

Lesson 10: The Atonement Cover

Read: Exodus 25:17-22, Leviticus 16:11-19

The atonement cover, also called the mercy seat, was like a lid covering the Ark of the Covenant. On top of it stood two cherubim (angels) at the two ends, facing each other. The cherubim, symbols of God's divine presence and power, were facing downward toward the ark with outstretched wings that covered the atonement cover. The whole structure was beaten out of one piece of pure gold.

Discussion:

1. What is the significance of the atonement cover in light of Exodus 25:22 and Leviticus 16:2?

The atonement cover was God's dwelling place and throne in the tabernacle. He sat enthroned between the cherubim (see also 2 Samuel 6:2). It was very holy; it could not be approached lightly. Above the ark and the atonement cover, God appeared as a cloud in His glory. (Additional information: This cloud is sometimes referred to as the Shekinah glory. The word Shekinah, although it does not appear in our English Bibles, has the same roots as the word for tabernacle in Hebrew and refers to the presence of the Lord.)

2. The ark and atonement cover were a symbol of God's presence and power among His people. Do you recall any incidents regarding the power of the ark in history of the Israelites?

There are quite a number of miracles recorded in the Old Testament surrounding the ark: With the presence of the ark, the waters of the River Jordan divided so the Israelites could cross on dry land, and the walls of Jericho fell so that the Israelites could capture it (Joshua 3:14-17, 6:6-21). When the Israelites fought their enemies the Philistines during the time of the prophet Samuel, they disregarded the commands of the Lord and took the ark out to the battlefield with them. God caused the Philistines to win the battle and "the glory departed from Israel, for the ark of the Lord was taken" (1 Samuel 4:22). However, God showed His power to the Philistines when He caused their idol, Dagon, to fall to the ground when the ark was placed next to it, and several Philistine cities were plagued heavily when the ark was in their midst (1 Samuel 5). Ultimately, the ark was returned to Israel.

3. Leviticus 16:11-19 talks of the Day of Atonement, the annual day that the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies. Bringing burning incense to shield his eyes from a direct view of God's glory, the high priest sprinkled blood from a bull onto the atonement cover for his and his household's sins, then sprinkled blood from a goat for all the sins of Israel. Thinking back on previous lessons regarding blood, what was the significance of sprinkling blood on the atonement cover?

Blood was the means by which God allowed people to make atonement for their sins. God promised that when He saw the blood of an innocent animal sacrificed, it would cover over man's sin, as if the animal was dying in man's place. When the high priest entered the Holy of Holies before the Ark of the Covenant, he was entering God's very presence. He could only come into God's presence with blood, because without it, he would be guilty before a holy God (see Hebrews 9:7). When blood was sprinkled on the atonement cover, which was God's throne, His wrath was appeased. God temporarily overlooked their sins as if they had been obliterated.

4. Recall the three items in the Ark of the Covenant that reminded the Israelites that they had rejected God's provision, authority and law. They were an unpleasant symbol of man's sins and shortcomings in God's presence. In light of this, how is the atonement cover important? What is the significance of the term "atonement cover"?

It may have been uncomfortable to think that God's splendor was so close to the three articles associated with man's sinfulness. But this is where God's provision comes in. When God looked down from His presence above the ark, He did not see the reminders of sin. They were covered by a necessary object — the atonement cover. To atone means to cover over. The atonement cover, when sprinkled with blood, "covered over" man's sins in God's presence.

5. Do we have an atonement cover today?

Jesus Christ has become our permanent atonement cover. Through Jesus' blood, our sins have been covered over. When God looks at us, He doesn't see our sin, but the provision: His own Son. Jesus lay down His life for us as an innocent sacrifice so that God would look on us and see His perfection.

6. Read and compare Hebrews 9:7 and 4:16. What is the difference between the high priests in the Old Testament and us today in approaching God's throne?

The high priest could only enter the Holy of Holies once and year, never without the atoning blood of an innocent animal. He had to prepare for the day by washing himself with water and putting on special clothing. The high priest had to be on his guard. If he did anything against God's commands or if his sacrifice was not acceptable, he could be struck dead in the Holy of Holies. Today, the curtain to the Holy of Holies has been torn, just as Christ's body was torn for us (see Hebrews 10:19-20) and we, as believers, can enter into God's presence at any time. Christ's atoning blood has been poured out for us. God sees Jesus' perfection and righteousness when He looks at us who have believed. The atonement is perfect and permanent. We no longer have restrictions and reservations when we enter into God's presence, and we can approach Him with confidence, because God's throne is a throne of grace through Jesus Christ.