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The Miracles of Calvary

Miracle #3 - The Miracle the Rending of the Veil
Matthew 27:51

Introduction

Israel's first house of worship was a portable tent known as the tabernacle, first presented in Exodus 25:1-31:18 and again in 35:1-40:28, see also Heb 9:1-28. The Temple, a permanent structure in Jerusalem, ultimately replaced the tabernacle in the wilderness. The Jerusalem Temple built by Solomon perpetuated the imagery and symbolism that was presented in the tabernacle. In the center of the tabernacle was the most holy place called the Holy of Holies. In this innermost chamber was the *shekainah* glory of God, the Ark of the Covenant, and the two cherubim atop the Ark, which comprised the Mercy Seat. This Mercy Seat was considered to be the throne of God and the innermost chamber, the Holy of Holies.

In the inner chamber, the holy place, there was the menorah, the table of the bread of the presence, and the altar of incense that stood before the entrance to the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was hidden from view by a curtain or veil that formed a division between the two chambers. This veil was elaborate and ornate. It measured twenty by twenty feet and was made of fine linen dyed with blue, purple, and scarlet. On the veil two cherubim were embroidered in gold, whose presence signaled a warning to "go no farther." Cherubim appear in Scripture as the guardians of God's holiness and always appear in close proximity to God. "Cherubim" is a plural form and is found 65 times in the Old Testament and once in the New. The singular form, *cherub*, is found 30 times, all in the Old Testament. God placed cherubim to guard the way to Eden, Gen 3:24; two were atop the Ark of the Covenant, Exod 25:18-20; two were on the curtain of the most holy place, Exod 26:1; and they are key characters in the prophet's visions in Ezekiel 1:1-28 and 10:1-22.

The veil separating the Holy of Holies from the holy place of the tabernacle was hung on four wooden pillars that were covered with gold and fastened together with hooks made of gold. The curtain or veil that separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies was 20x20 feet. The veil was made of linen and was dyed and embroidered in red, purple, and blue. All of the details of the tabernacle, its

boards, curtains, and furnishings are presented in Exodus, chapters 25-27 and 35-38. It was a portable sanctuary and was made to be disassembled and moved from place to place in the wilderness. The Temple in Jerusalem was permanent and a much larger structure. The holy place was 30 feet wide, 60 feet long, and 45 feet high. The most holy place was a thirty-foot cube with a raised floor.

The veil of the Temple was 30x45 feet high and four inches thick. When Herod upgraded the Temple, the curtain was raised to 75 feet in height. There is an ongoing debate as to whether there were one or two curtains, with a space of one cubit between them. The Talmud suggests that there was an outer veil that covered the edge of the walls and an inner veil that covered the opening. Alfred Edersheim, in his *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, states that the veils were so massive and heavy that it took 300 priests to manipulate them. Edersheim adds:

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 [seventy-two in all] fastened together might explain how the rent might be as described in the Gospel. Indeed, everything seems to indicate that although the earthquake might furnish the physical basis, the rent of the Temple-veil was - in reverence be it said - really made by the hand of God, see Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, pp. 893-94.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, also confirms the existence of the double veils between the holy place and the most holy place. He also reported other portents and wonders that occurred in the decade prior to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. These occurrences were considered portents of the coming destruction of the Temple. He listed eight such portents including, (1) a sword-shaped star in the sky; (2) a comet that appeared and remained for a year; (3) a bright light that shone around the altar and the sanctuary at 3:00 a.m.; and (4) chariots and armies seen in the clouds throughout the country. Additional signs seen inside the Temple included (1) a cow giving birth to a lamb; (2) the eastern gate of the inner court that took 20 men to move was seen opening of its own accord at midnight; (3) the priests in the inner court heard voices saying, "We are departing from here!"; and (4) woes against Jerusalem and the Temple pronounced by Jesus bar Ananius, who was beaten by the priest and handed over to the Romans for execution, but who was released by the governor as a madman.

Such stories only point to events that were often interpreted as reflections of the struggles between the gods of the Romans and the one true God of the Hebrews, see Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Passion*

Narratives of the Four Gospels, 2 Vols; New York: Doubleday, 1994, 2:1114, n. 39; S. V. McCasland, "Portents in Josephus and in the Gospels," JBL 51 (1932): 330-31; H. W. Montefiore, "Josephus and the New Testament," *Novum Testamentum* 4 (1960): 152. Whether there is truth in any of these alleged portents, their recording in the historical record affirms the undercurrent of turmoil that existed at the time of the trial and death of Jesus.

