



## Three Signs of the Cross – Part 2

### The Curtain Torn From Top to Bottom

Mark 15:37-39

David Sunday

April 9, 2017

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In His steadfast love, God will make sure that every promise He has ever made is true and will be confirmed to His people. All those promises are yes for us through Jesus Christ, and specifically because of the work He did on the cross. So open your Bible as we begin this Passion Week, where we worship on Palm Sunday, then on Good Friday at 7:00 p.m. and next Easter Sunday. We encourage you to invite your friends and neighbors to hear the gospel, the resurrection of

Jesus. We're going to read today the account of the crucifixion from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 15.

Lord, would You open our eyes to see our Savior high and lifted up, to know that He is enthroned on this cross as the Savior of the world, and that His death was His triumph and our salvation. We rejoice in You, Lord Christ—King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We proclaim that You have liberated us from darkness and brought us into Your light. We thank You that fear has no dominion over us. We thank You that sickness and death cannot rule our lives anymore. We thank You that sin can no longer separate us from God, because You were slain for our salvation. You are worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. Let our hearts worship and adore You.

As we read this account, may we take the shoes off our feet, so to speak, knowing we're on holy ground here. May You get from our hearts and our lives the offering of praise that You deserve, our great Savior. We love You. We thank You that You are with us. We thank You that You are alive today. We thank You for Your Holy Spirit, Who conveys Your presence, Your peace, Your life and power to us. Come Holy Spirit in the preaching of Your Word. Open our eyes, give us faith and renew our joy in our life in You. We love You, Lord. Amen.

Let's read, beginning at Mark 15:16:

*<sup>16</sup> And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. <sup>17</sup> And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting*

*together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. <sup>18</sup> And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" <sup>19</sup> And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. <sup>20</sup> And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.*

*<sup>21</sup> And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. <sup>22</sup> And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). <sup>23</sup> And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. <sup>24</sup> And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. <sup>25</sup> And it was the third hour when they crucified him. <sup>26</sup> And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." <sup>27</sup> And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>29</sup> And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, <sup>30</sup> save yourself, and come down from the cross!" <sup>31</sup> So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. <sup>32</sup> Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.*

*<sup>33</sup> And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. <sup>34</sup> And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>35</sup> And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." <sup>36</sup> And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." <sup>37</sup> And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. <sup>38</sup> And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup> And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"*

Along with the centurion, God's people say, "Amen."

Imagine you're a priest on duty at the temple in Jerusalem on this Good Friday, for in that temple there was never a lack of priests to guard the holy precincts. But on this day of Passover, there's a looming spectacle going on outside the temple, on a hill called Golgotha, the Place of a Skull, as the Jewish high priests and elders, along with the Roman rulers, conspired together to condemn Jesus to death. There on a cross was hung He Who came to be the King and Savior of

His people. On either side were two thieves. As a priest on duty, you're hoping this spectacle will end soon so the people can go home to celebrate this most holy and sacred of days—Passover.

But alarmingly, in the middle of the day at high noon, the daylight flees. There's a thick darkness over the land for three hours. With that darkness comes silence, trembling, awe. A solemn, eerie setting prevails. Then at 3:00 p.m. the ground beneath starts to quake. You hear a loud voice piercing through the darkness, as Jesus breathes His last breath on the cross and says, "*Tetélestai!* It is finished!" And with that loud cry, swiftly—as if an invisible hand reaches down from heaven—the curtain that guards the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies is torn in two from top to bottom.

The curtain was there in the temple for man's protection. It was there to say to sinful man, "You may go this far and no farther." Beyond that curtain was the one place on earth where God's holy presence dwelt in its most concentrated form. Beyond that curtain was the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. And on top of that Ark was the Mercy Seat where the blood of goats and animals would be shed to atone for the people's sins. For a sinful human being to step beyond that curtain would be to invite immediate destruction in the presence of a holy God. That curtain, Mark says—along with Matthew and Luke—was torn in two from top to bottom.

