

GOOD FRIDAY - The Mercy Seat

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on Good Friday the 13th of April 2001.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Mercy Seat and is from Exodus chapter 25 verses 10 to 22. We thank you for your word and pray that you may speak to us through it now for Jesus' sake. Amen.

You may like to have open the passage that was read on page 62 from Exodus chapter 25, page 62 in the Bibles. Now, generations for centuries probably have enjoyed stories of people finding lost treasure.

From Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island to Harrison Ford movies, there's a certain appeal and excitement about people finding a box, unknown what's inside but anticipating gold ingots and so on and prizing it open to find lost treasure.

And yet, it's quite ironic that this passage in Exodus 25 is regarded as so dull and boring. No doubt many of you wondered why this was read.

[1 : 3 1] All these details about the building of the ark, all these measurements and woods and metals that are used and so on. This is the point in the Bible where if you start reading the Bible from beginning to end, this is where you usually slow down.

It's pretty exciting up to this point but at Exodus 25 all of a sudden it becomes crashingly dull and boring and you give up. Well, many people do. But dull though this passage is, it actually describes the greatest treasure chest of all.

It's called the ark. But the word for ark is literally the word for box or chest, something that you put things in. That's all it is. This one happens to be covered in gold, both inside and out.

But what we're told here about what's put inside hardly sounds like treasure. All that's put inside are the tablets of the covenant that God makes with His people.

That is, two stone tablets, probably fairly small, on which were inscribed the words of the Ten Commandments. Now, the first section of this passage, verses 10 to 16, describes in detail how this box or ark is to be built.

[2 : 4 5] Moses is not told by God, I want you to build a box to put the covenant tablets in, full stop. But rather the details for how to build it are very particular and specific.

It's to be made of acacia wood, a wood that's found in the Sinai Peninsula where this happened, a very hard wood, a wood that's fairly resistant from insects and creepy crawlies that might sort of decay it and rot it and so on.

Its dimensions, we're told in verse 10, are two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide and a cubit and a half high. Now, that probably means little to us.

A cubit is the length from the tip of the elbow to the end of the finger, about 18 inches. It seems that in the ancient world there were slight variations on what people regarded as the length of a cubit.

Now, I've measured this out and this box is roughly the size of my coffee table but a bit higher. That is, it's three and a half foot long, two and a quarter foot wide and two and a quarter foot high.

- [3 : 53] And this box or ark is to be covered with pure gold, we're told, in verse 11, both on the inside as well as the outside, overlaid with gold or maybe gold leaf but it's pure gold.
- Gold that has got its impurities and maybe other bits of metal melted out of it somehow. A pure gold, the best and most precious metal.
- We know that the Israelites had been given quite a deal of jewellery and precious metal from the Egyptians who were so keen for them to leave. So, it should be no surprise that they had these sorts of metals available for use.
- In the bottom of each corner was some sort of foot arrangement, some stand that this box sat on and to each of those four corners was to be made and affixed a gold ring, we're told in verse 12.
- You shall cast four rings of gold for it, put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side, two on the other. And through these gold rings would go poles in verses 13 and 14.
- [5 : 02] You shall make poles of acacia wood, overlay them with gold and shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark by which to carry the ark. Now, the picture here is like one of those old chairs that people of importance might be carried around in in ancient times.
- You'd sit on the chair and have poles through it and somebody at the front and somebody at the back would pick you up and carry you around, a sort of ancient form of taxi or regal transport. That's sort of like what's going on here.
- But the idea is that people would not themselves touch the box, the ark. They could touch the poles that go through the rings. The poles were not to be removed from the rings but they wouldn't touch the ark or the box.
- It was too precious, it seems, for them to do that. Then what follows in the next paragraph, 17 onwards, are the instructions for the top of the box and the top, we're told, is in this translation a mercy seat of pure gold.
- Now, I need to pause here to explain what this is about. The word that's used is really a word that just in effect means covering.
- [6 : 18] It's related to the word for cover or sometimes translated even atonement. You may know that the day Yom Kippur is the day of atonement.
- There was a war on it some years ago now with Israel and its neighbours. So, Kippur is related to this word to mean cover but sometimes translated as atonement.
- And the reason for that is that when sin is atoned for, there's a sense in which it's regarded as being covered over but not quite so much covered over as in hidden, as though it's still there, but covered in the sense of paid for.
- You know, you might be at a restaurant with a friend and the bill comes and you say to your friend in an act of great generosity, I'll cover it. That is, you'll pay for it. It's covered.
- It's done. It's taken away. The debt's paid. That's in a sense what this word means. The debt, the penalty of sin is covered over. It's paid for. Hence, the idea of it being a place of atonement or in this translation, a mercy seat.
- [7 : 23] We'll come back to that idea a bit later on. But this covering mercy seat is to also be made of pure gold and at either end of it, on top of this box, this ark, is to be a cherub.
- Now, we tend to think of cherubs as being baby-faced angels with wings that are on kitsch cards that you can buy in card shops. But probably a cherub was a little bit more fierce and ferocious.
- There's one description later in the Bible of a cherub that has, from the different angles you look at it, the face of a man, the face of an ox, the face of a lion and the face of an eagle. A rather odd, almost bizarre sort of figure.

