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SHOFAR, SO GOOD

The *Shofar* (trumpet made from the horn of a kosher animal) holds an important place in Jewish life and history. When it is blown over 100 times on *Rosh HaShanah* (September 9 in 2010) it stands as a warning of the coming of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement (September 18 this year). Ezekiel (chapter 33) uses the trumpet in this way. In time of danger, the *shofar* became a signal for impending danger. Yet the sound of the instrument could also be used as an offensive signal (that is “signal for the offense”, not “objectionable signal”) in time of battle. Perhaps the most famous example of that is its use by Gideon.

Gideon was a nobody. “My family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.” (Jdg 6:15) When we first meet him, he is hiding. “Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide from the Midianites.” (Jdg 6:11) (Some versions add “it,” referring to the grain, after the word hide. Perhaps Gideon wanted to hide the grain, but most certainly he wanted to hide himself.) This is no soldier; some would call him a coward.

The Midianites had oppressed the land. Somebody should have done something about it, but somebody didn't, so God picked a nobody instead. The remainder of Judges 6 recounts Gideon's attempts to establish that he is indeed God's choice, unlikely though it may be, to lead Israel.

Gideon is a bundle of insecurities. He wants proof that the messenger that calls him is from God. When he gets the proof, he wants more proof. When told to tear down an idol, he has to do it at night because he is afraid of his father. He is afraid of the Midianites; he is afraid of his own people. He even has to sneak into the Midianite camp to hear a dream before he is sure that he is the one to lead God's people. And God seems determined to increase his insecurity. When he calls together a small army (in comparison to the Midianite army), God reduces the army by over ninety percent. (If to decimate is to reduce a population by ten percent, what is a word for this situation, where only that percentage were left?) When God has Gideon tell the fearful and timid to go home he probably had to specifically tell Gideon that he was exempt from that order. God needed him to stay.

Gideon was insecure. Then God put a *shofar* in his hand. The plan was to surround the mighty Midianite army with three hundred men. Each man was to wait for Gideon to blow his *shofar*, and then break a jar that concealed a flame and blow their own *shofarim*. As the watch was changing (an example followed by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor), the formerly timid Gideon blew a mighty blast on his *shofar*. The people followed their assignment and shouted. The Midianites lashed out in the dark, killing themselves. God and Gideon gained a victory through the sound of the trumpet.

At *Rosh HaShanah* perhaps we can learn some lessons from Gideon and his *shofar*. The scriptures are written for our learning, so let us learn.

God and a trumpet are all we need to give us courage to live for God. We may even be able to do without the trumpet, but cannot do without God.

God's word may be a warning to us. God's word may also be used to defeat his enemies. That is not to say we should beat them into submission with the scriptures. Sometimes just hearing the *shofar* of God's word is enough to cause them to stumble over themselves in flight.

Gideon should have listened to the warning of the *shofar* while he was using it as a weapon. Meek Gideon suddenly became Arrogant Gideon. As a result of this battle, Gideon created an idol that led Israel astray. Had he listened to the warning note, instead of the clarion note, he would have saved himself, and his son, much trouble. At *Rosh HaShanah* the *shofar* warns the Jewish people to repent of the sins of the past year, in preparation for atonement. It is important to listen to that note of the trumpet, and not follow Gideon into even greater sin.

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AGAINST SIN

Regrets can be dangerous. A person starts thinking about his past, and especially about past sins, and he can become overwhelmed with remorse. Everyone has sinned against themselves or someone else sufficiently to bring on a major depression if those sins are dwelt upon. Then if one considers that all those sins are also against God, one could wonder if there is any hope at all.

Regret can be a good thing, if it prompts action. “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of.” (2 Corinthians 7:10) An awareness of sin is necessary before one can seek forgiveness. It is less valuable if instead of repentance it works apathy. An acute awareness of sin in some people has an opposite effect to that desired by God. They become so overwhelmed with remorse that they feel that even God cannot forgive them.

God is in the sin business. He asks us to deposit our sins with him and then go on as if we had not sinned. He wants to take our sins so that we need not have any regrets. In that connection the Bible uses at least the following five words to describe what God does to or for our sin.

