

Lesson 8B – The Mercy Seat

The Mercy-seat, or better, the Propitiatory, derived its name from the blood of propitiation which was sprinkled thereon.

At either end of it was a cherub, not fastened there, but beaten out of the same one piece of gold of which the Mercy-seat was formed.

Exodus 25:17-22 “You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the

mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.” **ESV**



The Mercy-seat was a solid sheet or slab of pure gold.

Though a separate and distinct article in itself, it formed the lid of the Ark, being placed "above upon the Ark"; whose "crown of gold round about" (forming the top of its sides) would support and prevent it from slipping off.

The Mercy-seat differed from the Ark in that no wood entered into its composition. There was only one other piece of furniture in the Tabernacle made solely of gold, namely the candlestick, which was smaller in size and weight; therefore the Mercy-seat, according to its intrinsic worth, was the most valuable of all the holy vessels.

How this tells us of the preciousness in the sight of God of that which the Mercy-seat foreshadowed.

A. Its Significance.

The real typical meaning of the Mercy-seat has been Divinely explained to us in

Romans 3:25 “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine

forbearance he had passed over former sins.” (ESV)

The Greek word here rendered "propitiation" is the identical one translated "Mercy-seat" in...

Hebrews 9:5 “Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.” (ESV)

Romans 3, then, declares that in the gospel God presents Christ before us as the antitypical Mercy-seat.

Christ is the Mercy-seat, but He is so by virtue of the propitiation which He offered to God.

The Propitiatory was not the place where propitiation was made, but instead, the place where its abiding value was borne witness to before God.



The verb "to propitiate" signifies to appease, to placate, to make satisfaction.

When, then, we read in Romans 3:25 that Christ is now set forth a Propitiatory, the evident meaning is that, through the Gospel, God now bears testimony to His blessed Son as the One by whom He was propitiated, the One by whom His holy wrath against the sins of His people was pacified, the One by

whom the righteous demands of His law were satisfied, the One by whom every attribute of Deity was glorified.

The type of Christ as "the propitiation for our sins" is the bleeding victim on the altar; the type of Christ as God's resting place or Propitiatory is the Mercy-seat within the veil.

Christ has become God's rest, in whom He can now meet poor sinners in all the fullness of His grace because of the propitiation made by Him on the cross.

The great propitiation which Christ made, and the propitiatory which is the result of it, were given witness to in the ritual of Israel's annual Day of Atonement.

B. Its Purpose.

In the Tabernacle there was a table, but no chair for Aaron or any of the priests to sit on, because their work was never finished, needing constant repetition—emblematic of the fact that the one great Sacrifice, which would provide rest and satisfaction, was yet to come.

But there was one seat, the Mercy-seat, reserved for Jehovah Himself, who sat there between the cherubim.

This Mercy-seat, resting upon the Ark, foreshadowed the grand truth that God would find His rest in that perfect work which His incarnate Son should perform.

The Mercy-seat, then, was God's throne here on earth.

Exodus 25:21-22 " And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel. (ESV)"

The fact that the Mercy-seat formed God's throne in the midst of Israel is referred to in quite a number of Old Testament passages.

In 1 Samuel 4:4 we read, "So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God."

In 2 Samuel 6:2 it is said, "And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim."

2 Kings 19:15 "And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said: "O LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth."

Psalm 80:1 “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.” (ESV)

Psalm 99:1 “The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!” (ESV)

But now the question arises, How was it possible for the thrice holy God to dwell in the midst of a sinful people?

The answer is, On the ground of accepted sacrifice.

His throne was a blood-sprinkled one.

This is shown us in Leviticus 16:14, already quoted.

The blood of the sin-offering was sprinkled upon that Mercy-seat which constituted Jehovah's throne, and there that blood, as the abiding witness that the claims of His justice had been met, and that He could righteously dwell in the midst of a people who had broken His law—righteously, because their sin had been put away.

Now it is impossible to over-estimate the importance of thoroughly-settled views of God's satisfaction in Christ.

Many Christians never get beyond the fact, though a precious fact it is, that Christ's death has procured and secured their eternal life; and even this, in the case of many, is not maintained.

