

It happened once a year, every year, on the tenth day of the seventh month. No one was to work at all; except 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.

Chosen by God to do this work, the high priest didn't dress that day in the usual elaborate clothing; instead, he wore a simple linen robe. Strangely, he wore a 'simple, linen robe' to make a terrible mess. He would first select a bull and sacrifice it so that his own 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. 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 head of the goat and confess over it all the sins of Israel; then it 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. Once in history.

That day, there was plenty of work going on in the city. The Passover Sabbath had almost arrived. Once it's Passover, no one can work. People are bustling about on 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 about one: The One on the middle cross. He is the High Priest of us all.

He begins His day in a simple 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, gory, repulsive 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. This is your 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.

We can only stand in awe. Amen.