

# The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

## Chapter 21: God's Commentary on the Finished Work of Christ—The Torn Curtain

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Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. (Mt. 27:50-53)

And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost. And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. (Mk. 15:37-38)  
And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. (Lk. 23:45)

### Introduction

The gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us that the death of Christ was accompanied by miraculous signs. The very moment that our Lord's lips are silent and He breathes His last breath, God begins to speak in the unmistakable language of supernatural wonders. There is the sign of rending of the veil in the temple from top to bottom (Mt. 27:51; Mk. 15:38), right down the middle (Lk. 23:45). Unlike Matthew and Mark which place this event chronologically in their accounts, Luke mentions it topically and places it after the three hours of darkness. There also are the miracles of the earthquake and the resurrection of many saints near the holy city. The earthquake, the rending of the rocky cliffs, the opening of the tombs and the resurrection of many saints are only recorded in Matthew's gospel (27:51-53). Although the events have a certain order in Matthew's narrative (1. rending of the veil, 2. earthquake, 3. rending of the rocks, 4. opening the tombs, 5. raising the dead saints), it is very likely that these events occurred simultaneously the moment that Jesus died.<sup>1</sup>

While these miracles are indeed awe-inspiring, we must not forget that their purpose is to point men to the Savior and His amazing work of redemption. They can be compared to little planets around a large brilliant sun or a circle of small, polished gems that surround a very large, flawless diamond. Spurgeon's comments on this subject are noteworthy:

The more you think of the death of the Son of God, the more will you be amazed at it. As much as a miracle excels a common fact, so doth this wonder of wonders rise above all miracles of power. That the divine Lord, even though veiled in mortal flesh, should condescend to be subject to the power of death, so as to bow his head on the cross, and submit to be laid in the

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the Greek text in Matthew's account, R. C. H. Lenski writes: "It has been long noted that the wording of this passage is both beautiful and highly impressive. *Kai* [and] after *kai* piles one great sign upon another. The interjection *idou* [behold or lo] ushers them in, and they are certainly astounding" (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1125).

tomb, is among mysteries the greatest. The death of Jesus is the marvel of time and eternity, which as Aaron's rod swallowed up the rest, takes up into itself all lesser marvels.<sup>2</sup>

God's greatest work and historical achievement was the sacrificial death of His own Son.

The miracles that attend our Lord's death are to focus our minds on the Redeemer's perfect finished work by giving us God's marvelous commentary on what the Mediator had just done. Interestingly, among the Jews, tales "were told of catastrophes occurring at the death of pious rabbis, especially those whose intercession had been vital to the world; on rare occasions, Greek writers also applied such stories to the deaths of prominent philosophers."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the marvels surrounding the death of Christ would have, at a minimum, communicated to the people, whether Jewish or Gentile, that this Man's person and death were special and unique.

In order to properly consider the signs before us we will consider each sign in turn. Regarding the miracle of the split veil, there are three main areas to examine: (1) We need to determine the facts of precisely what occurred to the best of our ability (e.g., What was the curtain like? Which curtain was rent?). (2) What is the message that God is conveying to man by the rending of the veil? (3) What are some important applications that can be derived from our text?

## The Torn Curtain

(1) As we examine the split veil we want to determine precisely what occurred. Therefore, we need to determine: which veil in the temple was rent by God; what this veil was like; what purpose this veil served in the temple; and, what the rending of the veil must have been like.

Scholars are divided over which veil was torn in the temple because the temple contained two curtains. There was the outer curtain which separated the sanctuary from the forecourt (cf. Ex. 26:37; 38:18; Num. 3:26). This exterior curtain (the outer veil) covered the entrance to the temple structure itself and would have been visible to everyone facing that side of the temple. The innermost curtain (cf. Heb. 6:19) or the "second" veil (cf. Heb. 9:3) was the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple.

