

**God's Gifts in a Time of Challenge**  
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**Introduction**

Did you know that God wants to give you something? He does.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights... (James 1:17)

God wants to give you a good and perfect gift. In fact, he wants to give you lots of good and perfect gifts.

Let's ask: What are they? Well, they're different things, and they take different forms. In fact, there are so many, we can't discuss them all in one session. So today, we'll talk about a few of the things that God wants to give you. Also, we'll talk about the way that God gives them.

The gifts all have something in common. They center around God. The first and greatest thing that God wants to give to you is himself.

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

More than anything else, God wants you to know him. Everything else that God wants you to have is related to that in some way.

This is sounding warm and fuzzy. Sometimes, if we hear that someone wants to give us something, we get suspicious. We ask, "is there a catch". The answer is, "no, not at all". However, we do need to ask two important questions: 1) How does God give us good gifts - How does he help us to know him? 2) When does he give these gifts?

This is where the warm and fuzzy sometimes comes in. I often hear stories about God giving something wonderful to a person for no seeming reason, at some surprising time. I've talked to someone on the phone and they say, "God really blessed me today". You've all heard those stories.



On the other hand, sometimes God gives us gifts in ways that are harder. Sometimes, we receive good things from God during a ***time of challenge***. We're going to focus on those times today.

Some time ago, we announced that our church would be participating in an event called, "The Return". Some of you have been wondering why we're involved. That's a fair question. The event centers around a national day of prayer on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and that's just a few days away. So, part of what we're doing today is sharing a few thoughts about why we're participating. As a note, the principles we're discussing today work at any time of challenge, so if you're seeing this at a later date, read on!

We're going to look at some people in the Bible who faced times of challenge, and who received something wonderful from God.

## **I. The Jewish People on the Day of Atonement**

In the Law of Moses, there are a number of provisions and instructions for different areas of life. Among the things described, there are special days. These are days to be set apart for various reasons. One of the most solemn was called "Yom Kippur" or "Day of Atonement". Let's read about it:

29 "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you— 30 because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. 31 It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. (Leviticus 16:29-31)

This was the day that the Jewish people now call "Yom Kippur" or "Day of Atonement". There are three important things about this day.

### **A) It was a Sabbath.**

A sabbath was a day to do no work. On a sabbath people stopped everything. There was to be no work of any kind. Why? So people could reflect, think, and consider. It's hard to do that when you're busy.

Reflect about what? Sin and atonement. We're told the people were to do this because their sins were being atoned for. In order for sin to be atoned for, you need to recognize that you have sin. Otherwise, why do you need atonement? So, this day was set aside so that people could give special consideration to the problem of sin. In particular, their sin.

Sin is a terrible thing. It's our disobedience to God's authority. It creates at least two problems:

## **1) Sin causes us to be separated from God**

But your iniquities have separated  
you from your God;  
your sins have hidden his face from you,  
so that he will not hear.  
(Isaiah 59:2)

In order for us to have fellowship with God, we need to have the source of our separation removed.

## **2) Sin causes wrath**

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people... (Romans 1:18)

Wrath. The great king of the universe has righteous anger towards those who break his laws and ignore his authority.

Sin is very serious. So much so, the ancient Hebrew people were to have (at least) one day year when they stopped all activity so that they could reflect about their personal sin.

There's a second important quality to this day.

### **B) It was a Fasting Day**

The Law told the Jewish people that they were to deny themselves on this day. Deny means you want something. Maybe you need something. But you say, "no" to the want or the need. So, this has been interpreted as fasting. When you fast, you're hungry or thirsty, but you say "no" to your body's longing for food or drink.

There are different kinds of fasts. Some people fast from food, but not water. Some just limit the kinds of things they can consume. We'll discuss them in our session today.

This fast was one of the more serious. For 24 hours there was to be no food or drink. This is very serious because the human body can only go four days without food and water. With water, fasting can last much longer.

Why would somebody do that? As I've read about the topic of fasting, I've seen all kinds of explanations. I saw one from a well-known Bible teacher that was very interesting.