Without having studied the Book of Exodus and the Book of Hebrews, one would be clearly handicapped in grasping the magnitude of the message of the rending of the veil of the Temple.

I. The Timing of the Rending of the Veil: Its Significance

I want to lead this discussion with another quote from Alfred Edersheim. It is his description of the event as reported in the Gospels:

And now a shudder ran through Nature, as its Sun had set. We dare not do more than follow the rapid outlines of the Evangelistic narrative. As the first token, it records the rending of the Temple-Veil in two from the top downward to the bottom; as the second the quaking of the earth, the rending of the rocks, and the opening of the graves, while the rending of the Veil is recorded first, as being the most significant token to Israel, it may have been connected with the earthquake, although this alone might scarcely account for the tearing of so heavy a Veil from the top to the bottom. Even the latter circumstance has its significance. That some great catastrophe, betokening the impending destruction of the Temple had occurred in the Sanctuary about this very time, is confirmed by no less than four mutually independent testimonies: those of Tacitus, of Josephus, of the Talmud and of earliest Christian tradition. The most important 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, Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 610.

There are three points that reveal the significance of the timing of the rending of the veil of the Temple.

- A. First, it occurred on Friday, the sixth day of the week, the day on which Jesus was crucified. Remember that it was on this day that God finished His great creative work making the heavens and the earth, including human

life, as described in Gen 1:24-28. God finished His work and called it "good." On this Friday, Jesus was crucified to reveal that God completed His important work of redemption for all humankind. The day of the week is very significant as the last day of God's work before the Sabbath rest.

- B. It occurred at the beginning of the Passover. The priests were hurrying to get this execution over with because at sundown that Friday the feast of the Passover began, Matt 26:1-5. The Passover is the celebration of God's deliverance of the Hebrews from captivity in Egypt. It is the Old Testament picture version of the events surrounding the crucifixion. A lamb was chosen by the people on Palm Sunday. The lamb was slain at the time of the evening sacrifice, 3:00 p.m., the exact time of Jesus' death. Just as the Hebrews were delivered from bondage in Egypt [Egypt is a type for sin], so we are delivered from sin's enslavement by the crucifixion of Jesus, our Passover Lamb, just as Jesus told His disciples, see Matt 16:21-23; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Luke 22:14-23. As in Egypt when the death angel passed through the land, only those homes which had the blood of the lamb on the doorposts were spared. So it is that salvation comes only to those who have the blood of Christ sprinkled by faith on the doorposts of their hearts, Eph 1:7; 2:13; Col 1:20; Heb 9:20-22; 10:19; 1 Pet 1:2, 19; 1 John 1:7; 5:8; Rev 7:14; 19:13.
- C. It occurred at the ninth hour of the day. As we have noted, the death of Jesus occurred at 3:00 p.m. Each day at the ninth hour, 3:00 p.m., the priests stood before the altar of burnt offering. The blood was sprinkled before the veil, and the animal of sacrifice was laid upon the altar. So it was on this day, Friday, at the very moment of the evening sacrifice, Jesus cried, "Father, into your hands I commit My Spirit," and then breathed His last breath, Luke 23:46.

At the same moment that He breathed His last breath, "Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two, from the top to the bottom," Matt 27:50-51a. God wanted to declare the new way open to all people who now have Christ as their great High Priest, and the access open to all through Him who ever lives to make intercession for us, see Heb 7:11-28, esp. v. 25; 9:11-15; 10:10-18. Access to the Holy of Holies was granted to all who look to Him, and only to Him, for salvation, Acts 4:12. This was God's perfect plan and the reason Jesus came, John 1:29-34.

Read Hebrews 7:11-28; 9:11-15 and 10:10-18.

II. The Terminus of the Sacrificial System: Its Effect

The sacrificial system that reigned from Moses to Calvary ended the rule of law and ushered in the rule of grace. As the old gospel hymn says it, "Justice called and mercy answered," in Jesus' death on the cross.

