

The Ark: Kingship and Covenant

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[0 : 0 0] So, again, just to remind us, Alec Mateer had that helpful idea that the tabernacle is the greatest of all biblical visual aids to spiritual realities, that we can look at the details of the tabernacle and discover truths for our lives, truths about the gospel.

But let's begin this evening going on a guided tour. So imagine we are approaching the tabernacle complex. The first thing we would come to would be the outer courtyard, and there would be a curtain that we could then go through in order to access. From there, we would then come to the tabernacle tent itself. Again, there'd be another curtain we could enter.

And then right at the heart of the tabernacle, as we moved in, we would come to another, the final curtain. Beyond that curtain lies the Holy of Holies. And the thing that's so surprising that would have surprised people, were they able to enter that, compared to every other temple in the ancient Near East, behind the curtain, at the center of the tent, there was not a statue of a god. Instead, there was this small, beautiful box holding a copy of the Ten Commandments. This is utterly unique. Israel's worship is unique because they don't have an image of God. Everybody else would have expected the big statue, but they have the ark. That's how we would probably do a guided tour. We'd begin on the outside and we move in. But actually, when you look at the book of Exodus, Moses, as he writes it, begins at the center, begins at the heart. So the first thing that is detailed and the first thing that is constructed is the ark, because the ark is the symbol of God's presence and God's rule. And this ark is the way for us to understand this new relationship that God has entered into with his people, which is a covenant relationship. We're going to think about that. So it's a really significant box. Of course, the ark has been a source of endless fascination. For those of us who grew up with a golden age of movies in the 80s and 90s, Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark was huge.

And then it's really interesting, if you ever had time, look at the history of the 20th century for the number of times that people went to search for the lost ark. All kinds of schemes to try and find this ark. But we want to understand why does it matter for an Old Testament worshiper? What did it signify? And then how does it matter to us? What does it teach us about Jesus and the gospel?

So we're going to trace together briefly four ideas that we find from the ark. We're going to think about kingship and covenant and atonement and access. So some huge themes that we're going to cover very briefly. But let's begin thinking about the ark and kingship. So as I said, unlike all other temples in the day, Israel's tabernacle tent is unique because there is no idol or statue there. So we might ask, well, how is kingship shown by the ark, by this box? Well, the first thing perhaps that strikes us is the gold. So look at verse 11, overlay it with pure gold both inside and out and make a gold molding around it. And gold from the very beginning has been associated with glory and royalty and also with purity. There's an interesting little detail that the box has feet. And so people have asked, why is there feet on the box? And I think it was probably to avoid any contamination from putting the ark on the ground. So it's a purity thing. And it's the same reason why there are these poles to carry the ark, that this is where God's presence, God's holy presence is represented, therefore it cannot be defiled. So the gold helps us to think about glory and kingship. Secondly, there's the cherubim on the top. Verse 19, make one cherub on one end, the second on the other, and they've got those wings that spread and overshadow the ark. We meet cherubim through the Old Testament, the first place we meet them all the way back outside the Garden of Eden. Once Adam and Eve have sinned against God and they are thrown out of the sanctuary, the holy place, as judgment, then there are the cherubim, Genesis 3, 24, to guard the garden. God's holy place cannot be defiled. But we understand that the cherubim represents something of the rule of God. They are His royal attendants. And then the significance of the cherubim really becomes clear in 1 Samuel 4 and verse 4. As they're talking about the ark and what the ark represents, it is said there that God is enthroned between the cherubim. So when we think of the ark, we think of the gold, we think of the cherubim, we are invited to think of this is God's throne. This is the place where He rules from. And we're also told in this little section, what is the foundation of God's rule? And we find that in verses 16 and 17. For the people of God who have been redeemed by His grace, there are two things. Put in the ark, first of all, the tablets of the covenant law, and then they are to make an atonement cover. So there is a covenant law to keep.

[6 : 32] Here is how to live in relationship with God. Keep the law. And wonderfully, graciously, for when that law is broken, there is the atonement cover. There is a place where sin can be atoned for, where forgiveness can be found. So that's just a little on the ark and kingship. On a related theme, let's think together about the ark and what it says to us about covenant.

Our legal contracts, if we've ever entered into a legal contract, perhaps with a mortgage or something like that, are going to be held securely in a legal office somewhere, a record of binding agreements between a bank and a person or a company and an individual, they're going to be recorded and kept securely somewhere. The ark functions in some ways like a safety deposit box, because within the ark, there is the covenant agreement that has been entered into between God and His people.

Just help us think about that. What is this idea of covenant and a covenant relationship? So presupposing where we're at just now is the fact that God, by His grace, has chosen to save a people for Himself.

