

Offering Living Sacrifices  
**Leviticus 16:29-34 (read at start); Romans 3:21-26; 12:1-21**

## Introduction

As a student of the Old Testament, I have a special interest in Jewish tradition. Just last month, the Jewish "High Holy Days" were celebrated. September 30th was *Rosh Hashanah*, which marks the Jewish New Year, and October 9<sup>th</sup> was *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. The ten day period between these two holidays constitutes the "High Holy Days." My greatest interest lies in the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*. I am actually not very familiar with modern day celebrations of *Yom Kippur*. I have spent most of my study time fascinated with the **ancient** Day of Atonement recorded in the Scriptures. Nevertheless, a few years ago, I read an insightful newspaper article about some modern practices surrounding *Yom Kippur*. The article spoke of Rabbis who have been trying new and different activities in order to help their congregations truly embrace the meaning of the Day of Atonement. Along with the traditional activities of fasting, reflection, and prayers, additional practices have been introduced by some. The focus, of course, is the forgiveness of sin and the elimination of sin from the community.

One Rabbi directed worshipers to write down their sins on a paper, and then participate in a ceremony in which the papers were burned. Another congregation was directed to write down sins and throw them into a river. Another Rabbi had worshipers read aloud newspaper articles about poverty and oppression, presumably with the intent of confessing such evils and symbolically removing them from the community. Another Rabbi led worshipers in the simple activity of wearing a crimson string around their wrists as a reminder of their commitment to live righteous and holy lives before God. My favorite is the Rabbi who placed two bowls of water before the congregation, one with salt water, and one with fresh. He had the worshipers write their sins on paper using dissolvable ink. Then, when they dipped their papers in the salt water, the writing of their sins disappeared. Finally, they washed their hands in the fresh water.

These modern concerns are indeed consistent with the Old Testament Day of Atonement which served to cleanse the community of Israel from her sins and impurities, and secure atonement in relationship to God. This ancient ceremony in the Old Testament, held on the Day of Atonement, may seem irrelevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century New Testament Christians; yet, in truth, it provides a foundational understanding for the fulfillment of salvation which comes in Jesus Christ.

## I. The OT Day of Atonement Ceremony

In our age of advanced technology and information, there is little room for elaborate ceremonies full of mystery and symbolism. Rituals which evoke feelings of awe, wonder, and fear are often rejected as superstitious or considered the product of unrestrained emotion. We normally participate in only a few meaningful ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, and a few other religious rites such as partaking of the Lord's Supper. For most of us, however, nothing exists like the grand rituals found in documents describing ancient religious practices. Nevertheless, I invite us to suspend our 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific mindset, and explore, for a moment, the ancient Hebrew "Day of Atonement!"

As described in the book of Leviticus, chapter 16, the day long ceremony was to be held once a year in Ancient Israel. Its purpose was to make atonement between God and God's people. Atonement involved purification from sin and a commitment to life which made possible right and loving relationships.

There are a number of meaningful aspects to the ceremony of the Day of Atonement. However, I wish to focus on one central feature. This portion of the ceremony took place within the Holy of Holies inside the temple. For the faithful Hebrew of ancient times, the Holy of Holies might be considered the most revered location on the planet. It was inaccessible, hidden behind a great veil or curtain. No human was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies except for the High Priest, and he was only allowed access on this one day each year. On the Day of Atonement, the priest entered through the veil with a firepan of hot coals and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense. The priest would put the incense on the hot coals and create a cloud of thick sweet smoke. The smoke served to shield the priest's eyes from seeing the presence of God, for it was believed that no one could look upon the glory of God and live. When the room was prepared, God, the creator of the universe, would appear over the lid of the arc of the covenant, which is called the "**mercy seat.**"

Later in the ceremony, the priest would slaughter a goat outside of the temple. The goat was selected as a sin-offering on behalf of the people of the community. The priest took the blood from the goat into the Holy of Holies, and sprinkled or splattered the blood on the **mercy seat**, above which appeared the presence of God, in the midst of the cloud of smoke. This act represented the realization of two significant aspects of atonement. First, the blood served to purge human impurities and the effects of sin from the place of God's presence. Consequently, from above the **mercy seat**, the forgiveness of God was secured for the sins of the people.

Second, the sacrifice served as an offering of life to God. Thus; once a year, the hidden presence of God was encountered, in a cloud of smoke, behind the veil, in the Holy of Holies, within the temple. At that time, forgiveness was granted from above the **mercy seat**, and an offering of life was presented to God. Thereby, atonement was secured for the children of Israel!

