

Mercy's Seat

by Thom Gardner

You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide..." Ex 25:17

From the moment *we* drew *His* first breath, God could not take his eyes off of us. We looked just like Him. God was filled with love for man—for us—for you. We were the capstone of His creation, created for connection with our Creator.

When I read the account of creation I see the Eternal God, in the flesh, walking to a little bare spot in the midst of paradise. With His heart filled with excitement and love God put His hand into the red, dry, disincorporate particles of red dust and scooped some up into His palms. He closed those palms slightly forming a cup to hold the dust. Then pulling his palms toward his mouth, God began to exhale onto the dust in the cup of His own hands. After a few gentle breaths the condensation of God's own breath moistened the dry dust. Our Creator-God gently pressed His hands together causing the moisture of His own breath and the red dust of Eden to bond together. God worked the clay and formed it into something that would resemble Himself. Who else would you model your creation after if you were God? He stood back and looked at us and said something like, "*This is good.*"

Created for Him

We were the product of God's own breath—the Artist's rendition of Himself. From the moment He saw us He could not take His eyes off of us—off of *you*!

Why would God breathe His very breath into us only to walk away and let us run like some kind of clock that He stops by to rewind at random intervals? We are His! It is the very breath of God that forms us and the breath of God that wells up in us when we worship Him. Our worship is

merely the return of the breath that formed us in the beginning—our exhalation for His exaltation. Repeat after me, "*Hhhhhhaallelujah*"

God's greatest desire—His relentless passion among us men is to be with us and to have us with Him. From beginning to end, our Father God has wanted to be among us. In the Torah He says, "*I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.*" (Lev 26:12), and near the end of the New Testament John the beloved says "*Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.*" (Rev 21:3-4 NLT) God wants us to be with Him the same way we want our children to be with us. It is God's passion to be with us; the ones created and fashioned to be like Him and with Him.

Before He put His hand in the red dust of Eden to form man, God had made the decision that whatever it took He was going to be in fellowship with us. God had chosen us to be in His intimate presence before the foundation of the world...In love. (Eph 1:4) He was prepared to send a Lamb to the slaughter before He invented lambs (Revelation 13:9) to maintain the connection. All because He loves us. He can't help Himself: He is love! (1 John 4:8,16)

God is love, but He is also completely holy and righteous—totally flawless and altogether lovely. There is no darkness in God at all—no kind of shadowy doubt or variation. (1 John 1:5, James 1:17) We cannot say the same of man. After the fall, man was far from holy. His heart was filled with darkness and fear, though God had gone to extraordinary lengths to display His love for him. Man's nature was not going to change and neither would God's. God could not become less than He was and still be God. But there was still that matter of God's breath that was invested in us that draws

us back together. But how can a holy God be in the company of an unholy people? How could eternal perfection dwell among corrupt imperfection?

There was only one way for God and man to live together and that was that God was going to have to make the first move; again. God was going to have to get His hands dirty once as He did at first when He picked up that dust and breathed into it. Our fellowship with God lay in His hand. If God was to rescue our communion with Him He would have to reach into the very depths of His character and release His sovereign creative love on us. The same love from which we were created was going to be the very thing that would allow us to be with Him. *Love* moved out of the heart of God to draw us back to Him and became *mercy*.

God was so set on being with us that He relayed instructions through Moses to His people to build a sanctuary so that He could “*dwell among them*.” And in the heart of that sanctuary was created a venue through which a perfect and holy God could meet with imperfect and fallen man: the mercy seat.

The Mercy Seat

God commanded His people to build a seat—a place for His feet to rest. Heaven is His throne, but earth is His footstool. (Isaiah 66:1) We must meet the feet of God if we are to see the face of God. The mercy seat is the place where Heaven meets earth—where the Eternal pitches His tent among the temporal—the incorruptible among the corruptible. It is the governmental seat of His heart. The mercy seat is where God is discloses Himself—where He makes Himself vulnerable to a chosen and needy people.

When we look at the mercy seat we can recognize three main themes: The mercy of God, the presence of God, and the enthronement of God. God wants to love us, to be with us, and reign over us in love. The mercy seat was inspired by the needs of both God and man. God's need was for fellowship with His creation and man's total depravity that would not allow him to approach the throne of God. The first and primary aspect of the mercy seat is mercy.