Something that's quite fierce in a way. Not a baby-faced angel. A rather odd, even if you look at it, a little bit more powerful, a little bit more powerful. And these cherubs, the Hebrew plural is cherubim, there were two, one on either end and they would stand facing each other, in effect, across the ark, their wings outspread and their faces, we're told, turned down looking over the ark and the mercy seat on top of the ark.

That is, in a sense, they were guarding it, protecting it from people who might come too close. But it's a bit more than that as well because the last verse of this passage, verse 22, says, There I, God that is speaking, will meet with you and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.

[8 : 58] Now we get to see some of the importance of this contraption. It is the place where God dwells amongst His people.

Not in the box, but above the mercy seat, above the cover and between the cherubim. So the cherubim, as they face each other, their eyes slightly turned down, wings outspread, are not just protecting this ark, but they are like a bodyguard for God.

They are sort of protecting God or rather protecting people from intruding into the presence of God unwisely.

Later in scripture we read that this is the place where God dwells or God reigns. Now let me explain what this is all about. Why on earth am I telling you this and why on earth on Good Friday?

Firstly, one of the things that this passage, I think, is indicating to us is how different the Bible's religion is from any other religion.

[10 : 08] When you go to visit Buddhist temples, as I'll do in a few days' time, I hope, and you'll see statues of Buddhas that people will venerate or bow down to or prostrate themselves in front of.

And lots of religions have their icons, their statues, their paraphernalia that are processed round or held up or venerated or revered. But not in the Bible.

Though we get details about these sorts of things being built, there's no sense of veneration of these items, but rather the place where God dwells is actually in effect, well, to look at, an empty space.

There is no representation of God. You've got cherubim either side, the mercy seat underneath and the ark under that. In the middle to look at, you see nothing, but that is God's dwelling place.

That is, there is no way we can represent God with any picture or any statue. Biblical religion never tells us what God looks like and hence it prohibits us from trying to draw it or certainly to venerate any picture or idol or icon or statue.

[11 : 23] Secondly, there is a significance to cherubim here because they have occurred one other time already in Scripture. And for those people who do start to read the Bible from beginning to end may well have remembered when they get to this point, cherubim, I've seen them before.

They occur in the first book of the Bible in the third chapter and God places cherubim at the entrance to the Garden of Eden after expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden because of their sin.

And the cherubim there are to guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden to protect sinners from coming back in into the presence of God, to keep them out in effect. That is, it is to keep apart a holy God and sinful people.

And the significance of that applies here too. The cherubim in effect around the throne of God are protecting sinful people from coming into the holy presence of God without preparation.

It's telling us then that God is pure, God is holy and we aren't. Hence the pure gold that must be used, the best of metals possible as a sort of sign of the purity and holiness of God Himself.

- [12 : 41] The third thing is that this ark and its cover is in a sense a throne. This is where God rules from. The psalms sometimes refer to God ruling between the cherubim, God reigning between the cherubim or over the ark which is His footstool.

But it also tells us how God rules because in a sense His throne is based on the law that He gives His people represented by the Ten Commandments but other laws as well.

That is, God rules with a very clear standard of holiness to be applied to His people. A holy God decrees a law that expects holiness of His people.

But fourthly, and this is where we get to the heart of the matter, a holy law such as God gives us has one effect. It shows up our phones.

When we read the law about putting God first above anyone else or anything else, in part, it helps us see that we have failed.

- [13 : 56] When Jesus summarises the law as loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, it helps us see that we haven't done that all the time.

And when Jesus summarises the law as loving your neighbour as yourself, we realise that we have failed God's perfect standard. So, one of the things about the law that God gives and by which He reigns and rules is that it exposes our sin and failing.

And here is where the mercy seat is so critical because the mercy seat covers over the law that God gives us. God Himself provides for us a place where sin can be atoned for.

Yes, on the one hand God's law exposes our sinfulness but on the other hand God in His grace and mercy provides us a place where sin can be atoned for. It seems to me there's only one other place in the Old Testament where this mercy seat is important.

It's in the next book of the Bible and it's only important on one day of the year the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.

- [15 : 12] And on that day the High Priest will take the blood of the Atonement sacrifice go into this very central place of the tabernacle and tents and worship area for God the only day that anybody could go into the Ark and he carried the blood of the Atonement sacrifice with him and he sprinkled the mercy seat with blood.

A bit grotesque but it is God's provision for sin to be atoned for and the blood of the animal is the way the people in a sense identify and transfer their sins.

But it's a bit more than that as well because it's saying in effect it's God saying in effect I'll cover it. The blood goes to God.

In effect the blood goes on God's throne and God is saying I'll cover the debt of your sin. I'll pay the penalty.

Your sin comes on me. Now that's an extraordinary picture of God. God on the one hand who is absolutely pure and holy and holy who guards his presence from sinful people, who issues a law that expects perfection and holiness of his people but on the other hand a God who provides means for which people who fail his law as all of us do can actually have our sins atoned for and forgiven for and forgiven by him himself.

