

**THE TABERNACLE**  
**LECTURE 7**  
**THE ARK OF THE COVENANT**

**I. THE COVENANT**

At Sinai, God entered into a covenant with Israel. This covenant was initiated in Exodus chapter 19, codified in chapters 20-23, and confirmed in chapter 24. Many mistakenly view this covenant as “legalistic”, giving hope of salvation only to those who can perfectly keep the law. However, this is to overlook that divine grace and divine provision formed the foundation of this covenant. When the covenant was initiated the stress was on all that God had done for Israel when delivering them from Egypt (Ex.19:1-4). It is in the context of this powerful divine initiative that God then sets forth the appropriate response of obedience (19:5-25). As if to underline this, even the 10 commandments are prefaced with the words “I *am* the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex.20:1). The divine redemption comes before the divine rules. The covenant can then be summed up in two words – relationship (I will be your God and you shall be my people) and then rules (Therefore, thou shalt...thou shalt not...).

Not surprisingly these two ideas are prominent in the “Ark of the Covenant”. Indeed, we might say that it was so named because nowhere else were these two ideas of relationship and rules so clearly expressed in the nation. The Ark was the ultimate and highest expression of God’s presence with them and, as we shall see, it contained the laws which guided their relationship to Him.

**Figures of the True**

As the enfleshed Ark of the covenant, the Lord Jesus enfleshed both God’s presence with His people (Immanuel) and His laws for His people (“Yea that most holy law of thine I have within my heart” [Ps.40]). His great redemption brought God’s people into relationship with God and also gave them power to obey His rules out of love. “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him” (Jn.14:21).

***Let us thank God for bringing us out of the bondage of sin and into a relationship with Him through Christ. And, let us express our gratitude by living by the rules which He has provided for our good and His glory.***

**II. THE CHEST**

The Hebrew term for “ark” signifies a wooden chest or container of any sort. In this case it was a gold-covered wooden box (4.5 feet long, 2.5 feet wide, 2.5 feet high), and in it was deposited a copy of the commandments God gave to Israel (Ex.25:22). Aaron’s rod (signifying priestly leadership during the wilderness wanderings) and a golden pot of manna (signifying God’s provision in the wilderness) were deposited there temporarily, until the nation was established in the land with a king and temple (1Ki.8:9).

The most common name for the ark is “the ark of Testimony” (Ex.25:22), for in it were the two stone tablets of the law which testified to the Holy nature of God and His demands upon the people. As the visible symbol of God’s presence with the nation, it was to lead them whenever they went forward (Num.10:34-36). It was closely associated with the parting of the Jordan (Josh.3) and the fall of the walls of Jericho (Josh.6). Idols fell down in its presence (1 Sam.5:4), and men were cut down who handled it irreverently (2 Sam.3:6ff). However, it brought joy and blessing to both Gentiles and Jews who received it reverently (2 Sam.6:11-12).

### **Figures of the True**

Christ had the law in his heart perfectly and so testified to the Holy nature of God and His demands upon His people. He goes before His people as He leads them through the wilderness of this world, and across the Jordan into the promised land of heaven. He brings down the walls and idols of His enemies. He demands reverence and is a joy-filled blessing to both Jews and Gentiles who receive him with faith and worship.

***Let us worship the Christ who so perfectly testified to the holy nature of God and His holy demands. And let us follow Him as we journey on through the wilderness of this world, across the Jordan, and into our Promised Rest. May He be a joy-filled blessing to all who receive Him in faith. And, may He disperse all who oppose Him.***

### **III. THE COVERING**

If there was just a chest with the law in it there would have been no encouragement for sinners to approach God there, or even look to God there. Witnessing to their guilt and proclaiming their condemnation, the law could only thunder, condemn and terrify.

But, there is a covering! Having been placed in the Ark, the law was then covered with a golden lid, a slab of pure gold (Ex.25:17-21). In the King James version the Hebrew word for “covering” or “lid” is translated “mercy seat”, which explains its function. However, the literal translation is simply “covering” or “lid”. Being the same size as the ark, it fitted perfectly and so completely hid the law contained in it. And just to be sure, a golden rim encircled the edges of the ark to make sure that the lid stayed on.

However, more was needed than just hiding the law out of sight. The law needed to be satisfied. So, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the golden lid was sprinkled with sacrificial blood of atonement, so making the lid “the mercy seat”. It is the most important item of furniture in the whole Tabernacle. So much so, that in 1 Chron.28:11, the Tabernacle is designated “the place of the covering/mercy-seat”.

On this golden, blood-spattered mercy-seat, God met with and communed with His people (Ex.25:22). As such, it was His throne here on earth, a throne which spoke of God’s just demands and also of God’s merciful provision. God was able to dwell among sinners because he sat on a blood sprinkled throne of grace. On this throne, then, met the most contrary forces: law and mercy, righteousness and peace, God and sinners.

### **Figures of the True**

The Greek translation of the Old Testament (The Septuagint) translates “mercy-seat” with the same Greek word used in Romans 3:25 to describe Christ’s propitiation. In other words, Christ is our mercy seat, our propitiation. He is the blood-sprinkled golden lid which not only hides God’s demands upon sinners, but also satisfies them.

***“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb.4:16). In Christ meet the most contrary forces: law and mercy, righteousness and peace, God and sinners.***

#### **IV. THE CHERUBIM**

On either side of the mercy seat were two golden cherubim (Ex.25:18). Cherubim are usually associated with the administration of God's justice (Gen.3:34; Ezek.1:5-10; 10:7; 15:7). For example, in Genesis 3:24 they bare the flaming sword of vengeance and judgment in the aftermath of the first sin. However, in the Most Holy Place they are disarmed and their posture is not one of righteous hostility but of subdued wonder. They bow their heads as they gaze in holy contemplation upon the blood-stained golden mercy-seat covering the law of God.

The empty man-sized space above the mercy seat and between the cherubims was filled by a symbol of the glory of God, the glory-cloud which the Jews called the Shekinah (*lit.* the dwelling). From the words of Psalm 80:1 "Shine forth, thou that dwellest between the cherubim" it appears to have been a supernatural brightness or splendor, a very luminous object, resembling a bright cloud or flame.

#### **Figures of the True**

The redemption of the church is a matter of research and study, wonder and amazement to the angels of God. Peter tells us that the sufferings and glories of Christ are things which "the angels desire to look into" (1 Pet.1:11,12; cf. 1 Cor.4:9; Eph.3:10).

The "man Christ Jesus" came to fill the man-sized space and now shines forth from between the cherubims as the luminous and splendid glory of God.

In Revelation 11:19 we are told that even now in heaven can be seen the "ark of his testament". This of course cannot be the ark of Exodus 25. The symbol is gone. But the One symbolised remains forever. The wooden ark, covered with gold, sprinkled with blood, and enhanced by golden cherubim is gone. What it symbolised, however, remains forever – the everlasting covenant and the everlasting covenant keeper. There we see his humanity (the wood) and his divinity (the gold), a kept law, a slain Lamb, and a throne of grandeur, of glory, and above all of grace.

***Join the adoring cherubim as they reverently ponder the mystery and the wonder of salvation for sinners such as yourself.***

***Why not pray that He who dwells between the cherubim would "shine forth" into your life.***