This Bible Teacher said that food can be used as medication. If someone suffers depression, a doctor can prescribe all kinds of medications. But they're totally unnecessary. You know why?

Because there's something called pepperoni pizza. Pepperoni Pizza cures any kind of depression. At least for me. For you, it might be chocolate. It might be something else. Food can make us feel better. So, when we feel bad, we often reach for food.

If you reflect on sin, you know what happens? You feel bad. And you know what? At some point, we all have to face that.

We'll learn in a minute that we don't have to feel bad about our sin all the time.

We'll quickly add that some people say fasting focusses your mind. Other say that it adds weight to your reflections and your attitude. We'll talk more about the "why" of fasting in the future.

For now, let's look at the third important thing about this day.

### **3) Sins were atoned for.**

We said that God wants to give us good and perfect gifts. In this case, God provided the knowledge that a person's sin was atoned for.

What is atonement? The concept of atonement can be difficult. We'll treat it more fully at another time. For now, we'll say that sin is very serious, so it must be dealt with.

- Sin is impure - It must be cleansed.
  - That was a major emphasis on Yom Kippur.
- Sin causes damage – That damage must be paid for.
- Sin is the breaking of law – There is a penalty to be paid.

Atonement means all these things are dealt with.

The faithful among the Jewish people followed these instructions. They were rewarded with a picture. A picture of what would happen someday in the future. A day when a perfect atonement would come through Jesus Christ.

God wanted to give something of himself to the Jewish people. So, he challenged them. He warned them about the problem of sin. He wanted them to approach the challenge with a day of fasting and reflection about sin. Those who met the challenge saw what God wanted to give them. They knew him better. They knew that he was a merciful God who forgave. There would come a day when sins would no longer separate people from God. There would be a day when no one who was faithful to God's call would need to fear wrath.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...  
(Romans 8:1)

That's why we don't need to walk around constantly regretting our sin - Because there is joy in God's salvation.

Today, things are different than they were in the days that Moses gave the Law. The great atonement for sin, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is now in the past. The Jewish people looked forward to the day. We look back.

So, we don't observe a yearly day of atonement. For us, ***we reflect all the time***. We still have special times where reflection is even more intense. In our tradition, we do this every month when we observe communion. We always encourage people to reflect on their sins.

Question: Why do we do that, considering the great atonement has already happened? There are two reasons. First, sometimes sin creeps into our lives. Although daily sins don't prevent us from entering heaven, they hinder our walk with God. We don't enjoy him the way he intends. So, we're encouraged to confess and forsake sins.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Second, we grow closer to God. Recognizing the size of our sin increase our love for God. We enjoy his love better. To understand this, consider the following story: It involves a man named Simon who was troubled that Jesus hung around with sinful people.

41 "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. (Luke 7:41-43)

I like to kid sometimes that some people are saved from a life of sin and degradation at the age of four. Others are saved at a later point in life from more obvious sins. We're always happy when we hear that children receive the Lord in Sunday School. But sometimes, with thought and reflection, people come to realize later in life that they're saved from more than they realize. On that day, their love for Jesus grows.

So, on the day of atonement, God set a challenge before the Hebrew people. He told them to set aside a day to hold a strict fast and to refrain from all activity so they could reflect on their sin. They were rewarded with a deeper knowledge of God's mercy and love. Although people who have received Jesus don't need to do that today, we still benefit from occasional times set aside to reflect.

Here, we ask an important question: Is this new to you? Have you received God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ? Please check out Billy Graham's web site: [PeaceWithGod.net](http://PeaceWithGod.net). You can

learn how to be forgiven through the atonement of Jesus Christ. Or, contact our church: Write to [Info@TrinityTeaneck.org](mailto:Info@TrinityTeaneck.org). We'll be happy to help.

## II. Daniel

Sometimes, people face different challenges. Let's look at the prophet Daniel. When Daniel was a young man, the nation of Israel was judged because of their sin. The great city of Jerusalem was attacked and burned. Refugees from the city were led to Babylon where they lived in exile. Daniel was among those refugees. Through a series of miracles, Daniel rose from refugee to one of the most respected leaders in ancient Babylon. There were many times in Daniel's life when he faced incredible challenges. We'll look at two of them.

