

LESSONS ON PREDESTINATION #62

"The Phenomena Accompanying Christ's Death" (Scriptures from NKJV)

Matthew 27:51-56:

Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!" And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

Luke 23:48, 49:

And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned. But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

INTRODUCTION: The battle of the cross is now over. Christ is the victor, Satan is the loser. Satan has bruised Christ's heel; Christ has bruised Satan's head (Genesis 3:15). Jesus is now dead. His lips are now silent. He has spoken seven times while on the cross. He will speak no more until after His resurrection. But God will now speak in a language of His own. He will do so in three miraculous signs, each giving the significance and the effect of His Son's death. He spoke first by the tearing of the veil in the temple from the top to the bottom. He then spoke secondly by a great earthquake, and thirdly, by the opening of many of the tombs, with the saints coming forth in their glorified bodies. Rather than these occurring in chronological order, it is better to assume they occurred simultaneously when Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ***"Father into Your hands I commit My spirit."***

A. THE DARKNESS BETWEEN THE SIXTH AND NINTH HOURS.

1. Matthew 27:45 - ***"Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land."*** Since we have addressed this miracle in a previous lesson, only a few observations will now be made.

2. This was the first of four supernatural events which accompanied Christ's death on the cross. It is not surprising that miracles accompanied the death of Christ since they accompanied His birth. We talk about the birth miracles such as the virgin birth, the visits by the angels, the star that guided the wise men, but we do not talk much about the

miracles which took place at the cross.

3. What happened during these hours of darkness? The answer is that the Son of God took the burden of our sins upon Himself, was punished for them in our place, and experienced such terrible alienation from His Father that He cried out at the end of that dark period, "**Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani**" which is translated, "**My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?**" The darkness veiled the anguish of the Son of God while He was bearing the punishment for our sins, because it was not proper for human eyes to look on Him in this phase of His suffering. At the same time, the darkness cried out against the blackness of our sin and testified to the huge cost to God for our redemption. This darkness was lifted at the end of the ninth hour at the time when Jesus died.

B. THE TEARING OF THE VEIL IN THE TEMPLE.

1. Matthew 27:51a - "**Then behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.**"

2. The tearing of the veil is also mentioned by Mark and Luke, but not by John. The temple actually had two veils: one separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, and the other separating the temple proper from the outer courtyard. In the temple, the Holy of Holies was the innermost room or sanctuary where the presence of God was said to abide. The place was so sacred that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, only one man, the High Priest, was allowed to enter. He offered the blood of a special sacrifice to atone for the sins of all Israel.

The room outside the Holy of Holies was called the Holy Place. Only the priests could enter this room. Between the two rooms hung a curtain or a veil. At the moment of Christ's death (3:00 p.m.), this curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. Matthew recorded the direction in which it was torn to show that it was done at God's initiative, not man's.

3. This was done at the time of the evening sacrifice when the priests were inside the Holy Place. During the centuries of Israel's existence, it was unheard for common people to consider approaching God directly. The penalty was death. The priests would have been able to look into the Holy of Holies for the first time, since up until now, only the High Priest could do so, and that only one time a year. What is the significance of all this?

4. James Montgomery Boice gives us a good summery when he says:

The temple area was designed as a series of courts in the center of which was the temple building itself, divided into two parts. The first and larger part was the Holy Place. It contained the table where the shewbread was placed and

the large seven-branched candlestick. A veil separated this room from the outer courts and another veil separated it from the innermost room called the Most Holy Place. In the early days of Israel's history before the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians, this innermost room contained the ark of the covenant with its mercy seat and cherubim between the wings of which God was understood to dwell in a symbolic sense. The presence of God above the ark in the Most Holy Place testified to the presence of God among his people. In a contrary way, the veil that divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place also pointed to the enormous gulf that existed between the holy God and the people because of their sin. The veil was a way of saying symbolically but also unmistakably, "Thus far you may come, but no farther."

