

Day of Atonement

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Introduction

Last week we saw that the descriptions of the feast that begins the seventh month had a distinctive term used of no other feast, the one that refers to blowing trumpets. The Day of Atonement, on the tenth day of the seventh month, also has a unique description, found in Lev 23:27, 29, 32, Num 29:7, and also in the extended definition of the holy day in Lev 16:29, 31, “afflict your souls.” Not only is this expression not used of any other holy day, but it is hardly used apart from the Day of Atonement. It appears only three other places in the OT: Num 30:14 (which may be a reference to vows taken on the day of atonement), Isa 58:3, 5, and in a word play on v. 10 (which are probably referring to the day of atonement), and Ps 35:13 (the only instance where there is no apparent reference to the holy day). This highly focused OT expression is the basis of a NT exhortation that goes far beyond any single holyday to become a fundamental principle of the Christian life.

Today we study this expression and its parallels in the NT.

The Hebrew Expression

We need to consider both the verb “afflict” and the object “your souls.”

“**afflict**” is the Hebrew verb (*nh* in the Piel. AV translates it most often “afflict”; today, we would likely say “oppress.” The LXX overwhelmingly translates it by the Greek verb *tapeinow* “to humiliate, to abase.” It most often describes how one person or nation mistreats another:

Gen 15:13 And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall **afflict** them four hundred years;

Gen 16:6 Sarai **dealt harshly** with [Hagar]

Exo 22:22-23 Ye shall not **afflict** any widow, or fatherless child. 23 If thou **afflict** them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry;

It is a common word for “rape,” Judg 19:24; 20:5; 2 Sam 13:12.

Sometimes God oppresses his people, in order to teach them. This is the case during the wilderness wanderings:

Deut 8:2-3 2 And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to **humble** thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. 3 And he **humbled** thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live. ... 16 [He] fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might **humble** thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end;

Another example is the Assyrian captivity:

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2 Kings 17:20 And the LORD rejected all the seed of Israel, and **afflicted** them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight.

“**your souls**” is a common Hebrew idiom, serving to make the verb reflexive. “Soul” sometimes functions almost as “self” in English.

Job 32:2 Then was kindled the wrath of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the kindred of Ram: against Job was his wrath kindled, because he justified **himself** [Heb “his soul”] rather than God.

*Amos 6:8 The Lord GOD hath sworn by **himself** [Heb “his soul”], saith the LORD the God of hosts, I abhor the excellency of Jacob, and hate his palaces: therefore will I deliver up the city with all that is therein.

The point is not that they are to humble their soul as opposed to their spirit, or their body. It is that they are to humble themselves. This exercise was one objective of the day of atonement.

One way to afflict yourself would be to deny yourself certain pleasures, and so afflicting the soul is sometimes joined with fasting:

Psa 35:13, I **humbled my soul** with fasting;

Isa 58:3 Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we **afflicted our soul**, and thou takest no knowledge?

In fact a common name for the day in NT times was “the fast” (Acts 27:9). In the light of this widespread custom, it is remarkable that neither Leviticus nor Numbers says anything about fasting in connection with the Day of Atonement. Isa 58, which we don't have time to study in detail today, makes the point that ostentatious fasting is *not* the way to accomplish what God intended on this day, a point backed up by some of the NT instances that we shall study.

How then were people to humble themselves? The answer seems to lie in the distinctive ceremonies of the day, which were calculated to remind the people of their sin and its persistence. Consider Hebrews' emphasis on the meaning of the day:

Heb 10:1-4 For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. 2 For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. 3 But in those sacrifices there is **a remembrance again made of sins** every year. 4 For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

The reference to “bulls and goats” points us to the special sacrifices of the Day of Atonement. Done once, the sending away of the scapegoat might lead them to think that their sins were gone. When it happened year after year, they were to realize how sinful they were, and abase themselves before the Lord.

New Testament

In the AV, the NT says nothing about “afflicting one's soul.” But the Greek verb that the LXX used to translate (*nh* (*tapeinow*)) occurs 14 times in the NT. And we have seen that the direct object “soul” probably functions as a reflexive pronoun. So we are led to ask whether the NT ever uses *tapeinow* with a reflexive pronoun. Surprisingly, this construction is the most common

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use of the verb. Of 14 instances, only six are not in a reflexive construction, and three of these are in connection with reflexive instances. This NT usage appears to be a direct allusion to the day of atonement.

The reflexive instances in the NT fall into three groups. Four verses state a fundamental principle, two turn that principle into a command, and two give us practical examples.

The Principle in the Gospels

We are to humble ourselves, so that God will exalt us. In the gospels, this principle is one of our Lord's repeated statements, themes that surface repeatedly in different contexts in his teaching.

In Matt 18, the disciples asked the Lord who would be greatest in the kingdom. This appears to be part of their ongoing competition for preeminence in the coming order (cf. the request of the mother of James and John in Matt 20:20ff). The Lord's response was to bring forward a child from the crowd and instruct them,

Matt 18:4 Whosoever therefore shall **humble himself** as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The conjunction "as" here is adjectival, not adverbial. The comparison is not to how little children humble themselves. Any parent knows that little children can be the proudest, most arrogant beings around. The point is that we are to humble ourselves to the position of little children. What could be weaker, more lowly, than a little child? Children occupy the bottom of the social scale in a society. That is how we are to esteem ourselves.

