

Did you know that the term “scapegoat” originates with *Yom Kippur*—the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish faith? On that day Israel’s high priest would lay his hands on a goat, symbolizing the transfer of Israel’s sin onto that animal. The priest then chased the goat out into the desert to die. The Day of Atonement was very smoky and bloody. The priest sprinkled incense on burning coals to obscure the ark from the peoples’ sight. Someone also brought all the sacrifices to a place outside the camp where he burned them.

There was also, quite understandably, much washing. In preparation for the Day of Atonement’s ceremony, the priest would wash himself. After someone took the scapegoat out into the desert, he also washed himself. After the priest performed the Atonement ceremonies, he washed himself again. On top of all that, outside the camp, the man who burned all the sacrifices also washed both his clothes and himself before rejoining the people. The Day of Atonement also had to be noisy. Think of what all the bleating goats and bellowing bulls being slaughtered must have sounded like. The priest did much of the smelly, smoky, bloody, noisy work on the Day of Atonement. Hebrews 9:7 says, “*only the high priest*” walked on the extremely sacred ground that was the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle.

Let’s consider this was also quite dangerous work, because Old Testament priests stood in the gap between a most holy God and a sinful people. In fact, when priests entered the Most Holy Place, they did so with ropes tied around their ankles. That way someone could safely pull them back in case God angrily struck them dead in his presence. All the drama and seriousness of the Day of Atonement pointed to the miserable seriousness of the peoples’ sins. God commanded the Israelites to offer these sacrifices in order to help them understand all that it would cost to deliver them from their sins.

Yet as we Reformed Christians confess in the Heidelberg Catechism; no creature could actually “pay” for our sins. No goat or calf can bear the full weight of sin and release others from God’s wrath. No. To pay for our sins

God's children need "One who is truly human and truly righteous, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God" (Q&A 15).

On top of that, as we read in verses 9 and 10, "*gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.*"

These are only some of the reasons why Christians have professed that all the blood, smoke, and ritual of the Day of Atonement (in the end) points us to the Messiah. It points us to the way God graciously gave Jesus to us to set us completely free and put us right with God himself. Jesus Christ, however, entered God's presence not on the basis of the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood.

Jesus was, in a real sense, both the High Priest and the sacrifice. He both offered the atoning sacrifice and *was himself* the atoning sacrifice. However, our Savior was also the "scapegoat" on whom God laid our sins and then sent him out into the "desert" to die a death on the cross. So we Christians no longer believe we must sacrifice animals to please God. For Jesus *is* the Lamb of God who was sacrificed instead of more and more goats and lambs. Through his blood, he truly and fully takes away the sins of the world.

The *Jews for Jesus* website reports that because Jewish people no longer have a temple, they've replaced the old sacrificial system. They now substitute a kind of atonement by repentance (their prayers and good deeds) for the sacrifice of an animal. In other words, Jewish people hope that those religious acts will pay for their sins and appease God's holiness on the Day of Atonement.

Thankfully, Christians profess that God has graciously offered **another way** that produces more *confidence* that arises NOT from our superiority, but from God's kindness. Hebrews' writer reminds us in chapter 10 verse 19 that, "*we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.*"

Believers no longer have to go through some religious professional, whether it is a priest, rabbi, or pastor to have access to God. Christians no longer need

clergypersons to serve as a kind of mediator, a go-between for Christians with God. For Jesus' sake, God's dearly loved sons and daughters can go directly to God, especially in prayer.

"*Conscience*" is yet another main theme in this week's Scripture passage. Hebrews 9:9 reminds God's people that true Old Testament believers understood that the sacrificial system couldn't clear their consciences. After all, they offered these sacrifices only for sins they *accidentally* committed. The priests offered no atonement for *deliberate* sins.

Thankfully and graciously, then, Christ's death has cleansed our consciences (v. 14). Christians still sin, sometimes accidentally, but all too often quite deliberately. We grieve our sinfulness and confess it to God. Even our conscience, as God's own children confess, accuses us of having grievously sinned against all of God's commandments. However, God's people know that Christ has brought us peace with God. For Jesus' sake, God won't let the sin of any believer eternally separate us from the Lord. Jesus has paid for both our "accidental" and our "deliberate" sins. He has appeased God's wrath over sin.

