

Truth for Today

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A look at the Tabernacle - The Ark and the Mercy Seat

When my wife and I moved into our present home, we soon realised that we needed a toy chest for our grandchildren. I bought wood, screws etc. and made an oblong box with a removable lid. The toy chest has served its purpose well and is still being used by the younger grandchildren.

Our talk today is about a special chest constructed with better materials and for a far greater purpose. We read about it in Exodus 25.

Verses 1 and 2. "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel.'"

Verses 8 and 9. "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it."

Verses 10 to 22. "And they shall make an ark of acacia wood; two and a half cubits shall be its length, a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height. And you shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and out you shall overlay it, and shall make on it a moulding of gold all around. You shall cast four rings of gold for it, and put them in its four corners; two rings shall be on one side, and two rings on the other side. And you shall make poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. You shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, that the ark may be carried by them. The poles shall be in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. And you shall put into the ark the Testimony which I will give you. You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits shall be its length and a cubit and a half its width. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it of one piece with the mercy seat. And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat.

You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel."

The pattern of the Ark and Mercy Seat.

In everyday life, we usually have a pattern or plan before making anything, whether it be something large such as a building or something small such as a model aeroplane. We see from the verses in Exodus 25 that there was no room for error - the pattern was given to Moses by the Lord. Hebrews 9:23 tells us, "Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens..." Verse 23 is referring to the tabernacle and all the furniture. The copy was a visual representation of heavenly things, intended to help the nation of Israel in their understanding of God. Today, the Christian is more interested in the original than the copy.

The dimensions of the Ark and Mercy Seat.

The dimensions for both the ark and the mercy seat were given in detail to Moses. The ark was a sizeable container, approximately 45 inches by 27 inches and 27 inches deep. The mercy seat was constructed to be the lid for the ark with the addition of two cherubim placed on the upper side of the lid.

The measurements give a ratio of 5 by 3 by 3. FW Grant in his book on "*The Numerical Structure of Scripture*" makes the remark concerning the number 5, "Five stands as the number of man, exercised and responsible, under the government of God."

The number three has a range of associated meanings:

1. That which is divine - three persons in the Godhead.
2. Separation to God - Moses said we will go three days' journey and worship.
3. New life - resurrection is on the third day.

The measurements bring together that which is of God and of man in responsibility before God. The qualities of the materials used speak of God. The first item to be placed inside the ark were the instructions for Israel to obey in responsibility before God.

The materials of the ark and the mercy seat.

The material used for the construction of the ark was acacia wood and pure gold. The pure gold was to cover the wood on the inside as well as the outside. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, "acacia" is translated "incorruptible". As a purely functional item of furniture in the tabernacle, the ark was intended to be durable, long lasting and glorious in appearance. The mercy seat was made entirely of pure gold. The two cherubim which were attached to the mercy seat were made from gold.

Gold is valuable, its appearance is pleasing and it does not rust. The ark and the mercy seat are associated not only with gold but with pure gold. Gold is described by its purity. This is seen in jewellers shops; 9, 18, 22 and 24 carat describe the increasing purity of gold. 24 carat is pure gold containing no impurities at all. However, pure gold is also relatively softer than a lower specification. We can see the wisdom of God employing a gold of more durability for the moulding around the ark and for the rings and poles used when the ark was being carried, since pure gold was not specified for these. The historic purpose for the ark and mercy seat.

The tabernacle was to be the place for the Lord to dwell among His people Israel. There were restrictions as to who would be able to enter certain areas of the tabernacle, the most holy place, the holy place and the court. Initially the Lord met with Moses and spoke to him from above the mercy seat and from between the two cherubim. Once the Tabernacle system was established it became the responsibility of the high priest, Aaron initially, to go into the most holy place once a year on the Day of Atonement.

The ark was to hold the Testimony that the Lord would give to Moses. Moses received the instructions for the tabernacle while on Mount Sinai for forty days. During the forty days Moses also received the Testimony written on two tablets of stone. The Testimony was communicated to the people of Israel and the stone tablets stored in the ark for safe keeping. The tablets of stone were the first of a number of items to be stored in the ark during Israel's wilderness journey.