The reason for this is that we listen so often to the dictates of our evil hearts of unbelief, which tell us that self must have a hand in the work of salvation, must contribute something to it—if not works, then feelings!

But the truth is that God has entirely set aside ourselves, and acted for Himself in saving us. God's glory, and our salvation are indissolubly linked together.

Accordingly we ought not only to enjoy the assurance of our eternal security, but also enter into a deeper communion with God's revealed thoughts concerning the power of Christ's blood in relation to His Throne In Heaven!

It is this which the Mercy-seat or Propitiatory particularly and so blessedly typifies.

The Mercy-seat, which formed God's throne in Israel, then, directs our thoughts to the governmental aspect of the Atonement.

Not only is it true that Christ died for sinners, but it is equally true—though in a different sense—that He died for God: He died in the stead of His sinful people, He died on behalf of the thrice holy God.

Christ lived and died to make it possible for God to take hell-deserving sinners into fellowship with Himself, and that, consistently with His holiness and justice.

He died to vindicate the character of God before all the intelligences of the universe. He died that God's throne might be established: "justice and judgment are the habitation (or "base") of Thy throne" (Psalms 89:14).

God's throne is settled in Christ, because all the claims of God's righteousness have been settled by Christ.

The Antitype of this is most gloriously brought before us in Revelation 5:6; "And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne... stood a Lamb as it had been slain"!!

Romans 3:25 “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” (ESV)

To "put forward" here signifies to make manifest, to proclaim and exhibit publicly.

Liberal theologian Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969) said that the idea of Jesus' death on a Cross as a substitution for the sins of others was a slaughterhouse religion.¹ In his book, *The Modern Use of the Bible*, Fosdick explains his views, saying that Jesus Christ going to the Cross should be looked at as more of an example of a life of service and sacrifice and not compared with "old animal sacrifices" and "made 'a pious fraud' played by God upon the devil" (p. 230). Fosdick believed that the idea that God would actually send His Son to death on a Cross to take our place is the basis for a violent and bloody religion. Fosdick rejected the biblical message of the Cross. And a long trail of "Christian" teachers

Divine righteousness requires that His law should be obeyed, and that its penalty should be enforced where its precepts have been broken.

Divine mercy could not be exercised at the expense of justice, the character of God as the Ruler of the universe was involved.

But the Anti-type of the Mercy-seat sets forth the precious fact that God's avenging holiness was fully satisfied by the shedding of the blood of His Son on the cross.

Justice instead of being reduced to the necessity of taking a part from the bankrupt, (us) has received full payment from the bankrupt's Surety and thus his deliverance is guaranteed.

Thus Christ by His life of obedience "magnified the law and made it honorable" (Isaiah 42:21), and by His death glorified all the Divine perfections.

God's love, grace, and mercy were manifested at Calvary as nowhere else; equally so were His holiness, justice and righteousness.

For this reason, then, the Mercy-seat was made solely of pure gold—the Divine glory displayed.

Propitiation has been made, and God points all to His Son, the Propitiatory, as the proof of it; just as the Mercy-seat with the blood sprinkled thereon attested that propitiation had been typically accomplished.

3. Its Dimensions.

It is not without good reason, for there is nothing meaningless or even trivial in God's Word, that the Holy Spirit has been pleased to give us the measurements of the Propitiatory.

Its length was two and a half cubits and its breadth one cubit and a half. But nothing is told us of its thickness:

Does not this designed omission suggest what is recorded in Psalm 103:112, "For as the heaven is high above the earth so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him"! What, then, are we to learn from the measurements which are recorded?

That, its length and breadth were precisely the same as those of the Ark.

The dimensions speak clearly of the strict limitations which God has set to His saving grace.

As another has said, "It is all very well to say 'there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea,' but it is much better to understand clearly what is signified by the words 'two cubits and a half shall be the length, thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof.'

God's mercy is, indeed, wide enough to take in every sinner who contritely presents himself at the appointed Mercy-seat, but it extends no further than that.

The limits are Divinely established, and are unalterable.

There are some who count upon the love of God apart from Christ and His atoning death, which is virtually to devise a Mercy-seat which is wider than the Ark.

But this is a vain delusion. God's **grace reigns** "through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord."

Romans 5:21 "so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (**ESV**)

No grace can be shown unto any sinner apart from the redemptive blood of the Lord Jesus.