Only one day during the year could the high priest pass the veil, and that was on the Day of atonement when the high priest took the blood of an animal killed moments before in the courtyard, carried it past the veil, and then sprinkled it on the mercy seat of the ark. The mercy seat was the ark's cover or lid. The figures of two angels faced each other on the lid, and their wings stretched backward and upward, making a space in which God symbolically dwelled. The ark contained the two tablets of the law below the space where God was thought to dwell.

The ark was a picture of judgment, for the righteous, holy God of the universe looked down on the law, knew that it had been broken and that he had to punish the people for their sin. This dramatic illustration stood on the temple mount day after day throughout the year as a constant reminder of God's judgment. When blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement, however, coming between God and the law that had been broken, the act indicated that an atonement for sin had been made, illustrating grace. An innocent victim (the animal) had died in the people's place, and rather than pouring forth wrath, God was now able to show grace and mercy to the people. This pointed forward to the true and final atonement that Jesus Christ would make on the cross. It pointed forward to his death, and did all the other sacrifices of the Old Testament.

Here we see the significance of the tearing of the veil. When Jesus died everything the Old Testament sacrifices pointed to was fulfilled. There was no need for further sacrifices, and the way to God was open for all who would put their trust in Jesus. God showed this in a dramatic way by tearing the veil.

In addition, the veil was torn in two at three o'clock in the afternoon, which was the time of the beginning of the evening sacrifice. The priests would have been in the temple, engaged in their duties, when the veil was torn. They would have seen it, no doubt standing aghast before the now-exposed innermost recess of the temple, and they would have known that the age in which they had served was over and a new age of God's dealings with his people had begun. This may be the explanation of what we read later in Acts: "So the word of God spread. The numbers of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a *large number of priests* became obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7, emphasis added). (Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, pp. 623, 624).

5. So what was God saying in the tearing of the veil?

a. First, He was saying the system of religion being practiced in the temple had come to an end. There was no longer any need for animal sacrifices. There was no longer any need for priests to offer up the sacrifices, and there was no longer any need for a temple.

b. Secondly, God is saying that in His Son, a perfect and final sacrifice has been offered and is now complete. He is now our High Priest, and in His body (flesh) is the veil wherein we enter the temple. This is set forth in Hebrews 10:19-22. ***"Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, 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."***

The people of God could not do this before Christ's death. They needed a priest to intercede for them. Now the way is open for everyone to approach God directly.

6. So what happened to the torn veil in the temple? We are not told. We can only speculate that the Jews sewed it back up and continued the now bankrupt system of ritualistic religion for some forty years until A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple. Since then Judaism has been without a temple, without a priest, and without a sacrificial system. It has been abandoned by God!

C. THE SHAKING OF THE EARTH.

1. Matthew 27:51 - ***"And the earth quaked, and the rocks were split."***

2. The earthquake was recorded only by Matthew.

3. The sign of the earthquake resulted in deep cracks in the mountains and cliffs around Jerusalem. The Old Testament gives the significance of this occurrence. God's use of earthquakes reveals three things about God.

- a. First, they denote the presence and intervention of God.
- b. Second, they show His might and His greatness.
- c. Third, they reveal His righteous wrath against sin and injustice.

4. When God appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai, we read in Exodus 19:18, "**Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.**" This preceded the giving of the Mosaic covenant to the nation of Israel. We are told that the people "trembled" at the base of the mountain, knowing they were in the awesome presence of the holy God. Matthew Henry points out that at the moment of Christ's death, the earthquake revealed the horrible wickedness of Christ's crucifiers. He says:

The *horrible* wickedness of *Christ's crucifiers*. The earth, by trembling under such a load, bore its testimony to the innocency of him that was persecuted, and against the impiety of those that persecuted him. Never did the whole creation, before, groan under such a burden as the Son of God crucified, and the guilty wretches that crucified him. The earth *quaked*, as if it *feared to open its mouth to receive* the blood of Christ, so much more precious than that of Abel, which it had received, and was *cursed* for it (Gen. 4:11, 12); and as if it *fain would open its mouth*, to swallow up those rebels that put him to death, as it has swallowed up Dathan and Abiram for a much less crime. When the prophet would express God's great displeasure against the wickedness of the wicked, he asks, *Shall not the land tremble for this?* Amos 8:8.

