

# Day of Atonement

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## Overview

Consider three aspects:

- the ritual in the OT
- how it is or is not reflected in the NT
- the question that led to this study, whether Christ “atoned” for our sin.

## OT Teaching

### **Summary in Lev 23:26-32**

Note 3x, “afflict your souls.” This is the key phrase to describe this day; Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27, 29, 32; Num 29:7; and probably in Isa 58:3,5. The phrase also occurs in Num 30:13 and Psa 35:13. This was a day to feel sorry about one’s sins—and to do so in “holy convocation,” in community with others. Psa 35:13 and Isa 58:3-5 indicates that fasting was a common mechanism for assisting in this process, and the holiday came to be known as “the fast,” Acts 27:9.

### **Main instruction in Lev 16**

Note that this is the central chapter in all of Leviticus! The entire book is centered around this chapter.

Mechanisms of Atonement	1-7, Sacrifices	23-25, Calendar
Agents of Atonement (priests)	8-10, Preparation	21-22, Precaution against defilement
Need for Atonement (sin)	11-15, Ceremonial	17-20, Moral
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The chapter of the Talmud dedicated to this holiday calls it simply “the day,” *yomma*, emphasizing its centrality in the Jewish religion.

Edersheim notes that virtually every aspect of the day emphasizes the inadequacy of these sacrifices:

- After all the sacrifices prescribed in 1-7, why would there be a need for this special day?
- Why should the priests, who officiated in those sacrifices, be excluded from the holy of holies?
- Why should even the high priest forsake his ornate garments (Ex 28) for the plain linen garments of a slave (v.4)?
- Why should this day itself need to be repeated year after year?

Give special attention to the rite of the scapegoat.

- Two goats, vv. 7-10.
- V.15, the one that is killed is the culmination of the sin offerings, and serves (v.16) to “make atonement for the holy place.”
- V.20-22, it is the *other* goat on whose head *all* the sins of the people are placed, and this goat is *not* killed (although in later Jewish practice it was). Rather, it is simply let go in the wilderness.

Above all, notice the emphasis on afflicting one’s soul. This is not a time to rejoice that their sins were taken away. Rather, it was an occasion to recognize them and sorrow over them. Wenham points out Good Friday as the NT parallel to Yom Kippur, but the important point is that Easter, which is the real NT focus, has no parallel in the OT.

## In the NT

No celebration of this; only mentioned in Acts 27:9 as a mark of time.

In fact, our Lord’s words in Matt 6:16-18 forbid public fasting, and would make it difficult if not impossible for a believer in the church age to celebrate this holy day.

Described in detail in Heb 9-10, to describe how Christ’s work is superior.

- 9:1-15, 23-28
- 10:1-25

## Did Christ atone for our sins?

The words “atone” and “atonement” are common in the English OT, describing Israel’s animal sacrifices. The AV uses “atonement” in the OT 81 times; the NIV both words a total of 111 times, the NASB 93 times, to name only a few examples.

This vocabulary has been carried over into Christian theology and hymns to describe the death of Christ as providing an “atonement” for sin, or “atoning” for sin. It is remarkable that the NT writers themselves never use these terms to refer to the death of Christ. Occurrences of the English words in some translations, such as the AV in Rom 5:11 or the NIV in Rom 3:25 and Heb 2:17, are erroneous translations. If we wish to “hold fast the form of sound words” (2 Tim 1:13), we should reconsider whether it is appropriate to use these terms with reference to Christ.

We develop this argument in two steps.

1. Explain what it means to assert that a (Hebrew) word in the OT does or does not appear in the (Greek) NT, and set forth the linguistic facts concerning the OT and NT vocabulary, establishing the fact that the NT does not describe the death of Christ as an atonement.
2. Discuss possible reasons for this omission.

## Review of Vocabulary

See handout.

## **Reasons**

The basic meaning of *kpr* was long held to be “to cover,” as in Arabic and Gen 6:14. More recently, people argued that it mean either “expiate” or “propitiate,” but even more recently evidence from Aramaic has been cited to show that in the first century, people understood it as “cover.”

Regardless of the etymology, it is clear that the NT distinguishes Christ’s death from the OT sacrifices; it completes them. Two main passages:

- Rom 3:25
- Heb 9:15