Propitiation

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 Jn 4:10)

This is not a word we use very often. It is not a word we use at all in normal conversation. It is one of

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those church words that have meaning only if you had it explained to you once upon a time. So here is the explanation.

To propitiate is to gain or regain the favor or good will of another. There may be a good reason we don't use this word often. It is actually a mistranslation, or at best a weak translation. The Greek word translated propitiation three times actually carries the idea of a covering. In Hebrews 9:5 it is used to refer to the “mercy seat” that covered the Ark of the Covenant. Thus it is a translation of the Hebrew word from which we get *kippah* (the head covering that is, in Yiddish, a yarmulke) and *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement or Day of Covering, which falls on

September 18 in 2010). When used in this sense, John (and Paul and the writer of Hebrews) is saying that Jesus is the place where our sins are brought to God so that we might regain his favor. In another sense he is a covering for our sins.

On *Yom Kippur* the *Cohen Gadol* (High Priest) would kill the sin offering for himself, and sprinkle some of the blood on the *kipporah* above the Ark in the Holy of Holies. Then he would do the same for the sins of all the Jewish people. The sins of the people which had been committed against God were covered. (Those committed against other people were not forgiven if the individual had not sought forgiveness from the person against whom they sinned.) The people were restored to God for another year.

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:11-14)

Jesus serves as a better *Cohen Gadol* because he did not have to offer a sacrifice for his own sins. Furthermore, he made one offering for all time, and sat down by God's throne. He does not have to repeat the offering every year.

Remission

Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. (Romans 3:25)

This passage uses both propitiation and remission in one sentence. It is, in fact, the only passage to use this particular Greek word translated remission. There are a number of other passages that use a similar word which is also translated remission.

To remit is to lay aside or cancel something (debts, sins, jail sentences). The Greek word used in the passage from Romans above means to pass over or disregard. Thus God may choose not to forgive sin, but to ignore it altogether. He treats it as if it never happened.

The other word translated remission carries the idea that the penalty of sin is set aside; we are pardoned. God has acknowledged our sin and pronounced sentence upon us. Jesus comes before God and asks that he grant a full and unconditional pardon, and God complies. That is what Peter said happens when we are immersed. "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:38) At the time of immersion God grants the pardon for our sins, which enables us to rise from the grave to live a new life (Romans 6).

Redemption

Remission is not the same as redemption. The former is a setting aside of a sentence. No payment is made, no penalty imposed. Redemption, on the other hand, does involve a payment. Redemption is liberation obtained by the payment of a ransom.

In 1932 a baby was kidnapped from a home in Hopewell, New Jersey. Near the window through which the kidnapper had come lay a note demanding a \$50,000 ransom. Charles Lindberg was able to pay that ransom, but the child was later found dead, possibly from being accidentally dropped during the kidnapping. The "Crime of the Century" is possibly the most famous case in which a ransom payment was made in cash. (Some of that money later led to the arrest, trial, and execution of Bruno Hauptmann.)

Since that time countless books, movies, and television shows have involved a request for payment of ransom. Generally the police in those stories advise the recipient of the request not to pay it because, as in the Lindberg kidnapping, they may not get their relative back alive. And there is the difference between our ransom and those. Jesus shed his blood as a ransom payment for sin. God ensures that we will be returned alive. In fact, without the payment of the ransom death was certain; with the payment of the ransom life is assured.

Another well-known example of redemption can be found in records of the American slave trade. The opportunity for a slave to obtain freedom was rare. Wealthy Quakers, Methodists, and some others would attend slave auctions for the sole purpose of buying slaves and granting them their freedom. (This practice was soon banned in the south.) Rather than buying his own freedom, which was usually impossible, the slave was unexpectedly granted liberty. Imagine the joy of such a one! And this is exactly what Jesus did for us.

Our ransom was paid. We have been redeemed! And yet so many Christians say that as if it were no big deal. You were a slave to sin. Now you have been bought out of slavery. We should be shouting it from the rooftops, not mumbling it into our pillows.

Atonement

While the word atonement is used frequently in the Old Testament (with the same meaning as propitiation, as previously discussed) it only appears once in the New Testament, and has a totally different meaning. "We also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement." (Rom 5:11) In this case it does not mean a covering of sins. The word in the Greek carries the idea of an even exchange between moneychangers.

