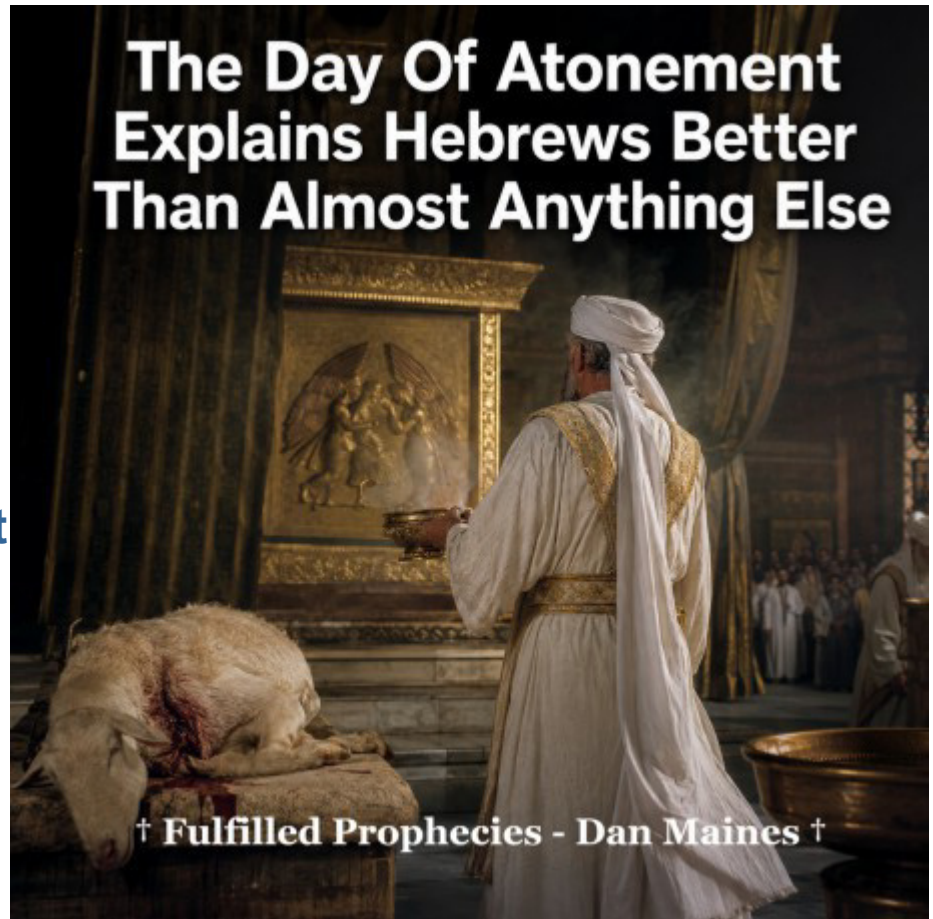


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**The Day Of
Atonement
Explains Hebrews
Better Than Almost
Anything Else**



By Dan Maines

The Day Of Atonement Explains Hebrews Better Than Almost Anything Else

Introduction

† The Day of Atonement gives us one of the clearest Old Testament backgrounds for understanding the book of Hebrews. The high priest, the blood, the sanctuary, the entrance behind the veil, the appearance before God, the cleansing of the sanctuary, and the waiting congregation all form the framework Hebrews uses to explain the work of Jesus Christ.

† Hebrews wasn't written in a vacuum. Its first readers knew the temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the annual Day of Atonement. When Hebrews spoke about a High Priest entering the sanctuary and later appearing, those words carried an entire covenantal picture with them.

† On the Day of Atonement, the high priest didn't simply kill a sacrifice and declare the ceremony finished. Blood was offered, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, atonement was made, the sanctuary was cleansed, and the priest came back out to the waiting people.

† That pattern helps explain why Hebrews can speak of Christ's sacrifice at the cross, His entrance into the heavenly sanctuary, His appearance before God, and His later appearing for salvation. These aren't disconnected events. They're parts of one priestly and covenantal work.

