

It happened once a year, every year, on the tenth day of the seventh month. No one was to work at all; instead, they were called to afflict their souls. No one was to work, save one: The high priest had important duties that day. And because he was the only one at work, it was clear that the day was all about what the high priest was doing.

So the high priest would go about his work on the tenth day of the seventh month. He wasn't just anyone, but the one chosen by God to do this work. He didn't dress that day in the usual elaborate clothing; instead, he wore a simple linen robe in humility. He would select a bull and sacrifice it so that he might be purified: The bull's blood was shed so that the high priest's sins might be taken away. He would then select two goats and sacrifice one of them; the blood of this goat was shed for the sins of the people. Once the sacrifices were done, he would take the blood of the bull and the goat and dare to enter the Holy of Holies, venturing into the presence of God. He would present the blood of the bull and goat before the Lord, covering various items in blood. He was making atonement for the sins of the people, and the blood was offered to cover their sins before the Lord.

The high priest would then leave the Holy of Holies and return outside to the one goat who was left. He would place his hands on the goat of the head and confess over it all the sins of Israel; in doing so--by speaking--he was placing all the sins of the people upon the head of the goat. Once the goat carried all the sins of the people, he was driven away to escape into the wilderness, never to be seen again. The scapegoat was taking all of their sins away.

It happened once a year, every year, on the tenth day of the seventh month. It was a gory sort of worship: throats were cut and blood was spilled, collected, poured out. It was not the sort of thing that was attractive or enjoyable; but it was necessary. These bloody sacrifices were a statement by God that there are fatal consequences for sin. But they were also a statement that there was a way that the people could be forgiven. The chosen high priest would make these sacrifices. One goat would carry the sins of the people away. The other goat would be slaughtered, and in effect his blood was used to cover up the sins of the people so that God would not count them anymore. Thus this Day of Atonement was called the "Day of Covering;" or in Hebrew, Yom Kippur.

But, you know, it wasn't really the blood of the goat that did this; it was the greater sacrifice that was coming, to which all the animal sacrifices were pointing.

That greater sacrifice happened once. Not once a year, but once.

There is plenty of work going on in the city, because the Passover Sabbath is almost here, and then no one can work. People are bustling about all sorts of tasks, and some Roman soldiers have drawn grisly duty: They are overseeing the crucifixion of three men on a hill outside Jerusalem. But although everyone seems to be about their own work that day, this day is really only about one: The One on the middle cross, for He is the High Priest of us all.

He begins His day in a simple, humble linen robe, but even that is stripped from Him. He is now hanging on a cross, wounded and bleeding, suffering for the sins of the world. No matter how the artists depict it, this is a grisly, repelling scene-in no way attractive or inviting. It is far more upsetting to view than the Old Testament Day of Atonement.

But stop and look anyway: This is your Day of Atonement.

As He hangs on the cross, Jesus is your High Priest: He is the One who offers sacrifices on your behalf to God. And in an incredible paradox, He is also the sacrifice. He atones for your sin. His blood covers your sin; for His sake, God no longer counts your sin against you.

He is the High Priest; He is the sacrifice, He is the scapegoat. He carries our sin into the grave, never to be seen again. He will rise three days later; our sin will not. Jesus is the sacrifice not just for one day, but for every day—his heartbreaking work of covering every sin is completely done.

And that is why, on the cross, the scapegoat declares, "It is finished." And because it is finished, the Son who cried out "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" is no longer forsaken. His very last words from the cross are "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."

He speaks these words clearly for all to hear. After the blood loss, the agony and the deep thirst, His voice remains loud and strong. This is not the normal way of dying; death robs us of our strength and abilities, so that at the last we can barely whisper, if we can speak at all. We are no match for the power of death. But Christ is: He cries out in a loud voice because death is not dragging Jesus to the tomb; Jesus is carrying death to its grave.

"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit;" then, He breathes His last. The disciples who were still standing around are near total despair. Though they don't know it yet, there is still hope: The Lord declares the work is done. It is finished.

As we have listened to the Last Words of Christ during this Lenten season, we have seen how our Lord offers comfort in a variety of trying circumstances--in times of guilt, doubt and uncertainty; in times of suffering and illness; times of persecution, worry, anguish, strife and woe. All of these are consequences of sin, and all of these are reminders of the greatest consequence: The wages of sin is death.

So, as we hear the words of our Savior just before He breathes His last, it is appropriate that we speak of death--that dark enemy which still lurks ahead for all of us. Unless Jesus returns first, we each face the certainty of dying; sooner or later, the pronouncement will be made over us: "There's nothing more that we can do."

It is then that the devil tightens the screws on even the most godly of Christians, for it is his last chance to persuade us to abandon our Savior. He haunts with thoughts of self-righteousness: He tries to distract the people from the cross by whispering that they should trust in their own goodness, or else that they certainly haven't done enough to earn God's favor. He generates fear within the Christian, fear which Martin Luther said was the worst part of dying. The fear may manifest itself in the form of anger toward God, leaving the Christian either ashamed at his outburst or at odds with the Lord. The fear may work in other ways, too, leaving the Christian to believe that--if he truly has enough faith--he shouldn't be afraid; and thus, he cannot be truly saved as long as he is afraid.

At such times, we do well to remember the truth. The truth of the devil is that he is a liar. He's very good at it, to be sure; he makes you think that his lies are good and right and even originate in you. But he remains a liar, for God says so. The Lord Jesus, on the other hand, always speaks the truth to you. He does not mislead or spin; He speaks to you the truth so that you might have life. Therefore, when you are tempted by the devil, just speak the words of your Savior.

What words? "It is finished." You do not have to wonder what you must still do to be certain of eternal life; there is nothing left for the baptized people of God. The Lord has done it all for you: The work for your salvation is accomplished.

"It is finished." You do not have to wonder if the Lord has some residual anger for your sin, that He is taking out a little wrath on you before your life is ended. He has placed all of His wrath on His Son, and there is none left. It is finished.

And should you think that you must not be afraid of death in order to be a Christian, repeat the words again: "It is finished." The Lord has died for all of your sins and all of your fears. He has made you His in Baptism. If you are a fearful child of God, you are still a child of God. That fear cannot hurt you, for Jesus declares, "It is finished."

Jesus is your High Priest and your Sacrifice, the One who is sufficient. There is nothing that can be added to what he's done. Your salvation is sure, because the price is paid in full.

Because it is paid in full, the Christian can also pray, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." Because it is finished, it is a simple thing to place our selves in God's hands. When you see the commitment He made to you at the cross, it's easy.

The devil will howl and chill your bones at times; but his howls about you and your Savior are all lies, and these lies lost their hold at the cross. God's Word remains. As you live and as you die, listen to those words: "It is finished." You are completely covered in the love of Christ.