

THE NEW AND LIVING WAY

Matthew 27:50-53

50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

51 And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.

52 And the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised;

53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many.

(Matthew 27:50–53, 2022 LSB)

THE MYSTERY OF THE AGES

We resume our journey through Matthew from where we left off last week. Jesus, having been crucified, having borne the immense weight and guilt of His people on the cross, cried out with a voice that echoed through the heavens and yielded up His spirit.

With this, Jesus' suffering ended. The separation of soul and spirit from the body at the moment of death is exactly what we experience. It's important to remember that once God the Son was incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth, He would be eternally incarnated, one Person with two natures. As Yahweh, Jesus possesses a divine nature. And as Man, Jesus possesses a human nature. It was not His deity that died on the cross but His human body. That is, *God* didn't die on the cross, the *Man* Christ Jesus did.

I want to emphasize again this week that Jesus did not helplessly submit to the processes of death as they ravaged His body. We have no control over the powers of death and destruction, but Jesus chose His exact moment of death. Jesus did what we can never do: He chose the precise moment to yield up His own spirit. We can see death coming; we can resign ourselves to the fact of it, and we can even look forward to it, especially those who know the Lord. Sadly, some choose to deliberately end their lives by destroying their physical body. But Jesus did not die because the processes of His physical body were interrupted. He died because He gave up His spirit. He committed His spirit into the hands of the Father (Luke 23:46), received the glory that had been His for eternity (John 17:5), and entered paradise with the thief who had trusted Him.

Just before He died Jesus said, "It is finished." What exactly was finished? What did Jesus accomplish on His cross?

- 1 He was the ultimate sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9:24-26; Hebrews 10:11-12).
- 2 He satisfied the wrath of God as a propitiation (Romans 3:25; 1 John 4:10).
- 3 He paid the redemption price to purchase guilty sinners (Romans 3:23-24).

- 4 He was the ransom paid to redeem sinners (1 Timothy 2:5-6).
- 5 He reconciled humanity to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).
- 6 He was the final sacrifice for sin, thus ending the need for further sacrifices (Hebrews 9:24-26; Hebrews 10:11-12).
- 7 He fulfilled the Law and Prophets (Matthew 5:17).
- 8 He made it possible for believers to be adopted into the family of God and to be sanctified (Romans 8:15-17).
- 9 He cleared a way for sinners to approach Yahweh boldly and confidently (Ephesians 3:12).

Paul writes in Ephesians 3 that he was given an extraordinary blessing:

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given,
to proclaim to the Gentiles the good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ,
9 and to bring to light for all what is the administration of the mystery
which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;
10 so that the manifold wisdom of God
might now be made known through the church
to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.
11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose
which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,
12 in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.
(Ephesians 3:8–12, 2022 LSB)

Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. That is the mystery of God, which was hidden for ages but now is revealed through the Gospel. Sinners of every kind, whether Jew or Gentile, can come boldly and confidently to God as long as they come through faith in Jesus Christ.

At the moment of His death, a tremendous sign of what Jesus accomplished was given by God the Father. We see it in Matthew 27:51: **And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.** Let's talk about this.

THE VEIL

Exodus 26:31-33 describes the veil in the Sanctuary.

31 “You shall make a veil of blue and purple
and scarlet material and fine twisted linen;
it shall be made with cherubim, the work of a skillful designer.
32 You shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold,

their hooks also being of gold, on four bases of silver.

33 You shall hang up the veil under the clasps,
and you shall bring in the ark of the testimony there within the veil;
and the veil shall separate for you the holy place and the Holy of Holies.”
(Exodus 26:31–33, 2022 LSB)

The veil used in the Tabernacle was small enough to handle; in fact, Numbers 4:5 says that it was used as a cover for the ark of the covenant when the people were on the move. But the veil used in the Temple was much larger, 60 feet high, and would have been very heavy, perhaps several hundred pounds.

The veil served a single purpose: it reminded people of the barrier of sin that kept them out of God’s presence. Only the high priest could pass through it, only one day a year—the Day of Atonement—and only after following exact instructions. The veil prohibited access into the Holy of Holies throughout the year and permitted access to the high priest on the Day of Atonement. To put it differently, the veil governed access to the presence of God.

