

# The Mercy-Seat

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The Mercy-Seat is a symbol of God's covenant love and mercy, represented by the solid plate of gold on the ark in the Old Testament, and Jesus Christ takes the place of the Mercy-Seat in the New Testament, symbolizing God's steadfast love and forgiveness.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 84:11, Micah 7:18, Romans 3:25, Romans 8:33, Hebrews 9:5

**Topics:** "God's Mercy", "The Love of Christ"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the mercy-seat in the Old Testament, which symbolizes the steadfast love and grace of God, ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He explains that the mercy-seat, central to the tabernacle, represents God's covenant love and the atonement made through Christ's sacrifice. Sparks highlights that Jesus is our mercy-seat, where God meets humanity, offering grace rather than judgment. He draws parallels between the mercy-seat and God's unwavering love for Israel, despite their failures, illustrating the depth of God's loyalty and forgiveness. The sermon calls for a deeper appreciation of Jesus as the embodiment of God's mercy and love.

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## Transcript

We go on with the next thing about the ark, and that is the mercy-seat. There rested upon the ark this solid plate of gold which was called the mercy-seat. It is mentioned twenty-three times in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament it is taken up as referring to the Lord Jesus. It is so set forth in the Letter to the Hebrews. The mercy-seat on the ark of the Old Testament is one other aspect of the glory and greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You notice that it is called 'the seat of mercy', and that word 'mercy' in the Old Testament is a very rich and strong word. It means 'the loving kindness of the Lord'. A new translation of the Bible has translated that word 'mercy' into 'steadfast love', and that is the nearest definition to the Hebrew word that we have. It is covenant love, loyal love, a covenant of love made in the blood which was sprinkled upon the mercy-seat. Because we are so familiar with the old versions, which give this word simply as 'mercy', we love that constant repetition of the statement: "His mercy endureth for ever", or "How great is Thy mercy!", or from the prophet: "He delighteth in mercy" (Micah 7:18). Perhaps we do not easily take to a new translation, but when we stay to think about it, the new translation is still richer. Perhaps, as we come more deeply to understand it, we shall be willing to accept this translation 'His steadfast love'.

It is a very impressive thing that, right at the very centre and heart of this whole great system of the Old Testament, represented by the tabernacle, is the mercy-seat. Everything else pointed toward the mercy-seat, and it gave its value to everything else. The mercy-seat governed and gave character to everything. It is a wonderful thing to think of that. Yes, the mercy-seat governs everything for the people of God. We turn to a little phrase in Psalm 84. You know that that Psalm is the Psalm of the House of God. It begins with: "How lovely are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord". It is sinful man saying that! This is poor, failing man who is speaking. Why is it that the poor, sinful, failing man speaks like that? Why is it that he so longs for the courts of the Lord's house? The answer is found in this little phrase: "The Lord will give grace and glory" (verse 11). The throne of grace, the mercy-seat, was right at the centre of the House of the Lord. The gold of the glory was there at the mercy-seat, but it was not a throne of judgment; it was a throne of grace.

We pass from the type to the Lord Jesus Himself. We said that the Lord Jesus takes the place of the mercy-seat in the New Testament. Now look at the Letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verse 25: "Whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by his blood". We can understand the difficulty of the translators, but their difficulty has deprived us of something very precious. It would have been difficult for the translators to have put: 'God hath set forth Him as a mercy-seat'. In the original it is not what God has done, but what Christ is. In that literal translation it would not be: 'God has set Him forth as a propitiation', but 'as a propitiatory'. It is what He is, although it is also true of what He has done. So it ought really to read: 'God hath set Him forth to be the mercy-seat'. Jesus occupies the central place in the whole scheme of redemption, and that place is the mercy-seat. It was there at the mercy-seat that God met the people in the representative person of the high priest. You will remember that when Aaron, the high priest, went in to the ark, he had the breastplate on him with the names of all the tribes of Israel, so that in the person of the high priest all the people of God were present, and there, at the mercy-seat, God spoke and made Himself known to His people. Aaron went in with the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkled it upon the mercy-seat, making an atonement for the people, and by that covenant in blood God made Himself known. It was a perpetual testimony to the grace of God. In that regime it was every year. It was maintained throughout all their generations, but with our Lord Jesus it is once and for ever. All who come unto God by Jesus Christ stand on the ground of His steadfast love, and for such people it is everlasting love.

