

## *Through the Veil*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on March 28, 2021.

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard (Matthew 27:45–66)<sup>1</sup>.

At Mount Sinai, the Lord gave his recently redeemed people specific instructions on how to worship him, much of which centered around a sanctuary tent, or tabernacle. It was to be constructed with precision according to “the pattern” provided by the Lord (Ex. 25:9). The tabernacle was divided into two parts: the “Holy Place” and the “Most Holy Place,” or literally in Hebrew the “Holy of Holies” (Ex. 26:33). Separating the Holy from the Holy of Holies was a veil, or curtain, of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns of “fine twined linen” with “cherubim skillfully worked into it” (Ex. 26:31). It was not only a beautiful work of art, it was an intentional barrier separating the presence of God from a sinful people, penetrable only by a ritually cleansed priest.

One day each year, the tenth day of the Hebrew seventh month, the high priest would go from the Holy through the veil into the Holy of Holies to perform specific rituals prescribed by God to

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

atone for the sins of the people. The day became known as the Day of Atonement, the pinnacle of Israel's festivals. In preparation, the high priest would bathe, adorn specific vestments, and then offer a bull upon the altar for himself and the sins of his family (Lev. 16:6). He would then take two goats, cast lots to distinguish between the two, and sacrifice one as a sin offering and set the other free as the "scapegoat," figuratively carrying off the iniquity of the nation (Lev. 16:22).

On that Day of Atonement, the high priest would carry the blood of the sacrifices, along with incense through the veil. The incense would be burned and then the blood sprinkled upon the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. It was here that the presence of the Lord dwelled among the people and here that he received the atoning sacrifice for "all their sins" (Lev. 16:21). This was the ritual practice in Israel in the tabernacle on to the temple, generation after generation leading up to Israel's captivity and the destruction of the temple.

During Jesus's earthly ministry, the temple differed significantly from Solomon's original temple, which differed slightly from the tabernacle. And while the Ark of the Covenant was missing or likely no longer existed, the veil separating the Holy from the Holy of Holies was there, serving as a constant reminder of Israel's separation from the Lord's holy presence, their need for atonement, the necessity of a priest, a mediator between God and man. Nothing changed until the cross, and our Lord Jesus cried out and "yielded up his spirit." In that moment, what had once served figuratively as an impenetrable barrier between God and man, the Scripture says, "behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, not by the hands of man from bottom to top but from top to bottom by the hand of God."

Matthew includes this detail, precisely placed at Jesus's last breath, but why? What is the spiritual significance of the torn veil and how does it relate to Jesus's passion and death? Why is it important for us? In considering these questions, let's start with the significance of Jesus's death as a sacrifice.

### **Once Sacrificed**

Crucified between two criminals, the most innocent man to ever live endured suffering and shame. The people of Israel and their leaders, even those who suffered beside him, hurled insults at the rightful King of Israel, as he died an agonizing death upon a Roman instrument of torture. But what was happening upon that cross was more than human suffering and shame. As awful as the physical and emotional agony was, it was the wrath of God that inflicted the worst upon that cross, as an altar of sacrifice.

The leaders of Israel mocked, "He saved others; he cannot save himself," (Matt. 27:42) when in reality he chose not to save himself to save others: "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10 NET). As our atoning sacrifice, he "suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous" (1 Pet. 3:18), and "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). The cross of Christ was the crossroads, so to speak, between the Fall and the eternal kingdom.

Evidence of this eternal reality could not help but be acknowledged in the King's creation. Inexplicably, darkness covered the land for three hours. The earth shook so violently that rocks split. The Apostle Paul says that "the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (Rom. 8:22), and on the day of Jesus's crucifixion a labor pain shot violently throughout Jerusalem. And as creation shouted the significance of his atoning death, so did the ripping of fabric in the quiet corridors of the temple, as the veil of separation was torn in two.

When we consider Christ's crucifixion through the veil, we see that Christ the victim is also Christ the priest. Penetrating the veil of heaven he brings not the blood of a bull and goat, as God had instructed Moses. Jesus, the Lamb of God, brings his own blood to atone for the sins of his people. The day of Jesus's crucifixion was, so to speak, the final and complete Day of Atonement. As the perfect sacrifice, whose blood was sprinkled upon the heavenly altar, Jesus served as the final sacrifice. When Jesus cried out, "It is finished" (John 19:30), it literally was.

It should, then, be no surprise that the veil was torn in two. No longer would a sacrifice be necessary; no longer would atoning blood need to be sprinkled; no longer would the high priest need to atone for the sins of the people. It was finished in Christ's atoning sacrifice once offered for the sins of his people (Heb. 10:10).

And yet, how many Christians practically disregard this truth in their daily lives? Do you hold on to sins of your past? Do you wallow in sin, as if you must atone for it? Do you worry that you might commit an unforgivable sin? Christ offered himself for your sin, atoning for your past, present, and future sin. You cannot atone for your sin. Christ has done it, as he was once sacrificed, "the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God . . ." (1 Peter 3:18).

