

Text: Matthew 27:51-56

Title: When Jesus Died

Truth: A number of remarkable events (signs) happened at the same time as Jesus's death.

Date/Location: Wednesday January 18, 2023 at FBC

Introduction

Jesus had just released His spirit and died after crying out with a loud voice.

I. Temple Veil, v. 51

A. What happened. In the tabernacle, and then in the temple there was a curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place. Read about the tabernacle version in Exodus 26:31-33. It was designed to be a "divider." Hebrews 9:3-5 mentions this veil as the second veil. It is the "second" veil because the first one was mentioned in Exodus 26:36, the one you would encounter first if you were entering into the tabernacle on the way to the most holy place. Numbers 4:5 says that the veil was used to cover the Ark when it was transported.

The *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* says this about it: "Because it shielded the sacred ark, it was made of the finest materials and was crafted with the most elaborate workmanship. It was the premier piece among the series of textiles that were integrated into the Tabernacle's design."¹

B. In the Jerusalem temple, the veil was much larger than in the tabernacle. Its exact thickness and composition is not something I am sure about, but as it was quite large, it must have been fairly substantial in its construction. In the original Temple design, 2 Chron. 3:14 mentions how Solomon commissioned and made a new veil for the temple.

¹ Carol Meyers, "[Veil of the Temple](#)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 785.

Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible says, “Between the holy place and the Holy of Holies was a double door made of olive wood, carved with cherubim, palm trees, and flower patterns and overlaid with gold. Inside these doors, veiling still further the Holy of Holies, was a blue, purple, and crimson curtain, made of the finest fabrics and ornamented with cherubim (2 Chr 3:14)...The Holy of Holies was 30 feet high.”²

New Manners and Customs of the Bible explains, “This veil was the curtain that hung between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. It was sixty feet in length, and reached from floor to ceiling. Note that it wasn’t torn in two from bottom to top as human hands would do it, but from top to bottom as only God could do it.”³

Whether 30 feet high or 60 feet high or wide, this is a large curtain.

- C. Significance. Hebrews 9 discusses the significance of the tabernacle (and temple) service. In this discussion, it is evident that the “way” into the most holy place was blocked, ultimately by the veil that hung at the entrance to the holiest of all. Not just anyone could enter the presence of God, only one person—and that only one day in the year. This symbolized that gifts and sacrifices in the Mosaic system could not perfect the consciences of the worshippers. Sin was a blocker between God and man.

Heb. 10:19-20 teaches us that Christians have access—with boldness—to enter the true Holy place through the veil, that is, the flesh of Christ. Here the author of Hebrews is making a likeness between the curtain in the temple and the body of Christ. The veil was torn, the body of Christ was broken. It is through that breaking of His body in His death that we have access to God.

² Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, [“Tabernacle, Temple,”](#) *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2021.

³ James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, [Manners & Customs of the Bible](#) (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 489–490.

II. Earthquake, v. 51

- A. Hebrews 12:26 and Haggai 2:6 mention the shaking of the earth. Here is another significant shaking. The death of the Creator caused the earth to shudder. Something was disturbed in the basic forces of gravity and electromagnetism when the Mighty Maker died. This is portrayed by the author as a supernatural event, both in timing and in effect. Could it have been a “natural” earthquake? Sure. But the timing was too perfect to be a coincidence.
- B. Jerusalem will be shaken again in a violent way in the Tribulation. See Revelation 16:18-19.

III. Resurrection of Saints, v. 52-53

- A. It seems that a side effect of the earthquake was that it disturbed many graves of Old Testament saints. Graves were opened. Something like this happens from time to time in modern natural disasters. Suppose there is a flood that ravages an area and affects a cemetery. Coffins sometimes are exposed in such events. For example, after category 4 Hurricane Ida in the fall of 2021 made its way through Louisiana, many coffins were moved out of their resting places, some floating down streets, many strewn in various places miles away from where they were originally buried.
- B. The text says that “many bodies of the saints...were raised.” They were seen by many people in Jerusalem. The record shows that there were many eyewitnesses to these resurrections. (We are not asked to believe things that are otherwise unattested, though I grant that we have the testimony of one human author, Matthew, on this point.)
- C. Significance. Christ defeated death at the cross. Some immediate fruit of Christ’s work was the resurrection of a number of believers of years gone by. The Bible does not name any of them. They may have been raised like Lazarus, to a natural body, but it seems more likely on my current reading of the situation that they were raised into glorified bodies and then at some later time taken into heaven that way. In this way, Jesus demonstrated mastery over death even *in* death.

D. Now, when I said, “immediate,” I did not necessarily mean that the moment Jesus died that these people were raised. The timing of the events has always been a bit unclear to me because it says that the earthquake happened, and the people were raised, and they came out of the graves after Jesus’s resurrection. So did the graves open on Friday, and finally by Sunday people came out of the graves? Or did they come out and then on Sunday appear in Jerusalem? The fact that their resurrection is correlated to Jesus’s resurrection would favor that he arose first and they second—that He was the firstfruits of the resurrection and not them (1 Cor. 15:20).

IV. Admission by the Centurion and Fellow Soldiers, v. 54

- A. The centurion was observing all of this very carefully. He had never seen a crucifixion like this one. Joining him were his fellow soldiers guarding Jesus from being assaulted by the crowds or being stolen by His disciples.
- B. The text tells us that the earthquake and the other things that they had seen convinced them. They probably had not *seen* the veil of the temple rent in two but could have heard about it, and perhaps they did not see the resurrection of people from the grave. But they had seen Jesus on the cross, heard His words, watched how He treated the “good” thief, stood in the dark gloom that covered their afternoon, observed how He died, and knew of His reputation as a good man without fault as even their leader Pontius Pilate had said.
- C. With all that, even *they* admitted, “Truly this was the Son of God!” They were making an exclamation of truth based on the very unusual evidence that they saw.

V. Women were Observing from Afar, v. 55-56

- A. Another group observing the events that day included “many” women from Galilee. Three of them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, most probably named Salome (Mark 15:40).

- B. All these witnesses certainly establish the fact that Jesus *died on the cross*. Against that conclusion can be raised no credible doubt. You may doubt the resurrection, but there is no way conceivable that you can doubt the crucifixion death of Jesus of Nazareth. Too many eyewitnesses testify to it to dismiss it—witnesses including Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, these women, and the soldiers (who were somewhat neutral observers).
- C. They were watching from a distance away. You can imagine their dilemma. They could not stand to watch the horrid sight of a crucifixion. But neither they could not leave Jesus, the One they knew to be the Son of God and Messiah of Israel. So, they compromised by locating themselves a “safe” distance away to avoid some of the grossness of the whole affair, but to still be eyewitness to what was happening.

Conclusion

These are the facts. God tore the veil, signifying that we could have access to Him directly through Christ. Jesus conquered death and provides bodily resurrection for His people. He is the Son of God. And His death was witnessed by many people, including His close friends who had served Him for years.

MAP