Of course, the 21st century's violence has made some Christians reluctant to talk about what we sometimes call "atonement theory." The bloodshed of so many people in so many places makes it important for us to consider carefully the need for Christ's blood to be shed. It's hard to fully summarize all the ways that Christ's death that came via God's grace saves us. The Bible, in fact, uses other analogies to talk about its saving effects. But faithful students of the Bible will search for ways to honestly admit and address the role of blood in our salvation that the book of Hebrews raises.

Through the gory death of Jesus Christ, we should see that Christians no longer know tenuousness or uncertainty. We don't have to just hope that God has written our names in God's book of life. God's adopted sons and daughters don't have to tie ropes to our ankles, lest God angrily strike us down as we approach him. No, because of what Christ has graciously done for his beloved children, God's people have what Hebrews 10:19 calls "*confidence*" or

boldness. As a result, you and I can “*draw near to*” him. We can approach God in what Hebrews calls the “*full assurance of faith.*”

Earlier God’s people came to God hesitantly and fearfully, but now we can come humbly and confidently, as well as joyously. Earlier God constantly warned people to keep their distance. Now God invites us to *draw near*. In the Old Testament only the appointed high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and even then, only once a year. Now Hebrews’ writer urges all Christians to come near to God at any time.

Many commentators see this invitation as referring primarily to drawing near to God in prayer. Hebrews 9 means that we can pray to God boldly, in full confidence that he hears and answers our prayers for Jesus’ sake. God’s adopted sons and daughters can now humbly but also boldly approach God in prayer because God first humbly came to us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

A friend of mine wrote an article recently that raised the question, “Does a sense of purpose in life help our brains work more effectively?” Investigators sought to answer this question with participants from the *Couples Healthy Aging Project* at Florida State University. For several days, participants were contacted on their smartphones and asked to rate their sense of purpose and then complete several short cognitive tests. Researchers found that “when participants felt more purpose driven than the average, they had faster processing speed.”

The article concludes by suggesting that a purpose-based intervention might help middle-aged adults have a better transition into older adulthood. This conclusion reflects the widely documented observation that our brains tend to slow down as we age. Though this isn’t always bad, the possibility of purpose helping our brains remain youthful is encouraging. The basic conclusion of the study is this: “Purpose in life can delay the onset of dementia and mortality by several years.”

What is the purpose that drives your life? Over 20 years ago Rick Warren wrote a book titled, *The Purpose Driven Life*. In it he claims that self-help books

often suggest that you try to discover the meaning and purpose of your life by looking within yourself. Rick Warren says that is the wrong place to start. You must begin with God, your Creator, and his reasons for creating you. We were made by God and for God, and until we understand that, life will never make sense.

In her book *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about her days as the coordinator for Christian education in a local congregation. People repeatedly told her how hungry they were for Bible study. So for over two years she provided more small group Bible study opportunities. Yet people stayed away. “Eventually” she writes, “I got the message that “Bible” was a code word for **God**. People weren’t hungry for *information about the Bible*. They were hungry for *an experience of God* which the Bible offers to us.”

I think this is exactly what the writer of Hebrews is telling us in Chapter 9. People want God, but instead they often get **information about God** instead of **personally experiencing the living God**, people often get **a religion of rules** and rituals and procedures.

Here at Ken Mawr, I’d like all of us to remember that no ministry or activity we do is wrong in itself. Indeed, nearly everything we do is to glorify God and fulfill our mission. But church activities are not the main thing; not the thing we need the most. It is access to our creating, loving, and saving God in Jesus Christ that we need the very most. A religion that is full of activity but lacks an authentic personal encounter with God is probably not a religion worth keeping.

Whenever and wherever a Christian community gathers for worship, God’s people are to follow Jesus our great high priest, “*Through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), [as] he entered once for all into the Holy Place*” (9:11&12). The astonishing good news is that with Jesus we can enter into **a sanctuary that will never decay**, to join **a fellowship that will not perish**, to sing **hymns of praise that will never cease**—to a God whose love and mercy is everlasting.

You and I both know that what people want isn’t religion. **People want God!**
Amen.