

The Mercy Seat

Wilbur N. Pickering, ThM PhD

The Ark of the Testimony was a box made of acacia wood, overlaid with pure gold, in and out. It was about 45 inches long, 27 inches wide and 27 inches high. That box had a lid, of the same length and width, made of pure gold. That lid is generally called the mercy seat;¹ at each end there was a cherub looking in, also of pure gold, of one piece with the lid.² That lid was the place where propitiation was effected, the place where God's holiness, justice, love and mercy met together to deal with man's sin. But at first God said to Moses, "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" (Exodus 25:22). Apparently this was a privilege that only Moses had, because after that only the high priest could go into the Most Holy Place, and even so, only once a year. The entire chapter 16 of Leviticus spells out the required procedure, whose purpose was to make atonement for all the sins of the people. The detailed procedure emphasized the difficulty surrounding a propitiating of God's outraged character, outraged by man's sin. Access to the mercy seat was protected by several barriers, the final one being the heavy curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Anyone who attempted to enter in an unauthorized manner died on the spot.

Those rules were not changed until the Lamb of God achieved the ultimate propitiation—it took an infinite Being to pay an infinite price. God Himself tore that curtain in two, top to bottom, symbolizing in a dramatic way that access to God was now potentially available to all. But there is more to the story than that, as Hebrews makes clear. "Without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22). This statement points back to Leviticus 17:11, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul". Note that for blood to be on the altar it has to be shed—someone, or something, has to die. Recall that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). In the beginning, the blood of animals was used, but that was only a temporary, stopgap, measure, "because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). So where does that leave us?

For an Eternal Being, time is irrelevant, because He knows the end from the beginning.³ For God Himself to set up and decree a stopgap procedure, He must have had a permanent solution waiting for the appointed time. Indeed, this is expressly stated in 1 Peter 1:18-21: "you were redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, as of a faultless and pure lamb; 20 who was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world,⁴ but was revealed in these last times for your sake." The Lamb of God was the permanent solution. But that permanent solution was not tied to the Ark of the Testimony, with its mercy seat, that was prepared by

¹ The KJV called the lid the 'mercy seat', and that designation continues in general use. The term 'propitiatory', used as a noun, would perhaps be more precise.

² See Exodus 25:10-21.

³ As the glorified Jesus said in Revelation 22:13, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, beginning and end, the First and the Last". How could He know that He was the 'end' and the 'last', if He had not been there? I suspect that time and space may be limited to our solar system, being especially relevant to our planet, as the home of the human race. Without time and space it is impossible to measure the universe.

⁴ This sort of 'blows my mind'—the Text is saying that the Lamb, with blood shed, was so known before the creation of our race and planet; which means that the Creator knew, before creating, what would happen and the terrible redemption price He Himself would have to pay, yet He went ahead anyway. Wow!

Moses.¹ God told Moses repeatedly to be sure to make everything “according to the pattern” that he had received on the mountain (Exodus 25:40). And why was God so insistent? Because that tabernacle with its furnishings was a “copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (Hebrews 8:5).² This would appear to mean that there is a ‘mercy seat’ in Heaven! Is this not clearly implied by Hebrews 9:11-12? “Christ entered once for all into the real Holy Places, having obtained eternal redemption—He had come as High Priest of the good things that are about to be, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation, 12 and with His own blood, not that of goats and calves.” ‘Holy Places’ being plural, the phrase must include the Most Holy Place, which contains but one piece of furniture, whose principal component is the mercy seat. Christ entered the heavenly Most Holy Place, as eternal high priest, carrying His own blood. And what did He do with that blood? He applied it to the heavenly mercy seat, “having obtained eternal redemption”, “so that those who have been called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15).

But even that is not the whole story. The shed blood of God’s Lamb also served for something else; it served to purify the heavenly things (Hebrews 9:23)! But how could anything in Heaven need purifying? Well, is Satan not a contamination, everywhere he goes? Job 1:6 and 2:1 state plainly that Satan presented himself before the LORD in Heaven, along with other high-ranking angels. If I understand Revelation 12:7-12 correctly, Satan still has access to God’s throne:

War was declared in heaven; Michael and his angels were to wage war with the dragon; so the dragon and his angels made war,³ 8 but he was not strong enough; neither was there any place found for him in heaven any more. 9 So the great dragon was expelled, that ancient serpent, who is called Slanderer and Satan, who deceives the whole inhabited world; he was thrown into the earth,⁴ and his angels were expelled with him. 10 And I heard a loud voice in the heaven saying: “Now the salvation and the power have come,⁵ even the Kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ, because the accuser of our brothers⁶ has been thrown down, who accused them before our God day and night. 11 And they conquered⁷ him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not cherish their lives, *even* up to death. 12 Therefore rejoice, O

¹ In passing, remember that the ‘box’ contained three items: 1) the stone tablets, 2) the gold pot full of manna and 3) Aaron’s rod that budded—all were covered by the ‘lid’, the mercy seat. Have you ever considered the significance of those three items? Allow me to suggest the following possibility: 1) the stone tablets represent God’s written Revelation to mankind, and its purpose is to orient our conduct; 2) the manna represents God’s provision for our physical needs; 3) Aaron’s rod represents God’s authentication of His plan of salvation, or redemption—His provision for our spiritual need. All three ultimately depend upon the definitive propitiation provided by God’s Lamb.

² Revelation 15:5 refers to “the sanctuary of the Tabernacle of the testimony in the heaven”.

³ The dragon knew that Michael had received the order, so he decided to get in the first blow.

⁴ “Into the earth”, including its atmosphere. The idea seems to be that at this point Satan is confined to this planet. From the content of the following verses, I take it that Satan’s expulsion occurs in the middle of the seven-year period. So he is still in heaven accusing us (accusing us of what? There would be no point in bringing false accusations, so we must be providing Satan with ‘ammunition’—not a nice thought!).

⁵ Wait a minute! If it is only “Now”, where have the Kingdom and Authority been in the meantime? As long as a government is being challenged, its rule is not complete or tranquil. I find it instructive that Satan still has sufficient power to wage war, in Heaven!

⁶ “Our brothers”—I wonder who is speaking, since the ‘brothers’ are saved by the blood of the lamb.

⁷ That is what the Text says. Comparing 6:11 and 7:13 (Revelation), perhaps it is necessary for a certain number of God’s servants to be willing to die for the Cause to bring about the accuser’s expulsion.

heavens, yes, you who are dwelling in them!¹ Woe to the earth and the sea! Because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has little time.”

Once Satan is expelled from Heaven, the final cleansing will take place. According to our timeframe, the Lamb’s propitiation has already occurred, while the expelling of Satan is still in the future. But to an Eternal Being our timeframe is irrelevant. The heavenly things have been cleansed.

The eternal mercy seat, with the infinite propitiation, resides in the heavenly Tabernacle. It is there that God’s holiness, justice, love and mercy met together² and formulated the definitive solution to man’s sin, and all other consequences of Lucifer’s rebellion. It is that mercy seat that guarantees the Plan of Redemption, with all its ramifications. Oh praise our God! Surely a doxology is in order.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him all creatures here below,
Praise Him above ye heavenly host,
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost!

How many sermons have you heard, or preached, on the subject of the heavenly mercy seat, or even the earthly one? I would suggest for your consideration that this has been a serious omission. The mercy seat should be at the center of any and every exposition of God’s Plan of Redemption. Perhaps then people would not be so careless about their relationship with the Sovereign Creator!

¹ It is the inhabitants that do the rejoicing, not the place.

² God’s holiness alone could not resolve the problem, nor His justice alone, nor His love alone, nor His mercy alone—it took all four, working together.