- A. Jesus' death on the cross marked the fulfillment of the tabernacle and temple sacrificial system given to Moses in the wilderness, Exod 25-31 and 33-40. With the veil of partition to separate the holy place from the Holy of Holies, there was no longer need for the symbol of separation. Jesus had broken down the middle wall of partition for every person, Jew and Gentile alike. Ephesians 2:1-18 is a wonderful commentary on this fact. Calvary answered the Garden of Eden. The barrier of access to God was set in the Garden of Eden when the cherubim were stationed to guard access to the tree of life, Gen 3:22-24. That symbolism had been preserved with the embroidered pictures of the cherubim on the veil of the tabernacle and Temple (Exod 26:31), and with the two cherubim atop the Ark of the Covenant, Exod 25:18. The cross and the death of Jesus for our sins removed all barriers and gave us access to God through faith. All of us who were alienated by sin and far off from God have been brought near and ushered into the presence of God by the blood of Christ, Eph 2:13.
- B. Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross marked the end of the priesthood as a special class, and every believer is a priest with Christ as our perfect and eternal mediator, Heb 7:26-28. Jesus is our great high priest and all believers are priests in their own right, 1 Pet 2:1-10. On the Day of Atonement, it was necessary for the high priest to make atonement for the sins of the people, Lev 16:1-34. The cross represented the final Day of Atonement. The rending of the veil opened the way of access once for all, for all who believe, for all time, see Heb 9:11-27; 10:5-18.

The Holy of Holies was opened by God for public view. No longer was it necessary for the high priest to make atonement since Christ did it once for all, Heb 10:10. From that time forth, there were no bulls, no blood, and no animal sacrifice. All the mysteries of the most holy place were open and accessible. All the ceremony, all the regulations, and all the promises were all satisfied in the person of our Lord,
2 Cor 1:20.

- C. Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross marked the end of the Old Covenant as necessary to meeting the demands of God to approach Him, Heb 8:1-13. Since the Old Covenant gave way to the New Covenant, the obvious

question would be, "Why do we have the Old?" Romans 8:1-39 comprises a wonderful commentary on this issue. The law was never intended to be a means of salvation. The law was a mirror of human sin and inability—no one could keep the first commandment.

So the law was only to show us our inability and bring us to the feet of Jesus, who alone could enable us to have access to God, Gal 3:19-25, esp v. 24. One should see also the contrast of the two covenants in Galatians 4:21-31 and Christian liberty in 5:1-15, 16-26. The Old Covenant was written in stone and the New Covenant was written on the heart. The Old prepared the way for the New and the New fulfilled the Old, see Jeremiah 31:31-34. What we could not accomplish by the law, we now are able to accomplish through Christ who in us is the hope of glory, Col 1:9-29.

III. The Truths of the Torn Veil: Its Message

- A. The rending of the veil was a release that marked the end of the temple sanctuary as it had been known. Up to this point, the most holy place had been shrouded in mystery. As Jesus released His Spirit to the Father (Luke 23:46), the Father prepared to release the Holy Spirit upon the church, Acts 2:1ff. According to Tacitus, there were a number of supernatural disturbances that occurred at the time of the rending of the veil of the Temple. He reported the following:

Hosts were seen to encounter in the air, refulgent arms appeared; and by a blaze of lightening shooting from the clouds all the Temple was illuminated. The great gates of the Temple were of themselves in an instant thrown open, and a voice more than human heard to declare, that the Gods were going to depart. There followed withal a huge stir and tumult, as resulting from their motion and departure, wonders from which some few found cause of dread, *The Histories, Cornelius Tacitus, Book V, Chapters 1-14 in The Works of Tacitus*, translated, Thomas Gordon, 1737.

These reports may have some embellishments in them, but do at least suggest that something remarkable happened at the moment of Jesus' death and the rending of the temple veil.

Professor Jim Sibley, Director of our Pasche Institute of Jewish Studies, shared this insight with me. There are other references to things that happened in AD 30, the time of the crucifixion, forty years before the destruction of the Temple. The lintel over the

entrance to the Temple broke. The authoritative teaching of the Tanakh was that on the Day of Atonement, as the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat, the other priest would tie a crimson thread to the outside of the door of the temple entrance. If it turned white, the people would rejoice for the sacrifice was accepted. If it did not turn white, the people grieved. This means that in AD 30 there was a keen awareness that atonement had been secured through the offerings on the Day of Atonement.