This brings forth a different aspect of the death of Jesus. He paid our ransom, but it was not a random number. What he paid was the exact equivalent of all the sins of man forgiven throughout history. Nobody got cheated in the deal. There is no sin left that has not been

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paid for. There is no forgiveness that goes unspent. Did Jesus have to die? Yes. Did he die unnecessarily? Never. God measured out the exact coinage in exchange for mankind's sin.

Forgiveness

In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace. (Eph 1:7)

Paul associates redemption with forgiveness of sins. We think we know what forgiveness is, but do we? We usually think of forgiveness as granting a pardon (remission). That may be involved in forgiveness, but forgiveness is more than just dropping the penalty for sin. Sometimes the word is used to translate some of these other ideas (remission, redemption, propitiation). In some cases it is used to translate a word that means more than just dropping the sins. It means throwing them far away. If you just drop something, it is still nearby. You can retrieve it any time you choose. If you throw it away it is difficult or impossible to retrieve. That is what God does with our sins. He throws them far away so that he won't pick them up again. Unfortunately, sometimes we keep copies of our sins, and just drop them at our feet. Then when we get angry with someone else or down on ourselves, we pick them back up again. Sometimes we even try to show them to God. His response would be that he threw that away long ago, and we probably should do the same. We need to stop cluttering our lives with junk that God threw away.

WHY WAIT?

King David had determined to build a permanent house for his God. Perhaps he felt that it was shameful that his God dwelt in a tent while the gods of the nations were housed in permanent dwellings. (OK, some of those dwellings were individual homes, because every man had his own idols, but they were still permanent dwellings.) Whatever his motivation, he was not allowed to build such a place. His son, Solomon, however, did build the Temple to replace the Tent as the housing for the Ark of the Covenant. It took him seven years to build it. (1 Kgs 6:38) Then came *Succos* (the Feast of Booths).

Solomon completed building the Temple in the eighth month of the eleventh year of his reign. He brought the Ark into the Temple in the seventh month of an unspecified year. Either he brought the Ark before completion of the Temple, or he waited almost a year after completion to bring it up. Either choice seems to indicate that Solomon chose *Succos* specifically for the dedication of the Temple. Why might he have chosen that time?

It is possible that the building was so nearly completed that this was a good time to bring it. But then, why not five days earlier, on or just before *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement? It seems that would have been a more appropriate time to make sure the Ark was in the Holy of Holies. That would be the time that the High Priest would go before the Ark every year. It would have been a day of great significance. If Solomon waited a year to dedicate the Temple there would have been time and ability to install the Ark before the Day of Atonement.

Instead he waited until "the feast in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month." (1 Kings 7:2) The people celebrated the feast (and the dedication) the required seven days, and then another seven days. Perhaps

Solomon wanted a celebration during a feast rather than a fast. Perhaps he wanted to associate this time with joy rather than sorrow. Or, perhaps he had another reason.

During *Succos* all Israel were required to live in temporary shelters. This was to commemorate their wanderings in the wilderness. For many years, the people of Israel offered sacrifices at a temporary shelter, the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting. Is it significant, then, that this practice ended one *Succos*? Did Solomon choose this feast for its symbolic significance? At a time when the people moved out of their permanent houses and into temporary shelters the place where God met the people was moved out of a tent and into a permanent house. There are at least three possible messages. First, God is greater than his people. While they have to live like vagabonds he was able to move into a house. Second, Solomon was emphasizing the peace that typified his name and his reign. Since he had brought about a *pax romana* (before the Romans existed) the Ark and God could finally settle down. Third, Solomon emphasized that God was among the people. No longer could his Ark be easily taken hither and yon. The people had to face the fact of the presence of God among them.

These may be some ideas that people may need to face even today. God has a permanent place in his world, but we are only here a short while. We need to act as if we are pilgrims in this world. God is peace, and without his presence we cannot have peace. Finally, God is among us. That can be a fearsome or joyous thing. Solomon apparently thought it was something to be celebrated, but it may also serve as a warning. Live as if God is living next door.

(Succos falls on September 23-29 in 2010)

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