

The Veil

Last 24 Hours of Christ

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the first book in the New Testament, the gospel of Matthew 27. As you're turning to Matthew 27, if you are a guest or visitor with us this morning, I want to welcome you somewhat towards the end of a journey through the gospels, not just one specific gospel or the entirety of the life of Jesus Christ, but specifically the last 24 hours of his life and ministry, and the reason that I invite you toward the end is because chronologically speaking we are in the waning hours of this most famous and most pivotal day in the life of humanity.

It began in the garden of Gethsemane and it will end in a tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, but today as we turn to Matthew 27, we're going to have the privilege and the opportunity to not just see and read about one of the most famous events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ but we're going to see something today that we've yet not to see. In fact, throughout the entirety of this 24 hour period, we've seen those of a Jewish background and their response and reaction, we've seen the Romans and the mercenaries, their response and their reactions, we've seen the crowds that were gathered, Simon of Cyrene and a host of others, in fact, we've seen a plethora of response from humanity across the scope of perspectives of opinions but today we're going to see something different. The creative order itself is going to cry out in regards to what is taking place. The rocks have been still up until this point.

In Matthew 27 beginning in verse 52, it's a very brief passage but it actually contains three specific stories in one. We have the tearing of the famous veil, we have the crying out of the centurion, and we have the resurrection of the saints all in four simple verses. It says in verse 51,

51 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; 52 And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, 53 And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. 54 Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.

Today as we make our way through this 24 hour time period, I want to again address just some very simplistic but profound questions regarding the text, the story, and the characters that are involved but we must begin with the "when," and of all of the messages throughout the series, the "when" of this one may be the most critical. This event of the tearing of the veil takes place after Luke 23. Why is that important? Because in Luke 23:46 Jesus Christ makes his final declaration from the cross. He began with, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they're doing." And over the course of the next 6-7 hours, there would only be seven statements that were made but his last statement recorded in Luke 23, he says, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The Bible says there in verse 46 and immediately he gave up the ghost. The reason this is important is that for the very first time in the entirety of the gospel accounts the physical body of Jesus is lifeless. There is no physical life in him. He is deceased, as we would call it. He has breathed his last breath.

Next week when we gather, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, will take his "lifeless body" and place it in a borrowed tomb, but it's also before the earthquake. I want to go back to verse 51 and I want to read very slowly and specifically because human nature has us reverse the events. It says, "And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in two from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent." It's just human nature to hear this story and believe that this incredible instrument known as the veil that we'll discuss in more detail in a moment, that as a response to the earthquake, as a response to the rocks, because of the ground shifting, because of the earth quaking, that naturally it became unstable and it tore. But read it again. The earthquake did not occur before the veil – hear me clearly – when the veil tore, the creation responded. When the veil tore, the earth quaked. When the veil tore, the rocks rent. So what we have before us is such of a critical nature that for the first time, this didn't happen in the garden of Gethsemane, this didn't happen when Judas betrayed him, it didn't happen when Peter denied him, it didn't even happen when the people said, "Give us Barabbas." For the first time there is an event within this 24 hour time period that not even the earth can contain itself at what has taken place.

So who's involved? There is this centurion and I know I'm kind of fast forwarding to the end of the text, but think about who this man would have been. In Acts 10 we meet a centurion who is crying out to the Lord and we know that Simon Peter sees the sheet that is tied at four sides lifted down three times to him, to tell him to go and share the gospel even with those that he "would deem unclean." Cornelius is named in Acts 10, this centurion is not. Why is this important? Because the centurion would have been a pagan worshiper. He was a Roman. All that mythology, all that history that we're familiar with, he would have embraced it wholeheartedly simply because of the position that he held. He was one in our military terminology, he was not in the trenches, he was not on the front lines, he was the one rendering the decisions of those that were. We don't know for sure but there is the possibility that the centurion was actually the Roman man who was "put in charge" of the crucifixions on Golgotha that day. He would have observed everything. He would have seen Simon of Cyrene at the base of the hill. He would have heard every statement. He would have experienced three hours of darkness and he would have seen the last breath. But notice that when the earth quaked, notice when the rocks

rent, what did he do? He declared, "Surely this is the Son of God." You realize that one single statement took everything that he had grown up with and believed and he "threw it in the proverbial trash can." He said, "Everything that I've known up to this point has to be changed because there's something different about this guy."

