

The LORD said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover.

³ *“This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ... “Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. ⁷ Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. ⁸ He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. ⁹ Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. ¹⁰ But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat.*

¹¹ *“Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering. ¹² He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. ¹³ He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die. ¹⁴ He is to take some of the bull’s blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover.*

¹⁵ *“He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull’s blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. ¹⁶ In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. ¹⁷ No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel. ... “When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. ²¹ He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. ²² The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert. (Leviticus 16:2,3a,6-17,20-22)*

We See Jesus Taking Our Place

“It’s not fair!” Someone once told me that she could always tell that the school bus had dropped her daughter off because she could hear that refrain coming up the sidewalk. Many of us associate that statement with adolescent behavior. But let’s be honest, we adults say it, too – in many different situations. Today I want to focus on one situation in particular: choosing a scapegoat. Nothing is more unfair than making one person suffer for a whole group’s failures. Unfortunately, that’s natural human response. When bad things happen, we want to point the finger at someone else. When a company gets into trouble, it’s hard for the boss to resist the temptation to single out one or two employees and make them scapegoats. Firing them might save the boss’ job. When we’re on the outside looking in, we see how unfair that is. But when we’re on the inside, we’re just as likely to single someone else out for blame. It’s not fair. But we still do it.

Today we want to consider what human eyes have to see as the most unfair event in all of history: Jesus’ crucifixion. To do that, we’re going to look at the most unique holiday that God gave his Old Testament people. Throughout the season of Lent, we’ve been considering Jesus’ work through the eyes of the Old Covenant. Our focus for today is on the Old Testament holiday known as Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement. In this holiday God does something that seems unfair to us. But in this shadow **we see Jesus taking our place.**

I.

When God destroyed the world in the great flood, he did it because of human sin. The human race had grown so evil that there was only one believing family left. So God punished the world. A young Christian once told me that it was unfair for God to kill millions of innocent animals because humans disobeyed him. I wonder what that young man would’ve thought about the entire system of Old Testament sacrifices? Again and again

God commanded his people to kill innocent animals for their own sins. Now, in truth, during the entire 1,500 years between Moses and Jesus, the Israelites rarely came close to doing everything Moses commanded. Except for a few generations that lived under remarkable spiritual leadership, the children of Israel ignored or corrupted this entire system that we've been studying for the last six weeks. But God still commanded these sacrifices. They were shadows of Christ. In the Day of Atonement, that's doubly true, because there we see Jesus twice.

We see Jesus taking our place. He died our death.

The Day of Atonement draws together all the different strains that we have been looking at during this Lenten season. It took place in the tabernacle. It was the one day of the year when the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place and stand in the presence of God. To do that he had to offer sacrifices. First of all, he had to offer a sacrifice for his own sin. That's the bull that Moses mentions. A sin offering was the offering God commanded for unintentional sins. So God was not saying that the priest had been unfaithful. But even the most committed and faithful high priest was still a human being. So before he could come in and remove God's anger against the people, he had to get rid of God's anger toward his own hidden sins. Even if he never realized that he had sinned, God knew he had. And any high priest who dared to come into God's presence without first washing that sin away died. So the high priest had to do something unfair: he had to transfer his guilt onto an animal that had nothing to do with his sin. He had to kill a bull and burn it up on the altar. He had to take its blood with him into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle it seven times before the atonement cover on the Ark of the Covenant. All of that had to happen before the high priest dared to deal with the sins of God's people.

Once that was done, the high priest had to bring a second sin offering, this time a goat for the people's sins. The really unique feature of this part of the sacrifice is the fact that he actually brought two goats to the sanctuary and then cast lots for them. He let God choose which goat would die and which would live. The one God chose took the people's place. It died and its blood was sprinkled before the atonement cover. Again, God was not saying with this ritual that his people had been deliberately unfaithful to him. That certainly was true for most of their history, and God knew it. But this ritual was for unintentional sinning. God was making them pay for sins they didn't even realize they were committing because they were sinful people.

God commanded the high priest to sprinkle the blood of the goat in the Most Holy Place, and said: **"In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness."** In fact, he had to do this for the entire sanctuary complex. The tabernacle, the house of God among his people, was stained by contact with sinners – even though those sinners were believers, even though they were God's people. It had to be cleansed with blood because the holy God appeared inside it.

