Atonement Fulfilled: The Bearer Of Sin

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As God leads us through our conversion, He regularly challenges our perception of Him. As we accept and apply ourselves to each challenge, our mental image of His character and nature sharpens. This spiritual process makes searching the Scriptures of paramount importance because they testify of the Father and the Son. Rightly dividing the Word of Truth clarifies our vision of God. Sometimes the Scriptures say things we find *too* challenging, and our minds revolt until we take an objective look. Hopefully, after considering it thoroughly, we will accept what the Bible says.

In today's church of God, there is a reluctance to accept an ugly reality of Christ's sacrifice that is plainly stated in Scripture. This resistance leads us to overlook one of the Messiah's major works. It is easier to hurry past a confounding verse than to let its meaning sink in. Such a response is understandable, as it can be unpleasant to think about the Son of God in certain terms. But without accepting this facet of His sacrifice, we miss a vitally significant part of what He did.

The Atonement Ritual

On the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) in ancient Israel, the high priest performed an elaborate ritual to cleanse the Holy Place and its holy objects, and to remove the nation's sins from God's presence. Of particular note is the second goat, the *azazel*, which was left alive to bear away the sins of God's people:

> Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand

> of a suitable man. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to an uninhabited land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:21-22)

These verses show two clear actions: First, all the iniquities, transgressions, and sins of the people are laid on the head of the *azazel*. Second, the *azazel* bears all these sins away from the Tabernacle (or later, the Temple).

These are not minor details. In fact, they describe the live goat's primary role. Their fulfillments should be easily found in God's Word—and indeed, they are. These two identifying actions appear in the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53:4-6:

> Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and *the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Verse 6 presents a clear fulfillment of Leviticus 16:21. God laid our iniquities on the Messiah, just as the high priest laid his hands on the *azazel* and confessed over it all the iniquities of the people.

In general, the laying on of hands indicates a solemn identification, testimony, or setting apart. It often involves the idea of transference. In the sin offering, the laying on of hands symbolizes the identification of an innocent substitute to which the guilty party transfers his or others' sins. The hands also identify who will bear the sin.

The live goat was a substitute. It was not guilty, nor was it being blamed for sin. Instead, the sins of the nation were symbolically transferred to it, and it bore them away from God's presence in the Tabernacle. A substitutionary sacrifice's purpose is to have an innocent representative stand in the place of a person or group, so the guilty party does not have to bear the sins. The

animal stands in for the sinner(s). The *azazel* was the type, receiving the sins of the nation, and the Messiah was the antitype as the Father placed humanity's sins on Him.

The Rotten Fruit of Sin

Isaiah 53:4 prophesies that the Messiah would bear our griefs and sorrows, which are not the sins themselves but the effects of sin. Verses 4-5 portray the trauma the Messiah would undergo, foretelling that the Messiah would do more than just die. If God only required death for His justice to be satisfied, He could have had the Romans cut Christ's throat, just like a sacrificial animal's. One quick and deadly slice, and it would be over. Yet Isaiah foretells that the Messiah would undergo incredible suffering before death.

There is a potent lesson here: Sin incurs more than just the death penalty. Sin also causes physical and emotional pain. It causes grief and sorrow. It separates people, and more critically, divides mankind from God, beginning with Adam and Eve's expulsion from God's presence in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22-24; see Isaiah 59:1-2).

Much could be written about all the rotten fruit that sin produces, but for our purposes, it is enough to recognize that when God laid our iniquities on the Messiah, that action caused more than death. It caused unparalleled agony and disfigurement.

Isaiah 52:14 declares that Christ was marred more than any man, such that it was hard to tell He was even human. That is what sin does: It distorts and corrupts the image of God in which He created humanity. Sin destroys that likeness.

The same chapter contains two more testimonies of Christ bearing sin:

> He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall *justify many*, for He shall *bear their iniquities*. Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the

> transgressors, and He *bore the sin of many,* and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:11-12)

These verses contain two references to the second function prefigured in the *azazel* and performed by the Messiah, that of bearing sin. As it says in Leviticus 16:22, the *azazel* was to bear on itself all the iniquities of the people. Its primary role was bearing sins as a substitute. Isaiah 53:11 teaches that justification results from the Messiah bearing iniquities. Verse 12 uses the prophetic past tense, saying that the Messiah "bore the sins of many." When this prophecy was given, His work was as good as done.

New Testament Confirmation

Some commentators describe the book of Hebrews as the Leviticus of the New Testament. Chapter 9 contains the New Testament explanation of the Day of Atonement, and its flow reinforces Christ's fulfillment of the holy day at every point.

