

## Jesus, Our Torn Veil

*Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.<sup>45</sup> Then the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two.<sup>46</sup> And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." Having said this, He breathed His last.<sup>47</sup> So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!"<sup>48</sup> And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned. (Lk. 23:44-48)*

People remain fascinated with the Ark of the Covenant. Do a cursory search and you will find plenty of theories about what happened to the Ark of the Covenant, where it is today, and supposedly, when it will return. Some say it is kept in Ethiopia, some will tell you it is hidden in secret passages under Jerusalem, some tell you it is in a cave under Golgotha. Some people who are excited about rebuilding a Third Temple will tell you that they know where it is and they are merely waiting for the right time to reveal it.

But what a lot of people miss is that the significance of the Ark changed completely after the Friday that Jesus died. Just as Israel had begun to worship the Bronze snake that Moses had made, and king Hezekiah had to destroy it and call it "Nehushtan" - just a piece of bronze, so people today place a kind of superstitious reverence on the Ark. A Indiana Jones movie many years ago added to this mystique. And of course, the fact that the Ark remained in a closed section of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, separated by a veil, only adds to the sense of its mystique.

The veil that separated the Ark from the rest of the Temple is what was torn on that Friday afternoon. If we understand the veil, what it was, what it did, and why it was torn, we can understand why the Lord's death on the Cross is something far more wondrous, far more glorious than the Ark of the Covenant.

### I. The Reality of the Veil

*"And you shall raise up the tabernacle according to its pattern which you were shown on the mountain.<sup>31</sup> "You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim.<sup>32</sup> "You shall hang it upon the four pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold. Their hooks shall be gold, upon four sockets of silver.<sup>33</sup> "And you shall hang the veil from the clasps. Then you shall bring the ark of the Testimony in there, behind the veil. The veil shall be a divider for you between the holy place and the Most Holy.<sup>34</sup> "You shall put the mercy seat upon the ark of the Testimony in the Most Holy.<sup>35</sup> "You shall set the table outside the veil, and the lampstand across from the table on the side of the tabernacle toward the south; and you shall put the table on the north side. (Exod. 26:30-35)*

Moses is given here the plans for the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle had an outer court, with the altar of burnt offering and the laver. Then you went into the Holy Place, where there was the golden candlestick and the golden table of shewbread. And then Moses was instructed to make a divider, a veil of linen of blue, purple and scarlet, hung on these gold and silver plated curtain rods and pillars. In front of the divider, in the same place as the Menorah, and the Table of Shewbread was the altar of Incense.

Behind this divider was the Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place. There the Ark of the Covenant was placed, with the Ten Commandments within and Aaron's rod, and a golden censer with some manna. But it is what went on top of the Ark that really mattered. It was essentially a golden lid that fitted the exact dimensions of the Ark, with two golden cherubim facing each other and overshadowing it. That was known as the Mercy seat.

*"You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you.<sup>22</sup> "And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two*

*cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel. (Exod. 25:21-22)*

This mercy seat comes from the same root words meaning atonement. It is the place of propitiation, where the blood was sprinkled by Aaron on the day of Atonement, where satisfaction was made so that God could dwell with His people.

Now, when Israel was settled in the Promised Land, during the time of Solomon, the Temple was constructed to replace the Tabernacle. Solomon's Temple essentially doubled the size of the Tabernacle. There's a tradition that Solomon actually set up doors between the Holy and the Most Holy, and covered these with the embroidered veil. We know this Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. The Temple was rebuilt under Zerubbabel in 520 B.C. but it was really refurbished and expanded under Herod in 22 B.C.

This was the Temple standing during the time of Christ. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus describes what the veil looked like, saying it was embroidered in scarlet, purple, and blue. Apparently about 10 by 20 metres, it was said to be the thickness of a man's hand. The veil was so large, and so heavy, that when it needed to be cleaned, it apparently took 300 priests to take it to the ritual baths to be immersed, and then dried in the sun. They would have had more than one curtain.

So why all this trouble? Why the need for this veil?

## **II. The Reason for the Veil**

A few biblical accounts can help us understand the importance of this veil.