In Hebrews 9 the contents of the ark are listed as the golden pot containing manna, Aaron's rod that budded and the tablets of the covenant or testimony. The manna would be a reminder of the heavenly provision for Israel's wilderness journey. Aaron's rod that budded would be a reminder of sovereign choice by the living God. The tablets of the covenant speak of divine instruction for the pathway. Just as Israel found on their wilderness journey that they needed provision and help from God, so today Christians need help. The New Testament parallels to what was found in the ark may be summarised by the following scriptures.

1. The Lord Jesus in John 6:33 said, "For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Also in verse 35, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger."
2. In Romans 8:28 we have the statement, "Those who are called according to His purpose."
3. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we are told, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

The various items in the tabernacle are all pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ. The qualities already mentioned about gold and acacia wood could not be applied to any one of Adam's sinful race. The qualities could only speak of God. How wonderful that such qualities were seen in Jesus, the Son of God incarnate! As man in this world, He was described as being without sin; indeed no sin in Him. In Matthew 3, the Father spoke from heaven about Jesus saying, "This is My beloved Son". Peter in 2 Peter 1, speaks of seeing the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout the New Testament, we are reminded again and again of the wonderful qualities of Jesus which in picture form are seen in the materials used in the construction of the ark and the mercy seat.

The mercy seat was made from pure gold; there was no wood in it. The mercy seat was the lid or covering for the ark. From above the mercy seat God spoke to His people and it was on the mercy seat that God needed to see the evidence of sacrifice. The right sacrifice was needed in order that communion with God could be maintained. The book of Leviticus details the rich and varied range of sacrifices that God required. In chapter 16 the important

sacrifices associated with the Day of Atonement are mentioned. This annual sacrifice, where the blood was sprinkled on and before the mercy seat each year, teaches the need for the blood of atonement. This was a repeated sacrifice for Israel as it was based on an animal sacrifice. Christians are brought into a relationship with God not on the basis of a repeated animal sacrifice but on the basis of a once only and far greater sacrifice: that of Jesus on the cross.

Hebrews 9 states, "Not that He (Jesus) should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another - He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself... So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many."

The sacrifices for Israel were inadequate in that they could not provide lasting forgiveness. The many sacrifices were necessary to fully set forth what was seen in the heavens but waited the coming of Jesus and His sacrifice. The mercy seat, constructed entirely of pure gold would speak of a throne indicating God's holy presence. God's righteous requirements were in the ark, below the mercy seat. The cherubim on the mercy seat looked to see if there was an answer to what God required. The pure gold mercy seat demanded a perfect sacrificial work as only seen in Jesus. The often repeated sprinkled blood was temporarily pleasing to God but awaited the fullness of the shed blood of Jesus.

Romans 3:24-25 tell us, "Being justified freely by His (that is, God's) grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood". The word "propitiation" is the same word as is translated "mercy seat". The shed blood of Jesus is of great value in the sight of God because it is the blood of Jesus, God's Son. The mercy seat takes on the added significance in that it points to both Jesus and His shed blood. God looks at Jesus, His work and shed blood and is able on that basis alone to accept the repentant sinner who comes by faith, sheltering beneath the blood.

The cherubim are first mentioned in Genesis 3 to prevent Adam and Eve returning to the garden of Eden. God placed the cherubim in order to prevent access to the tree of life by those who were now sinners. Cherubim are mentioned in a number of books in the Bible but mainly in Ezekiel and Revelation. They are primarily agents for God, acting on His behalf and often connected with judgement.

Cherubim are the living creatures which in Revelation do the bidding of God during the years of tribulation. How often there was failure in Israel, individuals and sometimes the nation came under the judicial hand of God. The cherubim were made of gold, not pure gold. It would have been inconsistent to have created beings represented by the same material as that which speaks of God or his divine attributes. The ark and the mercy seat were of pure gold, consistent with deity. If blood was not sprinkled to appease a holy and righteous God, then the cherubim would be employed in judging Israel on God's behalf.

