

The Ark of the Covenant
Exodus 25:10-22, 37:1-9
9/15/2013

It has been well said that the only building in existence that was perfectly planned, perfectly built, and which remained perfect, was the tabernacle. The pattern was heaven itself. The Garden of Eden was the prototype. Jesus Christ is its fulfillment, who tabernacled among us, as the Gospel of John says. It is not only the most perfect building ever made, but it is also probably the most important building ever made. One might object here and say that the temple was more perfect than the tabernacle. Ah, but the temple was built according to Solomon's ideas, not by God's own blueprint. The tabernacle was designed by God, planned by God, and built by artisans in whom resided the Holy Spirit. The most important article of furniture in the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant.

The ark of the covenant was a chest made of wood and overlaid with gold. It was a little less than four feet long, and a little over two feet in width and the same in height. A cubit, by the way, is around 18 inches. It is the distance from a man's fingertip to his elbow. This word "ark" by the way, is NOT the same word as the ark of Noah, or the ark that Moses' mother made for him out of bulrushes. So, we should be careful here not to tie Noah's ark to this ark just because the English word is the same. The word used here simply means "a chest." It's a box, albeit a very beautiful and important box. It is a box used to store 3 particular things. From here we learn that it housed the testimony, the carved stones of the covenant. From other passages we learn that they eventually put manna in it, as well as Aaron's rod that blossomed.

There was a molding around the top of the box, that was put there in order to keep the cover from slipping off. That cover was the mercy seat, so it was absolutely crucial that the mercy seat not slip off when the ark was being carried.

Speaking of carrying, Moses devotes four whole verses to describing the rings that go on the sides of the legs of the box, and the poles that go into those rings, and never come out of the rings. Probably the rings were placed relative low on the box, so that when the ark was carried by the priests, it would be elevated, much like the litter of a king. And that is indeed the significance of the rings and poles. The ark of the covenant is the throne of God before His people. The King of Israel was being exalted in the midst of Israel. This helps to explain the tragic incident of Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6. The ark was supposed to be carried ONLY by the poles. So when David was bringing back the ark, he made the mistake of putting the ark on an oxcart. That, in itself, was a degradation of the ark. You don't put your king's litter on top of an oxcart! You elevate it above the people so that the people can see their king. The ark is the place where God was present in a particular way, in an even more concentrated way than the tabernacle as a whole. God was present in the tabernacle, more so in the Most Holy Place, and most of all right above the cherubim. The poles were there to make sure that no one touched the place where God was. Because of these reasons, we can now understand why God struck down Uzzah. Uzzah sinned twice: firstly, by not carrying the ark with the poles. Secondly by touching the place where God was. This is serious stuff here, folks!

In verse 16, we learn that the Testimony belonged in the ark. In ancient times, it was customary to make two copies of a treaty between two nations. One copy would go in the sacred place of one nation, and the other copy in the sacred place of the other nation. Here, both copies are put in only one place.

The rest of the passage has to do with the cherubim and the mercy seat. The mercy

seat is the lid of the box. It was on this lid that the high priest would sprinkle blood once a year for the atonement of the people. That is so there was blood between God and the people, blood that would atone. The word "atonement" is a word that William Tyndale invented. The literal meaning of atonement becomes clearer, when we look at the elements of that word: at-one-ment. Atonement brings together two people who were enemies before. In Romans 3:23-25, Paul says this about the work of Jesus Christ: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed." There's a lot there, but I want us to focus on this word "propitiation." That is the word that the Greek translation of the Old Testament used when it came across this word "mercy seat" In Exodus 25. So what Paul is saying in Romans is that Jesus Christ is the mercy seat that turns away the wrath of God from us. Is Jesus Christ your mercy seat? Is He the place where you find mercy? He is so willing to give it to us. All we need do is to ask for it by repenting of our sins, and turning to Him in faith.

