

# Yom Kippur - The Day of Atonement

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## Part 1

Today's topics are Yom Kippur and why Christians don't observe the Jewish holidays. Let's begin with a short description of modern Jewish observance written by the largest Jewish campus organization in the world, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

*Yom Kippur is one of the most widely observed holidays on the Jewish calendar. It marks the highest synagogue attendance rate of any other day in the year. Despite its widespread observance and long hours spent in synagogue, Yom Kippur is a difficult day to understand.*

*The major theme of Yom Kippur, as its name implies, is atonement. The source for much of our observance of Yom Kippur is Leviticus 23:26-28 - "God spoke to Moses, saying: Mark, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall practice self-denial, and you shall do no work throughout that day for it is a Day of Atonement, on which expiation is made on your behalf before the Lord your God."*

*The requirement to "practice self-denial" is interpreted in the Talmud to mean the following five prohibitions: eating, drinking, bathing, sexual relations, using bath oils and lotions, etc., and wearing leather shoes.*

*In Biblical and Rabbinic times, Temple rituals and sacrifices were the focus of the holiday. Among the highlights of the day was the scapegoat ceremony during which lots would be placed on two goats. One goat would be offered as a sacrifice in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies; and the second would be thrown into the wilderness. Once the Temples were destroyed, prayer and repentance, are the focus while the Temple ritual is recounted as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy.*

*The Yom Kippur service builds in intensity throughout the day. During the final hour of the day, all who have fasted and prayed gather strength from their friends and cry out for the gates of forgiveness to remain open as they are about to close. The cathartic moment when nighttime has descended is punctuated by the blowing of the Shofar, as all congregations of Israel exclaim, "Next year in Jerusalem." <sup>1</sup>*

Hillel began by saying, "Yom Kippur is a difficult day to understand." That's not surprising, coming from a Jewish perspective. From a Christian perspective, Yom Kippur makes perfect sense because it explains, through symbols, the atonement that Jesus made on Calvary. If you don't understand Jesus' sacrifice, then you can't possibly understand the meaning of the Day of Atonement.

Another thing that makes it difficult for Jews to understand Yom Kippur is that they've changed it. They no longer take two goats to the Temple. Instead, they try to atone for their own sins through fasting and prayer, thereby destroying the meaning of the ceremony.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hillel.org/jewish/holidays/yomkippur/default>

So, today we are going to examine the true meaning of Yom Kippur, which will make it clear why Christians no longer perform animal sacrifices. We will begin with this explanation of The Day of Atonement from Chapter 23 of The Great Controversy by Ellen White.

## **Excerpts from Great Controversy, Chapter 23**

### ***What is the Sanctuary?***

Once a year, on [Yom Kippur], the great Day of Atonement, the priest entered the most holy place for the cleansing of the sanctuary. The work there performed completed the yearly cycle of ministration. On the Day of Atonement two kids of the goats were brought to the door of the tabernacle, and lots were cast upon them, "one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for the scapegoat." The goat upon which fell the lot for the Lord was to be slain as a sin offering for the people. And the priest was to bring his blood within the veil and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. The blood was also to be sprinkled upon the altar of incense that was before the veil.

"And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited." The scapegoat came no more into the camp of Israel, and the man who led him away was required to wash himself and his clothing with water before returning to the camp.

The whole ceremony was designed to impress the Israelites with the holiness of God and His abhorrence of sin; and, further, to show them that they could not come in contact with sin without becoming polluted. Every man was required to afflict his soul while this work of atonement was going forward. All business was to be laid aside, and the whole congregation of Israel was to spend the day in solemn humiliation before God, with prayer, fasting, and deep searching of heart.

Important truths concerning the atonement are taught by the typical service. A substitute was accepted in the sinner's stead; but the sin was not canceled by the blood of the victim. A means was thus provided by which it was transferred to the sanctuary. By the offering of blood the sinner acknowledged the authority of the law, confessed his guilt in transgression, and expressed his desire for pardon through faith in a Redeemer to come; but he was not yet entirely released from the condemnation of the law. On the Day of Atonement the high priest, having taken an offering from the congregation, went into the most holy place with the blood of this offering, and sprinkled it upon the mercy seat, directly over the law, to make satisfaction for its claims. Then, in his character of mediator, he took the sins upon himself and bore them from the sanctuary. Placing his hands upon the head of the scapegoat, he confessed over him all these sins, thus in figure transferring them from himself to the goat. The goat then bore them away, and they were regarded as forever separated from the people.

Such was the service performed "unto the example and shadow of heavenly things." And what was done in type in the ministration of the earthly sanctuary is done in reality in the ministration of the heavenly sanctuary. After His ascension our Saviour began His work as our high priest. Says Paul: "Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands,

which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."

The ministration of the priest throughout the year in the first apartment of the sanctuary, "within the veil" which formed the door and separated the holy place from the outer court, represents the work of ministration upon which Christ entered at His ascension. It was the work of the priest in the daily ministration to present before God the blood of the sin offering, also the incense which ascended with the prayers of Israel. So did Christ plead His blood before the Father in behalf of sinners, and present before Him also, with the precious fragrance of His own righteousness, the prayers of penitent believers. Such was the work of ministration in the first apartment of the sanctuary in heaven.