The vast majority of commentators believe that the inner curtain was the one torn for the following reasons. First, the word used to describe the veil (Gk. *katapetasma*) most often refers to the innermost veil next to the Holy of Holies. Second, the author of Hebrews by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit interprets the suffering and death of Christ as the means by which believers enter the heavenly Holy of Holies. "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh" (Heb. 10:19-20; cf. 6:19; 9:3). At the exact moment that our Savior died (i.e. when the veil of His flesh was rent by death; when His soul was severed from His body) God ripped the curtain of the Holy of Holies in half. The symbolic significance of the tearing of the inner curtain during the precise moment that our Lord died is scripturally unmistakable. Jesus and His completed work of redemption are the opened curtain, gate or door by which we enter into heaven and the special presence of God.

To understand how dramatic the rending of the inner veil was, we need to know how magnificent a curtain was involved. The curtain before the Holy of Holies was "40 cubits (60

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<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Rent Veil," 34:169.

<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 128.

feet) long, and 20 (30 feet) wide, of the thickness of the palm of the hand, and wrought in 72 squares, which were joined together; and these Veils were so heavy, that, in the exaggerated language of the time, it needed 300 priests to manipulate each. If the Veil was at all such as is described in the Talmud, it could not have been rent in twain by a mere earthquake or the fall of the lintel, although its composition in squares fastened together might explain how the rent might be described in the Gospel.”<sup>4</sup> Exodus 26:31 says that the curtain was beautifully embroidered with blue, scarlet and purple thread. It was adorned with cherubim, who represented angelic guardians shielding access to a thrice holy God.

The purpose of the veil was to separate the special Shekinah presence of Jehovah from the people and even the regular priests who ministered in the temple. Only the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies behind the veil. This special entrance occurred only once each year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2ff; Num. 18:7; Heb. 9:7). On this day the high priest would pull back the edge of the curtain and enter the most holy place with the blood of sacrifice for himself and the people of Israel; then, he would sprinkle it on and before the mercy seat. Under the Old Covenant administration the approach unto God was very restricted and this approach involved dread and fear. If any mistakes were made in the prescribed ritual whether intentional or not the person involved would be struck down by God. While the Day of Atonement pointed to Christ, the veil signified *no admittance*. The special approach to God was very rare and limited. To everyone (except the high priest once a year) the veil meant stay away; do not enter. God is holy and you are sinful and polluted. “The time when the high priest entered into it, it was indeed turned aside; whereon it immediately closed again and forbade an entrance and a prospect unto others. Wherefore there could be no entrance into that holy place abiding, unless the veil was rent and torn in pieces, so that it could close no more.”<sup>5</sup>

The veil symbolized that under the Old Covenant administration the way to God was not yet opened. There was not yet a freedom of access directly to Jehovah for all men. This point is clearly brought out by the author of Hebrews. “Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing” (9:6-8). The Holy Spirit tells us that as long as that curtain remained in place men had no hope of immediate access to God. “[T]he whole church was forbidden the use of this way; and it was appointed for no other end but to signify that in due time there should be a way

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<sup>4</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 611. Josephus gives slightly smaller dimensions for the veil (55 cubits high and 16 wide, see Wars, 5, 5, 4) Edersheim believes there is strong historical evidence that something dramatic happened at the temple at this time: “That some great catastrophe, betokening the impending destruction of the Temple, had occurred in the Sanctuary about this very time, is confirmed by not less than four mutually independent testimonies: those of Tacitus [Hist. v. 13.], of Josephus [Jew. War vi. 5, 3.], of the Talmud [Jer. Yoma 43c; Yoma 39b], and of earliest Christian tradition [the uninspired non-canonical Gospel According to the Hebrews]. The most important of these are, of course, the Talmud and Josephus. The latter speaks of the mysterious extinction of the middle and chief light in the Golden Candlestick, forty years before the destruction of the Temple; and both he and the Talmud refer to a supernatural opening by themselves of the great Temple-gates that had been previously closed, which was regarded as a portent of the coming destruction of the Temple. We can scarcely doubt, that some historical fact must underlie so peculiar and widespread a tradition, and we cannot help feeling that it may be a distorted version of the occurrence of the rending of the Temple-Veil (or of its report) at the Crucifixion of Christ” (Ibid, 610).

