
Lesson 53

The Signs of Jesus' Death

The Scripture Lesson

Matthew 27:51-53; Hebrews 9:1-14 & 10:1-22

To people of God in Old Testament times, the temple was the house of God. The temple had two main rooms. One was called the Holy Place. Only the *priests* could go into it. The other part was called the *Most Holy Place*, or the Holy of Holies. In this room was the ark of God. There, especially, was the dwelling place of God. A thick, heavy curtain, or veil, was hung in front of the Most Holy Place. Only the *high priest* could go behind that veil. And he went there only once a year, in order to sprinkle blood on the ark.

Do you understand why that heavy veil had to hang in front of the Most Holy Place? It is because the God whose house this was is a *holy* God. And all the people were *sinners*. The veil served to *shut out* sinners from the presence of God. If *we* had lived in those days, we would also have been shut out of the temple. For we are sinners, just like the people of Israel.

But things are different now. Let us try to see why that is. The high priest once a year brought blood into the Most Holy Place in order to atone for the sins of the people. But Scripture tells us that it "is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." The people, and the high priest, too, still had their sins, even after

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the blood was sprinkled on the ark. What the high priest was doing, however, was a *picture* of what *Jesus* would do. Jesus, who is our great High Priest, would come before God, not with the blood of animals, but with His own precious blood. That is, He would die on the cross. And when He did that, the sins of His people were *really gone*. His people could therefore come before God, perfectly righteous. No longer was it necessary that a thick veil shut them out of the Most Holy Place. They are still sinners, it is true; but their sins are *forgiven*.

And as a proof of that wonderful fact, the veil of the temple was rent, or torn, from the top to the bottom at the moment that Jesus died. The priests who were in the temple must have been horrified to see that happen. The way into the Most Holy Place was thrown wide open. The wicked Jews probably repaired the veil as quickly as they could. But they were doing wrong. Because of Jesus' death on the cross the way into the presence of God is at last open! The veil is gone! We can come to God without fear.

There was, at the moment of Jesus' death, another sign that shows that we will indeed share in Jesus' glory. There was an earthquake, and some of the graves in that place were opened. And then, when Jesus arose on Sunday morning,

the bodies of those saints also came out of their graves, and they appeared to many in Jerusalem. Do you see what that meant? It meant that Jesus' death and resurrection were not for Him alone. By His death and resurrection He destroyed the power of death and the grave also for *us*. As *proof* of that, the decaying bodies of those saints were raised. They were raised as glorified, resurrection bodies, which would never die again. And these saints are now in heaven, with their glorified bodies, raised by the power of Jesus' death and resurrection. We can therefore say with the apostle Paul, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

No Bone Broken

Matthew 27:54; John 19:31-37

Many frightening things had happened at the cross. There were the three hours of darkness, the earthquake, the splitting of rocks, the opening of graves. What could it all mean? No one at the cross would have been able to explain it all, but everyone there must have believed that somehow it was all connected with the crucifixion of that Man on the middle cross. The centurion certainly believed that. He was the officer who was in charge of the Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus. He had probably watched the trial of Jesus that morning. And then, when Jesus hung on the cross, he heard the leaders mock Him for saying that He was the Son of God. Then came the darkness and the mighty and terrible signs that happened at the time of Jesus' death. The centurion, who was a Roman, and a Gentile, saw it all and confessed, "Truly, this was the Son of God." He believed. There is a power, you see, in the cross; and that power worked in the heart of this Roman soldier so that he believed in the dying Christ.

The leaders of the Jews, meanwhile, began to worry about details of their law. Already it was late afternoon, and it was not very likely that the men on the crosses would die before nightfall. According to Jewish law, bodies of criminals should not remain hanging overnight. The leaders were especially worried about this matter on

this day, for the following day was the *Passover Sabbath*. These hypocrites did not want to do anything to defile their land on such an important day. So they went to Pilate and asked that the legs of the three men be broken, so that they would die more quickly. Then it would be possible to remove their bodies before sunset. Pilate gave orders that it be done as the Jews desired.

The soldiers came with their clubs to one of the malefactors and smashed his legs. Then they went to the other and did the same to him. Finally they came to Jesus ... and they saw that He was already dead. So they did not break His legs; but, to be sure of His death, one of the soldiers took his spear and thrust it up into Jesus' side.