We believe that Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of God's revelation, and the instrument of our salvation. Accordingly, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ present for us the fulfillment of the intent and meaning of the Day of Atonement, as described in Leviticus 16.

## II. Fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul argues that all of the various attempts to attain the righteousness of God have failed. He describes the actions of both Gentiles and Jews as falling short. After a lengthy exposition of these failures, Paul finally reveals how the righteousness of God has truly been made manifest. He explains that the righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

-[Read Romans 3:21-26]-

Paul explains that believers are justified through redemption in Christ Jesus, "**whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith**" (NASB). I believe this phrase recorded in Rom. 3:25 ("**whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith**") draws heavily upon Paul's knowledge of the temple rites, and the meaning of atonement as expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The key to this understanding appears in the term which is translated here (NASB) "propitiation." The Greek word, is *hilasterion*. It has been variously translated as "sin-offering," "expiation," "propitiation," and "offering of atonement." However, a careful study of the use of this term, and related terms, in the Scriptures suggests a different translation for the word. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this very term is consistently used to refer to the "**mercy seat**," which is that lid on top of the arc of the covenant inside the Holy of Holies. Though the word appears in other grammatical forms in certain texts of the New Testament, the only other New Testament verse containing this word in this particular form clearly refers to the "mercy seat" on the arc of the covenant. Thus, the use of this particular term throughout the Bible suggests that the word should be translated "**mercy seat**."

Paul seems to be calling Jesus, God's "mercy seat." At first thought, it seems odd that Paul would refer to Christ as a piece of temple furniture, the lid to the arc of the covenant. However, the surrounding sentence seems to affirm this translation. Notice, Rom. 3:25 also reads "**in his blood.**" Recalling that the priest would sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, this phrase gives added meaning to calling Jesus a mercy seat. Most convincing, however, is the preceding phrase of Rom. 3:25, "**whom God displayed publicly.**" The **mercy seat** was never displayed publicly! Recall, it was hidden behind the veil, in the Holy of Holies, in the temple, inaccessible to all, except the High Priest, and that only once a year!

Paul is making a dramatic statement, claiming that in Christ Jesus, the mercy seat of God, the place of God's presence, the place where forgiveness is secured, is now displayed publicly, accessible to all, at any time! No longer is God or God's forgiveness hidden behind smoke, veils, and in temples. No longer is an audience with God restricted to one person in the community, one time a year. In Jesus Christ, God's presence and the grace of God's forgiveness are made public and available to all, anytime, and anyplace!

The Gospel of Luke pictures this proclamation with its description of the time of the crucifixion. Luke records, as Christ hung on the cross, that the great veil of the temple, which hides the **mercy seat** of God, was dramatically torn in two. This illustration proclaims that in Jesus Christ, the **mercy seat** of God is exposed to the world. Jesus is God's mercy seat. Jesus is the place of God's presence, and the place where our forgiveness is secured, now available to all, at any time.

The second aspect of the meaning of the Day of Atonement ceremony is also fulfilled in Christ; that is, the act of presenting an offering of life to God. Recall, in the ancient ceremony, the worshiper offered blood to God through the action of the High Priest in the Holy of Holies. Leviticus 17:11 makes it clear that, in relation to atonement, blood stands for life.

-[Read Leviticus 17:11]-

Thus, the blood sacrifice offered in the Holy of Holies represented offering life to God. The practical application of this act was that the worshiper was then supposed to **live** the rest of that year as a servant dedicated to God! The problem was, that too many people simply behaved as though having the ritual performed on their behalf was enough to please God. They felt that going through the motions of the formal ceremony was action enough to atone them from sin.

I am told there was a time, perhaps it is still the case for some, when our catholic brothers and sisters were not allowed to eat any beef on Fridays. I read once of a protestant who moved into such a catholic neighborhood. Each Friday, this protestant would barbecue a thick, juicy steak, and the aroma would fill the neighborhood. When his catholic neighbors could stand it no longer; through great persuasion, they convinced him to become a catholic. At his baptism, the priest pronounced, "you were born a protestant, you were raised a protestant, and now you are a catholic." The next Friday, the new convert was back to barbecuing a thick, juicy steak. His frustrated neighbors overheard him saying, as he sprinkled water on the steak, "you were born a steer, your were raised a steer, and now you are a fish."

At my house, you might hear the words: "you were born a steer, your were raised a steer, and now you are tofu!" It doesn't work.

