

The mercy seat

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0 : 0 0] be read in Exodus chapter 25. You find at verse 21 the words, And thou shalt put the mercy seat above upon the ark, and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee, and there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.

There I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee. Now as you probably know, I spend most of my time thinking about the Old Testament.

That's what the church has told me to do. And I find that many people disparage the Old Testament. Some of them do it quite openly. They come up to you and they say, I can't make much of it. I don't really think it's got very much to say to us anymore.

And if truth be told, there's also those who don't come up to you and don't really say anything, because I suspect that they just leave the Old Testament very much quietly on one side.

But it is the same God who is the ultimate author of both Old and New Testaments. And his character doesn't change. And in both Testaments he is working out the same purpose of salvation.

[1 : 4 5] In the one he's doing it leading up to the coming of his Son into the world to effect salvation. And in the other his Son comes, and we have set before us a record of all that he has achieved.

But both Old and New Testament alike have the one focus, in Jesus Christ, the Lord's appointed Messiah.

So both, Old and New, have much to tell us. But they don't tell us it in the same way. The Old Testament is preparatory.

It's laying the foundations. It's teaching basic truths. We do no more nowadays. In the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, we undoubtedly are now in a position to see the truths of God far more clearly than people in ancient Israel were able to do.

But that doesn't mean that the lessons of the Old Testament have been set aside. The way they're presented has changed.

[3 : 0 1] The depth to which they're developed has increased. We're no longer, as it were, in the infant class of God's school. But though we're no longer in the infant class, the truths that were taught there are still the same.

One plus one makes two, whether you're in primary one, or whether you're trying to manage the most advanced business in the world, or whether you're seeking the secrets of the universe.

If you forget that one plus one makes two, it vitiates your whole enterprise. And it's the same spiritually.

The lessons that God was teaching in the primary class of his church are basic truths that are never superseded.

And if we pay attention to them, we can still derive much profit. Now here we've got the book of Exodus. We've got the Lord's teaching for his people, for his church, at a time when they were coming out of great darkness and having to learn bit by bit regarding him, regarding his way, regarding what they themselves were.

[4 : 19] And as you look at this book, it's quite reasonable to ask, what was the most important lesson that God was teaching them?

What is the most significant thing about the book of Exodus? Is it the way the Lord appeared to Moses at the burning bush? Is it the awesome display of divine judgment in the ten plagues that the Lord brought upon Egypt because of their stubbornness in refusing to recognize him?

Was it the awesome way in which the Lord led his people through the depths of the sea, led them away from the following Egyptian armies that seemed certain to engulf them in death and defeat?

Was it the way in which the Lord appeared on Mount Sinai in that awe-inspiring theophany and thunder and lightning and smoke so that the whole ground was vibrating?

Well, if you judge the matter in terms of the amount of space that Moses devoted to it in writing the book of Exodus, it was none of these things at all.

[5 : 39] The thing that was most important to him out of all the grand series of events that took place at that time was the way in which God laid down the basis on which he would come and dwell with his people, meet with them, and enjoy fellowship with them.

Not the way in which God came on that one-off fashion at Sinai, but the way in which he wanted to come to them on a regular daily basis as they traveled to the land of promise, yes, and after they got there, after they settled in the land of promise.

Because it's not just here from chapter 25 through to chapter 30 that we have the description of the tabernacle and all the institutions connected with it. We're told the same thing all over again in chapters 35 to 40.

Most of the details are repeated, although not quite in the same order. They're repeated then in terms of how they were carried out, how the instructions were obeyed by the Israelites and by their craftsmen.

And I think that when we read through Exodus 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and then you start at 35, 36, we do begin to think it's tedious.

[7 : 02] We often are impatient. We don't conceal it. All these details of an outmoded shrine. But those details were intended to teach lessons.

And we've got to ask ourselves, we've got to use them, and say, have I really learned the basic lessons that are being taught there? Important though it was that God had saved his people.

