

The Day of Atonement

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on August 12, 2018

This morning we are turning to the sixth sermon in a seven part sermon series on the seven Old Testament feasts. The seven feasts are as follows: Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles.

Throughout the series we have emphasized the central place these seven feasts hold in the Jewish faith and culture. The reason for this emphasis is the recognition that the more we understand about the seven feasts, the better we will understand the Bible. This is especially true as we have discovered that all the seven feasts find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

For example, in the first four feasts, the spring feasts, we observed that Christ was slaughtered as the Passover Lamb of God during Passover. He was wrapped and buried during Unleavened Bread. He was resurrected on the morning of Firstfruits, and when the Day of Pentecost came, he sent the Holy Spirit to write God's laws on our hearts. All this was accomplished at the first coming of Christ.

The final three feasts, the fall feasts, appear to point us towards the second coming of Christ. In June, we looked at the Feast of Trumpets. This morning we will be looking at the most holy day in the Jewish calendar, the Day of Atonement.

With this in mind, let us turn to today's Scripture reading. Our text for this morning, is Leviticus chapter sixteen, verses twenty nine through thirty four.

Leviticus 16:29-34

29 This shall be a statute to you forever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. 30 For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord. 31 It is a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute forever. 32 The priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the linen vestments, the holy vestments. 33 He shall make atonement for the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. 34 This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. And Moses did as the Lord had commanded him.

Among the seven Old Testament feasts, The Day of Atonement (along with Passover,) are the two that people are most likely to recall. The Passover, of course, is the most familiar. Even those who are not particularly religious will likely know about the exodus from Egypt, the ten plagues, the slaughtering of the Passover lamb and the application of its blood to the doorposts of the Hebrew homes to protect them from the angel of death who went throughout the land killing the first born.

With regards to the Day of Atonement, the average person likely will be able to provide less detail, and yet, most who are familiar with the basic Bible stories will know that this holy day is the most sacred day in the Jewish year. After that we might hear the about the goat upon whose head the sins of the nation were placed and who was chased out of the city bearing those sins. We all know about the scapegoat. In Christian homes, we have also heard how Christ was the scapegoat who took the sins of the world upon himself and carried them far, far, away from the presence of God forever.

At this point, most people will draw a blank. This is as much detail as most can provide about the Day of Atonement. And yet, there is so much more. And it is so important. For we cannot understand the message of the Bible and we cannot understand the ministry of Jesus unless we have a solid understanding of the Day of Atonement. With this in mind, let us take time this morning to explore its most salient features.

The first thing that needs to be considered is that the Day of Atonement is not an isolated event but it is part of an integrated series of religious observances set by God that we have identified as the seven feasts of the Old Testament. And just as the first four feasts, the spring feasts, could be considered one unit, the fall feasts, including the Day of Atonement also constitute a series of rites that naturally flow from one into another and could be considered to constitute a whole. Let me explain.

As we learned in our sermon on the Feast of Trumpets, the final three Old Testament feasts all take place in the fall, at the end of the harvest season, within a

period of twenty two days. The three feasts, Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles all flow from one into another.

Starting on the first day of the seventh month of the Jewish religious year, which coincides with our September/October, the fall feasts began with the Feast of Trumpets. According to Jewish tradition, on the day of Trumpets, God would open up His books in heaven, the books of life, and then wait for the Day of Atonement to make His judgements. In the ten days that separated the two feasts, it was believed that a person

had an opportunity to seek forgiveness for their sins and thus escape the wrath of God.

Then, ten days later, when the Day of Atonement arrived, Jewish tradition taught that God decided whether a person would live or die that year and whether they would be blessed or cursed. As a result, the nation of Israel sought to prepare themselves for that day of reckoning by confessing their sins and seeking reconciliation in any of their relationships they thought might be strained.

In other words, within the nation of Israel, the feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement were feasts that were not festive. They were times of sober reflection and earnest prayer, with the Day of Atonement being the most solemn and reverent occasion. Again, remember that in the Jewish mind, the Day of Atonement is the day that God makes His final judgement about the worthiness of His people. On this day, life and death hang in the balance. While the fall feasts do end with the Feast of Tabernacles, which is a week of celebration that is filled with blessings and joy, the people must first spend time repenting during Trumpets, and be forgiven and reconciled during the Day of Atonement. There is no way to bypass this difficult season if we are to experience the joy of the Lord. But, we are getting ahead of ourselves. Back to the Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, as it is known in Hebrew, is a holy day of fasting where the people of God came together as a solemn assembly, at the house of Lord. In the days of Moses, this would have occurred at the tent of the Lord. In the days of Solomon, and in the days of Jesus, it would have taken place at the Temple in Jerusalem.

On this one day in the year, atoning blood was brought into the Holy of Holies, representing the divine throne room, by the High Priest. He stood as the representative of the people to make reconciliation for the priesthood and the people and to purify the sanctuary itself from the sins confessed there during the year, thus also cleansing the temple.

In order to accomplish all this, the High priest took a sin-offering for himself and for his house before he commenced the work of atonement for the people. He then took two goats. The first goat was sacrificed to make atonement for the sins of the people which had already been confessed throughout the year. The reason this needed to be done is because all of the sacrifices for sins offered throughout the year were intended to atone for the individual personally but not for the sanctuary. The rites performed on that day concluded the atoning process of the sins of the Israelites by removing them

permanently from the sanctuary itself.

In the days of Jesus, the way this occurred, was through the scapegoat, upon whose head the High Priest placed all the sins of the nation. Then, an escort led the scapegoat to a designated cliff well outside the city, and he pushed the goat over the cliff, sending him to his death together with Israel's sins.

Connecting all of this to the life and ministry of Jesus, the sending of the scapegoat out into the wilderness represents the permanent removal and elimination of sin. It is also a ceremonial "preview" of Jesus pronouncing the final guilty verdict upon Satan as the source of all evil, and the sentencing of him to the abyss which will cleanse the heavenly sanctuary. Thus Satan will bear the judgement for all the sins he has instigated as well as those who have followed him in rebellion against God and have not forsaken their sins and received atonement. This will be the time when the sheep and the goats are separated.

In other words, the Day of Atonement signifies the complete eradication of sin and sinners, the binding and ultimate judgment of Satan, and the establishment of the new heaven and earth. Thus, the Day of Atonement typifies the fulfillment of Jesus' redemptive ministry at his second coming when He will dispose of sin by saving believers and punishing the unbelievers. For just as the confessed and forgiven sins of the Israelites were retained in the sanctuary until their final disposition on Yom Kippur, so the confessed and forgiven sins of believers today are recorded in the heavenly books where they remain until their final disposition on the Day of Jesus' return.

This is the significance of the Day of Atonement for the people of Israel and for the people of God today. And this is how Jesus is the fulfillment of the most sacred day in the Jewish year.

With this in mind, as we reflect on this sixth and most sacred Old Testament feast, may God lead us to true repentance. And, as we contemplate this divine mystery may we ask ourselves like the Apostle Peter, what manner of people ought we to be and what manner of lives ought we to live. For the Day of the Lord is at hand. And we need to be ready.

May we be alert. May we find forgiveness. May our sins be removed from the presence of God forever. And by God's grace may we enter into the eternal rest and joy of the Lord.