We need to understand that this was not just like one of our bed sheets. This curtain was about 30 feet wide, 30 feet high—100 square yards of heavy material. It was the width of a man's hand—about four inches. It was carefully embroidered with multiple layers of red, blue and purple thread. It weighed hundreds, maybe even thousands, of pounds. Philip Graham Ryken rightly says, "The only way a human being could have torn that curtain in two from top to bottom was by putting up a 25-foot ladder and hacking away with a broad sword." Surely no temple guard was going to let that take place.

### **The threat has been lifted.**

This, my friends, was the hand of God, coming down from heaven to earth, tearing open the curtain. And in doing so, God is saying something very wonderful to the priests on duty. He's saying something very wonderful to the people on the outside. He's saying something very wonderful to you and me, and to the nations. The first thing God is saying in tearing that curtain in two from top to bottom is that the threat has been lifted. There is a threat, my friends, that was represented by that most holy place inside the temple. It's important to understand that the main reason that curtain was there was to protect us from the presence of God and to prevent God's wrath from breaking out against the sinfulness of those who were outside that curtain.

No one was allowed to go beyond that curtain except the high priest. And he could go only once a year. When he went, he had to go carefully prepared, cleansed, wearing the right garments. He had to bring with him the sacrificial blood of pure, unblemished animals that was shed for the sins of the people. He had to make atonement for their sins—and then he had to get out of there quickly. That high priest could not hang around in the Most Holy Place. It was not somewhere you wanted to spend much time.

Leviticus tells us that as the high priest would go into that Most Holy Place, he had to create a smoke screen to shield himself from the ark, so that he would not die in the presence of the Lord. Leviticus 16:12-13 says:

*And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die.*

That's how dangerous it was to go into the Holy of Holies. Those high priests went at great risk. Why did they do it? They did it to protect God's people from the outbreak of God's wrath. Because of their transgressions and their sins and all their uncleanness, the tent of meeting and the Holy Place had to be consecrated, had to be cleansed. Atonement needed to be made for the Most Holy Place, so that God could continue to dwell in the midst of His people. Scripture says the presence of sinful people begins to contaminate the Holy Place and without that cleansing God's wrath has to break out to separate Himself from all the sin. The priest was cleansing God's Holy Place from the contamination caused by the uncleanness of the people.

I read an illustration by Joel Edwards who compared it to something that happened back in 1961. It's portrayed in the movie [K-19: The Widowmaker](#). There was a Russian submarine on a mission in 1961 when they discovered that the nuclear reactor was malfunctioning. If left alone, it would have caused the nuclear explosion that might tip the Cold War into a full-blown conflict. So to avoid this dreadful prospect, a number of men entered the reactor room at great risk to themselves to carry out repairs. By so doing, they averted the explosion and the threat to peace, but several of them lost their lives as a consequence.

Listen to what Joel Edwards wrote:

Entering a dangerous place to carry out dangerous tasks for the sake of others—that was the role of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. The place was the Most Holy Place. The dangerous task was to cleanse the innermost sanctuary of the people's

uncleanness. It was a great privilege for Israel to have God dwell among them, but God is a dangerous neighbor for sinful people.

When He tore open that curtain, God was saying to a watching world, “Someone has come Who has entered this dangerous place and Who has carried out the dangerous task. His mission has been so successful that the blood He shed in this dangerous place is sufficient now to open up the hiding place of God’s presence for all the world to see.” And now God can come out from that Most Holy Place and dwell in the midst of His people throughout the world. People from all tribes and nations around the world can experience God’s presence coming out to meet them as the people of God in whom God dwells. “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all the nations*” (Matthew 28:19-20).

It’s a beautiful thing that that curtain was torn in two, because God is saying to us, in the words of Hebrews 10:12-14: “*But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*” No other high priest had ever sat down in that place. You didn’t go in there to sit down. You didn’t go in there to have tea with the King. You went in there to do your duty and to get out—hopefully alive. Now comes a Priest Who makes atonement for the sins of the people and He sits down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. “*For by a single offering,*” His blood, “*he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified*” (Hebrews 10:14). That, my friends, is good news. Jesus, through the offering of His blood, has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