The gold border round the ark.

This would have two functions. First it would keep the mercy seat securely on the top of the ark. Secondly it would be the point of contact when the ark was opened to place various items inside. We read in 2 Samuel 6, that Uzzah died when he touched the ark of God in a way that was not allowed by God. There will always be the distinction between God and His created beings, mankind included. In Luke 10 we read that "no one knows who the Son is except the Father". All through the Old Testament, the ark was always a restricted article of furniture regarding who could carry, touch or look into it. The ark, as we have seen, is a picture of Jesus who was both man and the Son of God in one person. There are many aspects of the person of the Son of God which are not mentioned in the scriptures. The same restrictions which applied to the ark of old are also true of Jesus who was both man and the Son of God incarnate. He is not for intellectual analysis. He is the object of faith. It is unwise to speak of Jesus in terms common to mankind. Let us always remember who He is.

The gold rings and poles.

The rings and poles enabled the ark and mercy seat to be carried about. This was the normal way for the ark to be carried and the limit of normal closeness. Levites would use the poles in the rings and the ark was carried on their shoulders. Only a certain family from the tribe of Levi, Kohath, were selected for the carrying of the furniture of the tabernacle.

When on the move, Israel would number some millions and in the middle of this vast company of people would be the ark and the other items of furniture belonging to the tabernacle. The Levites would all be moving in step careful to carry the ark to its next place of rest. It is well to mention at this point that the glory of the golden ark would not be seen as it was carried through the wilderness. In Numbers 4:4-15 we read about the ark being covered. There were three coverings,

1. The curtain which hung between the most holy place and the holy place.
2. A covering made out of badgers' skins.
3. A final outer covering of blue.

In Exodus 26 we read that the curtain was made from material of four colours, blue, purple, scarlet thread and fine woven linen with an artistic design of cherubim. The curtain was hung upon four pillars. Some expositors have linked this curtain with the presentation of the Lord Jesus in the four Gospels: blue for John, purple for Luke, scarlet for Matthew and the fine linen for Mark. Badger skins have a natural ability to keep clean and free from defilement. The badger skin covering sets forth the spotless purity of the Lord Jesus as a man here for the glory of God. There was no sin attached in any way to the Lord Jesus Christ. Blue is often considered symbolically as a heavenly colour. Therefore the blue covering would remind us of Jesus, "the second Man is the Lord from heaven", see 1 Corinthians 15:47.

To conclude.

The ark, the mercy seat and the tabernacle in total are a wonderful study. Let us remember that it was provided as a pattern of things in heaven. Today we are able to consider and meditate upon Jesus who came down to this world to be the sacrifice for sin - a once only sacrifice. On the basis of such a great sacrifice we draw near to God and the Father through Jesus the Son of God.

As Jesus walked through this world people rarely saw beyond his manhood to what was symbolised in the pure gold and acacia wood. Peter, James and John saw His majesty briefly on the mountain of transfiguration. In the Gospel by John in chapters 7, 9 and 10 we read that the people were divided as to who Jesus was, because of the things that He did and because of what He said. The things Jesus did and what He said clearly indicated that He was none other than God the Son.

In 1 Peter 2, Christians are informed that they are both "a holy priesthood" (verse 5) and "a royal priesthood" (verse 9). Through the work of Christ on the cross each Christian is made a priest with the privilege of direct entry into the presence of God. Christians exercise the holy priesthood when they worship. Christians exercise royal priesthood as they live for God in this world. When the Levites carried the ark in their desert journeys, all the people would know what was being carried. Is the character of my life telling others of Jesus?

Let us close in prayer.

Lord, help us to understand that what we read in the Old Testament are things written for our learning. The glory of the ark and the mercy seat in the tabernacle system is but a faint picture of the glory and greatness of Yourself and Your sacrificial work. Bless us this day. Amen.

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