

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL

“You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide. You shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat... You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark



you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel.”

*Exodus 25:17-18,
21-22*

Suppose an Ark with
no Mercy-seat; the Law
would then be uncovered:
there would be nothing
to hush its thunderings,
nothing to arrest the
execution of its righteous
sentence.

Arthur W. Pink

IN THE CLASSIC 1959 VERSION OF *BEN-HUR*, with Charlton Heston, Judah has just confronted his mother, Miriam, in the Valley of the Lepers. He cannot bear the thought of his mother and sister being condemned to this living grave, and his mother cannot bear the thought that her son now knows their fate.

Judah leaves his mother with Esther as he goes deeper into the cave in search of his sister. Esther leads Miriam toward the opening of the cave, into the daylight, and the older woman says, "I'm afraid." Her leprosy has condemned her to a life as an outcast hated by society, followed by a hideous and painful death. But in this miserable cave of lepers she has at least been with her own kind, and relatively safe. To step back out into the world as a despised leper sends a deep fear coursing through her.

Esther, who has become a follower of Christ Jesus, comforts Miriam with, "No cause. The world is more than we know."

Human beings are born afraid of God. He is, to mere humans, invisible and thus surely unknowable, other-worldly, something strange and almost alien.

He is not one of us.

Our fear of Him—not reverence, but fright—is manifested in a number of ways: arcane, mind-numbing and ultimately meaningless liturgy, outright rejection or denial, flippant dismissal, anger, petulance—each wrapped in a thin veneer of obligatory acknowledgment that He does, truly, exist somewhere up there above the clouds.

For some of us that fright is eventually replaced by reverential fear, and a desire to know Him as well as mere flesh can know an eternal, all-powerful God. But even after that we can demure, unable or unwilling to trespass into the realm of higher things, content to remain where life is admittedly less than ideal, but at least familiar. We are content with the little we know of Him, and afraid again of the rest. We are Miriam, miserable and angry, but stubbornly unwilling to leave the Valley of the Lepers, while Esther tugs at our arm, saying, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!"

Father God, through Christ Jesus, wants every believer to step out from his or her cave, into the daylight of discovery that is His world—His amazing, supernatural, exciting, mind-boggling world. He reminds us that there is no reason to be afraid of Him, no reason to shy away from the prospect of knowing Him more deeply, more thoroughly.

For, after all, God has given us the mercy seat. ♦

Not Guilty for Now

WHAT IF THERE HAD BEEN NO crucified Son of God? What if all we had for even a hope of a right relationship with God was just the Law? If that were the case now, God would look down from His throne, measure each of our lives against the dictates and regulations of the Law, and find us guilty.

Every time.

Hopelessly, irrevocably guilty.

Even the “good” people among us would be found guilty by a holy and just God, for no one is capable of keeping the entire Law.

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you

do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James 2:8-11

If I assiduously obey the command to honor my mother and my father, but at the same time hate my neighbor, I am guilty as a transgressor of the Law. If I have never in my entire life committed adultery, or even coveted my neighbor’s wife, but am an inveterate—or even occasional—liar, I am guilty as a transgressor of the Law.

For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “He who practices them shall live by them.”

Galatians 3:10-12



When Yahweh established the Mosaic economy at Mt. Sinai—the tent/temple, the Law, the blessings and curses under His righteous and just hand—He included a temporary remedy for this inability for humans to keep the whole Law: blood sacrifice.

Blood would be shed—daily or “as needed” at regular intervals for the individual, annually for the corporate Israel on the Day of Atonement—to appease (propitiate) the wrath of holy God for the sins committed since the previous sacrifice. Daily the people of Israel would bring their personal sacrifices to atone for the sins of which they were aware, or felt guilty of, or had become known by others. Daily those *known* sins were atoned for. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the most holy place to atone for the sins—of himself and all of Israel—that were *not* known, or that had been conveniently side-stepped out of “ignorance.”

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the high priest would enter the most holy place and there, between the two cherubim atop the ark of the covenant, would be the earthly presence of very God. Just what the priest saw we cannot know, but we can safely assume it must have been terrifying. Here, before the mercy seat, was the closest temporal man could ever get to seeing God face to face, and if the high priest did not follow, precisely, the letter of God's instructions for this holy moment, he would die.

The high priest, arrayed in his priestly finery, would kill a bull, catching some of its blood in a basin. This he would carry into the holy of holies to atone for his own sin. Then he would return to the open courtyard where a goat would be sacrificed. This blood would be also be carried inside in a basin, where the priest would use it to atone for the sins of the people.

[The LORD said to Moses:] "Moreover, he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.

Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat."

Leviticus 16:14-15

We dare not pass lightly over this scene. We dare not relegate it to an archaic, now-obsolete ritual having no place in modern Christianity, for this ancient scene is the very core, the essential nucleus of our relationship with God through Christ Jesus.