The soldiers were giving little thought to what they were doing. Yet, all of this was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Those prophecies were these: "a bone of him shall not be broken," and "they shall look upon him whom they pierced." Not the leaders of the Jews, not the soldiers, not even John at this time was thinking about the fulfilling of Scripture; but everything happened according to the word of prophecy.

It was a soldier that pierced Jesus' side. But it was really the *Jews* who were responsible for it, for *they* brought Jesus to the cross. And, more than that, *we* are responsible for it. Perhaps we read the account of Jesus' death and say that *we* would never have done anything like that to our Lord. But the truth is that we pierce Him every time we sin. There is hope for us, sinners, only because of Calvary!

Memory Work

Group A

Hebrews 10:19, 20 "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh."

Group B

Hebrews 10:4 "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins."

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- _____ 1. The rending of the veil of the temple occurred at the moment of Jesus' resurrection.
- _____ 2. In the old dispensation, only the high priest was allowed to go behind the veil into the Most Holy Place.
- _____ 3. Once a year the high priest would go into the most Holy Place to sprinkle the blood of an animal on the ark.
- _____ 4. The sprinkling of blood was to make atonement for the people, and by it their sins, which were many, were washed away and they were righteous before God.
- _____ 5. Jesus was the great High Priest who brought before God not the blood of bulls and goats but His own precious blood.
- _____ 6. By Jesus' shedding of His own blood, the way into God's presence was made open for all of His people.
- _____ 7. The chief priests were glad that God's promises were at last fulfilled, and that His people no longer had to be shut out of the Most Holy Place.
- _____ 8. Another sign that accompanied Jesus' death was the sound of a mighty, rushing wind.
- _____ 9. The Roman centurion who supervised the crucifixion was convinced by all he witnessed at Calvary that Jesus was truly the Son of God.
- _____ 10. The leaders of the Jews meanwhile began to worry that the soldiers might leave the bodies on the crosses overnight.

_____ 11. They therefore asked Pilate to order the soldiers to break the legs of the thieves, to hasten their death, but not to break the legs of Jesus, because He had already died.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. What were the two main rooms of the temple? What separated the one room from the other? Why was that separation necessary?
2. In Old Testament times, who went into the Most Holy Place? When did he do that, and what did he do there?
3. If the blood of animals could not take away a single sin, why did the priests make all of those sacrifices?
4. What happened in the temple when Jesus died? Do you know what that means for *us*? What did the wicked Jews probably do about this wonderful sign?
5. What else happened at the moment of Jesus' death?
6. What happened after Jesus' resurrection on Sunday, to show that His dying and rising again were not for Himself alone?
7. What did the centurion believe about Jesus after he saw all that happened at Calvary? Why is it surprising that *he* believed, while most of the Jews remained unconverted?
8. Why did the Jewish leaders begin to worry about how long it would take for the three men on the crosses to die? What did they do to speed things up?
9. Why did the soldiers not break Jesus' legs? What did they do instead? Can you tell why these actions of the soldiers showed that Jesus was really the promised Messiah?
10. It was a Roman soldier who actually pierced Jesus' side. What do we do every day, that is really the same thing?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, God spoke from heaven: "This is my _____ Son, in whom I am well _____" (Matt. 3:17). At the very end of that ministry, God speaks again, this time by amazing signs that proclaimed the tremendous significance and power of the Savior's death. The _____ of the temple was _____ in twain, the earth did _____, the rocks _____, and the graves were _____ (Matt. 27:51, 52).

2. As in the tabernacle, so also in the temple, the veil was made to divide between the holy place and the _____ holy. And within (that is, behind) the veil was put the _____ of the testimony (Ex. 26:33). Above the ark was the _____ seat; and there, the Lord had said, I will _____ with thee, and I will _____ with thee from above the mercy seat (Ex. 25:21, 22).

3. The Lord gave to Moses strict commandment that the high priest (Aaron) not come at _____ times into the holy place within the _____ before the mercy seat which is upon the _____ that he _____ not. Only once a year, on the great day of atonement, may the high priest go into the holy place, with the _____ of a bullock and _____ it upon the mercy seat, thus making an atonement because of the _____ of the children of Israel and because of their _____ in all their _____ (Lev. 16:2, 15, 16).