Important, vital though it was that he brought them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, brought them to the mountain. That act of salvation was not the end of God's intervention in their lives.

It was just the beginning. The culmination of what God was aiming at wasn't deliverance from Egypt. It wasn't even earthly enjoyment of the possession of Canaan.

It was rather enjoyment of God himself and worshipping him. There I will meet with thee. And so let's just see this morning for a little if we've grasped some of the basic lessons of how it is that God, back in those days, prepared his people so that he would meet with them.

[8 : 22] And let's also ask if we, now, are prepared in the same way. Think of this first of all. The tabernacle was erected by divine decree.

God gave Moses the plan for the tabernacle. And that meant people were not left to work out for themselves how they should worship God.

They were not left to themselves to work out how they should prepare for God to come into their midst. And repeatedly, Moses is told to follow exactly the instructions that had been given him.

It says there in verse 9, according to all that I show thee after the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall he make it.

And it's there again in the verse we didn't read at the end of the chapter. And look thou, look that thou make them after their pattern which was showed thee in the mount. This was important.

[9 : 29] There had to be no detail deviating from what God required. And so we ask ourselves how may we approach God acceptably. Worship isn't something that proceeds simply on the basis of what we think is right, what we think is going to work.

We have to come at it with a sense of the fact that we are approaching the great king, the ruler of heaven and earth and it's what he wants that determines the matter.

It's what he desires from us that determines how we may acceptably come to him. Worship is not to be conducted in a fashion devised by the worshipper.

All pertaining to it has to be done in accordance with what God has set down. And that's what the tabernacle, the place where God would be found, the place that he designated as his place of worship, that's what the tabernacle was to be like.

It was to be according to the pattern that he set out, deviating from it in nothing. And because of that, as we look at the tabernacle, we get a picture, a correct picture, of what God wanted his people to understand about himself and his worship.

[10 : 52] So if we too want to meet with God, if we too are preparing ourselves to meet with him and to commune with him, we have to ensure that we follow what he has set down for us now in his word with care so that we are coming suitably prepared.

Not as the primary class simply in terms of the outward appearance. God now emphasizes the need for true spiritual preparation, for inwardly being right with him, for getting our lives ordered before him and setting them in their place.

When we come seeking to meet the Lord, when we desire above all else to seek his face, we must make every endeavor to ensure that our preparation corresponds to what he has set down.

So the tabernacle, first of all, reminds us of the fact that if we would approach God, we must do it not in ways of our devising, but in ways of his appointment.

And then there's a second remarkable thing about the way the tabernacle is described. It's described in divine perspective.

[12 : 24] Suppose by one of the wonders of modern science, we were transported back through those thousands of years and saw the Israelite shrine in the middle of the camp.

And suppose we were to prepare a description of it to relate to others. we would naturally begin to describe it in terms of this area that was set off from the rest of the camp by a set of curtains of hangings that completely enclosed a courtyard.

And then we'd naturally describe what happened, what you would see as you went through the coverings into the courtyard and saw the altar there and saw further in a tent covered over.

and finally if you had been able to enter that tent you would have found that within it there was yet a further recess, a further area, separate compartment marked off as the most holy place, the Holy of Holies.

You see, our natural way to approach it is from the outside inwards. but when God starts to describe the tabernacle to Moses he doesn't begin outside and work to the centre.

[13 : 44] He starts at the centre. The order of the description is different in chapters 35 to 40 when it's repeated. It's different there, it seems there to follow the order in which the various parts of the tabernacle were in fact built by the craftsmen.

but here in the pattern in the blueprint in the instructions given we start right at the centre.

In other words the tabernacle is not to be understood from the perspective of the worshipper. It has to be understood from the perspective of God.

God it was being constructed so that he could presence himself there. It was his presence that gave meaning to everything else and it was what he required to be put in the most holy place that informed everything else that was going on in the sanctuary.