**Leviticus 16:1** *Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they offered profane fire before the LORD, and died; <sup>2</sup> and the LORD said to Moses: "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud above the mercy seat. (Lev. 16:1-2)*

Aaron was told that he could not simply come into the Most Holy place at just any time in any way, or he would die. Aaron, according to the following verses had to make an offering for himself, wash, wear specific consecrated clothes, and follow a very specific order to avoid dying, as his two sons had died when they offered profane fire. The Ark and the Mercy seat were where the Holy Presence of God was experienced, so it was not to be approached lightly.

During the time of Eli, the Ark was captured by the Philistines, and it began to plague them. So they sent it back to Israel, and we then read of a tragic event.

*So when the five lords of the Philistines had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day. <sup>17</sup> These are the golden tumors which the Philistines returned as a trespass offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; <sup>18</sup> and the golden rats, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and country villages, even as far as the large stone of Abel on which they set the ark of the LORD, which stone remains to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh. <sup>19</sup> Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter. <sup>20</sup> And the men of Beth Shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? And to whom shall it go up from us?" (1 Sam. 6:16-20)*

When the Israelites simply looked into the Ark, it brought judgement. Several years later, a similar tragedy took place under David. David brought the Ark up to Jerusalem.

*And David and all Israel went up to Baalah, to Kirjath Jearim, which belonged to Judah, to bring up from*

*there the ark of God the LORD, who dwells between the cherubim, where His name is proclaimed. <sup>7</sup> So they carried the ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinadab, and Uzza and Ahio drove the cart. <sup>8</sup> Then David and all Israel played music before God with all their might, with singing, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on cymbals, and with trumpets. <sup>9</sup> And when they came to Chidon's threshing floor, Uzza put out his hand to hold the ark, for the oxen stumbled. <sup>10</sup> Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzza, and He struck him because he put his hand to the ark; and he died there before God. <sup>11</sup> And David became angry because of the LORD'S outbreak against Uzza; therefore that place is called Perez Uzza to this day. <sup>12</sup> David was afraid of God that day, saying, "How can I bring the ark of God to me?" (1 Chr. 13:6-12)*

The Ark was not supposed to be peered into, and it was not supposed to be touched. It was to be carried with specially made rods, on the shoulders of the priests.

What did all this teach Israel? It taught them that while God wanted to be in their presence, there was no direct access to God. No one could experience the holy presence of God in an unmediated, direct fashion. There were barriers. Both preventative barriers and protective barriers.

The preventative barrier was the sin of the people. The idea that is current in our culture, that anyone can approach God, if you mean well, and anyone can just commune with God on his or her own is completely foreign to the Bible. That's another religion, and another god. In the Bible, God is perfect, transcendent and pure, so a people stained with imperfection, corruption and sin, cannot enter His presence. And if one of these people decides to touch the Ark, or look into the Ark, or barge into the Most Holy Place, the physical result is death.

And then the protective barriers, kept more and more people out from getting direct access to God. If you were a Gentile, there was the court of the Gentiles where you could go, but you could not enter the Temple area. There was the court of the women, and women could not go further than that. A Jewish man could get as far as the brazen altar, but there he would hand his sacrifice over to the priest and go no further.

Only Levitical priests could officiate in the Temple, in the Holy Place, and they could only do it for the time they were on duty. There were no chairs in the Temple, to just sit down, and hang out. You did what you had to and left. And there, at furthest end, was this thick veil, signifying only one man in all Israel can come here, and only once a year, for a very brief period.

So much of the system seemed to say, God is here, but don't come. Beware! Keep your distance.

But now we come to what happened on Good Friday.

### **III. The Rending of the Veil**

*Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. <sup>34</sup> And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" <sup>35</sup> Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, "Look, He is calling for Elijah!" <sup>36</sup> Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down." <sup>37</sup> And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. <sup>38</sup> Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup> So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mk. 15:33-39)*

Now both Matthew and Mark emphasise that the veil was torn from top to bottom, not from bottom to top. This was not an act that some human in the Temple could have engineered. Perhaps with very sharp swords, a group of people could start from the bottom, and begin hacking, and eventually it would be above the reach of the tallest man, and they would have to either climb to the curtain rods, and attempt the precarious work of hacking downwards. But such vandalism would

have been caught almost before it began, and had it been done without anyone seeing, its appearance would not look like a torn veil, but like a shredded and tattered piece of material. The veil in the temple was torn the way you tear a piece of paper in two, or the way you might tear a piece of material you want to use for cleaning.