The most holy God of the universe, God of all creation, would descend to sit upon His throne—the mercy seat—between the cherubim. From that spot He would look down. And what would He see? The tablets of the Law beneath the lid of the ark, every one of which had been broken. His verdict? Guilty. Every person of Israel was guilty of failing to keep the Law, and was thus worthy of death.

But the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice—first for himself, then for corporate Israel—upon the mercy seat. After that, what did God see?

Not the tablets of the Law, but the blood. The sacrificial blood "satisfied" Yahweh's wrath. His verdict? Not guilty.

For now.



The writer to the Hebrews paints a breathtaking picture of how this is different in Christ. But let us first, for comparison, revisit the original tabernacle setting. Imagine that you are the current high priest, and the annual Day of Atonement has arrived: the tenth day of the seventh month. When you rise from your cot that morning it is with a sickening dread in your belly. Yes, there will be joy as the aftermath of the day; on this day the Lord God will strike from the balance sheet all the sins of Israel committed during the previous year. This will bring a sense of cleansing, even revival to the entire community. But first must come the requisite confession of and mourning over those sins; that will set the tone for the day itself. Weighing most heavy on you, the high priest, for the community to receive the promised atonement, the day will culminate in the performance of the most perilous burden of your office: meeting with Yahweh in the holy of holies, the Most Holy

Place inside the veil. The Scriptures are clear—and the dramatic death of Aaron’s two insolent sons proved—that any variation from God’s instructions will result in your immediate death.

Later that day the moment arrives. Your sharp knife slices through the neck of the bull and some of its blood is caught in a shallow basin. With heavy, dreadful steps you carry the basin of blood deeper into the tabernacle, toward the veil that covers the most holy place. This act will be personal to you; it will be your *personal* sin for which this blood will atone. You pass through the veil and there before you, all in gleaming gold, sits the ark of the covenant. And your legs quake with fear as you see the hovering cloud resting upon the mercy seat. It is very God! With trembling hands you dip your fingers into the blood and sprinkle the still-warm life first onto the east side, then in front of the mercy seat—the reaching, reverent wings of the opposing cherubim.

With a measure of relief you exit the holy of holies. The bull’s blood has satisfied Yahweh’s wrath against your sin. Now you must do the same for all of Israel. Quickly you take the life of the selected goat, catching some of its blood in

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

Leviticus 10:1-2

the basin. Back inside the holy of holies you sprinkle the blood on and in front of the mercy seat, just as you had done before. As you leave the most holy place, not to return until one year hence, your heart fills with joy that in this moment all of Israel is right with her God.

But then in the very next moment you apprehend the cold truth, that outside this tent new sins are already being committed, new sins that will raise barriers between the individual and his God, new sins for which new blood must be spilled. You feel the righteous anger of that, and anger over the utter futility of keeping apace with the weakness of flesh.

And in your anger you realize that you, too, have just sinned again. ♦

Not Guilty *forever*

EVERY CHRISTIAN BELIEVER KNOWS about the sacrifice Christ Jesus made on the cross of Golgotha. And, as the apostle John declares, this makes Jesus the “propitiation for our sins.”

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

1 John 2:1-2

As the propitiation, Christ Jesus is the blood of the bull and the goat carried into the most holy place by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. On the cross the innocent, sinless Christ shed His blood for the sins of the guilty—just as the innocent, sinless bull and innocent, sinless goat shed their blood for the sins of the guilty.

But there is one important, earth-shak-

ing difference between the blood of the animals and the blood of Jesus. The blood of the animals, sprinkled onto the mercy seat, satisfied the wrath of a holy God only for a moment—only until the next sin was committed. But the blood of Christ satisfied the wrath of a holy God *for all time*.



Jesus is not just the blood sprinkled onto the mercy seat; Jesus is the high priest carrying it beyond the veil into the holy of holies.

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 6:19-20

In Abraham’s time Melchizedek was the mysterious king/priest of Salem (Jerusa-

lem). Later, under the Mosaic Law, it was impossible for anyone to be both king and priest; after the Lord rejected Saul, all kings were from the tribe of Judah, and the priesthood could come only from the tribe of Levi. Yet, like Melchizedek, Jesus is both. And as high priest, *He carries His own blood into the holy of holies*.

As if that were not sufficiently astonishing, Jesus plays yet a third role in the drama of atonement.

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace *through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith*. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of

God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 3:21-26 (emphasis added)

This word translated “propitiation” in Romans 3:25 is not the same as the word in 1 John 2:2. In John’s letter the Greek word means the bleeding victim on the altar—the literal atoning sacrifice—whereas in the Romans passage the word means *propitiatory*—the mercy seat atop the ark, God’s throne on earth. Thus Paul is saying that Christ Jesus *is* the mercy seat.

In the design of the tabernacle/temple and in the economy of the Mosaic Law, there was no chair for the priest in the holy of holies. The high priest could not sit down because his work was never finished. Month after month, day after tedious day the bloody sacrifices went on, and on, and on. And year after year the high priest on the Day of Atonement had to go through the same identical ritual. He could never sit down in the presence of holy God because there would always be more sins requiring atonement. His work was never finished.

