

THE MYSTERY OF GOD

Part 5

Hebrews 10:1-10

For several weeks, prior to last Sunday, it has been my goal to awaken in you an awareness to what is called in the New Testament, “the mystery of God.” I have suggested that the Bible might very well be called, “the world’s greatest mystery book.” It is not an exaggeration to say that on almost every page of the Old Testament you will find threads, or clues pertaining to this wonderful mystery.

I want to be clear that when I speak about this “mystery.” I am not talking about something that is a mystery today. It is! It is a mystery today for many people but that is only because so many people are clueless about the true teaching of Scripture. When New Testament writers referred to the “mystery of God,” they were speaking or writing about that which had been hidden for ages, but had now been brought to light. They were referring to a plan that was conceived in the mind of God before the heavens and earth was created. They were referring to that which little by little had been revealed through the prophets and writers of the Old Testament scriptures. These writers not only lived through many of those providentially arranged sequence of events, they passed on God’s very thoughts and ideas about those events. What was revealed to them was that God had put into motion a plan by which all men could be forgiven of their sins and saved eternally. That plan would have as its crowning act, the incarnation of God Himself, and His subsequent taking upon Himself the punishment of death due to everyone who has sinned against him.

All of that was wondrously unveiled and prefigured for mankind in the many things written in the Old Testament. For example, take the matter of the exodus; the rescue of the descendants of Abraham from captivity in Egypt. This is told in the book that is called Exodus but how and why those descendants were in captivity in the first place is told in the book that is called Genesis. That rescue, brought about by a man named Moses, really wasn’t just about those people. It was a perfect preview of the rescue God would bring about some 1600 years later in the death of Christ on the cross. Although it prefigured the sacrifice of Christ, the rescue of Israel from Egypt was one of the many links in the chain of events leading to that ultimate event that took place on the cross. The Old Testament is filled with all sorts of things like that.

So, many times when we are reading those scriptures, what we initially see or understand is simply connected to an immediate context. However, when we understand what God was doing, and we begin to connect the dots, then we begin to see all of those things were the threads with which God was weaving His great tapestry of redemption. They were also clues pointing towards Jesus so that when He came, men would recognize him and understand what He came to do.

This morning I want to continue looking at some of those amazing things that foreshadowed Christ; his coming and his death upon the cross. We have talked about the many prophecies regarding Christ and His kingdom. Last time I shared with you about a number of characters in the Old Testament that foreshadowed Christ; men like Isaac, Moses, Melchizedek, Elijah, Joshua, David and many others. Study what is told about those men, and you will easily see each one of them giving us a preview of the Savior who was to come, and who in fact, did come. Today I want to spend our time looking at a number of things, rather than people, that also prefigured the coming of Christ.

One of the most amazing examples of this is something called the “ark of the covenant” and the “mercy seat.” You can read about this first in the book of **Exodus, chapter 25:10-22**. It was a chest not quite four feet wide, two feet high and two feet in depth. It was to be made of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold, inside and out.

(Incidentally, do you suppose it would have been okay if Moses had made it out of oak, or pine, or some other kind of wood? Why did it have to be acacia? Did God have to tell Moses not to make it out of oak or pine? No, when he told to make it out of acacia, that specified the kind of wood God wanted, and eliminated any other kind of wood.)

There are some other things we are told about that ark, but in verse 16 we learn that in that chest was to be put the law or testimony that God would give to Moses.

But then, beginning in verse 17, God goes on to give Moses directions for making a top to that chest; He calls it a mercy seat. This lid, as it were, was made of pure gold, and fashioned into that solid piece of gold were two figures in the form of angels, or cherubs. One cherub was fashioned at one end of the top, and the other at the opposite end. They faced each other with wings extended, as it were, overshadowing the mercy seat.

Now look at **verse 22**. God says, *“There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.”* This was to be the place where God would speak to Moses and make known to him all that he wanted the Israelites to know and do. This ark, with its mercy seat covering was to be placed in a very special place called “the holy of holies.”