† When this background is ignored, Hebrews can sound as though it's describing unrelated future events. When the Day of Atonement is placed behind the language, the argument becomes much clearer.

Leviticus 16:15-17

Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering, which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the atoning cover and in front of the atoning cover. He shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their unlawful acts regarding all their sins; and he shall do so for the tent of meeting which remains with them in the midst of their impurities. When he goes in to make atonement in the Holy Place, no one shall be in the tent of meeting until he comes out, so that he may make atonement for himself and for his household, and for all the assembly of Israel.

† Notice the complete movement. The sacrifice was killed, the blood was taken behind the veil, atonement was made in the sanctuary, and the high priest eventually came back out. The killing of the sacrifice wasn't the entire Day of Atonement

ceremony.

† This distinction becomes extremely important in Hebrews. Jesus' death provided the perfect sacrifice, but Hebrews continues the priestly imagery by presenting Christ as the High Priest who entered the true sanctuary with the value of His own blood (Hebrews 9:11-12).

† The congregation couldn't enter with the high priest. They remained outside while he performed his work within the sanctuary. Their waiting ended when the priest completed his ministry and came back out.

† Hebrews uses this same basic pattern when it describes believers as eagerly waiting for Christ to appear a second time for salvation (Hebrews 9:28). The imagery isn't random, it's priestly and Day of Atonement language.

Leviticus 16:29-30

This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble yourselves and not do any work, whether the native, or the stranger who resides among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord.

† The Day of Atonement was specifically associated with cleansing. The purpose wasn't merely the death of an animal, but the covenantal cleansing of the people before God.

† Hebrews repeatedly develops this cleansing theme. Christ's blood cleanses the conscience, removes the barrier created by sin, and provides access to God (Hebrews 9:14; 10:19-22).

† This also explains why Hebrews speaks about salvation as something already possessed and yet approaching its covenantal completion. The sacrifice had been offered, Christ had entered God's presence, and the first-century believers were waiting for the completion of that priestly pattern (Hebrews 9:28; 10:25, 37).

Hebrews 9:7-8

but into the second, only the high priest enters once a year, not

without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing,

† Hebrews directly connects its argument to the Day of Atonement. The high priest entered the inner sanctuary once each year, carrying blood on behalf of the people.

† The writer then makes a crucial covenantal statement. The old sanctuary represented a system in which unrestricted access into God's presence hadn't yet been fully manifested.

† The issue wasn't geography. The issue was covenantal access. The earthly sanctuary, priesthood, sacrifices, and veil represented the old order that was still standing when Hebrews was written.

† This is why the removal of that old covenant system matters so much in Hebrews. The writer was living during the transition from the old covenant age into the fully manifested new covenant order (Hebrews 8:13; 10:9).

Hebrews 9:11-12

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things having come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made by hands, that is, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all time, having obtained eternal redemption.

† Jesus is explicitly presented as the greater High Priest. The earthly Day of Atonement becomes the shadow, and Christ's priestly work is the reality.

† The Levitical high priest entered an earthly sanctuary with animal blood. Jesus entered the true heavenly sanctuary on the basis of His own perfect sacrifice.

† Christ didn't need to repeat His sacrifice annually. His sacrifice was once for all. Hebrews isn't teaching repeated sacrifices or repeated comings of Christ, it's showing the superiority and finality of His priestly work (Hebrews 9:25-26).

† The cross and the heavenly entrance therefore belong

together. The sacrifice occurred on earth, while the priestly presentation is described in terms of entrance into God's heavenly presence.

Hebrews 9:23-24

Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these things, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a holy place made by hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;

† Here Hebrews gives us the language of appearing that must be understood within its priestly setting. Christ entered heaven itself to appear in God's presence on behalf of His people.