You and I today don’t feel perfect yet, do we? We’ve confessed our sins to the Lord. We’ve acknowledged we have not arrived yet. And we need to continue acknowledging our ongoing need of grace as part of our fellowship with God. But friends, know this: The work that Jesus has done on the cross has perfected you for all time. You are now able to be someone with whom God can dwell. He has come to live in you by His Holy Spirit and He’s not going to leave you. He’s not going to go away from you. Even when you sin, He remembers that single offering that Jesus made that has perfected those who trust in Jesus for all time. So God now comes to live in your life, because of what Jesus has done. He’s done the dangerous task on your behalf. He’s gone into the dangerous place. He’s shielded you from God’s wrath. That’s the first thing the tearing of the curtain tells us.

### **Outsiders are now welcome in.**

You may need to go back to junior high to remember what it’s like to feel like an outsider. You know, you go into a room and everyone’s talking, then all of a sudden they stop talking when

they notice you. They're giggling and you realize, "I'm not in the 'in crowd.' They've been making fun of me." Or maybe you know what it's like to go on Facebook and see pictures of your friends at a party and you're thinking, "What happened to my invitation? Why didn't they invite me? Am I on the outside?"

Or go to O'Hare Airport with two hours to wait for your flight. Walk past those wonderful lounges with those frosted doors. You'll be thinking, "Wouldn't it be neat to get in there, sit in those fancy seats and eat those foods and feel comfortable while I wait for my flight?" But you can't. You're on the outside. Then you go on to the plane for that trans-Atlantic flight and you walk through that area of the plane with all those nice loungers. They do recline! And you think, "This is really nice in here. Maybe I could actually sleep in here." But you can't. You've got to go back, back, back, to this little seat that you can hardly fit in, and you're trying to put all your stuff away, and you're thinking, "This is going to be a long, long night." And then—then after they give those announcements—they pull that curtain closed and you realize, "I'm on the outside. I don't have preferred status here."

Friends, the whole architecture of the temple was designed to convey this kind of spiritual hierarchy. There was the Outer Court, which was kind of like where the tourists could come—the court of the Gentiles. Anyone was welcome there.

It reminds me of when Kate and I visited the George W. Bush Presidential Museum in Texas back in February. We got to actually walk into this oval office that was the exact size of the President's office. We got to pick up the phone that was on the desk, and I was thinking, "Oh, isn't this neat?" But at the same time I was thinking, "This is really kind of cheesy," because I knew it was all just a replica. We were not in the real Oval Office. We're never going to get into the real Oval Office. We were just tourists. When normal people visit the White House, we're on the outside.

That's what this court of the Gentiles was like. If you were not a Jew, you would never penetrate further into that temple.

There was a second court called the Women's Court. If you were a Jewish woman you could go in a little bit closer. But inside that Women's Court there were 15 stairs that led up to the Men's Court. You dare not, woman, climb up those stairs into the Men's Court. Then up in the Men's Court, another precinct beyond that was called the Priests' Court—the Holy Place. Only the priests could go in there. And then there was a curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place and only the high priest could go in there—only once a year.

There was a warning sign at the temple in Jerusalem that said this: "No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the enclosure around the temple. Whoever is caught will have

himself to blame that his death ensues.” And they took that seriously. Death without appeal was the penalty for anyone who transgressed the boundaries. Listen to what Fleming Rutledge says:

If you wanted to get close to God, if you wanted to be ‘in,’ if you wanted to be one of the chosen, if you wanted to be ‘first class,’ you had to be the high priest—or at least a priest—or anything but a woman or a pagan. The whole set-up was based on distinctions that separated groups from one another and restricted access to the Mercy Seat.

In the moment that Jesus died on the cross, all such distinctions came to an end. That’s what the tearing of the curtain signifies, friends. All these artificial barriers, all this hierarchy of who can get close to God and who can’t was all torn down. The way is now open for men and women of every tribe, language and nation to come to God. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28). We are all one in Christ Jesus and we all have equal access in the presence of God.