And if we're to understand what is there in the whole of this ritual in the whole of this elaborate system of worship we have to focus on what was in the most inmost chamber because that's where God starts from.

[14 : 57] We have to understand worship working from God out to where we are. And isn't that one of our problems very often at a communion season?

We come and quite naturally we start off from where we are. we come with our problems we come with our perplexities with our worries with our awareness of our failures and we're focusing on self.

And one of the first exercises we've got to do is to turn our perspective around and start looking at things the other way from where God is and thus to approach ourselves.

It's when we start our thinking from where God is that we'll begin to benefit that we'll begin to see what it is that's underpinning and informing all that we're going on with.

And that's what God was teaching back in the structure of the tabernacle because looking at it from the divine perspective we have to begin by considering the contents of the most holy place.

[16 : 14] and it's as we get them straight we then begin to see all that's going on. Now from the perspective of the ancient world the most significant thing about the holy of holies was what was not there.

The most significant thing was that there was no idol in the most holy place. The ancient world had hundreds of shrines thousands of temples and virtually all of them were built on a pattern not dissimilar to that of the tabernacle and the temple.

Virtually all of them had an inner shrine an inner area that was accessed only by the most privileged of worshippers and in that inner area would be found the idol of the god or goddess worshipped at that temple.

It was something unique in the ancient world but that was not the case in Israel. There's a story told of how much later on in 63 BC when the Roman general Pompey had conquered swept through Palestine had taken Jerusalem eventually he took the temple area that held out a little bit longer and he forced his way into the temple right into the inmost sanctuary.

He was expecting to see some wonderful idol some wonderful piece of human craftsmanship perhaps and was utterly flabbergasted when there was nothing there at all.

[18 : 00] There was no idol nothing at all in the temple of Pompey's day but that hadn't been true originally. Although the Lord had forbidden any representation of himself by idols he didn't leave his people without something to tell them about himself.

In the most holy place there had originally been the Ark of the Covenant. At some point in Israel's history probably around the time of the exile the Ark vanished.

perhaps it was destroyed perhaps it was hidden away for safety we don't know it vanished from the scene of history but the inner sanctuary had not been completely empty originally because the Ark had been there.

Now the Ark of the Covenant was basically a box made of shittim or acacia wood it was overlaid with gold so it was a very heavy and a precious box but it was just a box a box made to contain something and we see here in verse 16 the instructions given thou shalt put into the Ark the testimony which I shall give thee that's why the Ark refers to the stipulations of the covenant testimony refers to what the covenant king required of his people the terms of obedience that he laid down for them and in this case the testimony was the Ten Commandments engraven on the tablets of stone so there at the heart of the sanctuary was a statement of the law of God and that law of

God declared God's holiness God's law reflects God's character it wasn't just a set of prescriptions for their behavior that God was laying before the Israelites that's what human lawmakers have to do that's what even the wisest and best of human kings and rulers and presidents and parliaments have to do they have to describe ideal behavior that they themselves don't live up to it's only Israel's king who could set before his people a description of what he himself is like and say that's the way I want you to live be holy as I am holy and if we want to understand what God is like if we want to meet with God in a right way we've got to begin by learning this elementary lesson that God is the

[21 : 07] God who is holy in himself and looks for holiness sets his holiness before his people as the standard for their living now I know that holiness the holiness of God is used nowadays by people a number of different senses there are those who talk of God's holiness in the sense of the otherness of God he is not as we are there's something essentially unknowable about God and some people see in the word holiness and with some scriptural warrant in the way in which in Isaiah 6 you get the threefold description of holy holy holy holy is the Lord God almighty he is not as we are he is above and beyond what we are but it's not here the holiness of God's transcendence above what we are that is witness to it is the holiness of God's ethical perfection that is part of what is distinctively divine he is the one who is intrinsically and invariably holy and when we approach him we approach the one who not only sets the standards for ethical purity but is the living embodiment of them now there's a problem if what had been in the most holy place was the ark and the testimony and nothing else if all that Moses had been ordered to do was to place in the most holy place first the ark and then the stone tablets of God's covenant law the people of Israel of old would have been in a hopeless situation every time they came to this grand shrine this tabernacle to worship

