

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, You see the world today with all its paradoxes and complications. Pain and distress live alongside joy and happiness, and beauty and finesse are found next to ugliness and strife. Give us the means to understand our world, and come to love it with the same passion with which You worked for its salvation. Save us, Lord God, save us: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Education

Pray for those who make education policy in your country. Schools can be helped by good politics or ruined by bad politics; so pray for God to guide those responsible in government.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the world God has made and pray for its salvation
- Pray that politicians will grasp the importance of people's real needs
- Pray for Morocco, where people died in a crush at a music event

Meditation

Jesus, Your kindness touches our lives, and we thank You.

You enable us to stand firm in love and compassion;
You give us the courage we need to forgive others;
You assure us of Your presence now and in the future;
You sustain our joy with an abundance of generosity;
You lift us up when we fall, with care and sustenance;
You care about our health and welfare all the time;
You protect our souls when we experience great pain;
You comfort us with kindness when we suffer rejection;
You are with us in power as we strive to do our best.

Jesus, Your kindness touches our lives, and we thank You.

Bible Study - Exodus 25:10-22

¹⁰ They shall make an ark of acacia wood; two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. ¹¹ You shall overlay it with pure gold, both inside and outside, and make a gold moulding to go all around it. ¹² You shall cast four rings of gold for it and attach them to its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side. ¹³ You shall make poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, ¹⁴ and you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, by which they may carry it. ¹⁵ The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be removed from it. ¹⁶ You shall put into the ark the Testimony that I will give you.

¹⁷ Then you shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two cubits and a half long and a cubit and a half wide. ¹⁸ You shall make two cherubim of gold; make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat. ¹⁹ Make one

cherub at one end and one cherub at the other, and make them of one piece with the mercy seat at its two ends. ²⁰ The cherubim shall have wings spread out above, overshadowing the mercy seat, and facing one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned toward the mercy seat. ²¹ You shall place the mercy seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall place the Testimony that I will give you. ²² I will meet with you there, and I will speak to you about all the commands I give you for the Israelites, from above the mercy seat, between the two cherubim on the ark of the covenant.

Review

It is tempting for Christians to stop concentrating when they read Old Testament texts such as this. We ask, why do we need to know the dimensions of a wooden box used to store the Ten Commandments, when it was lost even before the Temple of Solomon was destroyed in 587 BC? Our challenge, however, is to understand why it was important for God to represent Himself to His people in this way. God has graciously made Himself known to His people in ways they can understand throughout history, each time building on what was known previously, until He made Himself known fully in Jesus Christ. Before that, He patiently revealed certain things step by step, building up to this supreme revelation. So each step tells us something about God, and with a little care, we can find out what He was teaching the Israelites by requiring them to build a wooden box and imagine Him speaking to them from above it!

In Israel's day, other nations built objects to represent their gods and worshipped them. This was banned in the Ten Commandments, but the Israelites needed help. How then were they to 'picture' God, and how could they know He was with them? How could they identify with God now that idols were banned? The design of the Tabernacle answered these and other questions, and this is why it is worth studying. Though remember, this passage describes the construction of the 'Ark' and its construction is described later in Exodus 37:1-9, with virtually identical words! We will first summarise the design of the box, and then assess what we can learn from it.

Most people imagine the Ark as a box containing the Ten Commandments. This is partly true, for this passage describes such a box (25:10-16), and the 'Testimony', another word for the two stones containing the Ten Commandments, was indeed placed in it later (see Exodus 31:18 and 34:1f.). The box was of modest dimensions, and given that a cubit was the distance from an elbow to a finger tip, it was probably just over four feet by two feet by two feet, with four legs underneath (25:12). The box was covered with ornate gold, including gold mouldings around the edges to band it together and gold overlay inside as well as outside (25:11). On the feet were rings through which poles were placed; they were to be left permanently in place, primarily to avoid any accidental contact with the Ark itself when being carried (25:13-15).