### **Justice Satisfied**

This of course presumes that a sacrifice was necessary, but why? Why is there no forgiveness of sin without the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:22)? In short, God is just and therefore sin must be punished. And we are all sinners. If sin is not punished, then we may deduce that God is not just, but make no mistake about it: God is just. How and when God chooses to punish sin is his business; that he will is our concern. Death is inevitable, the shedding of blood is necessary, because sin is deserving of death.

This is what makes the gospel so beautiful. God chose to satisfy his justice by punishing our sin in Christ, the righteous for the unrighteous. And he did this upon the cross.

Consider that while Jesus did not revile when reviled (1 Pet. 2:23), he does express the weight of his anguish, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is more than a direct quote of the twenty-second psalm; it is an agonizing cry of one who is bearing the weight of our sin. Paul explains, "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, [God] condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3), and Jesus feels the weight of that condemnation. He is the Son of Man, and in that moment of his punishment he is vicariously the vilest of sinners and bearing the consequences of it.

How then are we the guilty justified as righteous before a holy God? Paul explains it this way: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:23-26). This is the spiritual reality of God’s justice satisfied in the cross of Christ. This is good news, the best news ever! But as good as it is, who is the recipient of such grace? For whom was justice satisfied specifically? Justice was satisfied for “the one who has faith in Jesus,” but this does not mean that it is the God-given response of everyone. Consider, for the example, four stereotypical responses to Jesus in our passage. I call them the amused, the opposed, the professing, and the believing.

Consider the amused, those who gullibly look up for Elijah and miss Jesus. As Jesus cries out under the agony of God’s wrath, like children who must constantly be entertained, the bystanders hope not for atonement but for amusement. They do not hear the psalmist’s cry but instead look to the sky, saying, “let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” Even their thought of merciful medicine is thwarted by a lust to witness the miraculous. They may look to Jesus, but ultimately what they want from him is not eternal life but entertainment.

While some want merely to be amused, others are strongly opposed. They see Jesus as a threat. So concerned were the chief priests and the Pharisees that as soon as Jesus is buried they are on the offensive. Appealing to Pilate, they malign the deceased as a fraudulent “imposter,” guilty of shining light upon their hearts of darkness. So strong is their opposition, that they will later bribe the guards to suppress the truth of Jesus’s resurrection.

But not everyone is opposed to Jesus. Some witness the truth of God’s revelation, consider the person of Jesus Christ, and acknowledge that he is who he says he is, such as the centurion and those who were with him. Perhaps actively involved in Jesus’s persecution and crucifixion, these Roman soldiers are prepared for battle, but what they witness transcends their experience. They have witnessed Jesus’s passion and creation’s response, and they are “filled with awe,” professing, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

Whether the centurion’s profession was saving faith is unknown, what is known is the example of the believing, those who trusted in Jesus, followed him, as evidenced in their actions. While most of the men were hiding, we witness the testimony of three faithful women: the former demon-possessed Mary Magdalene; the mother of two of Jesus’s beloved disciples, and likely Jesus’s mother, referred to as “the mother of James and Joseph.” Perhaps they heard Jesus tell of his impending death and subsequent resurrection, or perhaps they are merely resolved to be faithful to the end. Regardless, they are with Jesus through his death and wait outside his tomb, the tomb of another faithful follower, Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph, like the three Marys, willingly identifies himself and his property with Jesus, as a faithful follower. He is willing to personally sacrifice for the One who sacrificed himself. Though there were many around Jesus in his suffering and death, there were few who believed through his death.

## *Through the Veil*

These are the immediate responses Matthew reveals to us: the amused, the opposed, the professing, and the believing. And they are alive and well today. The amused may acknowledge Jesus but only so far as he can entertain them. The opposed may acknowledge Jesus but only to deride him. The professing may acknowledge Jesus as they encounter him, but it is the believing who are redeemed.

### **Redemption Secured**

Of course, it is not because of our faithfulness that we are redeemed, but rather we are faithful because our Redeemer was, which brings us ironically back to the severed veil in the temple. The writer of Hebrews explains the significance this way:

since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful (Heb. 10:19-23).

In what could be considered an unveiled description of the preparation and presence of the high priest behind the veil, we find that in Christ we now have access to the Holy of Holies, which for all who are in Christ is “the new and living way.” We find that Christ’s body was indeed the veil, pierced for our transgressions, and severed that we might draw near to God, not cowering in fear but “with a true heart in full assurance of faith,” crying “Abba! Father!” as children, indeed “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:16-17). God himself is unveiled to us!

In light of this, the Christian life is a life lived through the veil. We do not live life as if God is absent from our lives, hidden from us. Through faith in Christ there is no separation between us and the presence of our God. In fact, I am sure “that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).