God and thought of what was there in the inmost recess their minds would have been drawn to consider that box the tables of the law lying in it the ethically pure the rigorous requirements of their covenant king and all they would have known was a feeling of condemnation when they thought of what was written there there would have pressed in upon them the sense of their failure how far short they came of all the norms that the Lord had set before them how far off and how far distant they were from what the Lord himself was like they would have had a religion of despair however can we manage to get things right between ourselves and this God whose testimony whose requirements of us are there engraved in stone and it's the same still if we measure ourselves by the standards by the standards of God's law the only conclusion that we can come to is that we are utter failures failures even in our very best endeavors and this is because just like

Israel of old we all start off with the same fallen vitiated humanity but God didn't leave his people just with the ark and the testimony the picture he gave had another essential ingredient thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof and thou shalt put the mercy seat above the ark and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee it was Martin Luther when he was first translating the scriptures into German who thought up the translation mercy seat and it's still an adequate translation but the word seat may mislead it's seat in the sense of place where something is located we sometimes use the phrase the seat of government if you say that the seat of government of the

United Kingdom is London you mean that's where the government is situated you don't expect to be taken as a tourist to some chair in London and told that's the seat of government in the same way here the mercy seat is a seat but it's not a but mercy there was something connected with making good the situation that resulted from the offence that sin gave to the holy god we had a there is a cover over the ark not in the sense that you put a lid on a cardboard box to cover it it was rather a cover an atonement cover that was effectively covering sin it was an atonement cover that was the place where ransom payment to release the sinner was made and the dimensions of the cover were such that it matched the box exactly and that pointed not just to the perfection of the craftsmanship that had to go into making the ark it pointed to the perfection of the way in what was represented by those objects was going to be accomplished the atonement that

God would provide for his people's sin matched exactly the requirements of God's law that they'd broken and that connection with atonement was renewed every year on the day of atonement when the high priest sprinkled the mercy seat the atonement cover with the blood of the offerings especially the blood of the slaughtered goat remember how in the day of atonement there was a sacrifice a unique sacrifice of two goats together one the scapegoat was led off into the wilderness pointing to the complete removal of the people's sin away from them and the other goat was sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on and before the atonement cover these were all pictures designed by God to teach the people of old testament times about what would in reality be effectively accomplished by

[29 : 00] Jesus Christ that was what Paul had in mind when he wrote Romans 3 where he describes our saviour as Jesus Christ whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood to be a propitiation that word propitiation renders this Greek term that we would refer in the old testament as mercy seat it's the same word Christ Jesus is the mercy seat he is the reality that was pointed to in pictorial form so very many years before in the primary class of God's church church so as we prepare ourselves to come to the Lord's table I'm suggesting that it's good as it were to visit the primary class again and to look there in the most holy place and to see there what

God deliberately placed to teach his people about himself to see there the ark the testimony and the mercy seat and there's two thoughts in particular I would urge you to dwell on and the first of these is that if you had been permitted to enter there the mercy seat would have on it that mercy seat of pure shining gold would have on it the stains of the splattered blood of the sacrifice as you look there right into the center of the most holy place there in even the primary class of God's people the lesson was being taught that the God who would meet and commune with his people the God who would meet with them over the mercy seat was meeting with them on the basis of the shed blood of atonement the blood of goats in itself was nothing but the blood that pointed forward to all that

Jesus Christ had done we've got to appreciate things from the Godward side if we are going to come and be built up we've got mentally to leave behind as it were where we are our weakness our frailty our sin and we're to come and look at things the way God's looking at it and seeing first of all the shed blood seeing seeing first of all Jesus Christ at his right hand the one who has already entered into the divine presence the one who can plead the perfection of his once for all sacrifice that enables all who are his to come with him and to enjoy fellowship with him but there's something else I would urge you to think of and this is the fact that right at the heart of the