Thither the faith of Christ's disciples followed Him as He ascended from their sight. Here their hopes centered, "which hope we have," said Paul, "as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest forever." "Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by His own blood He entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."

As formerly the sins of the people were by faith placed upon the sin offering and through its blood transferred, in figure, to the earthly sanctuary, so in the new covenant the sins of the repentant are by faith placed upon Christ and transferred, in fact, to the heavenly sanctuary. And as the typical cleansing of the earthly was accomplished by the removal of the sins by which it had been polluted, so the actual cleansing of the heavenly is to be accomplished by the removal, or blotting out, of the sins which are there recorded. But before this can be accomplished, there must be an examination of the books of record to determine who, through repentance of sin and faith in Christ, are entitled to the benefits of His atonement. The cleansing of the sanctuary therefore involves a work of investigation--a work of judgment. This work must be performed prior to the coming of Christ to redeem His people; for when He comes, His reward is with Him to give to every man according to his works.

While the sin offering pointed to Christ as a sacrifice, and the high priest represented Christ as a mediator, the scapegoat typified Satan, the author of sin, upon whom the sins of the truly penitent will finally be placed. When the high priest, by virtue of the blood of the sin offering, removed the sins from the sanctuary, he placed them upon the scapegoat. When Christ, by virtue of His own blood, removes the sins of His people from the heavenly sanctuary at the close of His ministration, He will place them upon Satan, who, in the execution of the judgment, must bear the final penalty. The scapegoat was sent away into a land not inhabited, never to come again into the congregation of Israel. So will Satan be forever banished from the presence of God and His people, and he will be blotted from existence in the final destruction of sin and sinners.<sup>2</sup>

## Part 2

Some people wonder why Christians don't celebrate the Jewish holidays and sacrifice a goat on Yom Kippur. The answer is in the book of Hebrews, chapters 4 through 10. These chapters tell us that we don't need earthly, Levitical priests making poor animal sacrifices, because we have a

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/gc/gc23.html>

higher priest who has made a much better sacrifice. We recommend you read those seven chapters in their entirety. Here are some highlights from those chapters.

**Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews, 4:14-16)**

**If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood ..., why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?**

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**Now there have been many of those [Levitical] priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.**

**Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (Hebrews 7:11, 23-27)**

**The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.**

**[Levitical priests] serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. (Hebrews 8:1-2, 5-6)**

**Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.**

**When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.**

**When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!**

**For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. (Hebrews 9:1-15)**

**For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:24-28)**

**Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

**If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

**So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.**

**[W]e are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. (Hebrews 10:19-31, 35, 39)**

Time constraints prevented us from reading the whole book of Hebrews right now; but these few preceding excerpts should make it perfectly clear why Christians no longer keep the ceremonial law. But even without this clear testimony, we could still make a compelling case from other Biblical passages.

God is very particular not only about how the ceremonies are performed, He has also specified where they are performed, and by whom. They must be done in His Temple. By particular people wearing particular clothes using particular implements.

In 1 Samuel 13:7-13, we are told what happened when Saul did not wait for Samuel to make burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before an important battle. Saul made the proper offerings himself, in the prescribed way, even though he was not authorized to do it. When Samuel found out about it, he told Saul,

**“You acted foolishly,” Samuel said. “You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD’s command.”**

If we perform a modified version of the Yom Kippur ceremony, without sacrificing a goat at the Temple in Jerusalem, without sending a goat into the wilderness, without the assistance of a Levitical priest, we would be just as disobedient as Saul was, displeasing the Lord in the same way he did. Good intentions do not negate intentional disobedience.

Jesus told a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well that the Yom Kippur ceremony would be abolished when she asked about the proper mountain to worship upon. In John, chapter 4, verses 20 and 21 the Samaritan woman said,

**Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”**

**Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.**

Jesus knew the Temple would be destroyed and meaningful sacrifices would no longer be performed there, or anywhere else. Jesus’ prophecy is in perfect agreement with the explanation that we just read in the book of Hebrews of why the sacrifices were abolished.

We should not try to atone for our sins by making an animal sacrifice—we should accept the sacrifice made once and for all by Jesus.

Now, having said all that, let us make it clear that although we should not try to perform the Yom Kippur ceremony ourselves, we should not completely forget about it, either. The Day of Atonement taught an important lesson to the Old Testament Jews about how Jesus was going to atone for mankind’s sin. It still teaches an important lesson to New Testament Christians about how Jesus did atone for mankind’s sin. So, we should not ignore Yom Kippur.

It is appropriate at this time of year to recognize the prophetic significance of Yom Kippur. It is appropriate to repeat the story in the context of Jesus’ fulfillment of it. Most of all, it is appropriate to give thanks for His generous, loving, sacrifice that takes away our guilt, and thank Him for the promise of victory over sin, and eternal life with Him.