The cherubim are a fascinating addition to this scene. Cherubim are mentioned almost 100 times in the Bible. They are guardians of holiness. They are NOT cute little babies with wings! Two cherubim guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden after the Fall. Two cherubim guard the place where God is here at the ark of the Covenant. Solomon built two very large cherubim to guard the entire Most Holy Place in the temple. Last, but not least, there were two cherubim in the empty tomb. Mary had gone to the tomb. John describes the scene this way: "She saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain." Have you ever wondered why it was that John recorded the location of the angels, that one was sitting at the head, and one was sitting at the foot of where Jesus had lain? Why else but to indicate to us that the empty tomb is a new most holy place (Remember that the cherubim of the ark faced each other)? Then, when we remember that it was the Word of God that was written on those stone tablets, and that Jesus is the living Word of God, not to mention the mercy seat, it becomes obvious why the angels are located where they are: everything about the ark of the covenant finds its fulfillment in the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. The way to God is through Jesus Christ. And now, because Jesus Christ has propitiated the wrath of God for all His people, there is no limit to how many of us can go to the Most Holy Place. It has been opened up for us. We do not have to be the high priest in order to enter. That is why the curtain of the temple was torn in two. We now have access through the mercy seat, the living Word, the risen Christ. We can go through into God's very presence because we have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

Another aspect of this placement of the cherubim worthy of attention is their focus. They are looking down towards the mercy seat. God says, in verse 22, that He will speak with the people from above the cherubim. That is where God will be. In Psalm 80:1, the psalmist says that God dwells above the cherubim. Similarly, in Psalm 99:1, the Psalmist says the same thing. This is one of the names of God: He who sits above the cherubim. For the Psalmist, that meant more than the cherubim who were in heaven. It also meant the carved cherubim of the ark. So, the reason the cherubim look down and not up is that even the angels veil their sight before the God of the universe. Remember in Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6, the angels had six wings, and with two of those wings they covered their faces so that they would not be looking at God. The privilege of seeing God is something that even the angels don't have. But God has promised us that we will see Him, and we will be changed so that we

shall be like Him. Most people think that it is the very act of looking upon God that will change us.

There are three main applications for us that come from this passage, and they come from the main points of the passage. Firstly, know that God's presence is now with us. The ark was the place where God was in a particular way. God is now with us by being inside us through the Holy Spirit. The practical implications of this are almost limitless. They range from how we treat our bodies, which are the temples of the Holy Spirit, to what we do when no one is looking, because Someone is actually looking. That simple fact of God being with us is comfort for the afflicted, for God never leaves us or forsakes us. But it is also warning to those who would live their lives in the dark. It is not dark to God. He sees all.

Secondly we find here a call to make our peace with God. The mercy seat has been sprinkled with the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. The two angels at the empty tomb confirm that this offering has been made, and that forgiveness is now available. Mercy is now available. You can flee the wrath of God by laying hold of the blood-sprinkled mercy seat. Cling to that, believing that your sin is forgiven through that perfect work of Jesus Christ, and that you can now have a relationship with God that is family, no longer a relationship of animosity.

Thirdly, we must pray to our God. The mercy seat is the place of prayer as well as propitiation. Indeed, the reason we can pray to God is that our sins have been forgiven. Do you pray for the mercy of God every day? Do you pray for the revival of the church? Do you pray for the salvation of the lost? Do you pray for the salvation of your children? Do you pray for the growth in grace of those who belong to Jesus? Most Christians are poor at prayer. We do not pray often enough, and we do not pray as though we mean it. And we often pray for the wrong things. We get pre-occupied with physical and tangible things, like our health, our bank account, our health, our bills, our health, and one other thing: oh yes, our health! Where are the prayers for spiritual things? Should they not have first priority over the physical things? The two main spiritual things we pray for are the salvation of the lost, and the growth in grace of believers. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the evening service had for its prayer requests, more spiritual things than physical things? And, even when we pray for physical healing, as we should, we can pray for spiritual growth and for the salvation of the lost right in the middle of praying for that physical healing. Rather than pray only for physical healing, why not pray that the sick person will grow through the experience, and that a non-believer who is suffering from a physical ailment will be drawn to Christ through that sickness? Above all, we should pray that the glory of God will be shown in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, as long as we shall live on this earth.