Old Testament in the ark and the testimony and the mercy seat there was being made this solemn affirmation that God is holy and that God is merciful or as we might nowadays say God is holy and God is love God was using this to teach his people and if we want to have a true understanding of God and what God is like we've got to learn this basic lesson it's as basic as one plus one equals two is to arithmetic the lesson of the most holy place the lesson that there is both the testimony showing God's holiness and the mercy seat showing his love and you can't put one before the other and we daren't have one without the other because if we do that we are distorting what God is really like and we're left not worshipping him as he is we're left worshipping something that we've thought up for ourselves both

God's holiness and God's love are needed if we're going to understand God and both his holiness and his love are equally ultimate and the problems that affect many people are when they refuse to recognize the equal ultimacy of God's holiness and his love that's what lies behind the problems of the ecumenical movement nowadays so many want a God of love but not a God of law a God who will accept but a God without standards they want the mercy seat but they don't want anything to do with the testimony and there are those who react against the pluralism of the modern ecumenical movement and tend to draw behind holy barricades and they tend to distort the message in the opposite direction they have a God of standards but a God without love it's as if they took the top off the ark cast the mercy seat to one side and focus solely on the word of testimony we darent go either way we must keep the balance that

[34 : 48] God's been teaching his people about right from the beginning he is holy and he is love the standards of his holiness are invariable and do not change but he has in his mercy placed above them the mercy seat and the blood it can sometimes appear unexciting unappealing to keep the middle ground it's very easy to take one idea and promote it for all it's worth and forget about the balance but this is a test that can be applied to any religious teacher to anyone who comes saying here is a movement that is Christian do they do justice to the God of the tabernacle do they do justice to the God who has covered the law with the mercy seat do they do justice to the reality of the

God of holiness and the God of mercy the God whose mercy covers because it has met the demands of the law if we emphasize one and forget the other we are left with no God at all but it's not just to others we have to apply this test we've got to apply it to ourselves 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 it was on the basis of the full revelation of the character of the lord that he met with Israel of old and it's on the same basis we still seek to meet with God we still seek to meet with our lord the son of god around his table doing justice in our thinking to both oh yes let us remember that the law is there let us be fearful because we realize how far short we've fallen but let us never stop there the testimony is covered by the mercy seat and the mercy seat bears on it the marks of the blood that testify to the fact that these symbols of old have been brought to reality in the ministry and the work of

Jesus Christ as you get ready to come tomorrow think back to the primary class think back to the elementary lessons they're simple they're there in picture form but they've never been superseded they've been realized they've been accomplished they've been fulfilled in Christ and we praise God for that but it's the same lesson and we got the same need we who have offended God can only come and meet with him and enjoy communion with him if we come to the God whose law is covered by the mercy seat sprinkled with the blood let us pray we we rejoice so Lord that thou hast not hidden thyself that over the centuries and millennia thou hast been gathering to thyself a people and giving to them revelation of who thou art and what thou hast from all eternity planned to do and what in

Jesus Christ has been accomplished help us as we seek to approach him to do so recognizing all that thy truth teaches us we are so often those who are fearful grant oh Lord confidence to us by enabling us to focus not on self but on our savior we are those oh Lord who so often are unsure of where we are in our spiritual journey so often we have to confess sin and our stumbling and how far short we have come help us to see the completeness of the cover that is made in Jesus Christ the propitiation for sin oh Lord our God help us to see that there is not one chink that is left uncovered by the gold of the mercy seat oh Lord our God grant to each one of thy people a holy confidence to come with reverence into thy presence rejoicing in sin remitted through the blood of

Christ rejoicing in the fact that now we have one who would conduct and lead us to himself and give to us that portion that lasts through this life and feeds us for all eternity hear us we pray do in and for us more than we can think think or ask and take to thyself the glory and the renown in Jesus name amen