

The following article presents beliefs and ideas for you to ponder, explore, and perhaps make your own.

Heaven's Version of Law & Order

There's nothing more riveting than a good courtroom drama — as long as it's on TV and you're not one of the handcuffed participants being shipped off to Riker's Island. And it sometimes looks like an elaborate chess match, with prosecutors and defense attorneys using legal chicanery to hide or expose key pieces of evidence. But the overriding goal of the judicial system is simple: get it right. Bring all realities to light, then protect the community by making sure justice prevails and rebellious, hurtful forces are removed from our midst.



Photo: Dreamstime

The children of Israel were fortunate to have a vivid daily/yearly reminder of how God had a plan to not only forgive their sins but eventually create a clean and restored eternal society. The sanctuary in their midst gave sinners the opportunity to bring a sacrifice to the priest; the animal's spilled blood gave assurance of forgiveness and also reminded them that a true Lamb and Messiah was soon coming to redeem the entire nation.

But there was more. Once each year, on Yom Kippur, the high priest entered the "Most Holy Place" and stood before the ark of God. Now the sanctuary itself was cleansed; one final sacrifice of the "Lord's goat" gave Israel a satisfying sense that the entire nation had experienced Jehovah's forgiveness and was now liberated from sin. It reminded Israel that God didn't want them to simply co-exist with sin and failure forever, falling and being repeatedly forgiven. The accumulated "guilt" of the past 365 days was atoned for; this "foreshadowed the final application of the merits of Christ to banish the presence of sin for all eternity and to accomplish the full reconciliation of the universe into one harmonious government under God" (F. B. Holbrook, *Light in the Shadows*).

Many Bible students accept that this same sanctuary object lesson happens cosmically in heaven, with Jesus serving as the world's High Priest and giving repentant sinners the same assurances. The author of Hebrews writes in chapter 8: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man (v. 1).

What does this mean for each of us? It's good news that we have a very sympathetic Priest in Jesus! Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy (Hebrews 4:16). Even though God is supremely holy and sin is a pollutant and a barrier, we are not estranged! Jesus is willing to be our mediator, representing us before a heavenly Father who equally loves us.

But does the second phase of the sanctuary system, the “Yom Kippur” aspect of forgiveness, also have a heavenly application? Christians are grateful for salvation — and yet we continue to stumble and fall. The global church lurches along; we make mistakes. Will there come a time when the universe is made permanently clean?

It’s necessary to acknowledge that sin isn’t a thing, a stain on a white sweater. It’s not “paper” where a kind friend can just burn the record and bury the ashes. Jesus promises in John 5:24: I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him [God] who sent Me HAS eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. The book of Acts assures us that when we repent and turn to God, our sins are immediately “blotted” or wiped out. Additionally, we are each saved by a grace relationship, not by a paper trail of our past transgressions.

But it’s also true that even believers are men and women with free will; we can enter into a trust relationship with Christ — or we can abandon it. John writes: He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life (1 John 5:12). I’m thankful that a person who decides to be a Christian doesn’t check into the Hotel California — you remember, where “you can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave.”

And when God comes to this final judgment, He doesn’t spot a backslider in the church and then renege on Calvary, fishing around in the ashes in order to glue the pieces of Sin Exhibit A together. God is God! He knows all things! It’s never “paper” with Him. And yet a watching universe wants to be assured that He’s a wise and fair-minded Judge, that the repentance of those who claim the name of Christ is a genuine experience. Jesus’ parable of the wheat and tares portrays a church where truly repentant sinners and cynical fakers are sitting side by side. God knows each heart, but we don’t. So the Bible gives this picture of an end-time judgment where forgiveness itself is on trial. Has God shown a perfect heart in how He populates His eternal kingdom?

The great sweeps of prophetic time found in the book of Daniel do imply that this end-time process of God’s own purposes being on trial has already begun. It’s a thrilling time to be alive and in a secure relationship with Jesus our High Priest! I like how Pastor Tony Evans imagined his own courtroom confession: “I’m guilty of every sin there is. But when I was a boy, Jesus, I claimed You as my Savior. And Jesus, You are all I have.”