

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

By F. G. BURKITT

*“Herein is love, not that we loved
God, but that He loved us, and
sent His Son to be the propitiation
for our sins.”—1 John iv. 10.*

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Leviticus xvi.

THIS is a most important chapter, not only because of the truths it contains, but because it is very helpful towards a right understanding of many passages both in the Old and the New Testaments. There are three main truths set forth in it. (1) The blood on the mercy seat as that which met God's holy requirements, signifying propitiation; (2) The sins confessed over the scapegoat, signifying Christ as our substitute; and (3) The reconciliation of all things.

And first let us say a word as to the high priest's dress. He was not to wear the special high priestly garment with its gold, precious stones, etc., but the simple linen garments. This was Jehovah's command and it had its meaning. The linen garments spoke of Christ's perfect and personal purity and righteousness rather than of His high priestly position. For Christ's work as our High Priest began, properly speaking, when He took His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high *after* He had made purification of sins. He entered the holiest of all, that is heaven itself, *having* first obtained eternal redemption (Heb. ix. 12), and there His intercession is carried on for His people here.

Aaron was forbidden to go at all times into the holy place within the vail. Only once in the year, on the great Day of Atonement, was he permitted to enter there. He was to take a bullock for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, for himself

and his house. And for the children of Israel he was to take two goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

Leaving aside for a moment the bullock for Aaron and his house let us briefly consider the two goats. They represent two aspects of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ—for it required the two to complete the figure. They were to be set “before the Lord” and Aaron was to cast lots upon them—one for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. The high priest was then to kill the one on which the Lord’s lot fell and was to pass within the veil with a censer full of burning coals from off the altar and his hands full of sweet incense, and sprinkle the blood upon the mercy-seat seven times.

Here everything prefigured Christ. The incense typified the fragrant grace of His presence, which indeed God alone could appreciate in its fulness. And the very strength of the trial to which it was subjected, of which the coals of fire remind us, only made the fragrance of the incense arise all the more before God. The blood was for atonement—a word often misunderstood and under-estimated even by true Christians. Atonement was that which was absolutely necessary and required by the very fact of God’s holiness, justice and righteousness, which had to be vindicated and satisfied as regards the question of sin.

Viewing then the work of the cross as that which has fully met all God’s requirements—this aspect of it is what we might call the more important part, if indeed any part can be said to be less important in a work where everything was absolutely necessary. Similarly, when considering the offerings, we saw that the burnt offering—that is that aspect of the death of Christ in which God was perfectly glorified—came first; the sin offering, which represented God’s provision for sins committed, came last.

Here the goat for the Lord's lot is first in the divine order; it is what we may call the Godward aspect of the work of Christ.

We may fittingly recall here the words of John the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Jesus was *God's* Lamb, the Lord's lot. Through the efficiency of His blood, presented before God, a full and complete atonement has been made:—"through the eternal Spirit He offered Himself without spot to God." Every attribute of God's holy nature has been satisfied, yea even glorified, by that wonderful work accomplished once for all upon the cross. And as God's holiness and justice was infinite, so the One who alone could satisfy it must be infinite also.

Who could gauge the depth of those sufferings which caused the holy Son of God to say the solemn words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Truly they were beyond all human comprehension; yet, cost what it might, He obeyed, even to death. The fragrance of that perfect offering of Himself to God filled the holy place when Jesus said "It is finished," and bowed His head in death upon the cross.

We may find in the gospels many expressions conveying to us the Lord's own estimate of this work and its consequences. Take John xiii. 31, for example, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God be glorified in Him, God shall also glorify Him in Himself, and shall straightway glorify Him." Here the Lord, looking out upon the vast extent of the work He was about to accomplish, and viewing it in its Godward aspect, speaks of it as that in which God has been glorified; yea so glorified that, in righteousness, He would glorify the One who accomplished it, and that "straightway," that is, without waiting for the manifested glory of the kingdom.

Let us be careful also to bear in mind that these are great *realities*; *truths* and *facts* which must bring the most profound peace to the soul which rests upon them in faith, and which must likewise draw forth from the believer worship and thanksgiving to the Saviour who has done it all.

We have already seen that the "Lord's lot," the goat whose blood was carried within the veil, gave us the truth of propitiation, whilst the scapegoat spoke of substitution. Christ's blood having been shed and God's holy claims with regard to sin fully met, the evangelist is now entitled to go out and proclaim the gospel of the grace of God worldwide. Christ is a propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only but also for the whole world (1 John ii. 2—the words "sins of" should be omitted).

Moreover, God's righteousness is said to be "unto all"—this answers to the first goat—and "upon all them that believe"—answering to the second goat. God has set forth Christ "a propitiation through faith in His blood"; for the blood on the mercy seat has so fully met and satisfied His holy and just demands that He can be just and yet justify the one who believes in Jesus.

