

All Saint's Day – Epistle

THE GREAT ATONEMENT

All Saint's Day

Hebrews 9:11-14

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Author's observations: In my research of the word "kipper" I've discovered that it is often translated "atone" or "expiate" but could more appropriately be translated "purge." Originally, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kipper, included two distinct "purgations": First, the temple was purged by the sacrifice of the "hatta'th" (the purgation offering, three goats.) Second, the people were purged by the Azazel rite, that is, the placing of sin and guilt onto a live animal, a scapegoat, which was then sent off into the wilderness to perish. This later purgation was to be accompanied by personal repentance.

The word "kipper" evolved in meaning to finally include many nuances. Originally, it denoted the purging of the temple. The purging was necessary because individual and collective evil was

thought to accumulate in the Sanctuary, as if it had magnetic-like properties. If the evil-level in the temple became too high, it was believed God would leave it. To purge the temple of this evil, a goat was sacrificed and its blood sprinkled in the sanctuary. Later, the word “kipper” began to include the meaning “to cover,” as when it acted to “cover” the doorposts and protect the Israelites from death. Later, the meaning “ransom/substitute” was added, especially in the case of the scapegoat, which was sent out into the wilderness carrying the sins of the people. Finally, “kipper” came to include the notion of “expiation.” I believe that the writer of the book of Hebrews intended all these meaning in his reference to the Great Day of Atonement.

[Information gleaned from “The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible” Supplementary Volume (Nashville, Abingdon, 1976) p.78-83]

DIAGNOSIS: Total Contamination

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Contaminated Lives (not holy)*

Today is All Saints Day. Holy saints suggest peaceful, harmonious living, a being at-one with God. Yet we throw our hands up in despair because we see and experience just the opposite: misery. A total lack of at-oneness with God, which, according to the Old Testament writers, is the root cause of all human misery. When a heart is not at-one with God, that heart (so the Old Testament writers explained) becomes the wellspring of evil. This evil oozes from and clings to humans, permeating and contaminating their lives. It causes humans to feel guilt.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Scapegoating*

The existence of evil/guilty hearts is no secret; in fact, some humans make it their life- crusade to get rid of it. We seem to

have two preferred methods to “kipper” (cleanse, atone, purge) ourselves of our evil/guilt. The first favorite way, begun by Adam and Eve, is to blame someone/something else for it. We frenetically search until we find a scapegoat onto which we can transfer our sin and guilt, and then we make that poor scapegoat “take the blame” for us. Hitler and Stalin found convenient scapegoats for the misery of their times. So did George Bush after 9-11. So do we, constantly. “It’s my parents fault... It’s my spouse’s fault... It’s because of you I’m this way... It’s the system’s fault,” and on and on. The second way we try to “kipper” ourselves is by offering up a slew of sacrificial “good works” (our blood, sweat, and tears) which we gamble will outweigh our “bad works” in the long run. Never mind that this is convoluted thinking, we do it anyway. In fact, we become addicted to this gamble, never realizing that’s what it is – a gamble. (Maybe we expect we’ll win the gamble!) Nowadays, people often argue, “I’m a good person!” But notice that our Hebrew writer already identifies these works as “dead works.” They are dead works because they put their trust anywhere but in God and his Son.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Taking the Heat

There are massive problems with our methods. Method number one, scapegoating, requires an on-going process. It’s never a done-deal because sin/evil/guilt keep oozing up and out of us. We just can’t shovel it fast enough onto someone/something else! And if that’s not bad enough, sometimes WE become someone else’s scapegoat, which piles our guilt even higher. (God knows how hard we resist this predicament!) Method number two, the big gamble, also leaves us dangling in uncertainty. Can the sacrifice of “good works” really outweigh “bad works”? Only the Final Judge can make that assessment, but already we have an inkling as to the answer. We do a lot of bluffing, but deep down we know the Cosmic Dealer will ultimately call our bluff and

demand we pay up. “Paying up” involves giving our life-blood, being consumed by the fire of God’s justice. And we can’t cheat or finesse ourselves out of this!

PROGNOSIS: The Cosmic Catharsis

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Beloved Scapegoat*

To all frantic would-be gamblers and scapegoaters comes the astounding news that the Cosmic Dealer has had mercy on them/us and “turned the table”—to our great advantage. We learn that God has involved himself in ridding (kippering) humans of evil/guilt once and for all! The second member of the Trinity, Jesus, takes on the role of priest-mediator – for humans, AND ALSO (here’s the big shocker) offers HIMSELF as the “kipper”—the scapegoat/sacrifice. Jesus VOLUNTARILY became humanity’s scapegoat, willingly accepting and assuming all sin/evil/guilt on himself and willingly suffering God’s retribution—death, his blood (hatta’t’h) so that unholy, evil/guilt-ridden humans can be purged and therefore be at-one with God. (The Hebrews described this atonement as being able to enter God’s presence.) Jesus “offered himself without blemish to God” (v. 14). His blood, not the blood of goats, “secures eternal redemption” for everyone (v. 12). This “kipper” is so cosmic in scale that it need never be repeated again.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Purified*

Just as the early rite of Yom Kipper was meant to be accompanied by repentance, so too does this Cosmic Kipper involve repentance—an about-face—for scapegoating gamblers. So we turn around: repent. But really, it is a joyful turn-around. What a relief to be freed of continuous, frenzied scapegoating! What a relief to quit our gambling habits and simply TRUST that we have been purged/cleansed/purified by the Beloved Scapegoat.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Saints Alive*

The end result of the Great Cosmic Deal is that contaminated human lives are “kippered,” purified, hallowed – made “holy.” These “Saints Alive” are “holy” not only in the sense of being evil/guilt-free, but also “holy” in the sense of being set apart: set apart especially to be involved in God’s misery-abatement projects. Set apart to witness to, with their words and their lives, the marvelous Beloved Scapegoat whose Calvary “kipper” was the once-and-for-all Day of Atonement.