There was, indeed, a chair in the holy of holies—it just wasn’t for him.



When introducing Jesus to his disciples, John the Baptist declared Him to be “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Most Christians read that and see in their mind an image of the cross bearing the slaughtered Lamb who died to atone for their sins. Certainly true—and praise be to His name for that. Christ Jesus is worthy of our adoration, our devotion for that selfless act.

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left... It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Having said this, He breathed His last.

Luke 23:33, 44-46

That, however, is only part of the wonder of this supernatural drama, and we do ourselves and our Lord a disservice

when we stop with that. As vital and central as the cross is to our salvation, the subsequent scenes in this drama speak not just to salvation, but to *our whole life in Christ*. The entire story—the story so many miss because, through fear or disinterest, they don’t bother digging deeper—reveals a loving, merciful Savior willing to give everything of Himself for those who belong to Him.

Christ Jesus is the Lamb who was slain. It is *His* blood being carried into the holy of holies. As our great High Priest Christ intercedes on our behalf to the Father, carrying into the most holy place the blood that will atone for our sin. Once inside, He is the one who sprinkles the blood on the mercy seat—but He *is* the mercy seat.

To our temporal sensibilities this seems strange, if not downright bizarre. How can Jesus represent all three? How can Jesus *be* all three?

That is the point precisely.

We have so limited our knowledge and understanding of God and His Son that we too readily greet such information with a smug, “Aw, c’mon.” By being satisfied with Jesus as our Savior, and expressing little desire to comprehend Him further, in our mind we have restricted

Him to Calvary and the tomb. But in reality, Christ Jesus Son of God is Lord and Judge of the entire universe! He is *everything*, and in Him everything holds together!

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

Colossians 1:15-20

The mercy seat is God's throne on earth. As such it serves a multitude of purposes. First, the mercy seat "covers" the Law in the ark below. Physically this means that

under the Mosaic economy the Presence of God resting upon the mercy seat did not judge by the tablets contained inside, but judged according to the blood sacrifice. But that blood covered only those sins committed up to that point; after that, new blood was required.

The blood of Jesus truly and permanently "covers" the Law. Since Jesus is the mercy seat, and it is His blood eternally sprinkled upon it, the Law cannot touch those who are in Him. The writer to the Hebrews so eloquently describes this for us in the opening of his letter.

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

Hebrews 1:3-4

He sat down.

Year after year the high priest of the Jews had to sprinkle fresh blood upon the mercy seat. Always there were new sins, so always there must be new blood.

For this reason he never sat down in the holy of holies; his work was never finished. But Christ Jesus, as the Great High Priest sprinkled His own blood—and sat down, *becoming* the mercy seat.

Done. Accomplished. Finished.

Second, the mercy seat is where Yahweh met sinners in the person of the high priest. Now, with Christ as our Great High Priest and as the mercy seat itself, it is to our sublime Intercessor and Advocate we go. There He reveals the Father, and the Father sees us in and through His Son. It has never been called the "wrath seat," where the Lord God would dispense His fierce judgment over rebellion and sin, but it is called the *mercy seat*. And that name was never more apt than now when, in Christ, believers come to confess and mourn over sin, and receive His grace.

Christ is the one appointed Meeting-place between God and His people, the place where He meets with them not in judgment but in grace.

Pink

Third, the mercy seat is where believers can enjoy communion with their God

and Savior.

“There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel.”

Exodus 25:22

Jesus invites us to meet with Him. We need bring with us no priest, no sacrificial blood—all that has already been supplied. We need not be afraid; it is called the *mercy seat*. Here is sweet communion with our Lord; our very presence in His presence is proof of His love for us.

We need not behave like Miriam, miserable in our darkness yet unwilling to step into the light. Here is opportunity, *gracious* opportunity extended to learn of Jesus, to listen to His voice, to receive His counsel, to know Him on a level more profound than we can possibly imagine.

Ah, but you say, there is no tent, no tabernacle or temple. There is no longer a holy of holies behind the veil, no ark, no cherubim, no mercy seat—all that is gone. You are correct, and herein is the astounding wonder of it all. Believers are

in Christ and He is *in* them, so where He is, we are. Just as every disciple of Christ carries around with him or her the risen Christ, so we carry around with us the holy of holies and the mercy seat.

The veil is gone forever! It perished at His sacrificial, atoning death!

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.

Matthew 27:50-51

The mercy seat used to be hidden behind a veil; now it is hidden in every believer’s heart. ♦

It is in the Lord Jesus that Christians have been brought into this place of inestimable blessing. Not only have we been brought nigh to God, but we are permitted to speak to Him and hear Him speaking to us. Having been reconciled to God by the death of His Son, He now says, “I will commune with thee.” Wondrous grace is this! Oh that our hearts may enter into and enjoy this blessed privilege. Then, “Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace.” There is nothing between: no sin, no guilt, and the veil has been rent. We may worship in the holy of holies! Then “Let us draw near in full assurance of faith.”

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But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Hebrews 9:11-14

Issue #817, May 2018

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