So He has saved Israel out of slavery, brought them to Himself, has met with them in the wilderness, established a new relationship, established a new relationship with them, and has given them the covenant law, the Ten Commandments as the great summary of that. So a covenant, simply put, is an agreement between God and people where God promises blessing if His conditions are kept and threatens curses when His conditions are broken. And so we see that through the Old Testament. This is how to understand what's going on. So the covenant contract in the ark, you know, God has been faithful, God has saved them, God has established this relationship, and now here is what Israel is to do, to keep the terms of the covenant, to love God and to love their neighbor. And so the ark speaks of a covenant relationship, and it speaks of covenant obedience that is required.

And that's why the next thing we need to think about is so important, because we move from there to think about the ark and atonement. So, so far we have at the heart of Israel's worship this ark, this box, this chest as a symbol, that God is present and He rules as King, that God has entered into covenant relationship. And the tablets in the ark, and the tablets in the ark stand as evidence, and they stand as the requirements if the people are to enjoy blessing. And God is enthroned above the ark and the law.

[9 : 58] From His throne, what does the Holy God see? As He looks down, as He looks around, as He looks at His people, sadly we know that He sees that His people break those covenant conditions.

that His people don't live in obedience. They don't live with love for God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and they don't love their neighbor as themselves. The people of God have broken the covenant contract. If we were to fast forward to Exodus 32, the sad incident of the golden calf, Moses is up meeting with God at Mount Sinai, the people say, Moses has been away for a long time, let's make a calf that in some way represents God. And they begin this kind of revelry and wild, immoral worship, and God tells Moses to go down, and He sees what's happening. And remember, as He sees what's happening, He smashes the tablets with the Ten Commandments. It's really an enacted symbol that God's people that God's people have smashed the covenant by their disobedience.

But the thing that's so important for us to understand is that's not just an Old Testament Israelite problem. That's a universal problem. That we are made in God's image to glorify Him, to live in obedience to Him, to live worshipping Him.

But just like Israel, we too break those commands. We break faith with God. We dishonor God in our thoughts and our words and our actions. Remember what God is like. Think about that golden ark. He is pure. He is holy. He is the king. He is ultimate authority.

His law has been broken. He must judge what is evil and harmful and wrong and disobedient. And if we only had the box with no cover, we would be in trouble.

[12 : 25] That this box has a lid is of crucial importance to the good news of our salvation, to the story of human history.

The ark needs its lid if we can ever know God and live at peace with Him. If we can ever hope to find forgiveness and to enjoy life with Him.

Verse 17, make an atonement cover of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide. Indeed, this will become the place of atonement.

A few weeks ago, we were in Leviticus 16, thinking about the day of atonement. That one day in the year where the priests could enter in, and there had to be the right washings, and there had to be right sacrifices, and the blood was sprinkled so that the people could be forgiven, that all the uncleanness could be dealt with.

It happens here, on the atonement cover. Forgiveness secured at the cost of the blood of a substitute.

[13 : 39] And notice in verse 17, if you were to compare the dimensions with verse 10, this lid is an exact fit. And that's so important for us to know, that the blood of the sacrifice will be an exact fit, an exact payment to cover over and to atone for a broken law.

And then we have this detail in verse 20 of the cherubim with their wings spread upwards, overshadowing the cover. I was thinking all week, what's the significance of this overshadowing?

Well, I think it speaks to the significance of atonement. Because at this atonement cover, the sinner who has broken the law can be shadowed and shielded from the just judgment of a holy God.

Because now, when God looks down from His throne, He doesn't just see a law that has been broken. He also sees that a sacrifice has been made, that blood has been shed, that a worshiper who trusts by faith, though a sinner, is shielded and safe because of the ark and because of the atonement cover.

And again, related to this in part, fourthly, is the idea of the ark and access.

[15 : 24] Now, the curtains aren't mentioned here, but we need to think about the curtains, and we need to think about doorways as well. So, we know this. Doors can be both a place of entrance, but sometimes a place of not entering.

You know, sometimes you'll come to a door and the sign will say, staff only, and you'll find the door is locked, or access for authorized personnel only. You'll go to a shop and you'll see that it's closed and you can't get in.

When the tabernacle is constructed, there is a sense in which the curtains have that same message. So, while it was possible for anybody to enter into the outer courtyard through the first curtain, there was only a certain type of people, if they were ritually clean and pure, who could enter into the tabernacle tent itself.

But absolutely, when you came to the final curtain, it stood as a great big no entry sign, except for one day every year, when it became an authorized personnel only sign, because the high priest could go through on the day of atonement, to offer that sacrifice, to sprinkle the blood so that sin could be forgiven, that moral guilt could be dealt with.

And so, you've got this tension within Old Testament worship in the tabernacle, that at one and the same time, God is both absolutely at home with His people.

[16 : 53] So, we thought about that last week. Here's God's tent, and all the tents of Israel are right around it. God has mercifully come down to be right at home with His people. But the curtain also says, no entry.

There is a limit. Verse 22, as God speaks with Moses, He says, They are above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law.