Of course, there are those that watched with him that surely would have heard his statement, but then there's the Sanhedrin. These were the religious elites. These were the individuals who not only declared Jesus was blasphemous, they'd been up for at least 24 straight hours. They were determined to make sure this rogue rabbi from Nazareth would "breathe his last breath." They "lied, cheat and stole" to make sure that he would get on that cross. Why is this important to the story, he's breathed his last breath? Because you know what they would have done immediately thereafter? This was the Passover. The "sacred day" where they would remember that which the Lord had done in Exodus, how he delivered them from their sins, and what they would have done is they would have gone back to their homes, back to their families, and they again for who knows how many times in their life, would walk through this meal, this religious ritual, indifferent to the fact that the Lamb of God had just been slain for the sins of humanity.

So you've got one man on one side of the equation who grew up with erroneous teachings and beliefs who realizes, "I missed it." Then you've got a whole group of guys who should have known better who missed it all. They went home to "eat, drink and talk about" the Lamb who would come when the Lamb that came, they just witnessed do what the Bible said he would do.

Where does this event take place? Well, it's a unique place, it's the Holy of Holies. You see, he breathed his last breath on Mount Calvary or Golgotha. That's where the centurion would have been. But notice that when he does, the veil tears. This is a unique item that we'll discuss in more detail in just a moment but the important part here is it's the Holy of Holies. This is the center of the universe and I don't mean that proverbially speaking. You think about when we talk about real estate today, there are three words to guide you how much you're going to pay for whatever you want to buy: location, location, location. And the most valuable piece of property on planet earth is right there in Jerusalem. In fact, there is a Temple Mount there in Jerusalem that for thousands of years humanity of all faiths and backgrounds and philosophies have fought over, they're pillaged over because it is there that the Lord established through the "desire of David," through the hands of Solomon, a permanent place for his presence and his Spirit. It was a building that had been built in about 1000 BC where the sacrifices, those Passover sacrifices, would enter into. It would be destroyed in roughly 586 by the Babylonians. It would be rebuilt in the 5th century BC about 445 BC. It would go into disarray. Then actually the Roman leader by Herod would fund its building therein. Why is this important? Because this building is in the center of the busiest city at the busiest time for the Passover season, and the reason that people came to Jerusalem, the reason they pilgrimaged there at this time is because the Holy of Holies represented the presence of God, the Spirit of God.

Now at Passover that would not be the time that anybody would enter it, in fact, that would be the Day of Atonement or what we know today as Yom Kippur that would take

place late summer, early fall, but nonetheless every pilgrim that descended, every priest who operated throughout the temple, every person that was there, everything they did was because they wanted the Spirit of God, the presence of God, the place of God to respond appropriately. So Jesus breathes his last breath, the veil is torn, the activity is now in the most sacred, the most holy, the most important of places, more valuable than Gethsemane, more valuable than Caiaphas' palace, more valuable than Pilate's front steps, for there in the Holiest of Holies in the center of humanity's world, a veil is going to be torn.

So what took place in this famous event? Well, it's very particular. In fact, we've got to spend some time talking about this famous veil because there's a lot of tradition that surrounds it. There's not a whole lot of scripture, to be quite honest with you. You go back in the book of Exodus and we have some passages but let me describe what this veil would have looked like from a physical particular perspective. It would have been about 30 feet wide, and because Herod had remodeled the temple and built it bigger previously, it would have been approximately 60 feet in height. Now the big question we have is what was the width and the tradition says it was the width of a man's hand, and so therefore we've typically said on the conservative side roughly 4-5 inches in thickness. Now that's important for several reasons, the first of which is this, according to the book of Exodus the way that it was constructed is that the fibers were interwoven together. So don't think just a seamless easy piece of fabric here. Not only do you have fibers that are woven together "horizontally" but also vertically as well because of the depth that is involved. And because of its height and because of its width, it was actually constructed in 5x5 foot squares. So I want you to imagine a piece of fabric that is 5 feet x 5 feet and, say, 5 inches thick. Can you imagine how heavy that would be? Can you imagine the denseness of it? And then all of them are attached to one another and they are hung at the entrance to the Holy of Holies.