† This is the High Priest before God. The earthly priest disappeared from the congregation's sight when he entered behind the veil. Christ likewise entered the true sanctuary and appeared before God for His people.

† Hebrews isn't describing Jesus as inactive between the cross and the completion of the old covenant age. He was functioning as the great High Priest, representing His people in the presence of God.

† The language of entering, appearing, cleansing, and waiting all comes together in this sanctuary framework.

Hebrews 9:26-28

Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been revealed to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And just as it is destined for people to die once, and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.

† This passage contains the entire movement. Christ was manifested to sacrifice Himself, He was offered once to bear sins, and He would appear a second time to those who were

waiting for Him.

† The phrase a second time must be read within the immediate High Priest and sanctuary context. The comparison isn't simply between Jesus leaving earth and someday returning physically to earth. Hebrews has just described Christ entering the heavenly sanctuary and appearing before God (Hebrews 9:24).

† The Day of Atonement pattern helps explain the sequence. The sacrifice was offered, the High Priest entered the sanctuary, and the waiting congregation expected the completion of his priestly work.

† Christ's second appearing would be apart from sin, meaning not to offer another sacrifice. The sin offering had already been completed once for all. His appearing concerned salvation, vindication, and the completion of the covenantal work.

† The people addressed by Hebrews weren't told that this completion was thousands of years away. They were told that the Day was approaching and that the Coming One would come in a very little while and wouldn't delay (Hebrews 10:25, 37).

† This places Hebrews 9:28 naturally within the approaching end of the old covenant age, when Christ's priestly and covenantal work would be publicly vindicated in judgment upon the system that had rejected Him.

Hebrews 10:19-22

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let's approach God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

† The result of Christ's High Priestly work is access. Under the old covenant, the congregation remained outside while one man entered the Most Holy Place. Under the new covenant, God's people are invited to draw near.

† The barrier represented by the old sanctuary system has been removed. God's people don't stand at a distance waiting

for an earthly priest to represent them year after year.

† Jesus is the permanent High Priest over God's house.

Through Him, believers have direct covenantal access into God's presence (Hebrews 7:24-25).

† This is one of the great themes of Hebrews. The story moves from restricted access to open access, from repeated sacrifices to one perfect sacrifice, and from an earthly priesthood to the permanent priesthood of Christ.

Hebrews 10:35-37

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay.

† The waiting congregation theme becomes impossible to miss. Hebrews wasn't merely teaching theology about the sanctuary, it was encouraging real first-century believers who were waiting for the promised completion.

† They needed endurance because the promise hadn't yet reached its historical covenantal climax. But the writer didn't tell them that countless generations would pass before it happened.

† He said it would happen in a very little while. That time statement must be allowed to mean what it meant to the original audience.

† The High Priest had entered. The sacrifice had been accepted. The old covenant was becoming obsolete. The Day was approaching. The congregation was waiting. The Coming One wouldn't delay (Hebrews 8:13; 10:25).

† AD 70 brought the decisive historical removal of the earthly temple, Levitical priesthood, sacrificial system, and old covenant order. What Christ accomplished became unmistakably vindicated when the competing earthly sanctuary was removed.

Hebrews 12:22-24

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living

God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

† Hebrews ends its argument by telling believers where they had come. They weren't being directed back toward earthly Jerusalem, an earthly sanctuary, or an earthly priesthood.

† They had come to Mount Zion, heavenly Jerusalem, God Himself, Jesus the Mediator, and the blood of the new covenant.

† The better blood had accomplished what the blood of bulls and goats could never accomplish. The better High Priest had entered the better sanctuary and established the better covenant.

† This is why the Day of Atonement explains Hebrews so powerfully. Hebrews isn't merely borrowing a few interesting Old Testament symbols. Its argument is built around the movement from shadow to reality, earthly to heavenly, temporary to permanent, restricted access to open access, and old covenant to new covenant.