Isaiah 45:21 “Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together!

Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me.” (ESV)

Saving mercy is extended to none except those for whom Christ met the demands of Divine justice.

There is much so-called Evangelism today which is condemned by the strictly defined dimensions of the Mercy-seat!

Christ died not to make possible the salvation of the whole human race, but to make certain the salvation of God's elect:

Hebrews 2:17 “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” (ESV)

4. Its Ornamentation.

This was in the form of two cherubs, one on either end of the Mercy-seat, with wings outstretched over it, thus overshadowing and as it were protecting God's throne.

That there is profound and important significance connected with the figures of the cherubim is clear from the prominent place which they occupy in the Divine description of the Mercy-seat.

In reading, Exodus 25:17-22 you will find that mention is made of them, either in the single or plural number, no less than seven times.

The first time the "cherubim" are mentioned in Scripture is in Genesis 3:24, where they are guarding the way to the tree of life, the "flaming sword," suggesting that they are associated with the administration of God's judicial authority.

In Revelation 4:6-8 (cp. Ezekiel 1:5-10) we find them related to the throne of God.

Revelation 5:11-14 indicates that the cherubim are the highest among the angelic order of creatures.

In the Psalms and in Ezekiel the cherubim come before us in connection with judicial acts, with Divine interference in judgment, and this gives a striking significance to their place here on the Mercy-seat:

God's righteousness, and His wrath against sin, is seen to be of one piece with His mercy! God's attributes do not conflict: light and love are but two sides of His nature!

On the Mercy-seat the two cherubim stood facing each other, attracted by a common object, heads bowed as in adoration.

Their number speaks of competent witness.

1 Corinthians 4:9 declares that the suffering apostles were "made a spectacle (theater) unto angels."

Ephesians 3:10 tells us that "the manifold wisdom of God is now being made known by (through) the Church unto the principalities and powers in the heavenlies."

1 Peter 1:11, 12 announces that the sufferings of Christ and His glories which were to follow are "things which the angels desire to look into."

We take it, then, that the figures of the two cherubim, with their bowed heads over the Mercy-seat, denote the interest of the angelic hierarchies in the unfolding of God's redemptive purpose.

5. Its Blessedness.

First, this comes out in the fact that the **Mercy-seat** completely hid the tables of stone which were kept in the **Ark**.

As the cherubim stood there with their faces downward, they could not see the holy law which condemned its transgressors; instead, they gazed on that which spoke of the glory of **God—Deity magnified by sacrifice**.

There was blood between the law and its Administrator and His executors!

Second, the Mercy-seat was the place where Jehovah met the sinner in the person of His representative: "And he (Aaron) shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it with his finger upon the Mercy-seat eastward; and before the Mercy-seat shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times" (Lev. 16:14).

This tells us that Christ is the one appointed Meeting-place between God and His people, the place where-He meets with them not in judgment but in grace.

But remember that the typical Mercy-seat was in the holy of holies, hidden from the view of the sinner who desired to approach God.

So it is with the Antitype: God's throne of grace is not visible to the eye of sense; it can be approached only by faith.

Thus we have the exhortation Hebrews 10:19-22 "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which He hath newly-made for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith."

Hebrews 10:19-22 “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” **(ESV)**

Third, the Mercy-seat is the place of communion: "And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with Thee from above the Mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim, which are upon the Ark of the testimony" (Exodus 25:22).

A beautiful example of this is furnished in Numbers 7:89: "And when Moses was gone into the Tabernacle of the congregation to speak with Him, then he heard the voice of One speaking unto him from off the Mercy-seat that was upon the Ark of testimony, from between the two cherubim: and he spake unto Him."

It is in the Lord Jesus that Christians have been brought into this place of immeasurable blessing.

Not only have we been brought near to God, but we are permitted to speak to Him and hear Him speaking to us.

Having been reconciled to God by the death of His Son, He now says "I will commune with thee."

Wondrous grace is this! O that our hearts may enter into and enjoy this blessed privilege. Then "Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace."

There is nothing between: no sin, no guilt; and the veil has been rent. We may worship in the Holy of Holies! Then "let us draw near in full assurance of faith."



PRAYER TIME

