincing people that they *don't* have a relationship with God. The concepts of holiness and sin and penalty are absent from modern views of God. The modern idea of God is a rather transparent, omnipresent personality who finds good in everything we do, and as if He were simply a bird keeper with homing pigeons, we all return back to Him once we have spent our lives doing what we pleased on earth. Nothing has come between us and God. If God made us, and made this world, then He must want us just as we are, right?

That's why people scoff at the idea of 'getting saved' or being 'born again'. They do not believe that there is anything in them or about them that would cause God to be broken off from them. They believe they have a relationship with God. They take it for granted. To them, being alive means

somehow being a child of God.

When you try to speak to such people about salvation, and speak to them about sin – what is the response? Fill in the word – they say, “I believe in a God of _____”. What they are saying is, “I believe in a God who does not require atonement.” This actually means, ‘I believe in a God who is not holy.’ Which means ‘I believe in a Big Sinner who somehow owns the universe.’

But the Day of Atonement teaches us otherwise. If we were all children of God then there is no need for atonement. If we were all such good people then there is no need for atonement. If we were born in good standing with God then there is no need for atonement.

Isaiah 59:2 *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.*

The rabbis have abandoned the biblical truth of original sin – of us being born with a sin nature. Therefore, to them, atonement can be through many means - repentance, Yom Kippur, suffering, death.

But the Day of Atonement, as long as it was performed in Israel with the Tabernacle or the Temple, sent a message loud and clear – don't take a relationship with God for granted.

The Bible warns us very strongly about taking a relationship with a holy God for granted.

Why do people do that?

Perhaps because they grow up praying the 'Lord's Prayer' which begins 'Our Father' – so they assume God is their father. Perhaps because their parents tell them from an early age – good children go to heaven. Perhaps because they were baptised as infants, and feel part of Christendom. They do not disagree with the preacher, which to them must mean that they believe. Perhaps because they watch Hollywood stars saying things like 'we need to have faith' and 'pray'. Perhaps because they hear politicians asking for God's blessing in a land where that could mean Allah, Krishna, Buddha, Hashem or Jesus. Mostly, it is the general feeling and teaching today that we are good people with faults, not that we are bad people with some redeeming qualities.

Romans 11:20-21 *Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.*

Matthew 7:21-2 *Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²² Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' ²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'*

II. Israel were Not to Meet God on Their Own Terms – Nor Should We

As Aaron went about his duties on that day, he had to follow a precise order. He had to make sure he sacrificed the right animals at the right time. He had to make sure he was ritually cleansed, wearing the right materials, presenting blood for his own sins, and for the sins of the people, and for the cleansing of the Tabernacle. There had to be two goats, not one or three, and not cows or roosters.

Israel understood something very clearly: God sets the terms of reconciliation. God is Holy, He is the Creator. He decides what satisfies Him as far as reconciliation goes. He graciously reveals what satisfies Him, but He does not enter into a discussion about what will satisfy Him.

If Aaron or any high priest had decided to just improvise – what would have happened? We recall what happened to Aaron's two sons in **Leviticus 10:1-3** *Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. ² So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. ³ And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified.' "* So Aaron held his peace.

Israel understood – not only must we not take a relationship with God for granted, but we must not improvise, innovate or otherwise create how we come to God. We must humble ourselves and come as He told us.

Now the nature of false religion has always been to set the terms itself.

Think of Cain vs. Abel.

Think of Saul with his sacrifices.

Think of King Jehoshaphat with his new altars and new priesthood.

Think of Israel worshipping in the high places.

Think of the Samaritans and Mt. Gerizim.

As if God has no will, no personality – all He cares about is that we come to Him one way or the other.

People today say things like, “It is the height of arrogance to suggest that there is only one way to God, through Jesus Christ!” But in fact, it is the height of arrogance, to tell a holy God that he had better accept your self-made religion. It is the height of arrogance to dismiss what He has called for, roll your own religion, and demand that God accept you simply because you are sincere.

Today, we have the idea that if we come to God, just by us coming God is satisfied. God is happy just because we come. The Day of Atonement teaches us that if we tried to come, and there was no atonement – we would be killed.

Do you recall Esther and king Ahaseurus? She could only approach if the golden sceptre was held out.

Now Israel knew what was required for atonement, and it hasn't changed. The sins of the people must be atoned for by the death of an innocent; a sin-bearer must take the sins away.

If you don't have those things, you have no right to invent new ways to find atonement. We cannot come to God on the basis of being a nation where the Christian message has been here for some time. We cannot come to God on the basis of a life of apparently good works. We cannot come to God on the basis of baptism. We cannot come to Him on the basis of family. We cannot come to Him on the basis of a particular religious denomination or family tradition. We cannot come to Him on the basis of race, or language, or education.

If you want to be reconciled to God, the message of the Old Testament still stands. Your sins must be atoned for. Your sin still requires death as the penalty. God still accepts only perfect holiness as the payment.