Even more significant are the statements in the Babylonian Talmud, which say that forty years before the destruction of the Temple in 586 BC, that the crimson cord in the Temple that normally turned white after the offering of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, always remained red, signaling no forgiveness of sin. The light on the menorah, on the far left, did not shine, the lot of the Lord never came up in the right hand, and the doors of the courtyard opened of their own accord. Forty years before the destruction of the second Temple in AD 70, the western light went out, the crimson cord remained crimson, the lot for the Lord always came up in the left hand and the gates would open at midnight of their own accord, see Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation, V. B.: Yoma, Chapters 3-5* (Number 295) (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994) pp. 49-50; Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation, IX: Tractat Rosh Hashanah* (Number 306) (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); and Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of the Land Of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation, (Vol. 14)* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 176; Josephus, *Wars*, VI, 6, 3.

What did all this mean? It meant that there were miraculous changes in the offering of sacrifices and in the service of the Temple that indicated sins could not be atoned by these practices. The miraculous signs were given in AD 30, but since the Jews refused to hear Jesus or heed all the miracles, the Temple was destroyed forty years later in AD 70, and the sacrificial system is not in use to this present day. Ezekiel 40-48 presents a rebuilding of the Temple and a reestablishment of sacrifices in the millennium. The Jews will celebrate them with Christ as the perfect sacrifice in view just as believers now celebrate the Lord's Supper.

- B. The rending of the veil was a revelation of God's saving grace available to all who would come to Him by His Son, Jesus. The opening of the way into

the Holy of Holies was a wonderful divine invitation to come to God through Jesus, our great and compassionate High Priest. With the rending of the veil and the way into the Holy of Holies open, the light would shine in to reveal the mysteries of God in Christ. It was a vivid pictorial statement that God had unveiled Himself in His son, Jesus Christ, see Heb 1:1-4. The *shekainah* glory that had shown there shone in the person of His Son as it did at the transfiguration, Matt 16:28-17:13.

- C. The rending of the veil in two pieces was a dramatic resignation of the office of the veil by God, it having accomplished its purpose. It was torn from the top down by the hand of God. Jesus endured the shame and suffering of the cross that we might have open access to God through Him. It is of this fact that Paul speaks in Ephesians 2:11-22, esp. vv. 14-15. Now go back and re-read the suffering servant passage in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and see the miracle of God's plan as it unfolded at Calvary.

Lessons

1. The rending of the veil was a supernatural demonstration from God. Its timing was miraculous, and its message was miraculous.
2. The rending of the veil was one of a cluster of miracles associated with the Temple that called attention to the saving work of Jesus as the Messiah.
3. The rending of the veil was another of the miracles of Calvary that are affirmed by non-biblical sources in Roman and Jewish history.
4. The rending of the veil was an open invitation for all believers to come to God through Jesus and receive the rest of His saving grace, see Heb 4:1-16.
5. The rending of the veil was a dramatic sign of the end of the sacrificial system. While the system continued until the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, it was a portent of the end of the sacrifices, which Christ fulfilled by His death on the cross.
6. The rending of the veil also was a dramatic portent of the end of the priesthood as it had been known and practiced since the time of Moses. With the way opened, all believers are able to come directly to God as priests in their own right.
7. The rending of the veil also was a dramatic sign of the conclusion of the Old Covenant under Moses and the implementation of the New Covenant for the Jewish people under Jesus as foreseen by Jeremiah, see Jer 31:31-40.
8. There was a dramatic shift in the place of the Temple and sacrifices that commenced forty years before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. This shift occurred in AD 30 and coincides with the death of Jesus on the

cross. An article entitled, "The Mysterious Events of the Year 30 A.D!" by William F. Dankenbring, is an interesting read and is available on the internet via Google, (type in the title of the article as listed).

9. The rending of the veil was the picture book version of the redeeming grace of God made available to all through the great High Priesthood of Jesus. It is a vivid pictorial statement of Hebrews 1:1-4.
10. The rending of the veil in two parts from top to bottom was a dramatic statement by God of the resignation of the office of the veil as a separation between ordinary humans and the divine presence of God as presented in Ephesians 2:11-22.