

## Is The Passover Just A Sin Offering? (Part One)

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God provided a testimony of the Messiah's life in four gospels. Each presents a unique perspective on Jesus Christ's life and ministry, and all work together to render a vivid account of how God acted as a human being.

Even as the gospels give four distinct representations of the same perfect life, so also Christ's death has multiple facets and implications. While it is common to view His death solely as the means of our forgiveness, God provided lenses through which to view His Son's life and death through the various sacrifices, enabling us to glean as much meaning as possible. Christ's sacrifice reveals the richness of God's Word, yet in these days of distraction and forced brevity, we miss much of the fullness of Scripture if we consider that unparalleled event too narrowly.

Every professing Christian knows that Christ's death paid the penalty for sin, yet many stop there, not plumbing the depths of Scripture to draw out more meaning. They use John 3:16—"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son"—as a mantra, but the Bible contains tens of thousands of other verses that we cannot ignore if we desire a vision of what God *is doing* and not only what He has already done.

Jesus told the Jews of His day that "the Scriptures"—which at that time consisted only of what we call the Old Testament—testify of Him. On the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, He likewise drew those disciples' attention to all the places they should have recognized Him in the Old Testament but did not: "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

"Moses" here refers to the Pentateuch—the first five books, which Moses wrote. All the details in the sacrificial system and ceremonies that we tend to hurry past—if we spend any time in "Moses" at all—point to Jesus Christ in

some way. Every sacrificial animal, of every specified species, age, and gender, testifies to the Savior in some facet.

It is no wonder, then, that Paul told Timothy that “the Holy Scriptures [the Old Testament books] are able to make you wise for salvation *through faith which is in Christ Jesus*” (emphasis ours throughout). That is, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, when understood with faith in Christ, teach us about the fullness of salvation.

### **One Type Among Many**

God planned and willed Christ’s sacrifice before the foundation of the world (I Peter 1:18-20; Revelation 13:8). Even though His sacrifice certainly fulfilled the sin offering, that type of offering is only one among several that Jesus also fulfilled. While the other offerings also involved death—whether of an animal or a harvested product, such as grain or vintage—they do not picture sin or its payment. In these other offerings, a life was given for a different purpose. At times, Christ’s sacrifice is clearly described in terms of payment for sin, yet in other instances, His sacrifice should be seen through the lens of one of the other types of offerings.

Building on this principle, we must be careful when interpreting how God’s Word uses a particular sacrificial animal symbolically. For example, even though Scripture employs an assortment of animals as types of Christ, it pictures Jesus as a lamb more than any other animal. A lamb is certainly fitting because it represents quiet, accepting submission even in suffering and following without resistance. However, lambs fulfilled a wide variety of symbolic roles within the sacrificial system. Thus, we must consider the context before concluding what a New Testament reference to a lamb signifies.

For instance, Moses teaches that lambs were used for:

- » the Passover meal (Exodus 12:3-5);
- » the redemption of the firstborn (Exodus 13:13; 34:20);

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- » the morning and evening sacrifices (Exodus 29:38-41; Numbers 28:3-8);
- » the peace offering (Leviticus 3:7);
- » the sin offering (Leviticus 4:32) and the trespass offering (Leviticus 5:6);
- » sanctifying the priesthood (Leviticus 9:3);
- » cleansing after childbirth (Leviticus 12:6-8);
- » cleansing from leprosy (Leviticus 14:10-13);
- » concluding a Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:14);
- » beginning each Sabbath and month (Numbers 28:9, 11-14); and
- » each annual festival (Leviticus 23:12, 18-20; Numbers 28—29).

Each lamb served a different symbolic role, depending on the instructions. That lambs were used both for the Passover and the sin offering does not make their respective roles identical, just as the rituals of cleansing from leprosy and the new moon offering were not equivalent simply because they both contained lambs.

In short, God's Word consists of abundant, rich details that all fit together to create an awe-inspiring picture, and the vision becomes clearer as we fit each element into its proper place. But connecting the pieces haphazardly blurs the vision.

Following this through, if we inadvertently limit Christ's sacrifice to fulfilling the sin offering alone, we blind ourselves to the fullness of God's purpose. The simple truth is that God is doing more than "saving" mankind in the sense typically understood by nominal Christianity. Christ's sacrifice is about far more than just paying the death penalty for sin.

## Passover and Atonement

Each year, dedicated followers of Jesus Christ observe the Passover at the beginning of the fourteenth day of Abib, even as He and His disciples did and His church has continued to do through the ages. It is an annual commemoration of His death (see I Corinthians 11:26).

But how do the Scriptures teach us to observe it? Which facet of Christ's death should we keep in view as we partake of the bread and wine? What was on Jesus' mind and what did He teach His disciples during the Passover meal before His crucifixion?

Because we typically view Christ's sacrifice solely as paying for our sins, and because the Passover the evening before His crucifixion is a memorial of His death, it is natural to conclude that the Passover fulfills the sin offering. But if we are willing to dig deep and seek the gems under the surface, we will find a much greater appreciation of the Passover observance.

As with many things in God's Word, traditions and assumptions have arisen around God's festivals that can blur our focus concerning these appointed times. In particular, Passover and the Day of Atonement have accumulated false concepts that have clouded their meanings.