We try to imagine the sound it made when it tore. And when the priests came in, for there would be hundreds of them in the Temple complex, overseeing the slaying of the Passover Lambs at that very moment, what must have been their reaction, seeing grand veil of red, scarlet, and blue, hanging limply in two pieces, the Most Holy Place now exposed and in full view. There must have been deep fear and consternation. Though none of the disciples were in the Temple, clearly the secret got out. Later on, in Acts, we read “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). I think the reason a number of them became obedient is because of what they saw on this day. Actually, that's not the only thing they saw.

The Talmud records that forty years before the Temple was destroyed, the light of the menorah would go out, the doors of the Temple would open by themselves, the crimson thread which was placed on the scapegoat no longer turned from crimson to white, and the lot which was cast on the day of Atonement, one for the Lord, and one for the scapegoat, kept coming up in the left hand, instead of the right -the hand of favour. The priests would have been deeply disturbed and perplexed by this, and I think, when they heard the Gospel preached in Jerusalem, many of them believed for that very reason.

So what did all this mean?

**First, it meant that the Law and its ceremonies was over.** God did not start with the smallest thing, and work His way up. He did not break open one of the outer doors of the Temple. He did not topple the bronze altar outside. By tearing the veil between the Holy and the Most Holy, God was making an undeniable statement: I Myself am declaring this system null and void. No more Passover Lambs. No more Day of Atonement and Yom Kippur goat. No more appearances three times a year. No more morning and evening sacrifice. No more Levitical priesthood, no more Aaronic High Priest. Indeed, no more Temple.

By tearing this veil, God was switching off the mains, He was cutting the jugular, He was going to the very heart, and saying, no more.

Why? Had God changed? Did God no longer require atonement as He once had? No, and it is a great error to think that the God of the Old and New Testaments are different Gods. Instead, that Good Friday, a final, and once for all sacrifice was made. Mark tells us that during those three hours of darkness, Jesus cried out “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” It was during this time that God was pouring out His wrath at sin, exacting retribution for it, meting out justice on Jesus the substitute.

*But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. <sup>12</sup> Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.<sup>13</sup> For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, <sup>14</sup> how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb. 9:11-14)*

Old Testament sacrifices could never really deal with guilt. Jesus did not have to enter into that High Place again and again, but once for all. His sacrifice is not a temporary cleansing. His priesthood is not temporary.

For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, *which are* copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; <sup>25</sup> not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another-- <sup>26</sup> He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. <sup>27</sup> And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, <sup>28</sup> so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Heb. 9:24-28)

God had not changed. God completed the new and better way than the old, the once for all sacrifice, the once-for-all priest, the once-for-all Day of Atonement, the once-for-all Passover.

The Law's ceremonies could now be removed, because in Jesus, there was a permanent removal of sin. Such was the removal, that Spurgeon points out that God did not just tear off a corner of the curtain. "The rent is not in one corner, but in the midst, as Luke tells us. It is not a slight rent through which we may see a little; but it is rent from the top to the 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 rent in the midst, and rent from top to bottom, so that the chief of sinners may find ample passage! This also shows that for believers there is no hindrance to the fullest and freest access to God.

So how strange it is that there are people who long to return to the old way. They want the Law back, and wish to continue the shadows as if they are substances. They wish to declare foods clean and unclean, they wish to mandate certain days of observance, they will tell you that such are needful for your salvation. Other will tell you that you need human mediators and sacrifices again. So they will hijack the glorious Gospel of Christ and re-introduce all that Jesus abolished on that day. In place of the sacrifices, they now put the Mass as a perpetual sacrifice. In place of the Levitical priests, they place mediators with the Mediator: Mary, the saints, human priests. And weekly, you are to come, and gain a repeat of this atonement each week.

