

The Miracles of Calvary – The Torn Curtain – Matthew 27:50-51a

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 9:1-12

Introduction

I can still remember where I was and what I was doing when the planes hit the Twin Towers in New York – I'm sure you can as well

And I vividly remember seeing the images on television as the second plane flew into the second tower – it was as surreal as it was horrifying

I can only imagine the feelings of the citizens of New York who lived and worked in the shadow of those buildings every day seeing them destroyed as suddenly as they were

It wasn't that what happened that day was unexpected – it wasn't even imagined that such a thing could happen

The unimaginable also happened on the day that Jesus was crucified

Last week we looked at the three hours of total darkness that fell over the world as God's only begotten Son suffered under the weight of our sins

As we did we saw that God had caused the darkness to validate the mission of Jesus on the earth, to hide his intense suffering from human eyes, and to illustrate the fate of the unsaved

No one expected the sun to suddenly go dark at noon and remain dark for three hours

We just get used to the constancy of some things over time and never even consider that they might someday go away

That's going to be the case today as we consider the account of the torn curtain in the Temple which is found in Mark 15:38 and in our passage this morning Matthew 27:50-51a

This morning we are going to first consider the **Description** and **Function** of the Curtain

Then we will look at the **Tearing** of the Curtain

And lastly we will consider the **Significance** of the Torn Curtain

Please join me in your Bible as I read **Matthew 27:45-51**

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.

We will be focusing on the curtain today and take up the earthquake next week but the two miracles are closely related as to their timing and cause so I wanted to read verse 51 in its entirety to show context

As we begin looking at the description and function of the curtain I believe it is best to start by making sure we have a basic understanding of its origin

The curtain was a major part of the Temple furnishings and it had a very important purpose in Temple worship

So let's begin by taking a quick look at the temple of Jesus' day and its origin

I. Description and Function of the Curtain

The Temple that existed in Jerusalem in Jesus' day had changed a great deal from its beginnings

As we see in Exodus the Temple actually started out as the Tabernacle as the children of Israel wandered in the desert

Then first permanent Temple was built by Solomon after God denied the honor to his father King David and it stood until the Babylonians destroyed it in 586BC

Zerubbabel began the second Temple in 538BC and construction of it was ultimately completed after 22 years in 516BC

This second Temple was considerably smaller and less grand than Solomon's Temple much to the dismay of the older Jews who remembered the former Temple

And it remained pretty much that way until King Herod took control of the Temple in 39BC

Herod, who is known for his building projects, began to expand and improve the Temple until it covered an area of about 35 acres and added many courtyards, balustrades, gates, and porches that were not a part of the original Temple

So, ultimately, the second Temple far surpassed Solomon's Temple in both size and grandeur [temple~~diagram~~.jpg]

As we seek to understand the torn curtain – its design, function, and significance – it will help to understand a bit about the temple itself

Herod's Temple [temple~~diagram~~.jpg]

All the Temple area was considered to be holy but the Temple became "more holy" as a person entered further into it

In Herod's Temple, Gentiles were limited to the outer courts which King Herod had enclosed with colonnades during his expansion

It was within this area that we saw the disciples teaching when we went through the book of Acts

Only Jews were allowed within the inner Temple area itself and warning signs were prominently posted warning that the penalty for trespass was death –

You may remember that it was for this alleged offense that Paul was attacked and nearly beaten to death in Acts 21

Once inside that area, women were restricted to the Women's Court while men could venture further into the aptly named Men's Court but that was as far as the typical Jew could go

Priests alone were allowed into what was known as the Priest's Court or the Holy Place which contained the altar for burnt offerings and the large basin called the brazen laver

Beyond the Court of Priests there was a staircase that led to a curtain and only the priest on duty was allowed to go beyond that first curtain into the actual Temple itself – or the Holy Place – where the golden altar of incense, the golden table of showbread, and the golden lampstand would be found

Finally, only the high priest could go beyond the final curtain – the curtain we are considering today – into the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place

And even for the high priest entrance was severely restricted

He could enter only once a year, on the Day of Atonement – also known as Yom Kippur