In verse 17 of our chapter we find that it was commanded that there was to be no man in the tabernacle when the high priest went in to make atonement until he came out again. So God and Christ must be alone in the great work of Calvary, when darkness covered the earth and God hid His face from the holy sufferer during those solemn hours when He was making atonement on the cross.

In the case of the scapegoat, the high priest was to lay both his hands on its head; here he stood as the representative of the whole congregation. Then he was to confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, in all their sins—the threefold repetition of the word "all" here shows how completely the goat

stood charged, so to speak, with the sins of the people. The goat was then sent away, by the hand of a man standing ready, into the wilderness, where he bore upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited. Thus it is the believer's blessed privilege to know that all his sins are *gone*; lost in the land of God's eternal forgetfulness.

This is plainly the great truth of substitution. It shadows forth for us the One who bore our sins in His own body on the tree, on whom God laid our sins and iniquities; and now they are entirely gone from God's sight and memory.

Turning to Hebrews ix. 25-28, we have both parts of the Day of Atonement brought together in those verses—it is, however, a passage which is frequently misunderstood. Christ "has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." This is sometimes quoted and spoken of as though it meant that sin has been put away; but the passage does not say so, and as a fact, sin, as such, has not been put away, it is still here.

True, the believer's sins are put away and he is justified from all things, but this is quite another matter. What verse 26 says is that Christ *appeared* for a definite purpose, namely, "for the putting away of sin." The work has been done upon the cross, atonement has been made, but "sin" will not be put away until it is entirely banished from the whole universe, and that will not be until the new heavens and the new earth.

Then in verse 28 we have the second goat, the one for substitution, "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many." Carefully note here that it is "sins" not "sin"; and it is "many," it does not say "all." Christ's death is *available* for all, but it is only those who believe who avail themselves of it. It is when one believes the gospel that he is entitled to say that Christ bore his sins and put them away for ever.

It is true that there is a sense in which Christ "died for all" (2 Cor. v. 14) and "gave Himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim. ii. 6) but the truth of substitution does not come in here. Where that truth does come in, as in Matt. xx. 28, "The Son of man came . . . to give His life a ransom for many," the word translated "for" is a different one, and it is limited to "many."*

We now come to the third part of that which God ordained for this solemn day—the reconciliation of the tabernacle. The high priest was to make atonement for the holy place, the tabernacle, and the altar of burnt offering, by the sprinkling of blood. Atonement needed to be made, not only for the *persons* but for the *things*, for even the heavens are not clean in God's sight.

Thus everything had to be reconciled by the blood. We have this same truth in Colossians (chapter i. 20), "By Him (Christ) to reconcile all things unto Himself; by Him, I say, whether they be things on earth or things in the heavens . . . and you . . . hath He reconciled." The "things" have not yet been reconciled; but believers are already reconciled to God. But the day is coming when, in virtue of the blood of Christ (to quote the words of the hymn) "All taint of sin shall be removed, all evil done away"; that, however, will not be until after the wicked have been cast into the lake of fire, and when the righteous shall dwell in the new heavens and the new earth.

In conclusion, let us say a few words as to the bullock for Aaron and his house. These latter represent Christ and the church—the latter looked at as the priestly family.

*It has been pointed out that, when strict substitution is intended, the preposition used is *anti*, as when Abraham offered up a ram *instead* of his son; so also in Matt. xx. 28, referred to above. Another preposition, *huper*, "in favour of," "on behalf of," but not strictly in the sense of substitution, is found in 2 Cor. v. 14: and in 1 Tim. ii. 6, it is "a substitutionary ransom on behalf of all men."

Needless to say, Christ did not need atonement for Himself personally, being without any taint of sin; but His people did. As Caiaphas prophesied, He was to die for that nation, and also to gather together in one the scattered children of God (John xi. 49-52). And in virtue of that blood, the believer now is washed whiter than snow and has access at all times within the rent veil, into the very presence of God Himself.

May we thus be better enabled to apprehend the Holy Spirit's mind in these instructive types, and to appreciate more fully the personal glory of the One around whom all truth centres and in whom the shadows of the Old Testament find their substance and reality.

This must produce, in our souls, a spirit of overflowing worship and thanksgiving to the One who accomplished all the will of God—and at such a cost to Himself!

As to the word "atonement," it has been pointed out by another that it does not occur in the New Testament (save in Rom. v. 11, where the word used should be translated "reconciliation"). The Hebrew word occurs nearly 100 times in the O.T., chiefly in connection with sacrifice. It refers to the removal of guilt out of God's sight. Its N.T. equivalent, "propitiation," with its cognate words, occur about six times, and in Heb. ix. 5, one of these is rightly translated "mercy seat."

Psalm xxii. may be taken as giving us a view of the *atoning* sufferings of the Lord Jesus on the cross and His inward feelings at that solemn hour in perhaps a deeper way than any other Scripture. The contemplation of these should, indeed, bow our whole heart and soul as we think of the One who, in divine love, was willing to undergo all so that God might be glorified and we might have the light and joy of His presence. To Him be all the glory. Amen.