Clearly, words do not turn steak into tofu, nor does water turn steak into fish, nor does the mere ritual of baptism make one catholic. In the same way, the mere ceremony of the Day of Atonement did not make Israel suddenly pleasing to God. The prophets of the Old Testament made this clear, as they pronounced God's judgment against those who offered sacrifices, but lived in ways contrary to God's direction. We find just a sample of such prophetic judgment in Amos.

-[Read Amos 5:21-27]-

Thus, for truly fulfilling the intent of the Day of Atonement ritual, the children of Israel were called to offer their everyday living to God. The blood sacrifice was representative of living in obedience throughout the year.

The testimony of the Gospels is that Jesus fulfilled this intent perfectly. Jesus lived all of his life as an obedient servant to God. He was even killed in His commitment to doing God's will. Thus, Jesus literally lived out what the Day of Atonement represented. He offered his life to God, both in daily obedience, and in literal surrender through death. As followers of Christ, we are called to do the same; to pick up our own cross and follow Jesus. We need not sprinkle goat's blood on an altar, but we do need to seek God's forgiveness, and offer ourselves as God's servants in life. Thus, the intent of the Day of Atonement can become the reality of a Christian's commitment in Jesus Christ.

### III. Offering Living Sacrifices

The Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of sacrifice to call believers to this very type of Christian commitment. Drawing upon the imagery of the sacrificial system, and applying the prophetic emphasis of daily living for God, Paul exhorts believers to "present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice," in Romans 12:1. We are called to **offer living sacrifices**: dead to selfish concerns, dead to evil temptations; but alive and dedicated to serving God daily! Such service to God can be reflected in everyday words, attitudes, and actions. In the rest of the passage in Romans 12, Paul describes some examples of what it means to function as "living sacrifices":

-[Read Romans 12:9-21]-

Human illustrations of living sacrifices surround us with inspiration and guidance. Consider the story of the widow whom Jesus saw at the temple giving her last two pennies in an offering. Consider missionaries like Mother Theresa in India and Bruce Olson in South America. Each of these dedicated servants endured great hardships, yet offered years of committed service to others, with the motivation and joy of Christ in their lives. In the weeks following 9/11, accounts of modern day living sacrifices emerged in the news: two people who carried a disabled woman down over 60 flights of stairs to escape the destruction of one of the World Trade Center towers. Two men who drove all night to bring needed skin grafts from Texas to New York, for burn victims. Firemen, seeking to rescue the needy, ran **upstairs** and **into the fire**, against a mob of those running down.

The Christian life does not necessarily call us to become such national heroes; unless of course we recognize simple acts of kindness and love-on-a-daily-basis as heroic, and perhaps we should. To come home after a difficult and maddening work day, and determine to express joy and love to waiting family members; to share time and food at the end of the month when the checkbook is empty, with those who are lonely and hungry and have no checkbook; to open up home and resources to those who have no bed. I continue to be inspired by **my older brother, Tim**, who consistently gives of himself to high school students at risk. I had enough trauma raising my own three lovely girls, with whom I have had the opportunity to share my values and beliefs since they day they were born. I can't imagine, one like my brother, who took in teens who have been abused, neglected, and impacted by negative models of value and belief. Nevertheless, they were need of care and a home. Tim took them in, despite the tremendous stress and drain it placed on his own family resources.

Today, he is investing himself in trying to provide for the education of such needy teens. In a time when charter schools are focusing on "talented and gifted" programs, Tim established a "charter school" aimed at drop-outs and troubled youth who rarely make it through the traditional public school system. Tim is one of my heroes.

There are many other such inspiring models of "living sacrifice," here in our own community. Those who continually share their time and resources with others, those who are always present to offer a word of comfort and love in a time of crisis, those who consistently give a smile or a warm touch simply communicating the inspiration of encouragement. Offering living sacrifices simply requires the discipline to daily think, speak, and act in ways which communicate care and love, in the name and Spirit of Christ.

## **Conclusion**

In the spirit of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, and in light of its great fulfillment in Jesus Christ, let us take on the commitment of ridding our community of sin, thanks to God's gracious forgiveness in Christ, and let us take on the discipline of offering ourselves to God daily as "living sacrifices."

It is not our tradition to write our sins on paper and burn them, or tie a crimson string around our wrists; but it is our practice to gather around the altar when the Spirit draws. We don't bring the blood of bulls or goats, but we do bring our lives in commitment to God. If the Lord is calling you to a renewed commitment of offering your live to God daily, the altar is here and Christ, our mercy seat awaits you. Let us commit ourselves to becoming "living sacrifices" for God.