To those who thus humble themselves, the Lord promises greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Our next three verses contain the same promise, and in addition suggest how we should humble ourselves.

*Matt 23:12 And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall **humble himself** shall be exalted.

This follows the Lord's exhortation to his disciples not to accept or use honorific titles, such as Teacher, Father, or Master. Those who teach God's people should not seek special prestige or honor, but should take the lowest place.

Luke 14:11 For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that **humbleth himself** shall be exalted.

This instance follows the Lord's instruction that when we go to a feast, we are to seek out the lowest table, and not try to claim the place of highest honor. This goes beyond self-promotion among teachers in the church, and extends to general social functions.

*Luke 18:14 for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that **humbleth himself** shall be exalted.

This instance follows the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. The publican, confessing himself to be a sinner dependent on God's mercy, understands the true meaning of afflicting one's soul. The Pharisee boasts of his fasting, supposedly a means to humbling oneself, but in fact it is only an object of pride to him.

Paul perhaps has this story in mind in Col 2:18-23. He advocates true humility:

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Col 3:12 Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering;

However, in 2:23 he warns against physical deeds of humility (“neglecting the body”) that “actually lead to the satisfying of the flesh” (for this translation of v. 23, see Hollenbach, NTS 25 (1979) 254-261).

The Pharisee makes the same error as the Jews in Isa 58, presuming that physical fasting could satisfy the requirement for true self-affliction. It is the praying publican, not the fasting Pharisee, who succeeds in humbling himself.

The Command in the Epistles

James and Peter turn the Lord's repeated principle into a command. Both of them command believers to humble themselves, and both of them base this command on Prov 3:34,

Surely he scorneth the scorers: but he giveth grace unto the lowly.

James is concerned with strife among believers (*4:1-2). He traces this strife to the lusts that friendship with the world stimulates (3-4, cf. 1 John 2:15-17), and then urges the authority of Scripture (5-6). Translate these verses,

5 Do ye think that the scripture speaks in vain? Does the spirit that dwells in us lust to envy? 6 On the contrary, he [the Spirit] gives more grace. Wherefore it [the Scripture] saith, “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”

On this basis, he urges them to recognize themselves as sinners whose hands need to be cleansed, and as double-hearted hypocrites whose hearts need to be purified (8). Awareness of their sin should lead them to be afflicted, to mourn and to weep (9), a process that he summarizes in 10,

10 **Humble yourselves** in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

Peter is dealing with the role of elders in the church. After exhorting the elders concerning their duty (*1 Pet 5:1-4), he turns his attention to the “younger,” those under the care of the elders, and urges them to submit to the elders (5). In fact, all of the believers are to be subject to one another, a theme that Paul also emphasizes in Eph 5:21, “submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” Peter grounds this teaching on Prov 3:34:

1 Pet 5:6 5 ... Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.”

Then he concludes with the command version of the Lord's saying.

6 **Humble yourselves** therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:

Two Examples

Two of the uses of the expression in the NT give examples of what it means to humble oneself.

Paul

In 2 Cor 11, Paul is defending himself against criticisms from within the church at Corinth. Because he supported himself, some were comparing him unfavorably with other teachers who

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were more eloquent and more “professional,” asking fees for their services. Paul describes their tolerance for these haughty individuals:

2 Cor 11:20 For ye suffer [tolerate it], if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take [money] of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face.

Following the Lord's command in Matt 23, Paul refuses to exalt himself in his teaching role. He writes,

2 Cor 11:7 Have I committed an offence in **abasing myself** that ye might be exalted, because I have preached to you the gospel of God freely?

He did not take a proud posture toward them, or even accept money from them, because he did not want to burden them (v. 9). Instead, he humbled himself, working at a trade just like the rest of them. And as he approached the end of his life, he was conscious that God was faithfully fulfilling the promise to exalt those who humble themselves:

2 Tim 4:7-8 7 I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.

Our Lord

The greatest example of someone who afflicted his soul—who humbled himself—is the Lord Jesus. Paul uses this expression of him in Phil 2:8.

*Phil 2:7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he **humbled himself**, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Recall the example of the publican. On the Day of Atonement, God's people were to recognize that they were sinners in need of God's mercy. Here our Savior, himself without sin, takes their place. He becomes the scapegoat, the sin-bearer, the very lowest one in the entire sacred scheme.

The sequel confirms the principle that he laid down in the gospels.

*Phil 2:9-11 9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; 11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

“Whoever exalteth himself shall be abased, and whoever humbleth himself shall be exalted.” His experience shows how universal this principle is. It applies not only to the Israelites on the day of Atonement, not only to the publican in the temple, not only to Paul in his ministry, but to the Son of God. Certainly it applies to us.

Some things change between the Old Testament and the New. We no longer offer bullocks or send goats into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement. But one thing has not changed. God expects his people to afflict their souls, to humble themselves, to take the lowest place, trusting in him to exalt them in due time. For Israel, this was the theme of one day in the year. For us, it is to be our constant, daily practice.