<sup>5</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1855] 1980), 6:506.

opened unto believers into the presence of God.”<sup>6</sup> The rending of the curtain that resulted from Jesus’ death means that, in the new and better covenantal era, “God’s people constitute a holy priesthood with full right of access into the divine presence (cf. Heb. 10:19ff.; 1 Pet. 2:5).”<sup>7</sup>

The rending of the veil must have been a shocking, frightening and awesome event to the priests who were ministering in the temple. No wonder Matthew’s account “is ushered in with *Behold*: ‘Turn aside, and see this great sight, and be astonished at it.’”<sup>8</sup> The curtain was ripped asunder from the very top to the bottom (Mt. 27:51; Mk. 15:38). Luke gives us the added detail that it was torn right down the middle (Lk. 23:45). The fact that the curtain was torn from the top to the bottom proves that the tearing was supernatural. Normally, when a curtain grows old and wears from repeated use, it virtually always frays and tears at the bottom not at the top. Also, it would never tear right down the middle. The priests who were ministering in the temple knew that this was the hand of God. The noise from the quick tearing of such a large and thick curtain would have been exceedingly loud and startling. This tearing occurred at the time of the offering of the evening incense and would have been witnessed by the offering priest and those who assisted him. The Holy of Holies that was not to be seen by men or ordinary priests was opened. The rent down the middle of the curtain would have exposed the whole room to those officiating at the incense altar which was near the veil. The multitudes of people that were gathered outside of the temple would have heard the sound of a loud tear. They would have seen the shocked look upon the faces of the priests that ministered at the temple. Word would have spread rapidly through Jerusalem that the veil to the Holy of Holies had been torn in the center from top to bottom; what a sobering and mysterious sign from God. The Nazarene yields up His spirit and at that very instant the ears of the priests are pierced by the sound of the great veil of separation tearing.

(2) In the split veil God was saying something to Israel and the world about the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. While there may be secondary meanings or applications of this great event, the central or primary meaning is that the Redeemer has opened forever the approach to God. The sacrificing of animals pointed to the way. But the death of Christ is the actual, true and only way to God the Father. “If you desire to approach God, the death of Christ is the way to him. If you want the nearest access and the closest communion that a creature can have with his God, behold, the sacrifice of Christ reveals the way to you. Jesus not only says, ‘I am the Way,’ but, rending the veil, he makes the way. The veil of his flesh being rent, the way to God is made most clear to every believing soul.... He was not suffered by the Father to die without a miracle to show that he had made a way for sinners to draw near to God.”<sup>9</sup>

When the Savior offered Himself on the cross making atonement for sin, His once and for all sacrifice for sin made an access with boldness into the gracious presence of God. Without His perfect work, “the law and its curse were like cherubim and flaming sword, that turned every

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 504.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 323.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:430. Interestingly, the Most Holy place behind the veil in the *second Temple* contained nothing. Alfred Edersheim says, “[A] large stone, on which the high-priest sprinkled the blood on the Day of Atonement,” occupied “the place where the ark with the mercy seat had stood” (*The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 58). When the Babylonians conquered Judah and destroyed the first temple built by Solomon in 586 B.C., they took everything out of the temple as booty. Apparently the mercy seat and the ark of the covenant that contained the Ten Commandments, the manna, and the flowered staff were never reconstructed. Josephus reports in his history of the Jewish War that when the Romans entered the Holy of Holies in A.D. 70 it was completely empty.

<sup>9</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Miracles of Our Lord’s Death,” 34:698-699.

way to keep sinners from drawing unto God.”<sup>10</sup> God tore asunder the veil to say to us in dramatic, unmistakable language that He has accepted the perfect sacrifice of His Son. All the impediments and obstacles that stood in our path, that made access to God’s loving presence impossible, have been removed by the redemptive work of the Mediator. The author of Hebrews even says that we enter the Holiest with boldness by the blood of Jesus.