Exodus continues without a break to describe a cover for the box made of solid gold, called a 'mercy seat'! In its construction, it is unclear whether there was any other 'lid' to the Ark. Other boxes of that time (chests and sarcophaguses from ancient Egypt – see also Gen. 50:26), suggest it is likely that the 'mercy seat' was indeed the lid, and therefore integral to the Ark, rather than a separate object placed over it. Certainly, it makes sense for this to be the case given that the size of the lid was identical to the box (25:17,18)! Its distinguishing feature was that it was made out of one piece of cast gold, with two cherubim hammered out at the ends. The description of these cherubim is fantastic and awesome, like spiritual sentries posted adjacent to where God would speak to His people (25:22).

But what are we to make of this? The object itself was not an idol, and was not intended to depict God. It was evidence of His presence in the world, and God said that He would use

In addition to this, the sight of a 'mercy seat' on top of the Ark containing the Laws of God surely says to us that God's mercy 'triumphs' over justice, a fact that we constantly celebrate in the atoning death of Jesus for our sins. Unfortunately, people regard most Christian theology as oblique and incomprehensible, even though it only seeks to understand the nature of God; those who have been to church for years will sometimes confess their uncertainty very readily. Is it worth our while learning from the Old Testament that sometimes, people will respond well to visual aids that speak specifically about God, not in simple terms, but quite complex ones too? Indeed, can visual aids say more to us than just words, and draw us towards a mental exploration of the nature of our great God?

Please do not misunderstand me, for we have a complete understanding of God in Jesus Christ, but the Bible does suggest that we can learn about God visually, and there may be many ways of doing this without making direct 'representations' of God or Jesus that would be idolatrous. The Cherubim were not gods and did not represent God, but the sight of them said much about God, and people who want to learn more about God have always responded well to visual aids in the best sense of that much miss-used term!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What does the Ark express to you about the nature of God, and how might this help Christians today?
2. What does the mercy seat express to you about the nature of God, and how might this help Christians today?
3. How can we express our beliefs about God and Jesus visually today; what should we do and what should we not do?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

There is great debate in the church about what is acceptable in terms of visual representation of Christian themes and even God Himself. The debates will go on for years, but we cannot avoid making a visual statement of faith. A badly kept church says a great deal to a community about the Christian faith practiced in their neighbourhood, for example. We do need to face the fact that what we present to the world of ourselves is seen, and it is better if this points to God, rather than ourselves.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think carefully about what has visually affected your faith. A picture of God as a man with a beard when you were a child, perhaps? What else? It is good to try and work these things out so that you come to understand the affect these things have had on your faith.*
- *Pray for God's people, that they will learn to apply their faith to the world and enable people to come to know God.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, be our guide through the years. Work through all that has happened to us in the past; touch us with Your loving hand as we find our way through the present; and give us confidence in the future You have prepared for us. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN

it as the place from where He would speak whatever he needed to say (25:22). This was God's way of saying to the people of Israel 'I am not an object, but I am real, and if you respect my Ark, it will represent my presence with You, and I will speak to you through it.' Without this Ark, the people of the day would have struggled to accept that their God was real. Later generations of Israelites were able to believe without the Ark, as God revealed more of Himself, but as we all know, our picture of Him is something that grows.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- How was the Ark made (25:10-16)?
- What did the Ark mean to God's people?
- How was the mercy seat made (25:17-22)?
- What does the mercy seat mean to God's people?

Notes on the text and translation

V10 *'they shall make an ark'* The Hebrew word for 'ark' is 'aron', which means a chest of some kind. Joseph's bones were placed in such a chest after he died in Egypt (Gen 50:26), and other references to a 'chest' include the money boxes created by various kings to collect money for the Temple (2 Kings 12:10, 2 Chron 24:8f.). All other uses of the word are for the box containing the two 'tablets of stone' we call the 'Ark'.

V11 *'both inside and outside'* The overlaying of the gold inside the box is a significant feature. The Hebrew for this says 'in the house and outside', perhaps hinting at the use of the whole construction as a dwelling place for God.

