

Voice of the Church Message
Easter 2015
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If you were reporting on a day on which the following events occurred, where would you begin your account?

On this day, there is an earthquake so strong, that rocks are split. Tombs are opened, and many people are raised from the dead. They walk from the graveyards into the city, where they appear to the people who knew them.

On this day, a centurion, watching a man being crucified, sees the earthquake and everything that takes place. And he's led to make this exclamation: "Truly this was the Son of God!"

And finally, on this day, the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom.

It was truly an amazing day, the day we now remember as Good Friday, the day that Jesus Christ was crucified. And one of the men who reported on the events of that great day was the evangelist Matthew. And given all that occurred on that day, the choice he makes in the 27th chapter of his gospel might strike you as being more than a little unusual. Because he first tells us about the tearing of the temple curtain before he even mentions the earthquake, the rocks splitting, the tombs opening up, the dead being raised and appearing in the city, and the confession of the centurion.

A powerful earthquake is unusual enough. Mass resurrections from the dead are unheard of. But a curtain tearing? What's so special about that?

First of all, what was this curtain? In Exodus 26, we're told that the curtain in the tabernacle was made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It was decorated with cherubim skillfully woven into it, and it was hung with gold hooks on four pillars of acacia wood, overlaid with gold, each with a silver base.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the curtain in the temple was forty cubits in length from top to bottom, so about sixty feet long. It was four inches thick, and Josephus

wrote that it was so strong that horses tied to each side couldn't pull it apart. This curtain was large, and it was very strong.

But it's not really the strength or the size of that curtain that was so important – it was its purpose that made that curtain significant. The curtain had been constructed to separate two areas of the tabernacle, and later the temple – the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place, or the Holy of Holies. The Most Holy Place had been where the ark of the covenant was housed, the symbol of the LORD's presence in the temple. When King David spoke of the temple he had planned to build, he called it “a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and for a footstool of our God” (1 Chronicles 28:2). The temple was God's dwelling place, and the Most Holy Place was the inner sanctum.

In Hebrews 9:6 and 7, we're told that the priests could enter the Holy place regularly; but the Most Holy Place was only open to the high priest, “and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.” It was serious business to enter into the Most Holy Place. This was entering into God's presence, and that was only made possible by the shedding of blood. The sins of the priest had to be atoned for, along with the sins of the people; the LORD is holy, and if you hadn't been made clean, you couldn't enter into His presence.

So this gives us some idea of what the significance of that curtain was. It may have been a large and beautiful curtain, but nevertheless, it was just a curtain, made of cloth, like any other curtain. But in practice, it acted like a wall – an impenetrable barrier. While the LORD had said He would dwell in the midst of His people, not even an average priest could have complete access to His presence; that privilege was reserved for the high priest, and that only once a year. And so, when that curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom, it was a sign that Jesus' death had made an incredible change to the way that the LORD would relate to His people. The curtain was torn; and not only was it torn, it was torn from top to bottom. This was not the work of human hands. This wasn't even the result of a great earthquake. This was the LORD's work.

We humans had created the great divide between humanity and God by our sin and rebellion against Him. It was our rejection of Him and His reign that led to the separation between God and man. But now God Himself tore the curtain that separated us from Him. And He did that by sending His own Son into the world to make the ultimate sacrifice – the sacrifice of His life on the cross.

And as the final sacrifice, He shed His blood to make atonement, to cover the sins of His people. No more would those animal sacrifices of the Old Testament be necessary, because the One to whom those sacrifices had pointed had come. And His death was the perfect and final atoning sacrifice. Now, as the great and final high priest, He welcomes us all to enter into the presence of the LORD, through faith in Him. No curtain is necessary to keep God's people from His presence any more.

“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” This is what we're told in Hebrews 6:19 and 20. And in Hebrews 10:19 and 20, the writer of Hebrews goes on to tell us that “since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Good Friday was an incredible day in many ways. Darkness covered the land for three hours. The earth trembled and the tombs opened up. The dead were raised when the Son of God died, providing a foretaste of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection that His people look forward to. But it was the tearing of the temple curtain that revealed the great significance of the death of Jesus Christ. Because Good Friday was not just an incredible day, marked by amazing natural and supernatural phenomena, it was the single most important day in history.

On Good Friday, God Himself provided the way of reconciliation between us and Him. Because of what Christ accomplished on that day, we can enjoy real fellowship with God. We are welcomed into His presence, through the blood of Christ. We can come to God in confidence, without being afraid – not because of anything we've done, or because of our own worthiness, but because of what Christ has done, and His worthiness.

Only He, truly and completely human, and truly and completely God, could provide the perfect sacrifice that was necessary to pay the price for our sins. And He did pay that price. And that's why we call Good Friday “good,” despite the fact that the murder of Jesus Christ was the worst injustice ever perpetrated by man. Because on that day, we celebrate. The curtain has been torn. God and sinners have been reconciled, once and for all.

PAGE 3