The Mercy of God

Mercy is the Divine instinct—the very heart of God. It is not native to our fallen carnal nature. It is much higher—beyond us. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness (mercy) toward those who fear (tremble in awe of) Him. (Ps 103:11) God is full of mercy—rich in mercy! (Ephesians 2:4)

What is God's mercy? Though this whole book is written to try and define mercy, it might be helpful to have a simple and basic definition of it. In the most general sense, **Mercy is the sovereign love of God flowing toward the need of man.** Love and need are the key words where mercy is concerned.

The mercy of God is artificial respiration where God breathes into us as the wounds and life have knocked the breath out of us. By mercy, God breathes into us re-inflating our spiritual lungs with His own breath.

The mercy of God flows out of love of God which is His very nature. Mercy is the active, kinetic expression of love that flows toward our need much as electricity flows to a darkened light bulb. Without the mercy of God we are in the darkness.

Love precedes mercy as it says so many times throughout the Bible.

Remember me for this also, O my God, and **show mercy to me according to your great love.** (Nehemiah 3:22)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. (Psalm 51:1)

“But God, being **rich in mercy**, because of His **great love** with which He loved us...” or

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:4-5)

Mercy is love that moves the heart of the Father. When God hears the cries of His own children He moves in mercy to pick them up much like a father or mother would pick up a crying child. It is the need of the child that touches and alarms the instinct of the parent. The parent does not launch

into a theological or philosophical debate as to the worthiness of that child; neither does God.

Throughout the Bible God is displaying His love through mercy toward those in some kind of need. Psalm 68: 5-6, says that God is *“A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, Is God in His holy habitation. 6 God makes a home for the lonely; He leads out the prisoners into prosperity, Only the rebellious dwell in a parched land.”* (Ps 68:5-6) (See also Hosea 14:3). All of these are in places of helplessness—those who live beyond their own ability to do for themselves. God allows His love to flow toward the poor (Dan 4:27).

Mercy is the fragrance of God's love that overwhelms the need of the world. Mercy carries the fragrance of God to the nostrils of the needy. Mercy is a God thing. It's very hard for us humans to get a hold of it. We need it—and seldom willingly extend it. Mercy is not natural—not reasonable.

Mercy is the single most important facet of relationships of all kinds. It acts in love despite hurt or offense. The scriptures tell us that *“love is as strong as death”* (Song of Songs 8:6), or we might say that mercy, which is the outworking of love, is able to overcome the death that works through our carnal natures. Mercy is the glue that keeps our love honest toward each other. Love cannot exist, indeed is not really love unless it is guaranteed by mercy.

Mercy is the decision to become weak —to become vulnerable to the vulnerable. Paul tells us that he himself became weak to the weak to win them to Christ. (1 Corinthians 9:22) His love for them was stronger than their offense to him.

Mercy is the delight of God's heart. The prophet says, *“You delight to show mercy.”* (Micah 7:18 KJV) NASU translates it, *“You delight in unchanging love”*, which is a good sense of mercy because it does not change the nature or the intensity of love despite sin and circumstance. God is bent toward mercy because we need it.

Presence

“Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them.” Ex 25:8

Mercy is not a theological term, but an active one. Though mercy is a noun, it functions more like a verb. Mercy does not reside between the covers of systematic theology; **mercy must be shown.** To show mercy means that we have to get our hands dirty just like God did at creation. It implies a chosen closeness to the one we love in order to meet the need. God's mercy seat was a place where He could be close to those who needed Him and who acknowledged that need.

The mercy seat was a place of presence. In a Hebrew sense, personal presence and face were the same thing. The word panim has been translated as face (Gen 17:3) or presence (Gen 4:16). When we are in the presence of someone we are in their face. God met Moses face to face—presence to presence. It would not work if only God showed up. Moses had to be present as well to be shown mercy. We must draw near to God to find his mercy—we must get in his face.

God had Israel erect a meeting place—a place of connection and vulnerability for God. The mercy seat was the place of God's face among men. He could have stayed in Heaven and minded His own business dispatching unrepentant souls to Hell and the devil. But instead, God risked all and took a seat in the midst of rebellious people. He came where we were because both God and man needed Him to be there. We cannot help ourselves and neither can God help loving us out of his own nature.

