

The Perfect Atonement

By Linda Rex

November 3, 2024, Proper 26—This year on October 11, 2024, many observed a special day called Yom Kippur. On this important day of the year, the holiest on the Jewish calendar, many fast and pray, cease from all labor, and gather together for a special service. In Leviticus 16, we learn there were specific sacrifices that the ancient nation of Israel observed on this day, which is often known as the Day of Atonement.

Two goats would be offered, and each would have a specific role to play—one would be offered to God in sacrifice for the sins of the people. Blood from the goat offered to God would be taken by the high priest into the most holy place (never entered except by the high priest on this day, once a year), and the high priest would sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in the tent of meeting, purifying them. And then there would be a bull offered as well, for the high priest's cleansing, and its blood would be offered with that of the goat, and the great altar would be cleansed. Then the other goat would have the sins of the people laid on it, and as Azazel's goat, it would be sent out into the desert to carry away the sins of the people. There were many more offerings than just this (Lev. 23:26-32; Num. 29:7-11), but what I've shared so far enables us to begin to see the significance of our New Testament passage for this Sunday, Hebrews 9:11-14.

In all those years of animals being offered in sacrifice, the Levite high priest offered up the means of grace given them by God for the annual renewal of the covenant for the ancient Jewish people. The sins of the people were cleansed, the covenant renewed, but only an external cleansing or purification occurred. Nothing was done for the inward work of transformation which was actually needed.

Now, though, because Jesus is the perfect offering, the person who had no sin, who lived a genuine human existence as the Son of God in human flesh, we have a greater, more perfect sacrifice. He willingly walked the road to the cross, allowed himself to be crucified, because he knew he was fulfilling every one of these sacred events in the life of his people. He would be both the goat who was offered and the goat who took away our sins once and for all. He would be the bull who would cleanse us of our own personal sins. He would be both the great High Priest and the perfect Atonement, for us.

The author of Hebrews explains how the Son of God came in human flesh and took on the role of our high priest through his own sacrificial self-offering. In this particular passage, the author explains that Jesus Christ entered into "the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands...not of this creation." The tabernacle being described is actually heaven itself, for the Son of God, having taken on human flesh, lived a genuine human existence, was crucified and died, and was resurrected. Like the high priest who "ascended" into the holy of holies to offer the sacred sacrifice once a year, Jesus ascended into glory, still bearing our humanity, and offered himself in our place on our behalf. Today he continues to act as our divine Mediator and High Priest. Jesus has become our place of perfect rest in relationship with God, for he offers our prayers up to the Father in the Spirit, and offers us the high priest blessing of peace in return. Because he is without blemish, perfect in every aspect, he fulfills the sacred aspects of this day in his own person. As Thomas F. Torrance says, "Christ Jesus IS the atonement" (TFT, *Atonement*, 94).

Unlike the human high priest who had to offer a bull for his own personal cleansing, Jesus did not need any special offering for himself. As God in human flesh, Jesus was the perfect Lamb of God, as John the Baptizer described him, who was offered for the sins of all. Jesus was filled with the Spirit from conception, received the anointing of the Spirit for ministry, and lived and

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walked by the Spirit throughout his life and ministry. He lived in perfect unity with his Father in the Spirit each day, and was ever faithful in the Word of God and prayer.

Not only is Jesus the One who intercedes for us, but he is also the One who is sacrificed for us. What is cleansed is not just the outer person, but the inward person. For Jesus, in his perfect life and death and resurrection, writes God's law on our inward parts, and then sends us the Spirit after his ascension so we can begin to live as new persons, in right relationship with his Father in the Spirit as we trust in him and walk in the Spirit. As the author of Hebrews says, "how much more" will Christ's blood cleanse our inner mind and heart, enabling us to serve God as he always intended? This was always God's plan, and in Jesus Christ, he accomplished it! And this sounds to me like some very, very good news!

Dear Trinity, thank you for the marvelous work you have done to bring us into relationship with yourself through Jesus in the Spirit. Thank you, dear Jesus, for your perfect self-offering, and for standing as our High Priest, interceding for us and mediating for us in the Spirit at all times. Thank you, heavenly Spirit, for growing us up into the maturity that is Christ. We are simply grateful for all you have done and are doing. Amen.

"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He centered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"
Hebrews 9:11–14 NASB

"But now Christ has made his public appearance as High Priest of a perfect tabernacle. The good things that were predicted have arrived. This new tabernacle does not derive from its shadow type, the previous man-made one. It is the reality. As High Priest, his permission to enter the Holy Place was not secured by the blood of beasts. By his own blood he obtained access on behalf of the human race. Only one act was needed for him to enter the most sacred place of grace and there to institute a ransom of perpetual consequence. The blood of beasts and the ashes of the burnt sacrifice of a heifer could only achieve a very temporal and surface cleansing by being sprinkled on the guilty. How much more effective was the blood of Christ, when he presented his own flawless life through the eternal Spirit before God, in order to purge your conscience from its frustration under the cul-de-sac rituals of the law. There is no comparison between a guilt- and duty-driven, dead religious system, and the vibrancy of living your life free from a sin-consciousness! This is what the new testament priesthood is all about!" Hebrews 9:11–14 Mirror Bible

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Deuteronomy 6:4–9 NASB