At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; (Daniel 10:2)

Daniel faced a challenge. We don't know exactly what it was, but it was serious. We're told he mourned for three weeks. Something was bad. So bad, that Daniel just couldn't go through life like normal.

He didn't respond to the challenge with a complete fast. He responded with a partial fast: he limited his diet. As a respected leader, he could eat whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. Every day could be a party. But he said, "no party – not today. No celebration. My heart isn't up to it."

We won't read the whole chapter, but the result of this challenge was revelation. An angel from God was sent to Daniel. Here's what he said:

"Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them." (Daniel 10:12)

Daniel was a great prophet of God, so he received a messenger from God. The angel said two things that allowed Daniel to know God better. 1) God is a caring and loving. He listens to the prayers of his people. 2) The message he brought taught that God is powerful. He controls all of history. The messenger told Daniel what would happen in the future. The result was that Daniel knew God better.

Those kinds of things, angels with special messages, are very rare. They're reserved for people with a special mission like Daniel. However, there's still room for fasting and prayer when we meet challenges. Today, we sometimes face situations that are so difficult, we don't have any answers. If it's a difficult challenge, there may be room to not only pray, but fast in some way. Full fasts aren't always required. We just need to say, "right now, no party – no celebration."

But sometimes, a full fast is required. Earlier in his life, Daniel looked at the condition of his people, Israel. He was heartbroken when he saw how they had been dispersed in a foreign land. He knew that it happened because of their sin. Here's how he responded:

So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. (Daniel 9:3)

Here Daniel prayed. He fasted. He wore a material called "sack cloth". It was the symbol for mourning. He sat in the ashes, again another symbol of grief.

When he prayed, here's what he said:

4 I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: "Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 5 we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. 6 We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land. (Daniel 9:4-6)

When Daniel saw the condition of his people, he was led to confess. He confessed that his people had sinned. They had sinned against the clear commands of God.

When he did this, he used a vitally important word: "We". He didn't say, "O Lord, all of those **other** people have sinned. Aren't they lucky to have a perfect man like me praying for them." No, he included himself. This is something the most righteous men of the ages have done. Here's a familiar verse:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; (Isaiah 53:6)

Isaiah included himself when he spoke about sin. Maybe you've heard the song: "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like YOU." No - "That saved a wretch like Me." The writer of the book of Hebrews said Isaiah was such a righteous man, the world was not worthy of him. Yet, when Isaiah confessed sin, he included himself.

Daniel confessed his own sin and the sin of his nation. He humbled himself, mourning with fasting and prayer. And once again, Daniel was rewarded with a messenger from God. He met face to face with the angel Gabriel. The angel gave Daniel another message revealing God's sovereign power over time. Again, Daniel's answer to a challenge resulted in him know God better.

Once again, we don't expect personal revelation from God. But sometimes, we look around us, and our hearts grieve. We, too, can mourn with fasting and prayer.

Let's look at one more example.

### **III. Esther**

Esther is the wonderful story of another refugee. She was a Hebrew orphan girl cared for by her uncle. Like Daniel, through a series of miraculous events, she was elevated. She became the queen of Babylon.

But one day, she heard that there was terrible danger. A wicked and powerful man named Haman had plotted to destroy the Hebrew people. Even though she was Queen, her options were limited. The king was so paranoid that he created a rule. Anyone who entered his court uninvited was to die. It was dangerous even for the queen to attempt to talk to the king of Babylon.

Here's how she responded to this challenge:

Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. (Esther 4:16)

The people of Israel faced annihilation. This was serious. Esther's response was to call for a 3-day complete fast. Recall, that the human body can only last 4 days without water. The result? The king of Babylon, a tyrant, allowed Esther to enter his courtroom. He listened to her. The Hebrew people were saved.

