

St Andrew's URC Canterbury – The Day of Atonement

Introduction

Good morning St Andrew's. Thank you for your invitation to come and preach this second sermon in your series on the Autumn Feasts.

I'm using the English Standard Version of the Bible this morning and will focus later upon Leviticus chapter 16 and then Hebrews chapter 9.

By way of brief reminder, the three Autumn feasts are:

- Yom Teruah – the Day of Trumpets (or Blowing)
- Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement
- Sukkot – the Feast of Tabernacles

According to the biblical Hebrew calendar, which is a lunar calendar, all three fall in the seventh month – the month of Tishrei.

The **Day of Trumpets**, Yom Teruah, falls on the first day of Tishrei and the **Day of Atonement**, Yom Kippur falls on the tenth day. Jewish people refer to those 10 days as the **Days of Awe**.

That is primarily because of the significance of Yom Kippur. It is the holiest day in the biblical Hebrew calendar. People are reminded that they will be judged by God for their deeds. So, the preceding days are an opportunity to repent of sins, to seek forgiveness from anyone hurt, and make restitution where possible.

From our two short readings (Leviticus 23:26-32 and Numbers 29:7-11) we can see that Yom Kippur is the only biblical feast with the command 'afflict yourselves'. But like the others it is a day set aside from normal work.

'AFFLICT' is taken to mean 'fast' – so Yom Kippur is a day-long fast.

FASTING is a classic biblical way of humbling oneself before God.

People would also sit in sackcloth and ashes but fasting was more common.

The prophet Daniel fasted before God on important questions.

You will have noticed from our readings that the PENALTIES were severe for not fasting, or for working: being cut off, or being destroyed, respectively!

That is another indication of the significance of Yom Kippur.

Despite being largely SECULAR, this is the one day in the year when much of modern-day Israel comes to a halt, so that roads are empty of cars and lorries.

That cost the nation dear in 1973 when Israel was attacked by the Egyptian and Syrian armies, catching the Israelis off guard.

Background to the instructions

Detailed instructions are given in chapter 16 of the Book of Leviticus.

It starts by saying God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons – a very significant event in the history of Israel.

Nadab and Abihu were two of Aaron's four sons. With Moses and their father they had set up the Tabernacle and consecrated both the Tabernacle and themselves in accordance with God's instructions. All were accepted when fire came out from the LORD and consumed the offering on the altar.

But afterwards, Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorised fire before the LORD, taking fire from the altar and offering incense before him from their censers. As a result, they were consumed by fire that came out from him.

Moses explained to his brother Aaron that the LORD said:

*“Among those who are near me I will be sanctified,
and before all the people I will be glorified.”*

Thus, there is a reminder of the serious nature of Yom Kippur right at the start of the detailed instructions in Leviticus chapter 16.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, SO THAT HE MAY NOT DIE. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.”

Detailed instructions (Leviticus 16:3-10)

Aaron had to bathe and then put on the holy garments of the High Priest. He had to come with a bull sin-offering and a ram burnt-offering for himself, along with two male goats as a sin-offering, and one ram as a burnt-offering for the people.

Aaron had to offer the bull and make atonement for himself and for his house; then cast lots over the goats, one for the LORD and the other as a scapegoat. He offered the first as a sin-offering, but the other was presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it and then send it far away into the wilderness.

Making Atonement for Tabernacle (Leviticus 16:11-19)

'He shall sprinkle some of the blood of the bull on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat seven times. Then he shall do the same with the blood of the goat sin offering.'

NOW THERE WAS THE CHALLENGE! Because God had said to Moses: "No one may see me and live." The LORD dwelt over the mercy seat and seeing the LORD usually resulted in death – although there do seem to be a few exceptions.

So, Aaron was told to burn sweet incense before the LORD so that the cloud of the incense would cover the mercy seat ... so that he does not die.

'Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.'

'Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and some of the blood of the goat, and put it on the horns of the altar all round. And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel.'

- ➔ The focus is on the sins of the people of Israel – their uncleanness.
- ➔ The Holy Place, Tabernacle and altar all had to be cleansed by the blood of the sacrifices.

Making Atonement for Israel (Lev 16:20-22)

"And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put

them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.”

A painting by William Holman Hunt, from 1854, depicts the goat bearing the sins of Israel on its head.

- ➔ Note the need to confess the sins.
- ➔ The goat takes the sins of the people far away from them.
- ➔ Tradition says the goat was killed so that it did not return.

THE OUTCOME, if the ceremony went smoothly – all Israel was forgiven!

It can be helpful to break the key word into its three parts.

There is AT-ONE-MENT between God and Israel.

That is a status – God and his people at one, in right relationship.

A Statute Forever (Lev 16:29-31)

“And it shall be a statute to you for ever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute for ever.”

- ➔ Yom Kippur acknowledges judgment, and that God is the Judge.
- ➔ Also, that God is just – he does not let sin go unpunished.
- ➔ And that God is also merciful – he is prepared to forgive.

Another Jewish source says they used to hang a red thread in the Temple and at the end of Yom Kippur the thread would turn white; EXCEPT – the turning white ceased 40 years before the Temple was destroyed in AD 70.

BUT NOW let’s turn to the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 9.

Under the Old Covenant (Hebrews 9:8-10)

- ❖ Only the high priest goes into the Most Holy Place.
- ❖ Just once a year.
- ❖ Not without taking blood as a sin offering.

'By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation [or new order].'

Under the New Covenant (Hebrews 9:11-28)

- ❖ Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come.
- ❖ He entered the greater and more perfect tent (not of this creation).
- ❖ By means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.
- ❖ Christ entered heaven itself once for all

'For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the PURIFICATION OF THE FLESH, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, PURIFY OUR CONSCIENCE from dead works to serve the living God.'

Yom Kippur – Relevance Today

First, it is worth us spending time reflecting upon and confessing our own sins. But there are two potential problems to avoid. One is descending into a spiral of gloom and despondency; the other is to treat our own sins too lightly. So, the PURPOSE is to gain a deeper understanding of God's grace to us by acknowledging the extent of our own sins.

However, Yom Kippur is a day of national repentance and forgiveness for Israel. So, it is good to take the opportunity to pray for God the Father to draw more of them to Jesus. The PURPOSE being to bring God glory by fulfilling his promise to save all Israel.

AND in that context, it is worth remembering the Apostle Paul's confirmation that 'all Israel will be saved' – this is an expectation for the future (Romans 11:26-27).