- [16 : 46] So often we think of the God of the Old Testament as being angry and wrathful and judgmental just full of punishment, a very holy pure God that's very remote. There's truth in that.

It's true that he reigns by his law and holiness but here we see that his throne is also a throne of grace and mercy, a throne where sin is forgiven freely by him, not by us, not by our achievement but by God's free mercy extended to us where he invites the blood of the atonement sacrifice to come onto his very throne and that's where Jesus comes in.

Many of you, most of you probably know that we're in the process of extending our church buildings and many of you have seen the model for that. The model helps us to appreciate what is being proposed and what we're going to do but the model of course is not the real thing.

It's a shame because the model is already there but we won't all fit into it. It's fairly small and it's in my wardrobe at the moment. But the model is a 3D, three-dimensional sketch of a future reality.

The model itself will pass away. It's really, in one sense, unimportant. It's the future reality that matters and the model is a preliminary sketch of that.

[18 : 12] Now, in a sense, all these rules and regulations in the Old Testament for sacrifices and temples and tabernacles and blood and so on are like a 3D model of a future reality reality and it's the future reality that matters in the end.

That's why we have the last reading from Hebrews 9. I know that it's a difficult reading. I'm sure that you found it hard to follow but in a sense that's what this writer is saying.

Firstly, he describes the preliminary model from the Old Testament. Hebrews 9 says, Now, even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary for a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, the bread of the presence.

That's called the holy place. But behind the second curtain was a tent called the holy of holies and it's inside that there was the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold in which there were a golden urn holding the manor and Aaron's rod that budded and the tablets of the covenant.

Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot speak now in detail. That is the original preliminary sketch. He goes on to say about it that such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties but only the high priest goes into the second tent and he but once a year and then not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people.

[19 : 53] By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. This is a symbol of the present time during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper but deal only with food and drink and various regulations and so on.

The writer is saying that's the preliminary 3D sketch, the Old Testament but it only stands for a time. But now he says about the future reality that for him has come in verse 11, but when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come then through the greater and perfect tent, not made with hands, that is not of this creation, he entered once for all into the holy place, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

And he goes on to contrast the model with the reality. The model, he says, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified but how much more, he says, will the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God.

What he's saying is that the old sketch of Old Testament sacrifices, was a valid model but pointing to a deeper and greater reality. It accomplished something by way of blood of bulls and goats and purifying people in a sense ritually but he says the better sacrifice has come, Jesus himself.

His blood is the atonement blood and his blood is better than the blood of bulls and animals because his blood not only makes us ritually clean but it purifies our hearts and our consciences as well.

[21 : 41] So, the old model of the Old Testament was only ever built to point to the future reality which was Jesus coming as the atonement sacrifice, the blood that would bring us forgiveness of sins.

God put forth for Jesus. But this is also why we had the reading from Romans. Only in two places in the New Testament comes the word mercy seat translated into Greek.

One was there in that reading I've just read from Hebrews, verse 5 of chapter 9. Romans 3 where we read in verse 25, God put for Jesus as a mercy seat in effect by his blood.

That is saying that this gold covering over the ark, the place where blood is sprinkled is actually fulfilled in Jesus himself and in his death on the cross.

Jesus is God's throne of grace. Jesus also is God reigning in holiness. He is the place where our sin is atoned for. He is where God himself pays our debt and takes on our sin.

[22 : 55] If you go to Europe and see some of the great old castles and stately palaces, you see some thrones. Can't quite remember but maybe places like Versailles would have some sort of throne room and throne, usually ornate and grand, often with gold and a beautiful embroidery, speaking of majesty and honour and everything that looks good and nice.

In a sense the Old Testament ark covered with gold with a mercy seat and gold cherubim on either side is beautiful, ornate, speaks of holiness and grandeur and majesty.

True. But when from our perspective we peer more closely into the throne room of God, we're in for a shock because that gold ark and cherubim, though it may have looked nice, is just the model.

But when we peer into the throne room of God and see what is the throne, we realise that it's an old rugged cross.

That's the throne. That's where God reigns from because it's on the cross that God reigns in holiness because he deals with sin. But it's also on the cross that we find the place of atonement where sin is forgiven by Jesus' death.

[24 : 23] There we find a holy God but also a merciful God. There we find God taking on himself our sins and failings and paying our debts.

There's no holier place than this. There's nowhere else that you can come closer to God than at the cross. There's nowhere else that you can see into the heart of God more clearly and deeply than at the cross, the throne of God where Jesus died.

No wonder Harrison Ford went in pursuit of the ark. It's worth finding. It's God's treasure chest. It's the greatest treasure that anyone can find.

Sins forgiven and access to God. But Harrison Ford got it wrong because he pursued the model and not the reality.

And the reality is not lost. It's available for all. For all to see. Jesus on a cross, dying for our sins, paying the penalty that we should pay.

[25 : 42] How deep the Father's love for us. How vast beyond all measure that he should give his only son to make a wretch his treasure.

How great the pain of searing loss, the Father turns his face away as wounds which mar the chosen one bring many sons to glory.

How he do we do it? That's 50 away. Okay, let's do this. I profit down that one of the lost and overcome the angry and love the Father's love.