And the high priest had to be very specifically attired and carry with him burning incense and the blood of sacrificed animals for the sprinkling of atonement

Leviticus 16 contains the text that tells all that the high priest had to go through to enter this room

Once inside, the floors, walls, and ceiling of the Holy of Holies were plated with gold and there was no artificial light in the room because its illumination was provided by the presence of God himself

The only furnishing in the room was supposed to be the Ark of the Covenant complete with the mercy seat but the Ark of the Covenant that had originally resided in the Most Holy Place had gone missing long ago

So the high priest of Jesus' day had to sprinkle the blood of atonement onto a stone that represented where the Ark would have sat

The Curtain

The curtain that divided the room from the rest of the Temple was made according to God's design for the curtain of the Tabernacle

Let's look at that design in **Exodus 26:30-34** – turn with me there

Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain.

“And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it. And you shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, on four bases of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in there within the veil. And the veil shall separate for you the Holy Place from the Most Holy. You shall put the mercy seat on the ark of the testimony in the Most Holy Place.

God was very specific about the design of his Tabernacle and its furnishings as you will quickly see as you read through his detailed instructions for it in Exodus 25-28

Here we see that the curtain had a base of fine linen fabric that was then embroidered with red, blue, and purple thread and the biblical description says there was somehow a pattern worked into the design to represent cherubim

This description is all we have on which to base our mental image of the curtain and if you do an internet search you will find a gazillion ideas of what the curtain might have looked like – but the truth is we don't know for sure

Looking at **1Kings 6:20** we see that the size of the original Most Holy Place was a cube 20 cubits on each side and a cubit is generally figured to be 18 inches which made the room 30 feet wide, deep, and tall and the curtain would have been at least 30 x 30 feet

Of course, Herod's Temple was 15 feet taller than Solomon's so the curtain could well have been 45 feet from ceiling to floor spanning a room 30 feet wide – which means the curtain when laid out flat might have been 45 feet x 75 feet or **375 square yards of very heavy fabric!**

I have heard preachers and others make the claim that the curtain was also as thick as a man's hand or roughly 4 inches thick but in my research I found that there is no trustworthy source for that tidbit of information

The closest I could come was a mention in the rabbinical writings which must be taken with a grain of salt as they can be rather fanciful in their claims and conclusions

It seems the idea of a really thick curtain might well be one of those juicy sermon illustrations that has been passed along so often that it has taken on an aura of reliability that it doesn't deserve

And preachers are tempted to use it because we want to believe that a curtain that is four inches thick means a bigger miracle – but that just isn't so

In actuality it really doesn't matter if the curtain was four inches thick or an inch thick or merely the thickness of a heavy drapery, no thickness would hinder God's ability to tear it which is what we're going to see happened

Symbolism

The main function of the Tabernacle and the Temples that succeeded it was to show how a sinner could acceptably maintain a proper relationship with God and what was required to worship him properly

And a part of what was shown is that the approach to God was imperfect; there were barriers that prevented free access to God

At each step toward God there were hindrances that prevented someone from going closer to God

Everyone except the priests were ultimately blocked by the first curtain from entering the Holy Place and all but the high priest were blocked by the second curtain

And the purpose of each curtain was the same: it existed to conceal what was behind it and to prevent any unauthorized passage beyond it

Lay people could only draw so near to God and couldn't even approach the altar where the burnt offerings were made so the priests were needed to conduct the sacrifices for the covering of sins

Then only the priest who was on duty on a particular day was granted the privilege of entering the place where the symbols of fellowship with God resided and only the high priest could enter the area of greater fellowship with God

And then only with proper preparation and on one day each year

The Tabernacle and the Temples that succeeded it were designed to show that God was holy, which means he was apart from mankind and separated from man, and access to him was limited

And the final curtain that closed off the Holy of Holies was a barrier between God's holiness and mankind's wickedness that could only be penetrated once a year by one specific representative who was bearing the blood of atonement

But all that was about to change in an instant at the death of God's Son on the cross

II. The Tearing of the Curtain

Look with me again at **Matthew 27:50-51a** as we consider **the tearing of the curtain**

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.