This remarkable statement tells us the great privilege of the gospel—that, because of Christ, in our salvation, our worship and our prayers we have a great liberty, boldness and confidence to enter into the favorable, loving presence of the Father. The Old Covenant had many boundaries because Jesus had not yet shed His blood. There were boundaries around Mount Sinai so that the people would not come too close to God’s special presence and perish. There were boundaries with the tabernacle and temple. There was a boundary for Gentiles. There was a boundary for the non-priestly Jews. There was even a boundary for the regular priests. “Now this whole temple really was a great fort, a bulwark. The middle court also was separated from the rest by a stone wall; placards of warning threatened the death penalty against the unqualified who came too near it. Hence this veil became a world issue. Heathendom was kept away from it, and the people of Israel too in its common ranks were prohibited from passing through it.”<sup>11</sup> But with the death of Christ all believers, whether Jew or Gentile, whether minister or non-minister, have a right, title and liberty to directly approach God in heaven through Jesus. No longer is there a priestly hierarchy. No longer do men need the assistance of sinful, fallible, human mediators. What a glorious and blessed privilege! The Savior superseded the old levitical priesthood with its shadow rituals and its multiplicity of sacrifices by His once for all, all-sufficient sacrifice.

Also because of Jesus’ redemptive work, we approach God without dread, fear, or terror in our minds. Believers have not received “the spirit of bondage unto fear, but the Spirit of the Son, whereby with holy boldness they cry, ‘Abba, Father;’ for ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty’ [2 Cor. 3:17].”<sup>12</sup> Only the precious blood of Christ could have achieved this. “Confidence in an access unto God not built on, not resolved into the blood of Christ, is but a daring presumption, which God abhors.”<sup>13</sup> To seek access to God without going through the veil of Jesus’ sacrificial death is not only futile and ineffectual but it is also sinful. It essentially says that Christ is not the only way of entering everlasting life. It says the blood of the Redeemer is unnecessary and denies the necessity of the suffering and death of the Savior. It rejects the perfection and efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice. Such people trample the cross of Christ underfoot as worthless. Our faith, trust and confidence must be directed to Jesus alone who was rent in His sacrifice and who alone is the door to the Father. The rent veil is a proclamation of grace. The Mediator has conquered. By keeping the law perfectly and enduring the curse, He has thrown the gate to heaven wide open to all who will believe in Him. “When sin is gone, the barrier is broken down, the unfathomable gulf is filled. Pardon, which removes sin, and justification, which brings righteousness, make up a deed of clearance so real and so complete that nothing now divides the sinner from his reconciled God.”<sup>14</sup>

Commentators recognize that the rending of the curtain has other important, related secondary meanings and applications.

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<sup>10</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 6:241.

<sup>11</sup> Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 509.

<sup>12</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 6:502.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 6:504.

<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Rent Veil,” 34:171.

First, it was a sign of impending judgment upon the nation of Israel. The Jews' rejection and murder of the Messiah was such a serious act of complete apostasy that it sealed the fate of their nation in A.D. 70. Following the mockery of Jesus regarding His ability to destroy the temple (Mk. 15:29; Mt. 27:40), the rending of the veil by God would have been interpreted by the Jews as an act of "divine vandalism."<sup>15</sup> It meant that Christ did indeed have power to destroy the temple. "Jesus' death and the destruction of the formal structures of Judaism are inseparably bound together."<sup>16</sup> "With Jesus' death, the old religious order comes to an end; those who have rejected Jesus, the religious leaders, have now been rejected by God."<sup>17</sup> While the tearing of the veil proclaimed grace to everyone throughout the world who would come to God through Jesus, it proclaimed judgment, disaster and death to those who had rejected the person and work of Christ. The Holy of Holies and the temple were the very heart of the Jewish nation. If the heart is destroyed the nation dies. The rending of the veil was a warning sign to the Jews that their only hope before God was to turn away from their apostate leaders toward Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, the rending of the veil signified that the whole levitical system of types, shadows and ceremonies had been superseded and put to an end by Christ's work. God did not unhook the veil and carefully fold it up for use on another day; instead He violently ripped it in half. With the death of the Savior, God had no use at all for the old typical system. If God tears asunder one of the most important features of the temple cultus, then obviously all the secondary and minor features are put away also. "The ordinances of an earthly priesthood were rent with that veil. In token of the death of the ceremonial law, the soul of it quitted its sacred shrine, and left its bodily tabernacle as a dead thing. The legal dispensation is over."<sup>18</sup>