The *rocks rent*; the hardest and firmest part of the earth was made to feel this mighty shock. Christ had said, that if the children should cease to cry *Hosanna*, the stones would immediately cry out; and now, in effect, they did so, proclaiming the glory of the suffering Jesus, and themselves more sensible of the wrong done him than the hard-hearted Jews were, who yet will shortly be glad to find a *hole in the rocks*, and a *cleft in the ragged rocks* to hide them from the face of him that sitteth on the throne. (Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, Vol. 5, p. 431).

D. THE GRAVES (TOMBS) ARE OPENED AND THE SAINTS ARE RESURRECTED

1. Matthew 27:52, 53 - "**and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.**"

2. Just as the earthquake gave the world a foretaste of Divine judgment, it was followed by many of the tombs being opened, and the bodies of the saints to be resurrected. This miracle is the most difficult for the critically minded to accept. Not that the tombs were opened, but that these saints rose and appeared to persons in Jerusalem.

3. In the rocky country of Palestine, the dead were usually not placed in graves that had been dug in the earth, but into chambers that had been carved out of rocky elevations and were closed with a stone slab.

4. Matthew points out many bodies of the saints were raised, but not all. This resurrection was limited to a certain number of believers chosen by God. NOTE: God did not have to get their approval before He could resurrect them! They came forth at His call! Who were these? Those believers who had lived and died under the Old Covenant. Some may have died recently. Others may have been dead for hundreds or thousands of years. Whoever they were, they were elected or selected by God. Sovereign unconditional election is seen throughout the Scriptures by those who have eyes to see. Only those whose hearts are hardened against this teaching are blinded from seeing it.

5. There is a difference of interpretation as to whether the text teaches that these saints rose the moment Jesus died and the tombs were opened, or if they rose after Christ's resurrection. I take the position that there is a time span between the tombs being opened, and the saints' resurrection occurring after Christ's resurrection. The ESV helps with the English punctuation by placing a period after the word "opened" in verse 52, thus denoting that the opening of the tombs was a separate incident from the resurrection of the saints. If this is correct, the tombs were opened at the moment of Christ's death, and the bodies therein were raised later at the time of Christ's resurrection. Thus you would have the text read, ***"many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many."*** (ESV).

6. We are not told who these saints were or with whom they communicated. They did not at once enter heaven with their new glorified bodies; they had a duty to perform here on earth before their translation to their heavenly home.

7. A further question lingers in our minds. What finally became of these risen saints? There are varied answers which have been set forth.

One: They later died and returned to their graves or tombs. This seems highly improbable in that it would seem to require that they would have to sin again, in that the wages of sin is death.

Two: They were translated to heaven in their new bodies after their ministry on earth was done.

Three: They ascended into heaven with Jesus at the same time He ascended.

I am comfortable with either of the two latter views.

8. The great importance of this resurrection of the saints for us is the fact that the resurrection is not merely a future event, it has already begun in the case of these saints. Not only Jesus is risen from the dead, an advance number of the saints have risen with Him. This is one of many texts of Scripture in which we wish more information had been given to

us. This shows us that God in His sovereign election has not only elected a certain people, He has also chosen to select what information He would reveal to us and what He would conceal from us. We must bow before Him and say, "it seemed good in His sight to do so."

9. There are four miracles which God is using to speak to us from the cross. They contain four messages which are:

One: The Darkness - God punishes sin

Two: The Rent Veil - Mercy available for sinners

Three: The Earthquake - God's wrath against impenitent sinners

Four: The Open Tombs - There will be a resurrection of the dead

God may speak orally as He did from Adam to Moses, or by written forms as He did by the Old Testament prophets and New Testament writers. He may speak through providence or by the supernatural use of miracles. While God did not use oral words at the cross, He nevertheless set forth the grand doctrines contained in the Gospel.

