

- The Mercy Seat

Leviticus 16:1-2; Romans 3:21-25

Yom Kippur, Sunday, September 24, 2023 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Introduction: Atonement answers the yearning to know God and yet survive.

This is the week of Yom Kippur in the Jewish Calendar. It is the religious New Year and a day of great significance. Still celebrated by fasting and spiritual worship to this day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement was the day when the High Priest would sprinkle the blood of sacrifice upon the cover of the Ark of the Covenant and thus cover the sins of the people and then meet with God who would appear in the smoke of incense over the ark. It was dangerous, but necessary. Atonement answers the yearning to know God and yet survive. It has great relevance to the privilege that we have in prayer today.

- Catch 22

It is also a Catch 22. Author Bernard Glassman wrote this brief description of the famous novel of the same name. "Joseph Heller wrote a wonderful satirical novel by that name. It's how the phrase got into the vocabulary. I don't want to oversimplify what is a terrific reading experience, but the plot gimmick is that military pilots were being ordered to fly extremely dangerous missions. It was possible to get out of flying the mission if you were crazy. However, if you asked to be excused on the grounds that you were crazy, that proved that you were concerned about your safety. If you were concerned about your safety, you were sane. Sane enough to fly. Unless you were crazy. The classic double-bind. Catch-22 was the imaginary regulation that made it impossible to get out of flying, even while offering the apparent route to being exempted."*

- The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement answered a Catch 22 in that people have a desperate, even existential need to meet with God. Some would deny that, but I believe it to be true. Moses, in Exodus 33 spoke with God in which God said that He would bless him and bless Israel from afar for they were stubborn and sinful and His Presence would be dangerous to them. Moses would have none of it. If the Presence of God is not among the people, there was, to Moses, no point in continuing, but as we will see, the Presence can be dangerous.

- The Mercy Seat

In the days of the Tabernacle, and for many years thereafter, the heart of the worship place in Israel was the Ark of the Covenant, where the high priest entered annually to meet with God. In Leviticus 10, two of Aaron's sons attempted to burn incense in this part of the Tabernacle, contrary to the instructions of God and they did not survive the encounter. Their cousins had to drag them out of the Holy of Holies and it left Aaron not only bereft of his sons, but concerned about how he was to do his duties as high priest and survive the Presence of God?

Leviticus 16

In Leviticus 16, God instructs Aaron and reminds him that sins must be covered to safely enter the Presence of God and that they are covered by the blood of animal sacrifice. With the blood sprinkled on the top of the Ark, the "Mercy Seat," Aaron could enter and meet with God as He speaks from the top of the Ark. Meeting with the Presence of God was only possible with the blood on the Mercy Seat

Romans 3

These ancient concepts continue in the New Testament in Romans 3:23-25, where Paul wrote: "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set for as a propitiation by His blood through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed." That funny word, "propitiation" literally means "mercy seat." The whole understanding that to reach the presence of God requires the giving of blood in sacrifice is not an ancient religious/cultural relic but an ongoing principle that is not practiced in the Christian church because it was fulfilled once for all, not by the sacrifice of animals but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The entire privilege of prayer is based on this.

- Application

The application is to appreciate prayer for the wonderful grace that it is, based on Jesus and what He did, without which we would forever be seeking the Presence that we could never enter, like a Catch 22. Appreciate and be thankful for the atonement provided by Christ, and expect God to reveal more the Presence to you, for that Atonement makes that available to you. Pray mindful not only of the great cost and privilege it is but pray also considering where it leads. Note 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 1 Corinthians 13:12 we shall finally see Him face to face.

- Conclusion

Catch 2, the classic novel wasn't very biblical in scope but there is a Catch 22 in the Bible. We exist to meet with, worship, fellowship and serve Almighty God yet we cannot be in His Presence for nothing sinful can survive His Presence. The answer was the blood on the Mercy Seat, featured in the Old Testament but not discarded in irrelevant for it points to and is fulfilled by the death and resurrection of Christ. It offers to us, among many other graces, constant access to God in prayer, such is the value and the lesson of the Mercy Seat.

*[Bernard Glassman](https://www.quora.com/What-is-a-catch-22-and-what-are-some-examples-of-it) <https://www.quora.com/What-is-a-catch-22-and-what-are-some-examples-of-it>