THE SPIRITUAL VEIL

Keeping that in mind, remember that in John 14:6, Jesus said, **I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.** That is, Jesus governs access to God. In fact, in John 10:7, Jesus said, **I am the door of the sheep.** This is a figure of speech that points to a profound reality: Jesus Christ literally prohibits entry to some and permits it to others.

How does Jesus accomplish this work of governing access to God? Hebrews 10:19-20 says that Christians **have the confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh.** We enter the holy places through the blood of Jesus shed for us.

Jesus’ death ended the old way of approaching God timidly and fearfully with the blood of an animal. It instituted a new way of approaching God boldly and confidently because we come through the blood of His Son.

Jesus’ death ended the dead way of approaching God with the marks of death all around and instituted the new way of approaching God through the living Savior who ever intercedes for us. The veil, we are told, was His flesh. When Jesus was crucified, the barrier between God and man was destroyed.

The Tabernacle and the Temples that followed were built to limit access. Anyone could approach the outer part of the Tabernacle; Gentiles could freely walk through the Court of Gentiles in the Temple Mount. But only Jews could proceed into the Temple courts. Women were free to occupy the Women’s Court but were prohibited from moving into the Men’s Court. Men could freely be in the Men’s Court but were

prohibited from entering the Priestly Court. All Levites could enter the priestly court, but only those of the line of Aaron could approach the altar. Each day, a few priests – men of Aaron’s line – were chosen for duties inside the sanctuary. And once a year, on a single day, the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies.

Jesus died to provide access to all, but it is not free and open access. We come to the Father only through faith in Jesus. The way is closed to those who reject Jesus and His sacrifice for sinners, whether they reject it entirely or add their own good works to His death. But the way is open, gloriously open, to all who will come *through* Jesus.

TORN VEIL AND SHAKEN EARTH

Matthew 27:51

This spiritual truth was demonstrated through three miraculous signs.

51 And behold,
the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom;
and the earth shook and the rocks were split.
(**Matthew 27:51, 2022 LSB**)

The first sign was the tearing of the veil. This was a miraculous act. It would have been difficult for men to tear the veil from bottom to top. After all, it was four layers thick and stretched 60 feet to the ceiling of the sanctuary. But it tore from top to bottom to emphasize that Yahweh had opened up access to Himself through the death – the tearing – of His Son.

Some have suggested that the earthquake caused the veil to tear. Well, Linda and I were born and raised in earthquake country. We lived through the 1971 San Fernando earthquake; the 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake, which was just 11 miles from our house; the 1991 Sierra Madre earthquake, which caused a pan lid to fall from the top of our refrigerator and bonk Kevin on the head; the 1992 Landers-Big Bear earthquake; and the 1994 Northridge earthquake which did 20 or 30 billion dollars worth of damage. But not a single curtain was torn during any of those earthquakes. That’s not how earthquakes work, and it’s not how curtains work.

Yahweh tore that curtain from top to bottom to illustrate the spiritual effect of Jesus’ death on the cross. *Through* the Lord Jesus Christ, we have our access into the grace in which we stand (Romans 5:2). *Through* Jesus, Jews and Gentiles alike have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). It was God’s eternal purpose, accomplished in Jesus Christ, to provide us with bold and confident access *through* Christ. Jesus said that He is the *door* of the sheep (John 10:7); only by passing *through* Him can they enter the Father’s sheepfold. In fact, Jesus says that someone who enters apart from Him is a thief and a robber (John 10:1).

The second miraculous sign was the earthquake. Unlike the tearing of the veil, earthquakes were

common in the eastern Mediterranean. Powerful earthquakes have been recorded as early as three centuries before Christ. And, in fact, there are geological signs around the Dead Sea of a major earthquake that took place sometime between 26 A.D. and 36 A.D. The fact that earthquakes are natural phenomena doesn't mean that *this* earthquake wasn't miraculous in its origins.

Earthquakes in Scripture are usually signs of judgment. That's what we see in Revelation 16:17-20:

17 Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the air,
and a loud voice came out of the sanctuary from the throne, saying, "It is done."

18 And there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder;
and **there was a great earthquake,**

such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth,
so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty.