III. Israel were Not to Doubt God's Provision – Nor Should We

Israel was a people of The Book. Their law was written down. They could read and see what God said and required. If they followed His instructions, He had bound Himself to do what He said He would. If He had given instructions for the Day of Atonement, and those instructions were followed, what was Israel to do once that atonement had been made? They were to trust God for it.

They were to believe it had been made. They were to agree with it.

What if Israel had decided to have two days of atonement – just to be sure? Or if they had walked away from the Tabernacle saying, “Well, we don't know for sure, but we'll try to be righteous this year, and hope for the best.”

If a pagan had asked them after the Day of Atonement, “Are the sins of Israel atoned for?”, and one of them had replied, “No one can say for sure. But we hope so. We'll just keep trying our best”, what would that have said about God's provision? It would have said – it is not sufficient.

Now the book of Hebrews tells us many things about the provision that God has made. This book does so by way of contrast. Even though the Day of Atonement was sufficient to atone for sins once yearly, it was not the final provision. The book of Hebrews gives us at least four contrasts to help us to understand the finality of Jesus' provision:

- 1) The priests were temporary and died, but Jesus lives forever – Heb 7:23-25
- 2) The priests had to offer sacrifices repeatedly, and for their own sin as well. Jesus had no sin, and did not have to sacrifice for Himself. He offered one sacrifice that was once for all – Heb 7:26-28, 9:25-26
- 3) The priests used the blood of animals, Jesus shed His own blood - Heb 9:13-14
- 4) The blood of animals could not ultimately atone, but the blood of Christ does – Heb 10:1-4; 10:10-12, 14

Now this writer, and Paul often makes the point – the Old Covenant was glorious, and it was what was needed for that time – but it was temporary and passing away. Now that the New has come, with its full provision, how much more should we embrace it?

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of every type, picture and shadow from the Day of Atonement. Jesus is the fulfillment of both goats – He is the sin offering, and He is the scape goat who bears our sins away. He is the High Priest, who enters the Holy Place – not on earth, but in heaven, and makes atonement – once for all. He lives on, so that His atonement is eternal.

God signified that atonement had been made in a number of ways:

Firstly, that Temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. The veil was 20 metres long, 10 metres wide, and the thickness of the palm of your hand.

Previously, the veil separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, where only the priest could come on the Day of Atonement. By tearing it, what was God saying? He was not saying that everyone can come any old way. He was saying that the system of earthly priests is done away with. Christ, the Eternal high Priest is now the way you come to God

He also signified it with Jesus' words 'it is finished'

In the original language that word was used in a number of contexts. It was used when a debtor had paid his debt in full. The word was then written over the notice of debt. It was also used when a slave was purchased from the slave market or from another. The word meant – ‘absolutely, my property’ – full price paid. It was also used to describe a work of art when finished. When a sculpture or a painting was now a masterpiece – the words were often said.

That is Christ's atonement. The full debt paid; slaves of sin redeemed, and a masterpiece of God finished off.

Question: what is the appropriate way of treating a sacrifice like this? What is the right way to respond to provision like this?

Answer: believe it, and then rest fully on it.

Now, if you know that Christ is the final atonement for sin, and you turn to other things, or ignore this face, or turn back to Judaism, or lean on man-made religion, then the Bible has very strong words

Hebrews 10:26-31 *For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. ²⁸Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." ³¹It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Let's get very practical. When it comes to your salvation, your sins are either atoned for by Christ, or they aren't. You cannot be in a state of limbo – where they are kind of paid for, and you are kind of saved, or maybe you are halfway saved. At this moment, the once for all atonement of Christ has either atoned for all your sins, or it hasn't.

According to I John 2:2, there is the potential in the death of Christ to atone for the sins of the whole world. But that doesn't mean the whole world has been reconciled to God. Because like on the Day of Atonement – there were two goats – one was killed and the blood applied to the mercy seat, one was the scape goat. And Aaron placed both hands on the goat – confessing the sins of Israel. By the laying on of hands – it symbolised identification – this is the scape goat, this is the sin-bearer. God told us to do it – we believe it, we repent, we lay our sins on this animal, and trust Him to take them away.

In the same way, Jesus Christ is now the scapegoat. His blood has been shed, He has made atonement and applied it to the mercy seat in heaven – but unless you do the equivalent of Aaron with the scapegoat, you will not be saved. You must acknowledge you need reconciliation to God. You must acknowledge that sin has separated you from God. You must trust that Jesus Christ, the Son of God is the provision. And then you must lay your sins on Him. You must repent of them, ask Jesus to be your sin-bearer and to take them away forever.

Because He died and rose again, you can be assured that His atonement was successful. Those who come to God by Him are saved.

If you repent of living as God's enemy, come to God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ and ask Him to be your atonement, what must you then do? You must believe; trust. To doubt that His sacrifice was sufficient is to doubt Him.

Salvation is not based on wishing, hoping or dreaming. It is based on atonement. If you believe Christ is the atonement, if you want your sins atoned for, and no longer want to live in them, you place them on Jesus, trust Him, and receive eternal life.