Hebrews 9:22-25 describes the purification of the holy place, which the blood of the first goat (as well as the bull for the high priest) accomplished (see Leviticus 16:14-19). Significantly, no hands were laid nor sins confessed on either the first goat or the bull, so their blood allowed entrance into the Holy of Holies, even as Jesus entered the heavenly Holy of Holies with His own pure blood.

Next in the Leviticus 16 ritual, the *azazel* bore the sins of Israel. In the parallel in Hebrews, the author subsequently declares who bore our sins:

> . . . so Christ was offered once to *bear the sins of many*. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Hebrews 9:28)

The apostle Peter provides yet another credible witness that, like the *azazel*, Jesus bore our sins:

> . . . who Himself *bore our sins* in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. (I Peter 2:24)

Notice, the exact terms and functions that describe the live goat later are applied to Jesus as the Messiah. Peter tells us how and when Christ bore our sins: in His own body while on the tree. His bearing of sin was not simply a legal pronouncement. It had a real-life application and a recorded fulfillment. His bearing of sin took place during His extreme suffering, which He endured for hours while He took on the shame, reproach, anguish, piercing, crushing, bruising, smiting, grief, separation, and other disfiguring effects of sin.

Peter also says that healing comes from Christ's stripes, another reference to Isaiah 53. We commonly think about Christ's stripes in terms of physical healing, which is certainly one application. However, both the Greek word for "healed" here, as well as the Hebrew word in Isaiah 53, can also include spiritual healing, which is infinitely more important. Whether God heals us physically is inconsequential when compared to His spiritual healing that leads to eternal life.

Note that Peter says, ". . . you *were* healed." He is not saying that all saints were healed physically, but a spiritual healing took place for each of them—and us. The next verse shows this: "For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (I Peter 2: 25). This is yet another reference to Isaiah 53, indicating a spiritual condition rather than a physical one. Because Christ bore our iniquities, a spiritual healing took place, turning us to the Shepherd.

Christ Made to Be Sin for Us

We may not like to think about what happened to Jesus when our sins were laid on Him, but without admitting this facet of His sacrifice, we miss the foundational reason for His taking on human flesh (Romans 8:3). Certainly, we understand Jesus bore our sins and their penalty, but harder to accept is what the apostle Paul says Christ became:

> For He made Him who knew no sin *to be sin for us*, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (II Corinthians 5:21)

His words may startle and discomfort us, but they are true: God the Father made Christ to be sin! This fact does not mean God made Him commit sin; His life and nature were entirely flawless. But Paul's statement asserts that God made Him not only to bear the penalty for us but to *be* sin.

The instructions for sin offerings contain a detail to help us understand why Paul could make this statement. An interlinear Bible shows that in almost every Old Testament verse that mentions a sin offering, translators supply the word "offering." It is not present in the Hebrew, as the word for "sin offering," *chatta'ah* (*Strong's* #2403), is also the word for "sin." It has multiple meanings, including signifying sin, a sin offering, guilt because of sin, purification from sin, or punishment because of sin.

In a sin offering, the animal became symbolic of the guilt incurred by sin; it suffered punishment because of sin; and it was also the symbolic purification from sin. This is why the same word is used for both sin and sin offering. *The animal—the substitute—essentially became the sin needing to be atoned*. When the high priest laid all the iniquities of Israel on the *azazel*, that second goat became sin.

The *New Living Translation,* whose stated goal is to translate thoughts rather than words into everyday English, tries to soften the reality by saying that God made Christ to be the *offering* for our sin. While it is true that Christ became the offering for sin, such a rendering is not faithful to the text. The Greek word underlying "sin" in II Corinthians 5:21 is not like the Hebrew word. In Greek, *sin* simply means "sin." When a sin offering is meant, the writer must add another Greek word. But here, Paul means just what we read: God made Christ to be sin.

Truly, the role of the *azazel* was a dreadful one, but it was part of the work that only the Messiah could do, and which He had to do for us to be reconciled to God.

And a Curse for Us

Another commonality between the *azazel* and the Messiah, while not immediately apparent when reading Leviticus 16, further identifies who the

azazel prefigures. When the high priest places all the nation's sins on the head of the live goat, and the fit man leads it away from God's presence, it symbolizes being cursed. Being sent from where God is symbolizes divine rejection. Symbolically, it pictures separation from fellowship with the source of life and all good, which is certainly a curse. Sin entered the world through Adam (Romans 5:12), and God sent him away from the Garden of Eden, from His holy presence (Genesis 3:17, 23).

