

# Question About Yom Kippur and the Scarlet Thread

By Pastor Ed Anderson

The red and white thread in the Temple of Jerusalem was a scarlet wool cord that was part of the Day of Atonement ritual, a miraculous sign of God's forgiveness for the sins of the Israelite nation. One end of the scarlet thread was tied to the door of the Temple, and the other to the head of a goat designated to be a scapegoat. According to the Jewish Talmud, if the sacrifice was accepted, the thread miraculously turned white. This sign stopped occurring around 30 AD, about 40 years before the Temple's destruction, a period which caused great concern among the nation's leaders.

The ritual and its significance

The ritual: On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the high priest would perform a ceremony with two goats.

One goat was sacrificed as a sin offering.

The other was the scapegoat, sent into the wilderness to symbolically carry the sins of the people.

The miraculous sign: A scarlet thread was tied to the scapegoat's head before it was sent away. A portion was also tied to the Temple door.

If the thread turned white: It was a sign that God had accepted the sacrifices and forgiven the nation's sins for the year.

If the thread remained red: It was believed that the sins had not been expiated, causing despair.

The change in the ritual

The Talmud records that for the last 40 years before the Temple's destruction in 70 AD, the scarlet thread no longer turned white.

This change began around 30 AD, leading to great concern because it signaled that God was no longer accepting the Yom Kippur sacrifice in the same way.

**Answer:**

**Response: Yom Kippur, the Scarlet Thread, and the Mystery of Atonement**

Thank you for raising this powerful and symbolic tradition recorded in Jewish sources surrounding **Yom Kippur** (the Day of Atonement). The story of the **scarlet thread** has stirred the hearts of many who see in it a foreshadowing of something much greater.

### **The Ritual: Two Goats and a Nation's Atonement**

As recorded in **Leviticus 16**, the High Priest would choose **two goats**:

- **One goat** was sacrificed to the Lord as a **sin offering**.
- The other was designated as the **scapegoat (Azazel)**, symbolically bearing the sins of the people and released into the wilderness.

According to **Talmudic tradition** (Yoma 39a), a **scarlet wool thread** was tied:

- To the **scapegoat's head** before release.
- Another portion was tied to the **Temple door**.

If the thread **turned white**, it was seen as a miraculous sign from God that the nation's sins were **forgiven**, fulfilling the promise of **Isaiah 1:18**:

*"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."*

If the thread **remained red**, it was taken as a troubling sign that **God had not accepted the sacrifice**.

### **The Change Around 30 AD**

Jewish sources note that around **30 AD—forty years before the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD**—the scarlet thread **stopped turning white**. This raised serious concern among Jewish leaders. They wondered why the atonement no longer seemed acceptable.

Messianic scholars and many Christians see this as **no coincidence**. Around **30 AD, Jesus (Yeshua)** was crucified and resurrected—**once for all** as the ultimate sacrifice (see **Hebrews 10:10–14**). From this point forward, **animal sacrifices no longer carried the same significance**, as **Jesus had fulfilled the very shadow they represented**.

**Hebrews 9:12** – *"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."*

### **Tradition vs. Scripture**

It is important to note that:

- The **scarlet thread miracle** is part of **Jewish tradition** found in the **Talmud**, not the Bible. While rich in symbolic meaning, it is **not a biblical command or confirmed miracle** in Scripture.
- Similarly, the **tradition of tying a rope** around the High Priest before entering the Most Holy Place is not recorded in the Bible but appears in later Jewish commentaries. The idea was that if the High Priest died in God's presence due to unworthiness, he could be **safely pulled out** without others entering.

### Profound Fulfillment in Christ

Jesus fulfilled every symbol:

- He is our **High Priest** (Hebrews 4:14).
- He is the **scapegoat**, bearing our sins (Isaiah 53:6).
- He is the **Lamb of God** slain for our forgiveness (John 1:29).
- His blood makes our scarlet sins **white as snow** (Isaiah 1:18).

So today, we don't look to red or white threads—but to the **cross**.

### Conclusion

While these Jewish traditions are not binding or authoritative in the same way as Scripture, they can **point us toward deeper truths**. The shift around 30 AD is a **powerful witness** that something eternally significant happened in Jerusalem—and that Jesus is **the only acceptable atonement** for our sins.

The story of the **scarlet thread turning white** on Yom Kippur is **not recorded in the Bible**, but rather found in **Jewish tradition**, specifically the **Babylonian Talmud** (*Yoma 39a*). Therefore, it is best understood as **legendary—not historical fact** in the same sense as biblical accounts—but with deep **symbolic value**.

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### Source of the Tradition

The **Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 39a)**—a collection of rabbinic writings completed centuries after the Temple's destruction—states:

*“During the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple... the scarlet thread did not turn white.”*

This refers to a **miraculous sign** supposedly indicating whether or not God accepted the nation’s sacrifice.

### **Why It Is Considered Legend**

1. **It’s not in the Bible** – Nowhere in Leviticus 16 or elsewhere does Scripture mention the scarlet thread changing color as part of the Day of Atonement ritual.
2. **It is post-biblical** – The earliest reference comes centuries after the events it describes.
3. **It functions as midrash (teaching tradition)** – Jewish rabbis often used symbolic traditions to teach spiritual lessons.
4. **There is no archaeological or independent historical evidence** verifying the thread turning white.

### **What is Scriptural?**

- The **use of two goats** (Leviticus 16)
- The **scapegoat (Azazel)** released into the wilderness
- The **high priest’s annual Day of Atonement duties**
- The **red or scarlet** color often associated with sin and cleansing (Isaiah 1:18)

### **So What Can We Learn?**

Though **not historical fact**, the scarlet thread legend reflects a **deep longing for assurance of forgiveness**—something that was ultimately **fulfilled in Christ**:

*“Though your sins be as **scarlet**, they shall be white as snow.” – Isaiah 1:18*

*“...by His own blood He entered once into the holy place, having obtained **eternal redemption**.” – Hebrews 9:12*

### **Final Thought:**

While **the scarlet thread itself is tradition**, it **powerfully foreshadows Jesus**, whose once-for-all atonement made continual sacrificial signs unnecessary. It reminds us that **God’s forgiveness is real, complete, and not dependent on signs or colors—but on Christ alone**.