E. THE RESPONSES TO THE DEATH OF CHRIST

1. Matthew 27:54 - ***"So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'"***

2. The Bible presents three responses to the death of Christ.

a. First, that of the Roman Centurion and his soldiers.

b. Second, that of a group of devoted, believing women.

c. Third, that of the unbelieving crowd - Luke 23:48.

3. The response of the Roman captain and his men. Verse 54.

The word "centurion" comes from a Latin word for 100 and refers to a military office in charge of 100 men. He was in charge of the crucifixion of Jesus and the two robbers. He, along with the soldiers, were seized with great fear when they observed the darkness, and the earthquake, along with the other happenings. He may have been present at the Roman trials of Jesus. All of the happenings became so overwhelming that he realized this was no ordinary crucifixion like the many others he had seen. The gracious words of forgiveness, the statement to the dying robber, the darkness, the earthquake, and Jesus' final cry, caused the officer to confess that Jesus was who He claimed to be. He cries out, ***"Truly this was the Son of God!"*** If the dying thief could be saved on the cross, why could this man not be saved at the foot of the cross? Some in the early church gave him the name Longines and considered him to be a Christian. Are not the words of Jesus, ***"Father,***

forgive them” coming true right at the cross? Luke tells us in Luke 23:47, ***“So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, ‘Certainly this was a righteous Man!’”*** In so doing, he confesses that Jesus was an innocent man, not guilty of the charges against Him.

4. The response of the loyal women - verses 55, 56 - ***“And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.”***

a. From John’s account, we know that some of the women, as well as John, had been at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27). But perhaps they could no longer bear to observe the suffering of their Lord so closely, and were now looking on from a distance.

b. John MacArthur makes this observation:

Devoted women had traveled with and served Jesus for a long while. Among the earliest of them were “Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their [Jesus’ and the disciples’] support out of their private means” (Luke 8:2-3). Throughout His ministry, such women ministered generously and lovingly to Jesus and the Twelve with their financial resources, their talents, and their hospitality. It is probable that many, if not most, of the meals they ate were prepared by those faithful women. (MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary on Matthew*, p. 284).

5. The response of the unbelieving crowd. - Luke 23:48 - ***“And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned.”***

a. Here is the unbelieving crowd who can’t decide which side to be on. They are halting between two opinions (I Kings 18:21).

b. I will appeal to the words of John MacArthur again to sum up our lesson as he describes the response of the unbelieving crowd to the death of Jesus on the cross.

Like the soldiers, those people were alarmed about the darkness and the earthquake. And also like the soldiers, they realized that those terrifying phenomena were not caused naturally. Many of them doubtlessly had heard Jesus preach and seen Him perform miracles. Perhaps some of them had themselves been healed by Him. These people knew much better than the soldiers what Jesus stood for and who He claimed to be. They knew how He had all but banished disease from Palestine and had even raised people from the dead. They remembered that, with the rest of the multitude a few days

earlier, they had hailed Jesus as the Messiah. They had heard Jesus' gracious words from the cross and could not have helped suspecting that God's hand was in the awesome events they were now observing.

But as they "began to return, beating their breasts" in fear and remorse, they showed no sign of repentance. They were perhaps overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and foreboding about their participation in the execution of an innocent man. Like Judas, they may have wished sincerely that they could somehow undo the terrible wrong they had done. They probably realized that God was expressing disfavor through the darkness and earthquake and that they were the objects of that disfavor. But they made no confession, either of their sin or of Christ's lordship. They felt sorry for Him, but they did not try to help Him. They knew they were under His judgment, but they did not seek His mercy. They neither gave Christ help nor sought help from Him, and instead of turning to Him like the soldiers, they turned away. (MacArthur, *Ibid.*, p. 282, para. 3, 4).

Many are like this yet in our days. They are not openly hostile to Jesus, but they will not come out openly and confess Him as Lord and Savior. Jesus had some fearful words for this kind of hearer in Luke 13:1-5.

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Pnyon fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."