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MINISTRIES

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The Tabernacle: The Ark of the Covenant

The tabernacle in the wilderness was God’s dwelling place among the Israelites after he freed them from slavery in Egypt. It can be a chore to read through the passages that describe the tabernacle, but it turns out that the tabernacle is full of symbolism and spiritual lessons that teach us about our relationship with God. For a quick introduction to what the tabernacle was, we recommend watching our teaching, [The Tabernacle: An Introduction](#). In this teaching, we’re going to take a close look at one particular item in the tabernacle: the Ark of the Covenant. Let’s get started.

The Ark of the Covenant was the most important item in the tabernacle. The Ark was basically a large box. It was two and a half cubits, or 45 inches long, and one and a half cubits, or 27 inches wide. It was also one and a half cubits tall. It was made of wood overlaid with gold, and it had a solid gold cover, sometimes called the “mercy seat,” placed on top of it. The Ark was kept in its very own chamber, called the Holy of Holies, inside of the tabernacle building. This chamber was separated from the rest of the tabernacle by a veil. We see the details of the Ark’s construction in Exodus 25:

Exodus 25:10-22

They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it. You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you. You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the

mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. 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.

So, the Ark held a “testimony,” and God would speak with Israel from above the Ark, between the two golden cherubim. Since the Ark was the most important item in the tabernacle, one might think that people interacted with it frequently, but in fact, they did not. The High Priest only approached the Ark on one day out of the year: the day of Atonement. On that day, when the High Priest went behind the veil and appeared before the Ark, God would judge both the High Priest and all of Israel. The High Priest gave sacrifices of atonement in order to cover his sins and the sins of the whole nation, so that they would not be found sinful and die. We read about this day of Atonement in Leviticus 16:

Leviticus 16:1-3, 30, 34

The LORD [YHWH] spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD [YHWH] and died, and the LORD [YHWH] said to Moses, “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. But in this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place: with a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

[v. 30]...For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD [YHWH] from all your sins.

[v. 34]...And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins...

Why was judgment given on the day that the High Priest approached the Ark? Well, there is a parallel between the Ark of the covenant, and the throne of a king. Scripture tells us that God’s throne was upon the golden cherubim that covered the Ark. That was where he sat as king over Israel:

1 Samuel 4:4

So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim...

Psalms 99:1-4

The LORD [YHWH] reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The LORD [YHWH] is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

(see also: 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalm 80:1)

When someone went before the Ark, before the golden cherubim, it was as though they were entering the throne room of the king. Often times in the Bible, when someone appears before the king’s throne, it is for the purpose of receiving the king’s judgment. If a person had a dispute that he needed to have resolved, then he could present his case before the king’s throne in order to be judged. We see this throughout Scripture: Queen Esther appeared before the king to present her case on behalf of the Jews

(Esther 8:3-8); Solomon the king gave judgment to the people who came before him, most famously determining which woman was the mother of a baby (1 Kings 3:16-28); Festus brought Paul's case before King Agrippa (Acts 25:13-14); and there are many other examples of kings being approached on their thrones for the purpose of giving judgment (e.g. 2 Samuel 19:16-23; Daniel 3:8-20; Daniel 6:12-16; Luke 21:12-16). When the High Priest appeared before the Ark on the day of Atonement, this is exactly what was happening; the priest, as a representative of all Israel, was appearing before God's throne and requesting judgment.

So, if the nation was judged on the day of Atonement, when the High Priest approached the Ark, what standard were they judged by? How did God determine whether they had sinned? Well, that is answered by another element of the Ark—that is, the testimony that was placed inside of it:

Exodus 25:16

And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you.

What was this “testimony” that was placed in the Ark? It was the “tablets of the testimony,” the stones that the ten commandments were written on:

Deuteronomy 10:1-5

At that time the LORD [YHWH] said to me, ‘Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to me on the mountain and make an ark of wood. And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets that you broke, and you shall put them in the ark.’ So I made an ark of acacia wood, and cut two tablets of stone like the first, and went up the mountain with the two tablets in my hand. And he wrote on the tablets, in the same writing as before, the Ten Commandments that the LORD [YHWH] had spoken to you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. And the LORD [YHWH] gave them to me. Then I turned and came down from the mountain and put the tablets in the ark that I had made. And there they are, as the LORD [YHWH] commanded me.

Exodus 31:18

And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

So, God's commandments, written in stone, were kept inside the Ark as a testimony. These commandments were the standard by which the nation was judged. Keeping them in the Ark had cultural significance as well. In the ancient world, when a contract was made between two parties, each party received a written copy of the contract. There was also a third copy, an official copy, that was sealed and stored in a secure location so that it could not be tampered with. If there was ever a dispute about what the contract said, the official copy could be unsealed and read to see what the terms of the contract actually were. This secure copy served as an official witness, a reliable testimony of the terms of the contract.

This is highly relevant to the relationship between YHWH and Israel. Israel had a covenant with God, and the terms of that covenant were written down on the stone tablets. Those tablets were the testimony of God's covenant with Israel.