There have been some through the years that have attributed the tearing of the curtain to the earthquake

Somehow, they reason, the shaking of the earth either caused the curtain to tear or caused a piece of the temple structure to fall and tear the curtain

To accept that reasoning we would have to reorder the miracles as Matthew has listed them to make the earthquake the second miracle

Perhaps the movement of the ground in an earthquake could tear a fabric panel that was stretched taut between two walls

But we would have to find it plausible that an earthquake powerful enough to tear a free-hanging curtain didn't also flatten the temple in which it was hanging

And no mention is made of any part of the temple being dislodged by the earthquake

The Cause

Looking again at the order of the sequence as Matthew wrote them down we see that Jesus cried out with a loud voice, the curtain was torn, and then in the last half of verse 51 there was an earthquake

So in looking for a cause we would have to say that it was this second loud cry of Jesus that caused both the curtain to tear and the earth to quake

Certainly Matthew directs us to that deduction by the way his account is written and Mark does as well in his account

Mark neglects to mention the earthquake but both gospel writers have the sequence of events being the same including the remarks of the centurion

And I don't believe anyone could successfully argue that the centurion's remarks weren't a consequence of the events that preceded them

The Cry

So what can we determine about this loud cry of Jesus right before he died?

Most crucifixion victims spent their last hours in deep exhaustion and laboring with all their might to breathe until their bodies gave out and then they fell into unconsciousness and quietly died from suffocation

But not Jesus – Jesus was able to speak and even cry out with power right up until he voluntarily gave up his spirit

Without a doubt, Jesus died on the cross but it wasn't the crucifixion that killed him – he gave up his life

The Greek behind our English translation of “yielded up” means “to cause or permit someone to leave a particular location; to dismiss someone”

Look at what Jesus told his disciples in **John 10:17-18** –

“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

No one took Jesus’ life from him – not the Jewish leaders, not the Roman soldiers, and not the devil himself

We know that every man has been subject to and deserving of death since the fall of Adam but death had no rightful claim on the sinless Son of God and so the only way he could die was if he gave up his spirit

And as Augustine said, “He gave up his life because he willed it, when he willed it, and as he willed it.”

Matthew and Mark both tell us that Jesus uttered loud cry but only John tells us what it was that Jesus said

John 19:30 reads:

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

“It is finished” is one word in the Greek – *tetelestai*

Tetelestai a victory cry and it was shouted out with the power of a victor it was completely devoid of defeat or despair

We spoke last week of the unimaginable weight of sin that Jesus carried on the cross during the three hours of darkness and now that weight has been lifted – his job is done, he has borne our sins, and the burden has been lifted from him

Just think of the sense of relief that would have accompanied and propelled this cry of triumph

But we might well ask just what it is that is “finished”

When Jesus was teaching his disciples he told them in **Matthew 5:17** that he had come to fulfill the law and the death of Jesus put the end to the Mosaic Law – it is finished

Then, the author of Hebrews has a lot to say about Jesus finishing the need for sacrifice for sin

Look with me at **Hebrews 10:11-14** –

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

We can safely say that Jesus put the end to the sacrificial system of the Jewish priesthood – it is finished

Jesus had told his disciples “I am the way” to the Father in **John 14:6** and now Jesus, by his death, opened once and for all the way to the Father

When Jesus shouted out his victory cry, “It is finished” he stamped “paid in full” on the debt of sin owed by mankind and there was no more need of a barrier between God and man

Jesus’ work of defeating sin was complete – it was finished

The Tearing

So God reached down and tore the curtain into two pieces opening up free access to him for all mankind

Last week we talked about this being the time of the Passover and as such the Temple was a very busy place

It was “all hands on deck” for the priests due to the vast number of sacrifices that would be offered up during this time

Remember that this was at 3 o’clock in the afternoon when the priests would have been busy with the evening sacrifice

Since it had been pitch dark for the past three hours they would have likely been working by the light of many lamps

Every one of those priests understood the meaning of the curtain between them and the Holy of Holies

And they knew well what would happen should anyone except the high priest intrude on that space