V14 *'... by which they may carry it'* At this point the Hebrew reads literally 'in order to carry the ark by them'. I have omitted the reference to the ark because in English it is repetitive to repeat a word within a sentence. However, I have included the reference to those carrying it, which is omitted by other translations.

V17 *'you shall make a mercy seat ...'* I have retained the traditional term 'mercy seat', though the meaning of this is very unclear (see study). The Hebrew word from which this comes is 'kapporet' and has the meaning of a 'cover'. However, it was used technically to refer to that which covers sin, and for this reason a variety of names have been used such as 'propitiatory', 'atonement', or 'atonement seat'.

Going Deeper

How was the Ark made (25:10-16)?

The word used for 'Ark' is the Hebrew word 'aron' (see notes above). This is quite different from the word used for the Ark built by Noah ('tebah'), so the confusion we see in English between the two is not there in Hebrew! Both words refer to different types of box, though it is not clear today what the difference between the two was. Moses was placed in a 'box' (a 'tebah') that floated in the river Nile shortly after he was born, but on the top of Sinai, he was commissioned to build another type of 'box' (an 'aron') as a permanent memorial of God's presence and the moral rule of God's Law!

The size of the box is not large, but it would have been a remarkable sight. The work required for such an artefact was clearly considerable, and the Hebrew words describing what had to be done with the gold are complex. It cannot be certain what they mean today, except that the instruction clearly says that the entire object was to be overlaid inside and out. Certainly, the Israelite workman who did this (named Bezalel – see 37:1f.) could only have learned the necessary skills in Egypt, and such lining is found in the remaining

sarcophaguses of Egyptian kings of that period. These examples are the only comparable work from the era, so we should expect that the gold-work would be highly decorated with motifs from Israelite culture of the time. We would love to know what they were!

The Hebrew words in verse 11 suggest that the structure had to be held together with a banding of gold around its corners (see 'moulding' - 25:11). This would have given the Ark strength, and it is more than likely that this was highly decorated as well. Naturally, feet were provided so that the whole thing stood off the ground. As a 'holy' object, anything touching it would be regarded as holy, so it was permanently raised; the Israelites did not appear to believe that the feet counted as 'contact'! In addition, poles were necessary for carrying the Ark because no one was allowed to touch it, and the rings for the poles were in its feet so that the whole Ark, together with its lid, the 'mercy seat', would be raised high above the ground when carried.

What did the Ark mean to God's people?

It is astonishing that this magnificent piece of work was to spend most of its time placed in a tent and accessed only by priests; but this was a holy 'dwelling place' for God, not a relic for viewing. There is something of a paradox here, representing the very nature of God's presence amongst His people. Like God, the Ark was real and the people knew it was there, and sometimes it was paraded before them (as in Joshua's conquest of Jericho – Joshua 6). However, for much of its time it was out of view, inside the holiest of tents at the centre of the Tabernacle tent complex, where priests ministered to God before it on behalf of the people. In this way, the Ark represents the greatness of the one true God who does not need to be seen all the time in order to be with His people.

How was the mercy seat made (25:17-22)?

It may be something of a surprise to us to discover that the mercy seat was probably a lid to the box called the Ark! Given the dimensions, I am not sure than anyone could find a way of placing it on the Ark unless it completely obliterated the lid, and the Hebrew word used in verse 21 for placing it suggests it was indeed touching the Ark. Also, there are no legs described, as there are feet for the Ark (see above), as if it the seat was like a bench.

The description of the mercy seat focuses on the two cherubim, to be fashioned from the same piece of gold, at each end of the 'seat'. The Hebrew describing the wings expresses magnificence and height (25:19), and emphasis is placed on the fact that they face each other (25:20). They look towards God, of course, who is in the centre (25:22), and their gaze directs all who see them towards the middle, where God 'dwells'; from where God said He would speak to Moses, not sitting or standing, but 'between the cherubim'. It is presumptive of us to think that God 'dwelt' on the seat in some human posture! It was enough that the God who made the whole world and Universe was willing to be at this place 'between the cherubim' to speak to the representatives of the people.