Third, the rending of the veil demonstrates that the special dwelling place of God is no longer restricted to a small nation in Palestine. The death of Christ is an event of world-wide historical significance. Inside the veil was the mercy seat, above which rested the Shekinah presence of God. In the Old Covenant God had limited His covenant blessings to one nation. If a foreigner or stranger wanted to join themselves to the covenant people they would have to become Israelites. Like Ruth they would have to move out of their own heathen nation to the land of Israel. But with Christ's death and the resultant Pentecost, God moves outside the old veil and enters the entire world. In a sense the Holy of Holies and the temple go into all nations. "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations," says the LORD of hosts" (Mal. 1:11).

(3) There are some important applications that are based on this important section of Scripture. First, the rending of the veil demonstrates that Jesus is the only way to the Father. If men are to have fellowship with God they must pass through the rent veil of the Savior's sacrificial death. If you place your trust in the person and work of Christ, the door to heaven stands wide open. You are free to enter because you have been washed by the Redeemer's blood and clothed with His perfect righteousness. When you die God says, "Come up hither to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Enter beloved into My heavenly sanctuary to be forever in My loving presence." But if you try to enter in by another way then you are without Christ, without the Father and without hope. You will die in your sins and the door to heaven will forever remain

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<sup>15</sup> See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 657.

<sup>16</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 575. Lane points out that the "early Church Fathers commonly interpreted the event as a warning sign of the impending destruction of the Temple..." (575).

<sup>17</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 657.

<sup>18</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Rent Veil," 34:170.

shut and locked to you. Oh that God would grant you the eyes of faith to see the beauty, perfection and sufficiency of Jesus and His work!

Second, the fact that God has ripped the curtain of the old order in half stands as a warning to all men who attempt to put it back together again by corrupt theology and worship. Dispensationalists attempt to repair the torn curtain by theorizing that the temple will be rebuilt and sacrifices reinstated as a memorial to Jesus in the millennium. They also rebuild the middle wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles by falsely teaching that God has two separate and distinct covenant peoples: the church and the Jews. Messianic Jews implicitly deny the rent veil by requiring circumcision and the old levitical holy days. Romanists deny God's tearing of the veil by the mass, the holy days and the use of human priests as mediators between God and man. High-church professing Protestants deny the rent veil with their sacramentalism, holy days, church calendars and other coarse imitations of the beggarly elements. All semi-Pelagians and Arminians deny the rent veil by their synergistic doctrine of salvation. For them Jesus has torn the veil part of the way down and man must grab the curtain and tear it the rest of the way. Remember, God rent the veil without man's help or assistance. Christ's perfect work does not make access to God possible, but actually achieves access to God. We cannot come to God with the scissors of free will or the knife of good works, for this curtain can only be severed by the precious blood of Christ.

Third, the torn veil ought to greatly strengthen our faith in the Mediator as we seek to please God in our daily lives. The ripped curtain should lead to boldness in our approach unto God. By boldness we do not mean a reliance on human strength, arrogance, flippancy or carelessness, but rather boldness in resting on the person and work of the Savior. This boldness should affect our prayer life in that it flows from our faith in and meditation on the Redeemer's victory. If we are neglecting our daily prayers or are not praying as we ought, then we are not living consistently with the reality of the torn veil. We need to rightly "esteem and duly improve the blessed privilege which was purchased for us at so dear a rate. What shall we render unto him? How unspeakable are our obligations unto faith and love!"<sup>19</sup> "The Lord has blessed, and he will make you a blessing. Your ordinary conduct and conversation will be a blessed example; the words you speak for Jesus will be like a dew from the Lord: the sick will be comforted by your words; the despondent will be encouraged by your faith; the lukewarm will be recovered by your love."<sup>20</sup> The boldness which arises from the perfection of Jesus' sacrifice should permeate every aspect of our Christian lives.

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<sup>19</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 6:504.

<sup>20</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Rent Veil," 34:176.