That torn veil, friends, is a rebuke to any spirit of elitism that still exists in our hearts. That torn veil is a rebuke to our racism that says any of us from a certain ethnicity are somehow more special or more privileged. That torn veil is a rebuke to our arrogance and conceit that looks down on other believers in the church. That torn veil is a rebuke to our cliquishness, because we want to have an “in crowd.” Because in the church of Jesus Christ, no one qualifies. It’s not like the Boston Marathon, where you have to qualify just to run the race. Actually, in the church of Jesus Christ, we all start at the “disqualification” point. All of us are disqualified. None of us can run this marathon.

But Jesus has done it for us. He has opened the way for people from all over the world—no matter what your background, no matter what your gender, no matter what your failures and sins have been—to come into the presence of God through Him. Anyone who trusts in Jesus has preferred status in God’s presence. That’s what the torn veil is saying.

### **The far off are drawn near.**

Then thirdly—this is similar but a little different—the far off are drawn near. You might realize, “Well, God doesn’t make distinctions based on race or gender or spiritual qualifications. There is no elite class.” But still you are feeling at a distance. What God is saying to us in that torn curtain is, “The far-off, those who are at a distance, I’m calling you near to Me.” You feel your unworthiness. You recognize your sinfulness. Listen to the song that says:

Let not conscience make you linger  
Nor of fitness fondly dream  
All the fitness He requires  
Is to feel your need of Him.

(From "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy," by Joseph Hart)

That's all He requires. Why? Because of the blood that was shed. Because Hebrews 10:19-22 (RSV) states, "*Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary*" — into the holiest of places—we have confidence to go there "*by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain.*" So the temple veil is just a symbol. It represents the human flesh of Jesus—His flesh that was torn and stricken and smitten and afflicted on the cross. It removed the barrier and opened up the way for each of us to get close to God. "*And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near.*" Let us get as close to Him as we can.

Don't let your own unworthiness keep you at a distance, because it says, "*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.*" So when my conscience condemns me, I recognize that the blood of Christ cleanses my guilt, erasing my shame, and that God actually wants me to get close to Him. He wants me to come near to Him through Jesus. He's the only Mediator I need. God is not annoyed by me coming to Him. I have 24-hour immediate access into the throne room of Almighty God. I can get as close to Him as I desire now. There's no request that is too great or too small. There's nothing I've done that can disqualify my admission into God's presence, if I put my faith and trust in Jesus.

God's not only inviting us, He's urging us. He's appealing to us: "Draw closer to Me. Draw nearer to Me." For thousands of years this same God was saying to His people, "Do not come any closer. For your own protection, don't touch that Most Holy place, lest you die." Now He's saying, "Come close. Get as close to Me as you wish. For the way has been opened through the blood that has been shed."

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of something I had heard A.W. Tozer say: "Over every tombstone of every believer you could write this inscription: This man, this woman, got as close to God as he wanted to be." I've often thought about that. What was Tozer saying by that? I looked it up and here's the bigger context of that concept:

You will have as little as you are satisfied with in the Christian life. If you're satisfied with just a little bit of the knowledge of God, that's what you'll have. You will have as little as you're satisfied with. The man, for instance, who is satisfied to live a defeated life will never be forced to take victory. The man who is content to follow Christ afar off will never know the radiant wonder of His nearness. The man who is willing to settle for a joyless, barren life will never experience the joy of the Holy Spirit or the deep satisfaction of fruitful living.

Tozer is saying it's really disheartening to realize how many Christians are willing to settle for mediocrity. It's really disheartening to realize how many Christians are willing to stay at a distance, when God is saying, "Draw near." Don't just come to the Outer Court. Go into the Most Holy Place, because the blood of Jesus has been shed. You are free now to dwell in the presence of the Almighty God. You can draw nearer to Him. Tozer also said, "You now have as much of God as you really want. If with all your heart you truly seek Him, you will surely find Him. If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, you will be satisfied. If you long for Him more, He will take you deeper."

I think sometimes we need that corrective, because we're thinking, "I know I'm at a distance. I know I'm cold. I know I don't have very close communion with God right now." And we are thinking, "God's got to do something to get me closer to Him." But God is saying, "Absolutely not. Through that torn veil, I have done everything that was necessary for you to come into the Most Holy Place." If you're not close to God and you're trusting in Jesus, the problem is not on God. The problem is you of little faith are not drawing near.