Exodus 34:27-28

And the LORD [YHWH] said to Moses, “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” So he was there with the LORD [YHWH]

forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

These tablets were stored in the Ark to be a reliable witness, an official testimony of the terms of the covenant. So, when the High Priest appeared before the Ark, not only was he before the king's throne receiving judgment, but also, symbolically, the official copy of the covenant was being checked to see whether Israel had obeyed it. If they were found obedient to the testimony, then they would live; if they were disobedient, then they would die.

How does all of this relate to us? Well, we know that, just like the nation of Israel was judged on the day of Atonement, we will all be judged one day, when we all appear before God's throne:

Revelation 20:11-15

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Paul tells us that, before this day of ultimate judgment comes, we should "judge ourselves." He says that we are under a new covenant, which we are expected to obey:

1 Corinthians 11:25-32

In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

If we judge ourselves, what standard should we judge ourselves by? Well, Jeremiah tells us that, under the new covenant, we will be given a standard of judgment. That standard is the same standard that was written on the tablets of the testimony: it's God's law.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD [YHWH], when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD [YHWH]. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD [YHWH]: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD [YHWH],' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD [YHWH]. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will

remember their sin no more.

So, under the new covenant, we should judge ourselves according to God's law, which is written on our hearts. The heart is the innermost part of us, just like the Ark was in the innermost part of the tabernacle. Having the law written on our heart is like having the law written on the tablets of the testimony that were inside the Ark. There are many scriptures that tell us that our heart is exactly where the testimony of the law belongs:

Psalms 119:36

Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!

Psalms 119:111

Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart.

1 Chronicles 29:18-19

O LORD [YHWH], the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you. Grant to Solomon my son a whole heart that he may keep your commandments, your testimonies, and your statutes...

When the law is written on our heart, it becomes part of our conscience, and it then determines what we do. When we obey the law, that becomes our testimony, our witness, that the law is written on our heart, and if the law is written on our heart, we know we are under the new covenant. Paul speaks of this in Romans 2:

Romans 2:12-16

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua].

The law, when written on our hearts, causes us to obey God, and our conscience bears witness, it testifies to this. The author of Hebrews speaks of our conscience in a similar way with respect to the day of Atonement. He talks about how the sacrifices that were offered on that day could not perfect a person's conscience—in other words, the offerings could cover over his sin, but they could not change his heart (Hebrews 9:1-10). He goes on to explain how Christ, as our high priest, by sprinkling the blood of his own sacrifice, has purified our conscience. When that happens, we no longer do works that lead to death, but instead we serve God.

Hebrews 9:11-14

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) 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. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh,

how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Hebrews goes on to explain that Christ's blood, which purifies our conscience and enables us to serve God, inaugurates a new covenant (Hebrews 9:15). This is the same new covenant that Jeremiah speaks of, where God's law is written on our heart (Hebrews 8:8-12). This all points to the same thing. In the new covenant, God transforms our heart, and writes his law upon it, just like the law was written on the testimony inside the Ark. Our conscience, thus purified, causes us to act in accordance with God's law, and this serves as our testimony, our witness, that we are part of this new covenant. So, this is how we judge ourselves. Do we obey God's law? Does our heart, our conscience, desire to obey him? If not, then we need to have it sprinkled clean by the blood of Messiah, and have his word written inside of us. We want to receive that atonement and instruction now, rather than receive judgment for our sins later.

There is one more point to be made about this testimony that is written on our hearts as part of this new covenant. This testimony is not just about God's law, but it is also about salvation. The Israelites received God's covenant at Sinai after they were saved out of Egypt. In fact, they kept that covenant because God had saved them. The very first words written on the tablets were, "I am YHWH your God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). When they obeyed the words on those tablets, their obedience was their testimony that YHWH was their savior (see also Deuteronomy 6:20-25). Likewise, we obey God as our testimony that he is our savior. David explicitly says that we observe God's testimonies because he has saved us:

Psalm 119:145-146

With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O LORD [YHWH]! I will keep your statutes. I call to you; save me, that I may observe your testimonies.

Psalm 78:5-7

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

God saves us because he loves us, and we obey him as a way of loving him in return. This love and obedience, again, is our testimony:

1 John 4:14-16, 19

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus [Yeshua] is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

...We love because he first loved us.

In the Ark of the covenant, we see this testimony of love and obedience. The terms of God's covenant are that he saves us, and we obey him. Just like the Ark had those terms written down inside of it, so too we should have the terms of that covenant written on our hearts. When we love others and keep God's commandments, that's our testimony that God's word is in our heart. When we have God's law inside our hearts, and examine ourselves according to that law, that is our testimony that he has saved us. When we love God with all our heart, that is our testimony that he loves us. When we love and obey

God, we testify that we are in covenant with him. We become, just like the Ark, the keepers of God's testimony. We become reliable witnesses who testify to the great things that God has done, and to the love he has for his people. May we all become such Arks of God's testimony.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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