The Bible records that it took 300 priests just to maneuver and to hang it up. Now I want you to put that in our terminology. Can you imagine getting three college football teams, now I'm not talking about just the guys that play, I'm talking about guys that are on the roster too, everybody. Imagine three entire football teams. We see these guys, we see their size, their ability, and it takes all of them just to carry it, just to hang it. The Bible doesn't say it just "hung," it says it tore, and imagine tearing that fabric, it says not from the bottom up, that would have been because of an earthquake, but from the top down.

So you have a piece of garment that is 5 inches thick, 30 feet wide, 60 feet tall, that is going to tear like single piece of paper, but there's one last aspect. Remember I mentioned the 5 foot squares? That means there would have been seams in the veil. You say, "Seams in the veil?" Absolutely. Imagine a patchwork, imagine a quilt, so to speak, where you have the lines connecting sideways, vertically, etc. which means not only do you have 5 inches of fabric torn 60 feet down, but if I do the math properly it would have had to go through 10 seams as well. Now let me illustrate this. You take any garment that you have, any fabric, and even if you want to get a head start on that fabric by using the scissors, take that tear and rip it, you'll rip until you hit a seam because when you hit a seam, you will naturally follow that seam.

Now in our home, we have a very and special, it's an important ritual that Tracy and I go through on somewhat of a regular basis. You're probably not aware of this ritual so allow me to share the family secrets. I'm a real fan of undershirts. I like undershirts. I think you ought to wear an undershirt under undershirts. I really do, I just, I'm a fan of them but one of the things about those who have an affinity for undershirts is that really they have to be broken in. You know, the new ones are nice and they feel good but a good undershirt, this is just my opinion, a good undershirt is one that can be seen through and has a lot of stains on it. That's a good undershirt. It needs to feel like second skin, all right? There's just, I don't know what it is, there's just something about it. The problem is that just about the time that they get to the point where they feel perfect, is the fabric starts to fail. Tracy's not a real fan. She doesn't mind the thinness. She doesn't mind necessarily the stains but the holes, eh, not much of a fan. And so every now and then from the back of the house I'll hear, "Meyers!" What? I go running back there and there she is with the sacred cloth and she has her fingers in the holes and she begins to tear. We've been doing this for 26 years. There's no telling how many of these she has torn.

But why do I bring that to your attention? Because even when she or I tear the thinnest of fabrics, it's not going to go through the seam. Every time it hits a seam, it always rides the seam. Can you imagine a seam that is 5 inches thick on top of the fabric that is interwoven that is 60 feet in height and it's got to go through 10 of those seams to finally conclude? So what takes place here cannot be explained except for one very simple response: the hands of God. The hands of God simply just came down and tore like you and I would a single sheet of paper.

So what's the picture? What do we have pictured here? This is interesting because remember it was on the Day of Atonement that they would go into the Holy of Holies and only one person was allowed in, the high priest. So there even in Jerusalem during Passover there might have been a couple of dozen of men who had ever been back there, who had ever seen, and remember originally when the temple was commissioned, the ark of the covenant was there, the mercy seat with the cherubim covered with gold where the blood would be, where mercy, where forgiveness would take place, the Day of Atonement. But remember the Babylonians who ransacked the temple? You know, history tells us that there is no record of where the famous ark of the covenant went post-Babylonian captivity. Now there's a lot of options out there. If you like to watch late-night cable television, they'll tell you it's in a church in Ethiopia. If you like to read the scholars of Jeremiah, they'll tell you there's the possibility that it is under the ground of the current Temple Mount. Or if you read the book of Revelation it says the ark of the covenant of God is in heaven, okay? So there's a lot of possibilities and debate and discussions there but here's the picture I want to draw for you. When that veil tore, can you imagine how many people wondered what it looked like? How many people had walked by that Temple Mount saying, "Man, I just wish I could get a glimpse of what's behind the curtain." What did they discover? Nothing. Just dirt.