While these articles primarily focus on the Passover observance, we will briefly consider the Day of Atonement in preparation for examining what God teaches about the Passover. Among the faithful Christians who observe the Day of Atonement, many hold that the *azazel* goat—often called the “scapegoat”—represents Satan. From this follows the conclusion that Satan's eventual binding (Revelation 20:1-3) is somehow involved in the atonement for our sins. Thus, the focus of this holy day, which should be on Jesus Christ's atoning work, is skewed to the point that the Devil receives far more attention than the Savior!

The high priest performed a unique ceremony involving two goats on the Day of Atonement. Together, these two animals comprised a single offering for sin (Leviticus 16:5). The Hebrew text calls the second goat *azazel*, which could mean “goat of departure” or “entire removal.” However, an apocryphal tradition—a counterfeit that arose well over a millennium after Moses—also

contains “Azazel,” but as the name of a lesser demon (not Satan) who is blamed for all of mankind’s sins and subsequently bound.

Yet when we root out all vestiges of that myth and hold fast to the inspired text, it becomes clear that the Day of Atonement is about the complete cleansing of sin through the work of Jesus Christ—alone. Satan, the adversary, plays no part in the removal of our sin, nor can his eventual binding expiate either our sins or his. Neither Satan nor his sins are in view on the Day of Atonement. Scripture itself says the ceremony was only for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16:21), for which Satan is not responsible and for which he cannot provide a solution.

In the Leviticus 16 ceremony, the high priest used one goat to cleanse the sanctuary, including the incense altar and the Mercy Seat—the symbolic meeting point between God and man (Leviticus 16:19-20; see Christ’s fulfillment in Hebrews 9:8, 11-14). The high priest left the second goat—the *azazel*—alive and confessed *all the nation’s sins* onto its head before sending it into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:21-22).

Christ fulfilled all the actions of this second goat as well, for the Scriptures give obvious testimony that our iniquities were laid on Him (Isaiah 53:6), He bore our sins (Isaiah 53:11-12; I Peter 2:24; Hebrews 9:28), and took them away (John 1:29; Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 10:4; I John 3:5). Is there a single scripture that shows or implies sins being laid on Satan—whether his own or those of humanity? Rather than picturing the binding of the Devil, the Day of Atonement is about what Jesus Christ has done to remove sin and provide atonement (see “[Who Fulfills the Azazel Goat—Satan or Christ? \(Part One\)](#)”).

### **Both Festivals, Same Themes?**

When the focus of the Day of Atonement is taken off Satan and put on the work of the Savior, the question arises: Since the Day of Atonement is about the payment for sin, what, then, is the Passover about? Do both feasts picture atonement?

One idea among the few who observe God’s annual feast days is that Passover and the Day of Atonement have the same themes—propitiation,

atonement, forgiveness, cleansing, justification—but these elements are applied to different people at different times. That is, some believe Passover signifies the sins of *the individual* being paid for, while the Day of Atonement represents the sins of *all mankind* being ascribed—erroneously—to Satan. A variation of this idea is that the Passover is for those who have been forgiven *during this age*, while the Day of Atonement is meaningful for those whose sins will be atoned for *after Christ's return*.

However, there is no duplication between the Passover observance and the Day of Atonement. While these two feasts contain themes that touch each other, they ultimately picture different gifts that God has provided for His people through the work of His Son. When the traditions, assumptions, and tenuous connections are laid bare, Atonement clearly pictures the complete cleansing from sin, while the Passover symbolizes the fellowship and peaceful abundance we now have with God because of His covenant.

Though Christ's sacrifice late on Passover day both sealed the covenant and fulfilled the Day of Atonement, the Passover itself (observed the evening before) is not about sin or its payment.

Another critical element is the timing of Christ's sacrifice. When rightly divided, the gospels show that Jesus kept the Passover as the fourteenth of Abib was beginning, just as He had commanded Israel (Exodus 12:6). Luke 22:15 points out that He observed the Passover with His disciples *before* He suffered. His death did *not* coincide with His keeping of the Passover—He was crucified *after* He kept it.

This fact is noteworthy because God ordained this death from before the foundation of the world. The sovereign God could have orchestrated the crucifixion to occur at any time. Yet, He determined for it to take place late in the afternoon of the fourteenth of Abib rather than at the beginning of the fourteenth, the evening before, when the Israelites were to kill the Passover lambs. Significantly, Christ's death also did not take place on the Day of Atonement, even though it is the defining means of atonement. Why the apparent discrepancies?

Even though Jesus was the object of the whole sacrificial system, the day and time of His death did not specifically line up with any of the sacrifices

He commanded Israel to make. Instead, it aligned perfectly with the sealing of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15, to which God added the sacrificial law and on which the New Covenant is based. (For an explanation of the timing, please see “[Why Was Jesus Not Crucified as Passover Began? \(Part Two\)](#).”)

The timing is important because it demonstrates another facet of Christ’s death besides atonement: It initiated an extraordinary covenant and eternally reminds those who observe it of God’s faithfulness. Hebrews 9:16-17 teaches:

For where there is a testament, there *must also of necessity be the death of the testator*. For a testament is in force *after men are dead*, since it has no power at all while the testator lives.

Christ’s death did more than pay the penalty for sins; it also inaugurated the New Covenant and functioned as a divine pledge of loyalty to those who made it. *His role as the “covenant victim” (as Young’s Literal Translation puts it) was distinct from His role as the ultimate sin offering*. His death served multiple purposes simultaneously.

Part Two will consider the original Passover instructions, for the observance of the New Covenant Passover builds on that foundation.