You would think that God's holiness would be stronger than human sin. And, of course, you would be right. But God did all this to teach his people just how serious their sin really was. And he built into the ritual of the Day of Atonement the key to understanding that all this blood was just a symbol: the censer with the incense. Before he came into the Most Holy Place, the priest had to take some live coals from the altar and put them in a censor – a metal container. He then put handfuls of incense onto them and let them burn in the Most Holy Place. The smoke was supposed to hide the presence of God. The kind of incense they sell at places like Spencer Gifts doesn't really give you an accurate idea of what this was like. Smoke filled this closed-up little room so that the high priest couldn't see, so that this sinner couldn't look at God and die. So even though he had killed a bull to pay for his sins, he still couldn't stand in God's presence. The blood of an animal simply wasn't enough for him. And it wasn't enough for his people either.

These sacrifices were really shadows of Christ. The Day of Atonement couldn't really make atonement; it couldn't really get rid of God's anger and bring us safely into God's presence. The Day of Atonement was a prophecy that commemorated another day, the single darkest day in all of history—the day we are commemorating today. The Day of Atonement was a prophecy of Good Friday—when heaven and hell, sin and grace, met at the cross of Christ. There Jesus did what no animal sacrifice ever could. He erased our sins. Like God's Old Testament people, we are sinners. Now that doesn't mean that we've totally ignored God's covenant. It doesn't mean that we've engaged in active rebellion against him. We aren't trying to erase his Word and drive out faithful pastors and replace them with people who will preach what we want to hear. But even the most faithful, committed Christian is still a sinner. Our hearts are still corrupt. Our sins stain everything that we do,

everything that we touch, everything that we are. If God treated us justly, there's only one thing that could happen: we would die and go to hell.

But God did the most unfair thing in history. He did something that no human court would ever allow. He let a completely innocent person step up and take our punishment for us. Can you imagine that happening in America? After the jury convicts a murderer, can you imagine any judge letting his lawyer volunteer to be executed for him? That's what God did. He transferred our guilt to Jesus. Then he rained all his anger and hatred of sin and sinners down on his beloved Son. He didn't hold anything back. Then he killed him. When he was done, our sin was paid for. Jesus' blood—the blood of God's Son—washed our guilt away. God no longer has anything to be angry with us about. God did all that because he loves us. And all of us who trust in Christ will live with him in joy forever.

II.

Just to make sure we understand all this, on the Day of Atonement, God pictured Jesus' crucifixion twice. First he used the blood and sacrifice that pervaded all of Jewish worship. But then he added a second ritual that was unique in all the Scriptures. Our Bible calls it "the scapegoat." That's the second picture of Jesus. In it, **we see Jesus taking our place. He carried our sins.**

The high priest brought two goats and then cast lots over them. One died. But the one that lived was brought to the sanctuary where the high priest laid his hands on its head. He then confessed all the sins that God's people were guilty of. This part really strikes me, because doing it honestly would have run the risk of enraging people. Can you imagine if I made a public confession of all the sins that I think our congregation is guilty of? Even if I limited myself to things we've done together, rather than each individual's sins, you might disagree with what I called sin and rebellion. God never tells us how the high priest was supposed to determine this, and we don't know how detailed the lists were. But I think it's something that would make us uncomfortable.

After this public confession of corporate sin, the high priest gave the goat to another man who led it out into the wilderness. He was supposed to take it far enough away that it would never find its way back. The picture here is beautiful. God piled all the sins of his people onto the scapegoat. That goat took all the sins so far away that they could never get back to his people. Of course, that's Jesus! On the cross, he carried our sorrows away. David wrote, **"As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."** That's what Christ did!

The Day of Atonement is about the guilt that we feel in our hearts as well as the sin that we deserve to be punished for. God took away our sin. We aren't guilty in his book anymore. But day by day, we still struggle with our guilt. Sometimes when I'm in my office or driving my car, without any provocation, something will turn my mind back to conversations I've had. Sometimes I shudder at the things I've said to people. Sometimes I wish that I could erase those things from my personal history. Have you ever had conversations like that? Do you wish you could undo the sins of your past? Well, Jesus did that for you. Your sins are as far away from you as the east is from the west. They are gone forever! They're gone because of what Jesus did on the first Good Friday. He died for them. He paid for them. And the following Sunday he guaranteed that they would never get back to you by rising from the dead. Whenever your heart troubles you with your past, God points you to Jesus, who took your place. That's where you find peace.

Humanly speaking, it wasn't fair. Jesus never should have carried our sins. Jesus never should have died in our place. The only fair thing would've been for us to die and go to hell. But Jesus did do those things. God's love sent him to do those things because God knew that was the only way to satisfy his justice while still satisfying his love. God is love. So Jesus never complained, never shouted, "It's not fair!" like we so often do. He simply picked our sins and carried them away from us forever. Amen.