Cherubim are powerful angelic figures within God's heavenly court, believed to be part of the group consulted by God about the creation of human life ('let us make people in our image ...' – Gen 1:27). Their representation here is highly symbolic, because although no 'idol' could be made of God, there was no bar against an image of a heavenly being, providing it was not worshipped. This is probably another reason why the cherubim were required to face each other; each looked away from themselves and directed the eye elsewhere, demonstrating that they did not receive worship from anyone, they served God.

Cherubim are not mentioned again in connection with the Ark, except briefly in the story of the Ark at Shiloh, in the time of Eli and Samuel (1 Sam 4:4), where this phrase is used to refer to God: 'the Lord of hosts who sits enthroned above the cherubim' (see also 2 Sam 6:2). They appear next in the construction of the Temple (1 Kings 6 and 2 Chron 3), and in

several Psalms. Ezekiel saw them in a vision supporting a throne (Ez 10), and Isaiah famously saw them with 'Seraphs' in his famous vision and call (Isaiah 6). Although there is not much about them, it is reckoned that they had a significant place in Israelite religion for centuries, especially during the years of the monarchy, from David to the Exile.

What does the mercy seat mean to God's people?

Enormous controversy has surrounded the 'mercy seat' for years, and you will see this reflected in the different translations of this phrase found today, along with the footnotes about it within most Bibles. The problem is not just what to call it, but what it means! The problems arise because of the Hebrew word 'kapporet' used for the 'mercy seat' (see notes above). The basic form of this word is used in a variety of places in the Old Testament, and most significantly, it is used for 'atonement', that is, the act of God in 'covering up' human sin. Most of the great Levitical laws about sacrifice were instituted to atone for sins (that is, cover them up before God – see Lev 4:10,20,26 etc.), and the great 'Day of Atonement' celebrated God's gracious desire to remove the sins of His people (Lev 16:30 – see the connection between 'kapporet' and 'kippur' in the Hebrew for day of atonement, 'Yom kippur'). It is often remembered that on this day, a goat was set free to take away the sins of the people, but it is not often remembered that another goat was sacrificed and the blood of that sacrifice taken 'inside the curtain (Lev 16:15f.) to the Ark and the mercy seat. Atonement required both the human and the divine action!

Unfortunately, the debate about the word to describe the mercy seat does not end with the concept of 'atonement'. Some scholars prefer to describe this using the old English word 'propitiation' because it means 'something done to win God's favourable response', and some suggest that the mercy seat be called a 'propitiation cover'! This is theologically reasonable, but the word is simply not understood by most people today, so I will not pursue this theme here. I mention it because some are still strongly attached to the use of this word in Romans 3:25 ('whom God has set as a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins' – Authorised Version), and it is useful to know the link between this and the 'mercy seat'.

Whatever the phrase used, whether 'mercy seat', or 'atonement seat', or 'propitiation cover', this great 'lid' or 'mercy seat' for the Ark spoke to the people about a characteristic of God. I prefer the term 'mercy seat' because this best describes what the cover of the Ark means to us today. Also, when it was first used, the evidence from the various passages I have quoted above is that it became the focus of God's mercy towards His people. It is quite remarkable that this great 'lid' construction covering the Ark and the Ten Commandments should represent mercy, sitting as it did above the revealed Law of God that exposed sin! It was a reminder to the people of the complete nature of God as both lawgiver and merciful judge.

Application

The best way we can make use of this text is to see within it a representation of God that holds in balance what can be seen and known and what cannot. Being both was a totally new concept to the Israelites, and we may need to be reminded of this today. It can be easy for Christians to be rather cavalier about the access to God we have through Jesus, and forget that in church life we are dealing with the awesome and mysterious God who holds all things in His hands, and also ordinary people who want to learn more about Him in every way. Some Christians disdain the use of symbols in the life of the church, but there is something very powerful in the imagery of the cherubim, facing each other and directing all who look at them to God. It may not be the most complete picture of God, but it reminds us that in Christ, we must be the same, directing all who look at us to the living God.