Historical References

† Josephus described the temple and priesthood as central features of Jewish life immediately before their destruction. His account of the Jewish War records the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, providing the historical setting for the removal of the earthly sanctuary system that Hebrews described as becoming obsolete. Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Books 5-6.

† Josephus also described the burning of the temple and the devastation surrounding Jerusalem. Whatever theological conclusions someone draws from those events, historically the earthly sacrificial center of Judaism was decisively removed in AD 70. Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 6.

† Eusebius later connected the destruction of Jerusalem with

Jesus' warnings concerning that generation and recorded the early Christian understanding that divine judgment had fallen upon Jerusalem. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapters 5-7.

† These historical writers don't establish the doctrine, Scripture does. They help us see the historical world in which the old temple order disappeared exactly when the New Testament had been warning that judgment was approaching.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We aren't a congregation still standing outside the sanctuary waiting for our High Priest to finish the transition from the old covenant to the new.

† We live in the reality that the Day of Atonement foreshadowed. Christ's sacrifice doesn't need repeating, His priesthood doesn't need replacing, and His covenant doesn't need another earthly temple.

† We don't need animal blood, Levitical priests, an earthly Most Holy Place, or another Day of Atonement. Jesus fulfilled what those shadows pictured (Hebrews 10:1-14).

† We can draw near to God with confidence because our High Priest has opened the new and living way (Hebrews 10:19-22).

† This also protects us from rebuilding in our theology what Christ fulfilled. A return to an earthly temple, animal sacrifices, and Levitical worship would be a return to the shadows after the reality has come.

† Our hope isn't that Jesus will someday finish an unfinished atonement. Our confidence is that the once-for-all sacrifice was accepted, the better covenant was established, and access to God through Jesus Christ is now open.

† The Day of Atonement helps us read Hebrews as its original audience would've understood it, sacrifice, High Priest, sanctuary, blood, appearing before God, cleansing, waiting, and covenantal completion.

† Once that pattern is recognized, some of the most difficult language in Hebrews becomes remarkably clear.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Does Hebrews 9:28 necessarily teach a physical return of Jesus to earth?

A: The immediate context is the Day of Atonement and Christ's High Priestly ministry. Hebrews describes Christ entering heaven to appear before God and then appearing a second time to those waiting for Him unto salvation (Hebrews 9:24-28). The sanctuary context should determine how the appearing language is understood.

Q: Why does Hebrews describe believers as waiting if Jesus had already died and risen?

A: Because the sacrifice had been accomplished, but the old covenant age hadn't yet reached its historical conclusion. Hebrews says the old covenant was becoming obsolete, the Day was approaching, and the Coming One would come in a very little while (Hebrews 8:13; 10:25, 37).

Q: Was the cross insufficient until AD 70?

A: No. Christ's sacrifice was completely sufficient and once for all. Hebrews distinguishes between the perfect sacrifice itself and the covenantal-historical completion associated with the removal of the obsolete order (Hebrews 9:12, 26; 10:10-14).

Q: Why is AD 70 important to the argument?

A: AD 70 permanently removed the earthly temple and sacrificial system that represented the old covenant order. Hebrews had already declared that covenant obsolete and ready to disappear (Hebrews 8:13).

Q: Are Christians today still waiting for the Day of Atonement pattern to be completed?

A: No. We live under the established new covenant with access to God through our permanent High Priest. We've come to heavenly Jerusalem and to Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Q: What is the main lesson of the Day of Atonement for understanding Hebrews?

A: Don't isolate the sacrifice from the priestly ministry that followed it. The biblical pattern includes sacrifice, blood, High Priest, sanctuary, appearance before God, cleansing, waiting, and completion. Hebrews applies that pattern to the superior and final work of Jesus Christ.

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Leviticus 16:15-17, 29-30; Hebrews 9:7-8, 11-12, 23-24, 26-28; 10:19-22, 35-37; 12:22-24

† Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Books 5-6; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapters 5-7

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