The Apostle Paul had a great knowledge of these Old Testament types. He was perfectly instructed in all the things of the tabernacle of old, and in ways which we do not always recognize he was alluding to that Old Testament system. I believe that those words which we love very much, but understand very little, are an allusion to the mercy-seat. Let us read them in the light of the mercy-seat, for they will throw much light upon it.

"Who shall lay anything to the charge of Gods elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that shall condemn? It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." That is the High Priest who has gone into the heavenly tabernacle with His own blood to make intercession for us. Now the next words explain the mercy-seat, that is, the steadfast love: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:33-35, 37-39).

That is the mercy-seat, the steadfast love of God for His own. That is the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ; and surely we can speak of that as grace and glory. That is what Jesus Christ has been made unto us.

Are you not more and more amazed at the steadfast love of God for Israel? You have only to read that long record of their history in the Book of the Psalms - Psalms 106 and 107. They are very long Psalms, but it is a long, long story of the steadfast love of God, and that love is set over against the long story of Israel's failures. Oh, how those people disappointed the Lord! They never had one little trouble but they turned against Him. It seems that they only wanted some little occasion to grumble at Him. When we come to the Prophets we are greatly impressed with the love of God for Israel. Indeed, it was steadfast love. How loyal God was to His people! His love for them often made Him close His eyes to their wrong. When I remember what Israel was really like I am amazed at those prophecies of Balaam. Balak, of Moab, called for Balaam to come and curse Israel, and perhaps you might think that if there were any people who ought to be cursed, those people were Israel! Balaam came to try to curse Israel, but the curse would not come out of his mouth, and he had to say: 'God has commanded me to bless. How can I curse?' But what did Balaam say, or rather, what did God say through Balaam's mouth? "He (God) hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel" (Numbers 23:21). Oh, what does this mean? There was plenty of iniquity in Israel, but God says: "I have not beheld iniquity in Jacob". Why did God speak like that? He was looking at Israel through the mercy-seat, and was being true to His covenant of steadfast love.

If you really love someone, you usually make a lot of excuses for their failures. If someone else points out the failures and the wrongs of the one you love, you always say: 'Well, perhaps that is true, but... but...'. You cover up the faults of the one you love because you are loyal to them. Loyalty is a great virtue. I wish that we Christians were more loyal to one another, simply because we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have to go a long way to be like God in this matter. There is an old saying that love is blind. Don't you believe that! Love sees everything, but love loves in spite of everything, and that is like the love of God.

We are poor sinners and we cannot accuse Israel. We are a very poor lot in ourselves, and God knows all about that, and much more than we know about ourselves, but with all His knowledge of us He loves us.

What do you think of this world? What do you think about those Congolese people who have done all that wicked work? They are only representative of humanity. What do you think of this world? Well, we are saying that this is a poor kind of a world. Man is a poor kind of creature. Do you think God does not know anything about that? He knows far more about man than you or I know, and yet it still stands - "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son", and God has set Him forth as a mercy-seat. We shall never exhaust the wonderful fullness of this mercy-seat! We find all the patience and the long-suffering and the forbearance of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is not a low kind of love, that is, a kind of love that does not care whether a person is bad. That is why there are two cherubim over the mercy-seat, and if you study the history of the cherubim you will see that they always relate to one thing - the holiness of God. The first time you meet them is at the gate of the Garden when man has sinned. Those cherubim say: 'Man in his sinful state cannot dwell in the presence of God. Something must be done about it.' When you get to the end of the Bible you find redeemed man in the midst of the Paradise of God. Yes, he is back in the Garden now, but God has done something about it. The Mercy-Seat has attended to this whole matter. The precious Blood has made a full atonement for man's sin.

The point is that the cherubim always speak of the holiness of God's love. The cherubim in Isaiah's time are heard chanting: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." His love is a holy love, and by the mercy-seat He lifts us from our own unholiness to His holiness. That blood on the mercy-seat always speaks of the great price that God paid to redeem man from his unholiness.

Forget the mercy-seat and remember Jesus Christ. He is all and more than ever the symbol represented.

We said that this is just one other aspect of the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ. May God give us a new appreciation of our Lord Jesus as our Mercy-Seat!

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