

## The Meaning and Message of the Cross

### Hebrews 9:6-14

October 6, 2019

**Rosh HaShanah** is the Jewish New Year, a time of prayer, self-reflection, and repentance. The holiday marks the beginning of a 10-day period, known as the *Yamim Nora-im* (“Days of Awe” or “High Holidays”), culminating with Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement. At the very heart of the book of Leviticus (chapter 16) an entire chapter is devoted to the **Day of Atonement**.

Leviticus tells us that before entering into the ceremony the priest had to cleanse his body, put on the holy garments, and offer up sacrifices for himself, the tent of meeting, and the people. And only then could he enter into the holy place. No one else was allowed inside the curtain where God’s white-hot presence was represented.

In addition to the two bulls that were sacrificed, the priest is to take two goats. Lots are cast as to which goat will be offered up as a sacrifice and which one will run free into the wilderness. The one on whom the lot falls is sacrificed as a sin offering and its blood is sprinkled on the mercy seat within the curtain. After the holy place is atoned for, the priest lays both hands on the live goat confessing the sins of Israel. By so doing the goat assumes all their sins. The goat is then set free into the wilderness as a scapegoat

What is this elaborate ceremony seeking to teach us? As Christians we read this chapter with different eyes. We see that this Day of Atonement points forward to a day when this will no longer be necessary. A few examples from the Old & New Testament: In Isaiah we read: *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6); For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45); But when Christ came as a high priest...he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11-14); And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when*

*Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (Hebrews 10:11-14).*

The basic symbol of the Christian faith is the cross. Today it is commonplace to see the cross on necklaces or ear rings. Strange in a way that the most gruesome form of execution devised should be worn as an ornament around our necks. But for many Christians it signifies their personal commitment to Christ and the way of the cross. But for many in society I'm sure it is little more than a popular decorative piece. Even church architecture was influenced by the cross, with the nave and transepts forming a cross. Nor should the centrality of the cross surprise us since each of the Gospels spend well over a third of their chapters on Jesus time in Jerusalem, from the entry to his arrest and execution. The cross is, in short, the pivotal point in the drama of our salvation.

There are different theories on the meaning of the cross:

*The Moral Influence Theory (inspires us to follow his example)*

*The Ransom Theory (God paid a ransom to the devil)*

*Christus Victor (victory over sin, death and evil)*

*The Satisfaction Theory (Anselm) (to satisfy God's justice)*

*The Penal Substitutionary Theory born in Reformation (Jesus Christ dies to satisfy God's wrath against human sin. Jesus is punished (penal) in the place of sinners (substitution) in order to satisfy the justice of God and the legal demand of God to punish sin.)*

An ancient Catholic tradition, born in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, depicts Jesus on the cross as the suffering saviour. This is a central emphasis in the art and liturgy of the early medieval church. For centuries after Christ's death the church had refused to portray him on the cross. It wasn't until the 11<sup>th</sup> century that the suffering Saviour became central in liturgy and art. Anselm wrote his famous treatise in 1098, "Why did God become Man", in which he argued that only the death of a God-man could atone for our sins. Hence the crucifix became the traditional symbol of Christ in the Western Church, reinforcing the satisfaction theory of the Atonement. Only Christ could satisfy God's justice.

Today many agree with the Anselm view on the satisfaction of Christ through the blood. But also today many react negatively to this strong “washed in the blood” theology. Naturally, many of our communion hymns use the language of sacrifice and blood. For example, “Here, O my Lord, I see thee” speaks in the final verse of guilt being washed away by Jesus’ blood.

But there are many others. The famous hymn made popular by the Billy Graham crusades, “Just as I am,” speaks of the blood that was shed for me. Another famous hymn, “Rock of Ages” speaks forcefully of the shed blood. One of the verses goes, “let the water and the blood, from thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure: cleanse me from its guilt and power.” And even more demanding for our modern ears is the third stanza which goes, “foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me, Saviour, or I die.” Interestingly it was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglican priest, Augustus Toplady, who wrote these words. There is the commonly sung, “There is a Fountain Opened Wide,” which boldly sings, “And since by faith I saw the stream your flowing wounds supply, redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.” Indeed, once you start to thumb through the hymn book you discover lots of references to the blood of Jesus as the source of our forgiveness and cleansing.

For many Christians only the blood, being washed in the blood, crude as that image may be, is the source of salvation. Some feel that this “blood theology”, derived from Anselm, wedded to the Reformation emphasis on Christ’s death as a penal substitution to assuage God’s justice and wrath, has contributed to the misunderstanding of the cross in modern thinking. Well perhaps to need to listen again to Jesus and to the apostolic witness in the New Testament.

In our Gospel today Jesus seems very clear that his sacrifice is ahead. This is a theme that underlines all the gospel accounts of Jesus “turning his face to Jerusalem.” The account of the crucifixion in all the gospels makes clear that it was for this purpose Jesus entered the human arena. He came to die. Throughout the New Testament we read passages that leave little doubt of this important teaching.

The centre of Paul's proclamation to the Gentiles is ***Christ crucified***. To the Ephesians we hear these words: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Peter writes, He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

And of course, collapsing all of this discussion into the words instituting the communion we come to the centre of the action. It is his body and his shed blood that is symbolized in the bread and wine. Perhaps the blood language of hymns and scripture is perhaps over emphasized to the detriment of the other valid theories. Modern ears need a full theology of the cross. Perhaps we need to place even more emphasis on God's love that is at the very heart of this cross symbol. Perhaps we need to balance the blood & penal theology of Anselm and Luther with the Moral Influence and the Christos Victor theories. That might be a more balanced theology of the cross!

Moreover, it is surely also instructive that at the moment of his death the Gospels report that the temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom. This is the curtain that separated the people from the holiest place in Jewish worship, namely the Holy of Holies, representing the very presence of God. In Leviticus only the high priest once a year could enter this holy place and not without the blood of sacrifice.

Surely the death of Christ on the cross is a powerful symbol of the tearing down of the barrier that has separated us from a relationship with God. The way is now open for each one of us to bow in the very presence of the Holy one. We can do so only because of this cross and his subsequent resurrection.

And so we turn to the table. The broken bread and the poured wine speak eloquently of Christ's death for us. This bread is my body given for you, and this cup poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood, he says. God gave his Son because he loved the world. Love is at the heart of God's action in Christ's life, death and resurrection.

**Amen**