Salvation would have been enough, but God gave them more. The Hebrew people were shown the power of God. They could know him better by seeing his power. But that power was shown after a terrifying challenge.

### **IV. Us.**

So, what does this all mean for us today? I don't have to tell you that today, we face many challenges. Those challenges rise to the level of crisis. At the beginning of the year, we heard about something called COVID 19. On September 7 of 2020, the Wall Street Journal feature a front-page article:

'Really Diabolical': Inside the Coronavirus That Outsmarted Science  
SARS-CoV-2 is a wily virus, with mysterious origins and a powerful ability to infect and spread; 'We underestimated it.'

A few lines into the article, the writers said: “Taken on its own terms, SARS-CoV-2 is the infectious disease success of the past 100 years. Almost unmatched in the annals of emerging human contagions, it has parlayed a few chance infections into a pandemic of around 27 million confirmed cases so far.”

Prior to the arrival of this disease, we were enjoying the best economy in generations. Unemployment was at all-time lows, especially in minority communities.

As the USA reeled from this, they were then hit with riots. A video of a man named George Floyd was released. He was thought to have committed a small crime. A police officer used excessive force to restrain him resulting in his death. Before we knew it, buildings were burning all over America.

If that’s not enough: On July 26, 2019, the Wall Street Journal published another article. Here is its title: “Yes, American Religious Liberty Is in Peril.” The article explains the ways that our religious liberty is under attack.

Is this scary? Sure. Many people are bewildered. They feel powerless as they watch the world being torn apart. If you feel that way, you’re not alone. But, as I said at the beginning of our talk, sometimes God uses times of challenge to give gifts to his children. God wants us to know him better. There is something of himself that he wants to show us through this crisis.

Here is what we need to do: We will do what God’s people have done for centuries and even millennia. Here is how the Prophet Joel told his friends to face a terrible crisis:

Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. (Joel 1:14)

This year, some Christian leaders in the United States have joined forces to call for a sacred assembly. These leaders have put aside the normal things that various denominations disagree on. They are calling for Christians in our country and the world to fast and pray, just as God’s people have done in the past. It will be on September 26.

The days surrounding it are special. The time from Friday, September 18 through Monday, September 28 are days of preparation and follow-up.

Here’s what we’re asking people to do: During the preparation and follow up days, consider treating this like the prophet Daniel when he restricted his diet. He mourned. He was so grieved, he couldn’t act like life was a party.

Then, from sundown on Friday, September 25 through sundown on Saturday the 26, set aside a sabbath. Don’t work. Shut off the TV, the devices, the computers.

And deny yourself. Of course, talk to your doctor. However, if you're able, consider a complete fast. No food and no water for 24 hours. If you don't think your health is up to that, then pray about what level of denial you will apply.

During this time, we will host a simulcast of the prayer meeting that will be held on the mall in Washington D.C. It will start at 6 PM on Friday evening and go until 9 PM on Saturday evening. I will try with God's help to be there for the entire time in case you want someone to pray with you. If you're reading this from overseas, visit the web site: [TheReturn.org](http://TheReturn.org). You can learn how to watch the event wherever you are over the Internet.

We will close our discussion with two short passages of Scripture.

Many of the people hosting the event are hoping the following Scripture will apply:

...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (II Chronicles 7:14)

That was a promise made to the ancient Jewish people when they built their first temple under King Solomon. We enjoy many of the blessings that God gave to them. But we are not them. Do all promises that God made to them apply to us? To be honest, I'm not sure.

Perhaps a better scripture for us comes from the book of Jonah. Jonah was told to preach to the people of Nineveh who had fallen into great sin. When the king heard Jonah's word, here's what he did:

6 The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, 8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." (Jonah 3:6-9)

This was a man who understood that God is never forced. There is no recipe. When we pray, we call upon his mercy.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that God wants to give us a gift. He wants us to know him better. He often gives this gift in times of challenge. We are certainly facing such a challenge.

Let's join with the believers throughout the ages who faced a crisis, a challenge, by humbling themselves and calling out to God. May he bless us with a greater knowledge of him as we do this.