Can you imagine the picture that here you are headed to the Passover feast, the celebration of celebrations, and you walk by the holiest place that you want to honor

where you believed and thought that sacrifice took place, and you discover that there's nothing there. What a picture of spiritual despair but it's prophetic. We've talked around it a whole lot but look in verse 52, all of a sudden in the midst of this passage it fast forwards 72 hours, Jesus breathes his last breath, the veil is torn in two, the centurion declares he's the Son of God, they see that the Holy of Holies has no mercy seat, but in the midst of this four verse section, it projects out 72 hours and says when Jesus Christ rose from the grave, that many saints of old rose with him and they walked in the holy city. Now there's a lot of debate and discussion of why the order of events are as they are but here's the prophetic element here, that the veil being torn in two was not just to expose the emptiness of what was behind, the veil torn in two was not just to demonstrate the power of God in the midst of his creation and to hear and see the rocks rent, the reason the veil tore in two is that those of us who had died could be now raised to life. Humanity now had the opportunity to experience what we've hoped for forever. Have you noticed our desire for life, just to live a little bit longer, to prevent that famous death experience just one more day, and yet it befalls to each and every one of us.

Now what the interesting discussion is and time will not allow us to do so, is who were these folks. I know they were believers of days past. We're not given their identities. We're not given their names. But you would have to admit it would have been an interesting period of time walking through, introducing yourself to somebody who you had never seen before and find out that they lived about 800 years prior to because it says many saints of old when Jesus Christ rose from the dead, rose and walked in the holy city.

So why is all this important for us? Because it's very particular. You see, in the book of Hebrews 10, it equates Jesus Christ and his body to the veil, that the veil was torn in two, that his body was allowed to be torn so that we could have access to, we could receive, we could have a relationship with the real, the true, and the living God. It's important for us because it not only shows us, shall we say, the futility of what was taking place prior to but the reality of what Jesus Christ can do in the present in our lives. He allowed himself to be torn. He allowed himself to be mocked. He allowed himself to be ridiculed. He allowed himself to experience all of what the cross was. Why? So that we finally could experience and be that which we had hoped and desired to be.

Here's the picture that I want to give you, though. Remember that Holy of Holies. Only one man, one day a year was allowed to go in. I know today we get upset when maybe our favorite team or our favorite player isn't drafted in the position that we like. I know sometimes we get upset because maybe the career path we had hoped or maybe a job that we'd aspired to didn't come to fruition. But can you imagine how every single little boy grew up in Jerusalem? So now today for better or for worse, every little boy dreams of playing a game or doing some marvelous deed. You know, there's an old adage about little boys and if you've never raised them, let me just testify it's true, it's not are they a superhero, it's which superhero are they, okay? That's how God wired us. Can you imagine that every young man whoever went to that temple site hoped that one day he'd be the one, and yet the overwhelming majority of them never had the opportunity or the privilege. They possibly knew somebody or knew somebody who knew somebody who

had been back there but they had never and they knew it was just not in the realm of possibility.

But what's the picture? You see, the curtain's been torn. The veil is torn. The Holy of Holies is exposed. Jesus Christ made it very simple in John 14:6, he says, "I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life and nobody comes to the Father but by me." And when that veil tore in two, let me tell you what the picture is: that means that you and I now have the ability, we have the privilege to walk right into the presence of God. Let me share with you what Hebrews 4:16 says, "Go boldly into the throne room of God." We don't have to worry about the geographical location of a building, we don't have to worry about being in the right city at the right time, on the right day, with the right gift, and the right sacrifice. I've got news for you: you can be laying in your bed unable to move because sickness has ravaged your body and you can walk straight into the presence of God. And in those days, nobody could except one guy, one day. You and I today because the veil was torn, we have the opportunity to walk straight into his presence.