4. When Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans the temple was destroyed and the ark was lost forever. The Jews who were brought back from the Babylonian captivity, however, rebuilt the temple, and its Most Holy Place was once more the sanctuary of God, the place where God dwelt in a figure with His people. In front of the entrance to that sanctuary was again a veil, beyond which only the high priest could go, _____ every year, not without _____, which he offered for _____, and for the _____ of the _____;

the Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the _____ of all was not yet made _____, while the first _____ was yet standing, which was a _____ for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and _____, that could not make him that did the service _____ (Heb. 9:7-9).

5. The veil thus symbolized the separation between God and men. And that which separates sinful men from the holy God is their sin and guilt. Throughout the entire old dispensation, as long as there was a temple, a thick veil hung before the entrance to the Most Holy Place, because it was not _____ that the _____ of bulls and goats should take away _____ (Heb. 10:4). However, though those sins remained a barrier, there was nevertheless comfort for the people of God in the temple service; for the priests and sacrifices were figures of better things to come. They would find their fulfillment in Christ, who would, not by the blood of goats and _____ but by His _____ blood, enter in once into the _____ place, having obtained eternal _____ for us (Heb. 9:12). He put away _____ by the sacrifice of _____ (Heb. 9:26).

6. The way into God's communion was therefore open; for, by one _____, Christ had _____ forever them that are sanctified (Heb. 10:14). How fitting therefore that when the real veil (our sins) was rent in Jesus' death, the veil in the temple was rent too, from the _____ to the bottom (Matt. 27:51) — to make it more obviously and emphatically the work of Jehovah.

7. Very likely the Jews repaired the veil, continuing to cling as they did to the old types. The shadows of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in Christ. The opening of the sanctuary by the rending of the veil was a picture of God's receiving His people — receiving them because their sins had been removed. And the wicked Sanhedrists preferred to close the sanctuary back up again. We, however, rejoice at the rent veil,

for in it we find assurance that with _____ we may enter into the _____ (the Most Holy Place — that is, the eternal tabernacle of God's friendship) by the blood of _____ (Heb. 10:19).

8. Occurring at the same time as the rending of the veil was the quaking of the earth and the rending of the rocks. Earthquakes speak of the judgment of God. In Jeremiah 10:10 we read that "at his _____ the earth shall _____, and the nations shall not be able to abide his _____." For the wicked, therefore, the quaking of the earth and the rending of the rocks is a foretaste of coming *judgment*. But it is more than that. The writer to the Hebrews explains that the shaking of the earth signifies the _____ of those things that are shaken, that those things which cannot be shaken may _____ (Heb. 12:27). There is coming, in other words, a *transformation* of the earth, which is yet under the curse because of the sin of man, its head — a glorious transformation of the old, into a new heavens and new earth ... and all on the basis of the dying of Christ.

9. Finally, there was the sign of the opened graves. Some of the graves in the vicinity of Jerusalem burst open as a testimony to the fact that Jesus had, by His death, already conquered death. At the moment of His death the graves were opened; and, three days later, many _____ of the saints which slept _____ and came out of the _____ after Jesus' _____, and went into Jerusalem and _____ unto many (Matt. 27:52, 53). The appearance of those saints in their glorified, incorruptible resurrection bodies was very likely for only a short time, after which they were brought to heaven, where they are pledges to other saints in glory, and to us on earth, of the necessary connection between the resurrection of Christ and our own glorious resurrection. Christ arose not as a mere individual, but as the Head of the church. His resurrection is the firstfruits of a harvest that is sure to follow.

10. When the _____ and they that were with him, watching _____, saw the _____ and those things that were done, they _____ greatly (Matt. 27:54). According to Mark 15:39 it was the centurion who cried, "_____ this man was the _____ of God."

11. The confession of the centurion stands in marked contrast to the unbelief of the Jews. Concerning the Jews we read simply that, _____ the things that were done, they _____ their breasts and _____ (Luke 23:48). They saw what the centurion saw; and, besides, they were better acquainted with Jesus' claims, and they had the Old Testament Scriptures. But they refused yet to believe. They were content to go back to their pious celebration of the Passover Feast. It was a Roman centurion who put such blindness to shame.