19 And **the great city was split into three parts,**
and the cities of the nations fell.

Babylon the great was remembered before God,
to give her the cup of the wine of the wrath of His rage.

20 And **every island fled away, and the mountains were not found.**

(Revelation 16:17–20, 2022 LSB)

Just as the tearing of the veil was a promise of life to those who belief, the earthquake, I think, was a warning of judgment to those who remained enemies of God.

The third sign is the resurrection of dead saints. Specifically, Matthew writes,

52 And the tombs were opened,
and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised;

53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection
they entered the holy city and appeared to many.

(Matthew 27:52–53, 2022 LSB)

This must have been a stunning event. The earthquake was probably responsible for opening up tombs around Jerusalem. But there was more: **many bodies of the saints of had fallen asleep were raised** from the dead. They emerged from the tombs after Jesus was raised and went into the city, where they were seen by many. What happened to them? I think it's likely they were received into glory at some point, perhaps when Jesus ascended to heaven, and perhaps after just a day or two. It's a truly stunning miracle, yet it is almost eclipsed by the events of Jesus' death and resurrection.

I want you to notice that it was only *saints* who were raised. Those who had died in their sins, in their rebellion, remained dead and awaiting judgment. Only those who had been objects of God's favor were raised. Only those who had truly trusted in Yahweh were raised.

Some religious traditions say that after Jesus died, He had to descend into hell in order to complete His atoning work. Jesus Himself contradicted that view when He said, **It is finished**. But we also see it contradicted in the resurrection of these saints. They were not raised when Jesus was raised but when He died. If the atonement was not completed with Jesus' death, then their resurrection, it seems, would have been premature. But since Jesus' death on the cross satisfied all of Yahweh's requirements for our redemption, they could be raised the moment that He died.

BRINGING IT HOME

Let's bring this home this morning.

On the mystery of the ages

Jesus remained in full control throughout His suffering. Nothing was forced upon Him against His will. Nothing came as a surprise. Even the moment of His death was in His hands. Jesus died as the final sacrifice for sin, satisfied God's wrath against His people, reconciled sinners to their God, and cleared the way for us – US! – to approach our heavenly Father boldly and confidently.

On the tearing of the veil

Jesus opened up a new and living way for us through His death. We quite literally come to the Father *through* Jesus. As we saw in Hebrews 10, the rending of the veil in the Temple illustrates what Jesus did for us. Jesus continues to govern access to the Father. No one comes to the Father except through Him. But those who come through Jesus, through the new and living way of His death and resurrection, come all the way to the very throne of God, accepted in Christ, counted as righteousness because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and find the Father ready to receive us and hear us. The tearing of the veil is a magnificent promise to all who will believe in Jesus Christ: come, believe in Jesus, and have life!

On the shaking of the earth

At the same time, the earthquake was a reminder to all that a day of judgment is coming. The very same Jesus who gave His life as a sacrifice for believing sinners will sit in judgment on those who continue in their sins and reject Him as Lord and Savior. As far as I can tell, Scripture always presents earthquakes as signs of the judgment of God.

Isaiah 24:19-20 describes the final judgment:

19 The earth is broken asunder;

The earth is split through;
The earth is shaken violently.
20 The earth reels to and fro like a drunkard
And it totters like a shack,
For its transgression is heavy upon it,
And it will fall, never to rise again.
(Isaiah 24:19–20, 2022 LSB)

The shaking of the earth at Jesus' death is a strong warning to the wicked. A day of judgment is coming, and you will not escape. There is nothing but hope in Jesus Christ, but no hope at all apart from Him.

On the raising of the saints

The resurrection of many dead saints combines the promise and the warning. All the saints in the Lord—not special, holy people, but all those saved by grace through Jesus Christ—will live. But only believers were raised when Jesus died. The wicked remained dead and imprisoned in Hades until the judgment.

I come away from this text with a strong sense of the finality of Jesus' actions on the cross.

He cemented judgment for those who will not believe. The earth shook as a warning of what is to come. Those who died in their sins found no grace, no mercy, no reason for hope, nothing to relieve their fear and anxiety.

And He finished salvation for all who will believe. We must believe in Him, but that's all. There is nothing else to be done. Even if we were capable of participating in our own salvation – and we are not – there would be nothing to do except believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the Gospel.