I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites. So, wonderfully, Moses enjoys the presence of God. He enjoys relationship with God. But, Moses cannot enter.

He's not the high priest. Once the... I was thinking about this this week. Once the tabernacle is built, once the curtains are up, Moses will never see the ark again.

Whenever it moves, it's always covered. So, he sees God with the eyes of faith. But there's a sense in which God is both at home, but there's a limitation of access for the Old Testament worshiper.

[18 : 03] So, the ark speaks to us of a king who's in covenant relationship with His people. He has saved them. He comes to be among them. But, as yet, there's no direct access. And that will continue to be the case until the coming of Jesus.

Jesus, our great covenant king, who is God with us in a whole new way, who is the means by which, as the author of Hebrews says, we can boldly approach God's throne of grace with confidence, because we come by way of Christ.

So, let's think together about how Jesus fulfills all that the ark pictures as we think about Jesus, our great covenant king. Because the gospels, of course, show us that Jesus is God's king.

The ark represents kingship. Jesus comes as the king. And His message, as He begins, repent and believe the good news, the kingdom of God is near, because the king has come to be with His people.

In the gospels, He is clearly identified as the Messiah, as the Christ, the anointed, promised king. We discover in the gospels that angels attend King Jesus.

[19 : 15] He's there at the birth stories. He makes sure that infant Jesus is protected. He's there at the angels are there at Gethsemane, giving comfort and strength to Jesus as He anticipates bearing the sin of the world and its guilt.

And the angels are there to report His resurrection. And, of course, the gospels themselves, as we consider the life of Jesus, they speak to Him as our, they speak of Jesus as our glorious King.

And so, as we come into the New Testament, now we see Jesus is how God meets with us. Jesus is how God speaks to us. Jesus is the one we are called to obey, and Jesus is the one we look to for mercy when we break the law and fall into sin.

Jesus is head of His church. Jesus comes to be enthroned in the praises of His people, and wonderfully, comes to be enthroned in the hearts of His people also.

That's how near our God and King come. And Jesus is the King who comes to establish a new covenant with His people. It's there in the language of the Lord's Supper.

[20 : 31] The broken bread and the cup of wine become symbols of His broken body and His shed blood, which are themselves the means for the new covenant to be established.

The law in our hearts, the Spirit given so we can truly obey. And then we think about the cross. We think about His sacrificial death.

And we recognize there in the providence and the mercy of God, here is the exact payment to cover all of our sin and all of our guilt.

The Bible is really clear about sin. Every sin, even the ones that we minimize and say they're no big deal, they are an infinite offense to an infinitely holy God. But in God's kindness, He has given His own Son, the sinless Son of God, and He lays down His life as an infinitely valuable sacrifice.

This is the only payment that will satisfy God's justice and will demonstrate God's great love so that now as the Lord looks down from heaven, from His throne, He doesn't just see that we are lawbreakers.

[21 : 42] He sees that Jesus has given Himself as a sacrifice. The sacrifice has been made so that He can be merciful. That God Himself has provided the Lamb so the guilty can find grace.

For us, the cross stands as our great atonement cover and mercy seat. So that when God looks at us as we are in Christ, when God looks at the Christian, He sees us.

As we truly are, and sometimes we struggle to see ourselves this way. I was reminded this week of Heidelberg Catechism number 60. Let me share that with us.

God, without any merit of mine, the catechism says, but only of sheer grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, even so, as if I never had had nor committed any sin.

Yes, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me, inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.

[23 : 02] by faith, we believe that Jesus' blood and righteousness overshadows us. We believe with John Newton and with our closing hymn that though our sins are many, His mercy is more.

So that as we look to Jesus by faith, our Father in heaven can be as pleased with us as He is with His Son, Jesus. He can love us as He loves His Son, the Lord Jesus.

And the result of the atoning work of the Lord Jesus, we have a new access. We have a new privilege that wasn't given to the Old Testament worshiper.

Remember that curtain that stood as a no-entry sign at the Holy of Holies. Author of Hebrews says that also represents the Lord Jesus Christ.

So in Mark chapter 15 tells us that as Jesus breathed His last on Mount Calvary and down there in the temple the curtain was torn from top to bottom, we're to see the connection.

[24 : 17] That the curtain is torn, Jesus' body is torn, opening up the way to God. Jesus is the one way, the living way into the very presence of God.

We can boldly come through the Lord Jesus and His sacrifice. So as wonderful as the ark was for an Old Testament worshiper, at the heart of our faith, at the heart of our worship, is someone greater by far than this ark.

The Lord Jesus who comes to rule in our hearts, to bring us into covenant relationship, who calls us to obey His word, to live with love for God and for others, to live in holiness, and who graciously has provided for us when we fail to do that.

and through Him, and only through Him, we're welcomed all the way in to life, to a home with our God.