

THE MERCY SEAT OF GOD

In the days of Moses, God instructed His servant to build the tabernacle in the wilderness with all its furnishings, in accordance with the heavenly pattern revealed to him. This included the Ark of the Covenant, fashioned out of Acacia wood and overlaid both inside and out with pure gold, as a symbol for the gold of the divine nature being wrought both over and within the perishable wood of mankind.

The top of the Ark was a golden cover known as the mercy seat, typifying the throne of God Himself, and was set in the Most Holy Place, where the glory of God would meet with Moses.

“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.¹⁸ And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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. (Exodus 25:17-22)

Now when Moses went into the tabernacle of meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice of One speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the Testimony, from between the two cherubim (Numbers 7:89)

Now this Most Holy Place was also where the high priest would come once a year to make atonement for the sins of the people, sprinkling the blood of sacrifice on the mercy seat itself, in order for the sins of the people to be covered.

“Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering, which is for the people, bring its blood inside the veil, do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and before the mercy seat.¹⁶ So he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions, for all their sins; and so he shall do for the tabernacle of meeting which remains among them in the midst of their uncleanness.¹⁷ There shall be no man in the tabernacle of meeting when he goes in to make atonement in the Holy Place, until he comes out, that he may make atonement for himself, for his household, and for all the assembly of Israel. (Leviticus 16:15-17)

The author of summarizes this arrangement in the ninth chapter, and in describing the mercy seat for the only time in the New Testament, calls it the ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion).

Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary.² For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary;³ and behind the second veil, the

part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, ⁴ which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; ⁵ and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat (ἱλαστήριον). (Hebrews 9:1-5)

Now then, we know that the antitype to this sacrifice is Jesus Christ, who was Himself offered once for all, for the sins of all mankind. And in describing this sacrifice, translated in some Bible versions as 'propitiation', John uses the same word, ἱλαστήριον.

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² And He Himself is the propitiation (ἱλαστήριον) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2)

So then, we see how clearly the idea of propitiation is linked very directly to the mercy seat, and that Jesus might quite rightly be spoken of as "*the mercy seat for our sins*". So wherever else we see 'propitiation' in the scriptures, we can understand it in terms of this mercy seat, signified by the golden seat of the wilderness, and fulfilled by Christ in heavenly reality, even as the earthly priesthood is fulfilled by His heavenly priesthood:

Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:17-18)

Now then, we come to the crux of the matter. Exactly what was accomplished by the blood of Christ? We are constantly hearing how He paid the penalty for sin, but what is the scope and reach of this payment, and what is the state of the prior debt?

Firstly, we can confidently assert that His death was for all, not for some portion or section of mankind.

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:9)

... He Himself is the propitiation (ἱλαστήριον) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

So this death was accomplished for every man, and whatever the implications with regards to sin debt and payment, they must surely pertain to all people accordingly. What then? Only that in the blood of Christ being shed, free justification by grace came to light also:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all^[h] who believe. For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ

Jesus, ²⁵ whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, ²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

Now then, one might read this and protest that it references justifying those who have faith in Jesus, as if the others are excluded from any effects of His sacrifice until they believe. Now there is indeed some truth to this, as there is a special blessing to believing now:

For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, ^[a] because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:10)

There is no doubt that many blessed elements of spiritual reality begin with belief, as revelation and faith in Christ are granted. And yet, we must also discern that the cross has already had a certain effect for every man:

For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that *if One died for all, then all died;* ¹⁵ and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. ¹⁶ Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. ¹⁸ Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹ that is, that *God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.* (2 Corinthians 5:14-19)

If the passage only said “One died for all” and then left it at that, one might at least argue that indeed Jesus died and merely left an “invitation”, so that His death will have its effect on our sins once we believe. But it continues to say “...then all died,” revealing that upon the cross, Jesus indeed tasted death for every man, and that every man is therefore reckoned to have already died!

Not only this, but the passage goes on to say that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. This reconciliation took place upon the cross, when Jesus Christ opened up a new and living way to the Father through His obedience. Though each man must have a revelation, it is a revelation of what Christ has already accomplished!

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that *while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* ⁹ Much more then, *having now been justified by His blood,* we shall be saved from wrath through Him. ¹⁰ For if *when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son,* much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. (Romans 5:8-10)

We see here that salvation comes after reconciliation. Reconciled by His death, then saved by His life. Oh the mystery!

So then, when it comes to the sin of mankind, we must see that the debt was fully paid at the cross. It is not “held on deposit” until we believe! Of course there is correctional judgment, but this is not in order to *pay any debt*. If a rich man went to every creditor in the world and paid every debt instantly, would any man still be in debt just because he did not realize or believe his debt has been paid?

Every time someone asserts that anyone will spend eternity cut off from God, tormented in hell, they testify against the blood of Jesus, and *assign it a horribly reduced value that does not even match the cost of Adam's transgression*. What an awful thing to believe! We would answer with the following:

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. ²³ But each one in his own order (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

A believer having a forgiving or unforgiving heart is very closely linked to the consciousness of this debt being paid or the belief that it was not, as to refuse to forgive also testifies against the blood of Christ, inasmuch as we are refusing to do that which Christ has already done, and denying the power of His blood. These are very grave things, and one of the many reasons the traditional lie of hellfire is a damaging error in every way. But thankfully, when Jesus Christ was crucified, He indeed paid the debt, not with any half-measure or innuendo, but completely, finally, and explicitly. He is the true mercy seat of God, achieving atonement with something more precious than the requirements of the old covenant:

Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:12)

So then, just as God spoke to Moses in a cloud of glory from the Most Holy Place, above the Ark with its annual sprinkling of blood, so now God speaks to us through His Son, who is the true Ark, and the blood, and the mercy seat, and the glory!

Therefore, when we look at any human being, be they likeable or difficult, good or evil according to the flesh, we can look at them as someone who has had their debt paid, and who are precious because they have had something precious shed on their behalf, and the Lord of Life has died in their place. This should create a glow of blessedness around every person we come across....may it be so!

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

Amen!