Perhaps we may turn the Scripture around: what God has torn asunder let no man join. God has torn the veil, cease sowing it up with human works! God has rent it cleanly and thoroughly, why seek to patch it with rituals and will-worship?

### **Second, it meant, that open access to God had been granted.**

*Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, <sup>21</sup> and having a High Priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:19-22)*

Here is what the writer of Hebrews says: we may not only look upon the Holy of Holies, but we may enter. We may now enter through a new way. We no longer go to a Temple with a veil. That veil was torn, and later, the Temple destroyed.

Instead, the new way is through Jesus Himself. He is the Veil, the God-Man who stands between the Holy God and man, who is a mediator between both, and who was torn for us on the Cross, His spirit torn from His body in death, paying our penalty. With Christ the Veil, and Christ the High Priest, and Christ the sacrifice, we now have access.

Everyone who is in Christ, who has received Him by faith, is found in Him, and has access to the Shekinah glory that the High Priest had but for a minute or so once a year. We can have access to

God as children related to the Father, as covenant-members of His covenant with us. You can come directly to God through the veil of Jesus Christ.

Now here is something the Israelite did not dream of. They were told at Mount Sinai not to come near, or they might die. David wrote in his psalms how he envied the bird that could make its nest in the Temple and never leave. *How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! <sup>2</sup> My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. (Ps. 84:1-2)*

Indeed, David may have walked with God, and prayed while keeping his sheep, but never would David have thought that his soul was in deep union with the Messiah, that he had unmediated access to God. Indeed, during his ten year exile from Saul, the deep grief of his heart was being unable to appear three times a year at Jerusalem. Even though David was regenerate, and even though David prayed and meditated on Scripture, there was an experiential union with God that did not yet exist until Christ came.

The believer today can worship and thank and confess to God directly. That does not mean he has no need for the church. In fact, in the next two verses, the writer draws the application that we should *consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:24-25)*

So what should we do with this access? Verse 22: let us draw near. The Law said, stand back, beware. The veil said, thus far and no further. But the torn veil says, if you are in Christ, draw near. Come and worship, come and admire, come and adore. There were no chairs in the Holy of Holies, but in the New Covenant we sit at a Table, and commune with Christ.

But we need training to do this. Some of us have not become bold in the blood of Christ to draw near. Some seek it in priests and saints, it is true, but I think there are way that Protestants seek some go-between between them and the Holiest. Some place their church leaders there, asking for him to pray for them, listening only to his sermons. But in the new covenant, the spiritual leaders are no longer called priests: they are called shepherds, people who nurture a flock. They are called elders: people who bring wisdom and leadership. They are called overseers: those who superintend the work of God. But no spiritual leader is your mediator. Some look for mediators in the latest Christian book, in some fad or hyped Christian celebrity. Some place some kind of substitute other than Christ. And too often, it is because they have an accusing conscience, accompanied by the Accuser himself, and together these shout, "Turn back! Go away! No access!"

But what does our text say? *let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

A true heart in full assurance, having our hearts unburdened from an evil conscience. You can approach not because of what you have done or have not done, but because of what Christ has done and not done. Christ has not sinned, Christ has fulfilled the Law, Christ has paid your penalty and rose from the dead. If you are in Him, and He is in you, you must by faith, draw near. This is what Wesley was writing of when he wrote:

Arise, my soul, arise!  
Shake off thy guilty fears;  
The bleeding Sacrifice  
In my behalf appears.  
Before the throne my Surety stands;

My name is written on His hands.

He ever lives above  
For me to intercede,  
His all-redeeming love,  
His precious blood to plead.  
His blood was shed for all our race,  
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

Five bleeding wounds He bears,  
Received on Calvary;  
They pour effectual prayers;  
They strongly speak for me.  
Forgive him, O forgive, they cry,  
Nor let that ransomed sinner die!

The Father hears Him pray,  
His dear anointed One;  
He cannot turn away  
The presence of His Son.  
His Spirit answers to the blood,  
And tells me I am born of God.

To God I'm reconciled,  
His pardoning voice I hear;  
He owns me for His child,  
I can no longer fear.  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And Father, Abba, Father, cry.