Try to imagine yourself in their midst and witnessing that massive curtain suddenly begin to tear down its middle starting up by the clasps that held it aloft and parting all the way through where it touched the floor

Remember, the earthquake hasn't yet happened – the earth will begin to shake immediately on the heels of this event but there would be no reason that they could discern at this point for the curtain to suddenly tear right down its middle into two equal pieces

Suddenly they were looking upon a room that none of them had ever seen before – no doubt they likely thought they were about to die – and it would have made a serious impression on them

It's doubtful they would have forgotten any of the details or quietly allowed a faulty accounting of the event by the gospel writers and yet there is no evidence that the gospel account was ever challenged

As a matter of fact, in **Acts 6:7** we read that in the early days of the church in Jerusalem, "*a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith*"

One might well wonder whether at least some of those priests had been on duty on that day and seen the curtain tear

Either way, in the many witnesses – witnesses that had no reason to build upon the narrative of Jesus Christ – we see God's hand in making certain that it would be recorded accurately for us so that we might recognize its **significance**

III. The Significance of the Torn Curtain

We have already touched upon the first significance of the torn curtain being that the way into God's presence had been opened by the death of the Messiah and that the barrier of separation between God and man was abolished forever

Sin had finally been dealt with once and for all and the office of the earthly high priest had been abolished by God himself

No longer would the high priest need to annually carry the blood of atonement into the symbolic presence of God

Christ himself as the true High Priest would carry his own blood into the very presence of God as an offering of his own righteousness to any sinners who would accept his sacrifice on their behalf

Charles Spurgeon [[spurgeon.jpg](#)] wrote the following concerning the curtain:

"It is not a slight [tear] through which we may see a little; but it is [torn] from top to bottom. There is an entrance made for the greatest sinners. If there had only been a small hole cut through it, the lesser offenders might have crept through; but what an act of abounding mercy is this, that the veil is [torn] in the midst, and r[torn] from top to bottom, so the chief of sinners has ample passage!"

Then we need to understand that now every believer has equal access to the Father as Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:18** – *For through him [Christ] we both {Jewish and Gentile believers} have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

The torn curtain has significance for believers

Individual believers no longer need the mediation of an earthly priest but have the freedom to enter into intimate fellowship with God through the mediation of Christ's death on our behalf

There is a very real sense that the curtain that hung before the Holy of Holies was symbolic of Jesus Christ himself as the only way to the Father and that with the completion of his work of atonement the symbolic gave way to the actual

So the torn curtain serves to pictorially emphasize the reality that Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal life; the only way to be reconciled to the Father giving us assurance of what we believe

It means that we can do away with striving to be good enough to earn God's favor through slavish devotion to legalism

We no longer have to trust in ourselves and hope that we have done well enough; now we see clearly that Jesus has completed all that is necessary

And for those who have not yet believed the torn curtain gives clear and compelling evidence of these same truths

The torn curtain is a well-attested fact of history and unbelievers must honestly consider the evidence it offers and make a decision regarding Jesus

The way has been opened but not everyone will pass through it but the truly good news is that it is only those who reject Christ of their own free will who will be left on the outside paying for what has already been purchased

Conclusion

When Jesus shouted, "It is finished" from the cross the curtain in the Temple was parted forever

The barrier that prevented us from being able to come to God was removed

The only eternal way was opened for us to come straight into God's presence

And since this was all accomplished by God and not by human hands we know that God has confirmed in a very visible, tangible way that our eternal life is assured – both in quality now and quantity in eternity

There are people all around us who need to hear this message – they need to see the reality of the miracles of Calvary

Christians are often accused of being self-righteous hypocrites who think they're better than everyone else

But the truth is; none of us deserves to come close to God

We are all equally guilty and we know it all too well

If we're honest some of us would have to admit that there seem to be unbelievers in the world that outshine us when it comes to appearing "good"

The difference is we know also the truth of **Romans 5:1-2**

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

And so we also, in spite of our guilt, know the truth of **Romans 8:1** which informs us: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" is also true

The way has been opened and as I said last week it's up to us as children of the light to share the light with those around us

Well, it's also true that it's the job of those who know the way to show others the open door

Let's pray