12. It occurred to the chief priests, meanwhile, that an ordinance of the Mosaic law required that the body of a man put to death for a crime and hanged on a tree must not be left to remain all _____ upon the tree, but care must be taken to _____ him that day, that the land be not _____ (Deut. 21:22, 23). For the three bodies to be left on the crosses overnight would have been bad enough therefore; but what would add to the offense, in the minds of these scrupulous Jews, was that Friday was the _____ (for the Sabbath). So, in order to assure that the _____ not remain upon the _____ on the _____ day (especially because that Sabbath day was an _____ day — the *Passover* Sabbath), the Jews besought _____ that the legs of the men might be _____ (to hasten death), and that they might be _____ away (that is, buried) before the beginning of the Sabbath at about 6 P.M. (our time) on Friday (John 19:31).

13. There was another Mosaic ordinance that applied. The people of Israel had been given strict commandment, concerning the Passover

lamb, that they must not _____ a bone thereof (Ex. 12:46). The pious chief priests would have been careful to insist that every bone of the Passover lambs be left intact. But when they have before them the perfect Lamb of God, the fulfillment of all the Passovers of the past, they appeal to Pilate for the breaking of His legs!

14. Pilate must have readily consented, for we find that soon the soldiers, ordered surely by their superiors, set about the task of breaking legs. Humanly speaking, it seemed therefore that the circumstances of the crucifixion were about to render this one detail of the Old Testament types impossible of fulfillment. For the soldiers had every intention of completing their assignment, and no one was there to stop them. But the Lord rules circumstances. John observed it all, and, though he could not understand the significance of it at the time, he could not help but wonder, in his later writing of the gospel account, at the precise fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, through the seemingly casual actions of the soldiers. For they break the legs of the _____, and of the _____ which was crucified with Jesus. However, when they came to Jesus, and saw that He was dead _____, they did not break His legs, but, in order to make certain He was dead, took a _____ and _____ His side. Thus were two prophecies fulfilled, says John: "A _____ of him shall not be _____," and "They shall _____ on him whom they _____." So remarkable was such fulfillment of every detail of prophecy, that John affirms the truth of it by saying that he _____ it with his own eyes. So unmistakably was Jesus marked out as the Messiah! And John bares record of it in order that we might _____ (John 19:32-37).

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. If the veil in the temple was intended by God to be a sign of the separation between a holy God and unholy men, why, do you suppose, did He not command that a solid stone *wall* be built, rather than a mere *veil* hung, between the two parts of the temple building?

2. Can you explain why only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and why he was strictly forbidden to venture beyond the veil *empty-handed*?

3. The people of God in the Old Testament understood, certainly, that it was "not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." Does that mean, do you think, that, after bringing to the temple their many sin offerings, they would return to their homes *comfortless*?

4. The rending of the veil did not mean, first of all, that henceforth anyone could go into the temple's Most Holy Place. It was rather a sign of a *spiritual* reality. Do you know what that reality was?

5. Rev. Vos once wrote that the rending of the veil was "the symbolic representation of the open arms of God." In light of that, can you explain why it was so sad that Israel's spiritual leaders were determined to cling to the old types — even, most likely, repairing or replacing the rent veil as quickly as they could?

6. Why were the graves opened on Friday if the bodies were to remain in them till Sunday? Try, in other words, to explain how the two aspects of that great miracle were connected, the one to Jesus' death, and the other to His resurrection.

7. How was the resurrection of those saints different from the resurrection of Lazarus? To this day, those saints can be distinguished from almost all the other saints in glory. What purpose do you suppose that serves in heaven?

8. Note the difference between the centurion's reaction to all of this, and the Jews' reaction. Calvin calls the latter "crass blindness." We read simply that they "smote their breasts and returned." How can that be called crass blindness?

9. The signs on Good Friday were hardly less impressive than those on Pentecost. Why is it that Pentecost brought a mass repentance of Jews, and Good Friday did not?

10. John tells us in Revelation 1:7 that when Christ comes again, "every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him." Does the latter, do you suppose, refer only to the Roman soldiers?