Paul writes that this is precisely what happened with our Savior:

> Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, *having become a curse for us* (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"). (Galatians 3:13)

Paul bases his statement on Deuteronomy 21:23: ". . . he who is hanged is accursed of God." The context concerns God's requirement to bury a hanged man on his execution day because God has cursed him, and to leave an accursed thing hanging would defile the land. Paul applies this to Jesus Christ's substitutionary role, recognizing that because Jesus was hanged on a tree, He was cursed in our stead.

Consider His crying out with a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). Jesus became a curse, not because of something He had done, but because of what we have done.

Galatians 3:13 refers to Christ on the tree, which is when and where He bore our sins. The Father laid on Christ "the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6), just as the high priest laid the iniquities of Israel on the *azazel*. Paul says Jesus became a curse. He does not say that Jesus is accursed in the present (see Romans 1:25; 9:5; I Timothy 6:15) because when Christ died, His death fulfilled the curse of the law. He bore the sins to the grave, to a "land cut off" (Leviticus 16:22; Isaiah 53:8; see Psalm 88:5; Lamentations 3:54).

After three days and three nights, the Father resurrected Him, and He later ascended to the Father. The next time He appears, it will be "apart from sin"

(Hebrews 9:28)—apart from what He took on and became. Yet Paul declares Christ became a curse for us. He fulfilled the awful, shameful role of the *azazel*, as only He could.

Outside the Camp

Another significant aspect of Christ's sacrifice is *where* it took place. The instructions for the regular sin offering specify that the animal had to be killed at the Tabernacle (Leviticus 4:4, 14, 24, 29) and its carcass burned outside the camp (Leviticus 4:11-12, 21). While those deaths took place at the Tabernacle (or later, the Temple), the *azazel* was the exception.

That the priest left the *azazel* alive does not preclude it from being a sin offering, as the second goat's life was most certainly consumed by its role of becoming sin, becoming cursed, and acting as a purification from sin. These roles fit within the meaning of *chatta'ah*, the Hebrew word for "sin offering" that has a wide variety of applications.

So, the life of the *azazel* did not end at the Tabernacle. Instead, it was sent or led outside the camp, away from God's presence, while bearing the sins of the nation. It may have been walking and breathing, but for all intents and purposes, it was dead, for "the wages of sin [which it had become] is death" (Romans 6:23).

Where did Christ bear our sins? Hebrews 13:12 says that He "suffered outside the gate." The priests killed standard sin offerings at the Tabernacle or Temple, but Jesus suffered outside the gate. The most likely place for His crucifixion was across the Kidron Valley, on a slope of the Mount of Olives. Christ's crucifixion was at a place where the centurion could see that the Temple veil, which faced east, was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51-54; Mark 15:38-39). To see that miraculous event required the centurion to have a specific angle and a minimum elevation to see over the Temple wall. He had to be standing somewhere on the Mount of Olives.

Jesus did not suffer at the Temple, where the sin offerings were killed. The gospels say He was *led away* and *sent from* the Temple, from the symbolic presence of God—just like the *azazel* (Matthew 27:31; Mark 15:20; Luke 23:26; John 19:16). The Second Adam was led and sent away to fulfill the curse

on the first Adam, so that we can now come back into God's presence. That was part of the curse He took on our behalf.

Unlike the first goat, but like the *azazel*, the Messiah's sacrifice was not an immediate death—He was alive for hours while He "bore our sins in His own body on the tree." Christ's bearing of our sins took time, and He felt every second. He became sin and a curse as He hung there, bearing our transgressions, outside the gate.

A Substitutionary Sacrifice

It is critical to remember that the *azazel* was a substitutionary sacrifice. It took the place of the nation to spare the people from having to bear their own sins. The innocent goat became cursed when the priest laid hands on it, confessed the nation's sins over it, and sent it away. Like the Messiah, its role was to *become* a symbol of sin and to bear the guilt of others, *becoming* cursed, but originally, it was innocent. It fulfilled a vile, shameful role, and we can rejoice that the Savior submitted to it to enable us to enter God's presence.

During Christ's ministry, He told the Jews that the Scriptures testify of Him. When we study His Word, we should be able to see how the various symbols point to Him in some way. These types may challenge our concepts and test whether we are willing to accept what we read.

As we know, sin produces all manner of evil fruit. In His mercy, God has provided a way for us to be healed and reconciled to Him, and not to be so overwhelmed by the consequences of our mistakes that we cannot continue. That solution was highly distasteful because it involved the Messiah fulfilling a terrible yet necessary role—becoming sin and a curse, as He bore in His body all the chastening sin deserves. If we accept His sacrifice, we must also acknowledge the reality of what the Son of God had to endure so that we can have life with Him.