God's Word is saying, "Everything that you need to have a closer relationship with Me has already been accomplished." Don't think that you've got to somehow clean up your act, that you've got to go through all these motions. No. Look to what Jesus has done on the cross for you and realize God has saved you. "You're never an annoyance to Me. You're not a bother to Me. You don't have to go through spiritual gymnastics to get closer to Me. All you need to do is look to the cross of Jesus and what He has done there for you, and realize I've opened the way. Come to Me, My child. Draw near to Me and I will reveal Myself in deeper and deeper ways to you."

### **The old way of dead works is obsolete.**

What is God saying to us through that torn veil? He's saying the old way of dead works is obsolete. Stop thinking you've got to do penance. Stop thinking you've got to pay for your sins. Stop thinking more sacrifices need to be made in order to make yourself right with God. You do

not make yourself right with God. Jesus makes you right with God. What Jesus has done on that cross is sufficient. You need nothing else and you must add nothing more to His perfect sacrifice. Don't think that you must do something.

Instead, listen to the words of this hymn:

Weary, working, burdened one  
Wherefore toil you so?  
Cease your doing—all was done  
Long, long ago  
'Til to Jesus' work you cling  
By a simple faith  
Doing is a deadly thing  
Doing ends in death  
Cast your deadly doing down  
Down at Jesus' feet  
Stand in Him, in Him alone  
Gloriously complete

(From "Nothing Either Great or Small" by James Proctor)

Let's bow our heads and pray. As you bow before the Lord, I'm thinking of two particular areas of need. First is that there are many people who come to church and hear the gospel, but never really put their trust in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. You're thinking too much. You're imagining that there's something you need to do. You're thinking you need to add to what Jesus has already done. And that torn veil is telling you, "God has done it all." If you have not put your trust in Jesus, right now is a perfect time to receive His finished work as the sufficient sacrifice to pay for all your sins and bring you close to God.

I'm also thinking of those of us who've known the Lord and trusted in Him, but are at a point of spiritual barrenness, coldness and distance. For some of us, maybe it's been there a long time. You've been excusing your coldness, excusing your prayerlessness, excusing the distance you are from God in any number of ways. But that torn curtain is God's way of saying to you, "I have done everything you need for you to get close to Me." You will be as close to God as you really want to be.

So let's ask God for hearts that hunger and thirst for Him today.

Heavenly Father, I pray for the person who may have known the gospel for a long time, or another who may be hearing it for the first time today. I pray, Lord, that we would put our trust in You. I pray that no one would leave this room today still clinging to his or her own works or thinking, "There's something I need to add, some way I need to make myself right." Thank You,

God, for tearing that curtain open to say to us the work that Jesus has done is enough to perfect us for all time.

O God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Jesus, You are my only plea. I trust in You and in what You have done.

For each one of us, Lord, thank You for opening a new and living way for us to enter into the Most Holy Place through the blood of Jesus. Thank You that the path of greater and greater knowledge of You and closeness to You and intimacy with You is open to us, that You've opened the way for sinful people to have communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that we can dwell in the secret place of the Most High and abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Thank You that there are treasures, eternal pleasures, at Your right hand that will satisfy our deepest thirst. Thank You that our greatest hunger will be fulfilled in Jesus. O God, I pray that You would satisfy us and make us hungry for more. Quench our thirst and make us more thirsty still. Don't let us be complacent. Don't let us stay at a distance.

O God, I pray that You would let today be a day of reviving, renewal of faith and renewal of longing for You in the hearts of all Your people at New Covenant. Lord, I pray our prayer meetings would be filled with people seeking You. I pray our Care Groups would be pulsating with an atmosphere of prayer and seeking Your face. I pray, Lord, that You would find us a people on the pursuit of You, a people hungry for You, a people thirsty for You, because we see that You've opened up this way for us. Let us be a people who prize the privilege of prayer. Forgive us, O Lord, for the great sin of neglecting such a priceless gift open to us through Jesus. Thank You, Jesus, for all that You've done to bring us close to God. We love You and we worship You. Amen.

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