Let’s think about this tabernacle a little bit. First of all, the Tabernacle God had Moses build was essentially a movable tent. It was approximately 45 feet long, 15 feet wide and 15 feet high. Around that tent was an outer court and in that court were two items: an altar of bronze covered wood which was used for the many sacrifices that would be made by the Israelites through the priests. There was also a bronze basin of water in which the priests would wash their hands and feet before they entered the larger room of the tabernacle to perform their rituals and service. Inside the tabernacle was a room called “the Holy Place.” In that room there was a lampstand, a table for some showbread, and a bronze altar for burning incense. At the back of that room was another room called the Most Holy Place, or the Holy of Holies.” In that room was just one item, and that was the Ark of the Covenant with the mercy seat on top.

Moses was told to warn Aaron, the high priest, and his sons, and all future high priests that they were not to enter that room at any time except at the appointed time of the year—the day of atonement—which was the 10th day of the seventh month.

What happened on that day was very interesting. First of all this was the day when Aaron or later high priests would offer sacrifices for all the people of the nation. There were many other times and types of sin-offerings, but this particular sacrifice was for all the sins of all the people.

The sacrifice on the Day of Atonement consisted of a bull and two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering. The high priest would first of all have to bathe himself before putting on special clothing, both inner and outer garments. He would then bring the bull to the altar in front of the tabernacle and kill it there as a sacrifice for himself and his family. He would then take the two goats and casting lots, set one apart to be used as a sin-offering, and the other as something called Azazel, or scapegoat. He was then to take some of the coals from the altar on which the bull had been offered, along with two handfuls of incense, and he was to enter the holy of holies, burning the incense in a censer so that its aroma would fill the room in which the mercy seat was placed.

He was then to take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat, and he was to do that seven times. He would then go back outside and kill the goat that had been chosen by lot to be the sin-offering. He would take some of its blood...

Some of you are probably thinking to yourself, “What’s with all the blood???” Well, trust me, there’s a connection, but I don’t have time this morning to really get into that, but it is an amazing study!

Anyway, the high priest would take some of the blood of the sin-offering, and return to the holy of holies, and do what he did with the blood of the bull. Moses was told, this was to be done each year to make atonement for the holy place because of all the uncleanness of the people, and their sins. He was then to go back out and sprinkle the sin-offering blood upon the altar to cleanse it, and when he was through with all of that—offering the bull for himself and his household, offering the sin-offering for the tabernacle and the altar of burnt offering—then he was present the scapegoat. He would lay both hands on the head of the live goat, and confess all of the sins of the people of Israel, placing them, as it were, on the head of the goat, which was then sent away into the wilderness, symbolically suggesting that their sins had been removed.

Now, don’t you know, as Moses received all of these instructions that he had to wonder what any of this, or all of this was about! Don’t you know that he must have thought to himself that the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat must have been the most holy, the most sacred thing in the world. Do you suppose that he had any idea that God’s plan of redemption for the sins of the world was being shown to him? Think about it, do you suppose he had any idea?

Peter tells us something in 1 Peter 1:12 that the angels had longed to look into those things that were now being proclaimed by the apostles and faithful Christians. Think about how even that was hinted at by the cherubim that adorned the top of the mercy seat. As it were, those figures symbolized the angels trying to see into the mystery, understand what God was doing! Did they know, until they were sent to herald the birth of the Son of God Himself just how God's mercy would triumph over law?

Don't you see? Man's problem is what? Man's problem is sin, isn't it? Well, what is sin? John tells us in 1 John 3:4 that sin is a transgression of God's law. Sin is a failure to do what is right, what God requires of us.

And what are the wages of sin? You know, don't you? Romans 6:23 makes it very plain. The wages of sin is death. So, if you are sinner, and we all are, then we deserve to die. We deserve the punishment of death. We deserve God's wrath to come upon us and destroy us. We know that, don't we? I'm not saying we fully understand that, but we know we are sinners and we know that if we get what we really deserve, we will be separated from God and punished forever in a place that was really made as a place to punish the devil and the angels that have followed him.

We know that! We don't like it, obviously, but in our heart of hearts, we know it is true. But in God's heart, He also knows that it is true, and He can't just say "Kings X." He can't just say, "That's okay. I forgive you." He can't just say that because He is a God in whom there is no darkness. He is a holy God, and He has never ignored sin, any sin! The Bible says, every sin must be punished!

If Adam and Eve got punished for eating some forbidden fruit, don't you think you might be in real trouble for all of the lying, and lusting, and leaving undone all of the good things you should have done, as well as for all of the ways you have ignored Him and resisted His overtures of love again and again? Do you really think that you somehow deserve forgiveness and eternal salvation?