Then it's prophetic. One of the reasons I love this passage is because when you read it for the first time, your head spins on your shoulders. What do you mean bodies of saints rose from the dead? What do you mean they walked in the holy city? It's this mysterious passage tucked in here but here's why it's prophetic, because you and I as believers in Jesus Christ, we desire, we hope, we long for that life called everlasting but to this point you and I have not experienced it. In fact, we're not the only ones. In fact, 2,000 years ago as the church was being established, the very first congregation that the Lord communicated through the Apostle Paul was the church at Thessalonica, the very first "letter of Paul" as we deem it, they were experiencing what you and I experience: sickness, heartache, death, despair. These believers had trusted that if they confessed their sins and asked Jesus to save them, they would have everlasting life.

So why am I attending the funeral of a loved one? So why am I watching somebody I care for die slowly? So why do I see what I see all around me? Surely, surely it can't be false. And there in chapter 4, beginning in verse 13, it says, "Brothers, I don't want you to be ignorant of this." Now just let that simmer in for just a moment. When God says don't be ignorant of this, he says you can rest in this, you can trust in this, and here's what he says, "for the day shall come for those who are dead in Christ shall rise from the grave, those who are alive in Christ shall be changed, for the Lord himself shall descend with the voice of the archangel and there we shall meet him in the air." Now we take that passage and we love it because it tells us there's coming a day that whether he comes for me or whether I die first, I'm going to meet him in the air and that's wonderful, but do you know what the validity of our hope is? This passage because there has been a time where the Lord raised up his saints unto himself and there will be a time where he does so again. That is why in Titus 2 at the end of his ministry, he called it the blessed hope that we have in his return is that one day we shall rise with him because others have as well. When that veil tore, it not only took care of those in days past, it addressed those days present, and you and I, which would have been future from then, that we can have hope, we can have forgiveness, we can experience grace because we have the testimony of a

Roman centurion and we have the testimony of countless believers of olden days who have gone before us. Let us walk alongside.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe this morning in this place or even watching online, the Spirit of God took the word of God and just really resonated in your heart the love, the compassion, the grace, the mercy that Jesus Christ is extending towards you. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord can be saved. What does that mean in light of today's message? You don't have to go to a certain building, at a certain time, with a certain item to hope you can get right with God. All you've got to do is call on the name of the Lord. Maybe today you're saying, "I'd love to, I just don't know what that looks like." Well, it's not a formula of words. It's not a test that has to be taken or a class that has to be passed. It's just simply your heart's cry of your sinful condition and your belief on Jesus to take care of the problem. Maybe your heart's cry today would go a little something like this. "God, today I believe, God, I believe I've got a sin problem that I can't fix. God, I've got a sin problem that religion can't fix. In fact, today, God, I believe the only one who can fix my sin problem is Jesus Christ alone. God, today I want you to know I believe. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf, he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that when he suffered the punishment of the cross, when he made those statements, when he breathed his last breath, he paid the punishment and the price for my sin. God, I believe that as we read today when he rose three days later, he made it possible for my sins to be forgiven, he made it possible for my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have the answer to all the issues and problems in the world and even my own life but there is one thing I know for sure, I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can solve. So the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who called on the name of the Lord. In a moment, we're going to stand and sing after I pray, we just want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We'd love to hear from you, pray with you, pray for you, just to hear your story and to celebrate with you. Maybe today you're already saved, you've never followed in believer's baptism, maybe you've done that and you want to be a part of this incredible body of believers, or maybe you say, "You know what? All that's taken care of." But maybe today is about leaving this service with a new perspective, a new perspective not just on the power of God to tear a veil but the fact that you can enter the Holy of Holies from any location, at any time, with any issue.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, thank you, thank you that as we read these verses we see the incredible vastness of not just your mercy and your grace but your love, that you want to be in relationship with us, you desire to hear from us, you desire to be a part of our lives so much so that you were willing to sacrifice yours to allow it to happen. God, help us today to simply respond appropriately. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.