Jesus' ministry was the expression of mercy of the Father. Jesus healed the blind, (Matt 9:27-31; 20:29-34), lepers (Luke 17:11-19) because His heart was disturbed—groaning with compassion. Jesus was the presence of the Father in human form—the mercy of God walking among the needy. God was present to the need. It was Presence to presence—need to need.

Our need is like a gravitational pull on the mercy of God. When Jesus walked from city to city His heart was moved with compassion toward the need of those who crowded in around Him. *“Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.”* (Matt 9:36)

Enthronement

Mercy is the most sovereign facet of God's person—the keystone of His person. It is the entourage of His glory that goes before Him. *“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; Lovingkindness and truth go before You.”* (Ps 89:14) Lovingkindness or mercy and truth or faithfulness prepares the way for the throne of God. We cannot proclaim the righteousness of God before we display the mercy of God.

Mercy must flow from authority by its very definition. Mercy is shown from the superior position—it flows downward. Mercy is sovereign love flowing toward need. The key ingredient to receiving mercy is for the needy to place themselves in the place of humility to receive it. Nothing flows up.

When Jesus refers to the kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of God He is referring to the sovereignty of God in the here and now. The reign of God has come among us; it is ours to enter into it through faith.

Jesus demonstrated the relationship between mercy and the throne of God or the sovereignty/kingdom of God. When He sent out his first emissaries of the kingdom Jesus gave them specific instructions.

“Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house.’ 6 ‘If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. 7 ‘Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. 8 ‘Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you; 9 and heal those in it who are sick (Show them the mercy of God), and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” Luke 10:5-9

It was showing the mercy of God that opened up the revelation of the kingdom of God. The order is mercy, then kingdom.

It occurs to me that we generally get the order backwards and turn people away from the very mercy that will draw them to God. We demonstrate the sovereignty of God in our own lives as we place the personal relationship with the

needy and lost above our evangelical plans and strategies. What must the lost and needy think of us when we tell them to trust God and we have not demonstrated trust ourselves? We appear as nothing more than self-righteous “do gooders.”

What about that person who works in the cubical next to yours who is crying out of their need to God. They have broken hearts and broken families. They are lost in this post-modern politically correct spiritual anarchy and crying out to a brassy heaven. They see a plastic Jesus or some other religious symbol on your desk. They have seen you bring your Bible to read in silence at lunch time. But at *the end of the day you pack it up and say “be blessed”* and go home. *“How dwelleth the love of God in you”* ? (1 John 3:17)

Mercy is the sovereign love of God—He chooses to love out of His sovereignty. When God says *“... I will have mercy on who I have mercy ...”* (Rom 9:15 also Exodus 34) He is not being selective or whimsical about who He is going to love. He is saying that He will have mercy on who He will out of His own sovereignty and not because someone seems to serve it. The mercy of God is not for sale; It is not a right, or universal grant, but an act of the sovereign will of God...His heart.

The mercy seat was the place of God's enthronement on earth—a temporal location for an Eternal Father's Heart. It was the place where His feet would rest. “He said to me, *“Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell among the sons of Israel forever.”* (Ezek 43:7)

Mercy has to do with the sovereign influence of God in the earth. When Jesus talked about the kingdom He described it in terms of the ministry of mercy. In Matthew 25 Jesus refers to meeting needs of the helpless as the kingdom of God.

Then the King will say to those on the right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. 36 I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I

was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.' Matt 25:34-36 NLT

The kingdom reign of God is expressed most powerfully through the showing of mercy. Mercy expressed through His subjects is proof of God's enthronement in their hearts.

The gateway to mercy is humility. For thus says the high and exalted One

Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, *"I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.* Isaiah 57:15

We approach the throne of God to find mercy just when things are falling apart.

To receive mercy we must draw near to the throne of grace to obtain mercy and grace.

Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:16) Our confidence is in the mercy of God because of the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus which unleashed a

torrent of mercy in the world. His throne is one of grace and mercy and help. The word help here is *boethia*, which is a term used to describe lashing together a boat. Just when things are the darkest and when our little boats are being torn to pieces on the waves of real life, God jumps into the stormy waters and lashes us back together again. What a God!

Mercy is the proof that the kingdom of Heaven has arrived. It is the means by which God breaths life upon us again. God's desire has always been to bring His heart to earth—to set up His throne here among men. Without the life-breathing mercy of God *we are become dust again.* *"The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he understands how weak we are; he knows we are only dust."* (Ps 103:13-14 NLT)

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