So the only hope that any of us had, or have, is that somehow God's mercy really does triumph over God's law, which is what the ark of the covenant covered by the mercy seat symbolized. But how could that be? We have already said, God could not just forgive sin without some kind of punishment. God has spoken: "The wages of sin is death." "In the day that you eat of that tree, you will surely die."

So how could God find a way to forgive men their sins without being unjust and untrue to His own eternal nature? Well, we know, don't we? Before He cast the first sunbeam, or fashioned the first star, or tree, God planned for a Day of Atonement! He would do what was prefigured in that ancient right in that old tabernacle. He Himself would become the lamb that takes away the sins of the world.

That's what John the Baptist said about Him wasn't it? "*Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" Jesus came to offer himself to God as both the sin bearer and a sin-offering. Interestingly He was also the high priest! Look at **Hebrews 8:1**. After talking about Christ being the fulfillment of the promise made to David that one of his descendants would be seated upon his throne, and become a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, 8:1 says, "*Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister (or priest) in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.*" We have such a high priest!

Now look at **9:11 & 12**: "*But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) Hebrews 9:12) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.*" Don't you see, our high priest didn't have to offer a sacrifice for his own sins because He didn't have any sins. So what did he do? He offered his own blood. We are back to the blood again!

So what's with the blood?

Do you recall that the Israelites were forbidden to eat anything with the blood in it. Why was that? **Leviticus 17:14** says, "*For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.*"

The blood of a creature, or the blood of a person represented the life of a creature, or the life of a person. Since God is the author of life, and as **John 1:4** tells us, "*In Him*—that is, in Christ—*was life*," that tells us that the life-blood of anything or anyone really represented God and belonged exclusively to God. Such was the case of the numerous sacrifices of the Mosaic system. The blood was only and always offered up to God, or as a symbol that that which was sprinkled by the blood belongs exclusively to God.

So Christ came to offer His blood, His life, and while the Israelites, under the first covenant were forbidden to eat or drink blood, what did Christ give His disciples to drink? A cup that represented His blood! Think about that! Let your mind and heart ponder that for a few days!

As the high priest Christ offered His blood, the blood of a sinless lamb. There is an interesting verse in **1 John 2:2**, where John writes: "*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*" That word for propitiation is a form of the word that is translated elsewhere as mercy seat. Paul says the same thing in Romans 3:25, which tells us that the mercy seat of the Old Testament prefigured the offering of Christ. Christ is how God's mercy would triumph over God's law.

Not only, however, was Christ the sin-offering, He also became the scape-goat. That is, upon him was laid the sins of us all. Isn't that what **Isaiah 53** said? It says, "*4) Surely he has borne*

our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5) But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6) All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Galatians 3:13 says, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"--*

Listen, as I once again read the words of **Hebrews 10:1-10**:

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. 2) Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? 3) But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4) For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. 5) Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; 6) in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. 7) Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" 8) When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), 9) then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. 10) And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Well, in lessons yet to come, I want to share some more some of these shadows and prefigurements of our Lord that are found in the Old Testament. There is a whole book full of them. Think about the veil of the temple, or that brazen serpent, or the manna in the wilderness, or any one of a number of things.

Do you remember what Jesus said in **John 5:39**? Talking to a group of Jews who were supposed to be experts in the scripture who could quote the fathers and the prophets, Jesus said they had missed the most important point. He said, "*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.*"

I don't want us to miss the point! I don't want us to sit here, week after week, year after year and never ever really see what this was all about. I don't want us living our lives till we take a last breath and never ever really understand what happened! I want us to get into the Word—really into the word—and really begin to see what God moved heaven and earth to show us, and that is His Son!

Are you a Christian? Have you made up your minds your want to be Christ's disciple, knowing and understanding how His blood shed on the cross made it possible for God to forgive you of every sin when you put your faith in Christ and do your best to obey His every command. Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Put your faith in Him as the Son of God

and the one whose death on the cross satisfied the justice of God. Repent of your every sin, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins. Take you place among the people of Christ, in the church of Christ, and serve Him the rest of your days with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength.

If you would like to respond this morning, please come while we stand and sing!