

Introduction

Over the last few lessons, we have discussed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We walked through the details and the significance of the crucifixion, understanding that Matthew leads the readers to conclude for themselves that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ fulfills the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. At the end of the last lesson, we looked at the Epistles and let the apostles express the impact of the cross.

Jesus has paid for sins, having had all the sins of the world for all time placed upon Himself, and He died a physical death by yielding up His spirit. Matthew now reports three things that happened at the moment Jesus the Messiah died, indicating the significance of His death: the veil was torn, an earthquake took place, and a centurion exclaimed the true identity of Jesus (Matthew 27:51-56). The tombs being opened is a result of the resurrection, not the death of Jesus.

The Veil of the Temple

What is this veil? There are two “veils” of the Temple. Exodus 25-27 provides the tabernacle's makeup with all its details and purposes.

Exodus 26:31-35 - This veil separates the holy place from the Holy of Holies (most holy place), where the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat were located. It is where God met the high priest on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would make atonement for the nation's sins once per year. (Leviticus 16:2).

Exodus 26:36-37 – This describes the curtain at the main entrance used as a doorway to the tabernacle from the courtyard. Even though they may seem similar, we know it was the inner veil that was torn because the words for *veil* and *curtain* are different in both Hebrew and Greek.

The veil in Herod's Temple contributed to its splendor. From Josephus and Rabbinic texts, we can gain some idea of its appearance. Within that central structure of the Temple, the veil covered the entrance to the Holy of Holies, which was 60' high by 30' feet wide.

This veil represented the boundary between God's abode and the created world. It was as though crossing that boundary brought the high priest into the presence of God.

What does this veil tearing signify? The fact that the veil tore at all indicates an act of God. There is no physical explanation as to why this would occur otherwise. From *top to bottom* does not necessarily mean that it was the direction of the tear, but the only reason that it is stated like this seems to indicate not only that it was torn in the entirety of its length, but also gives the direction of the tear. This indicates that the tearing was initiated by God and not by men.

The veil tearing also indicates that access to God is now unimpeded (Hebrews 6:17-20, 4:14-16).

The Earth Shook

Minor earthquakes were common in that area. But for an earthquake to happen immediately after the death of Jesus is obviously seen as a consequence of God. Not only were the rocks split, but verse 52 says the tombs were opened. This earthquake caused lasting impressions on the immediate population of Israel, especially those in and around Jerusalem. We will talk about verses 52-53 subsequently.

The Centurion's Proclamation

A centurion was a soldier in charge of 100 soldiers. Some took on other responsibilities greater than a hundred soldiers. This was probably the main centurion over the entire cohort (we discussed previously that a cohort escorted Jesus to the crucifixion and waited there until He was dead).

All the Roman soldiers saw the three hours of darkness, heard what He said from the cross, saw how He gave up His own spirit, and saw the earthquake that followed. What they saw caused them to become very frightened, and their captain pronounced, "Truly, this was the Son of God!"

This statement in Greek is "ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὗτος." There is much speculation about this proclamation. Some opinions:

- The centurion stated this was "a" son of god, not making any divine proclamation but simply identifying Jesus with the mythic god's of Rome.
- The centurion was not speaking of his own initiative, but God put those words in his mouth because this claim would not have been known to him.
- The centurion makes this proclamation while understanding, just as the one thief did, that Jesus was truly the Son of God, and he believed in Jesus.

There is no indication of what this centurion understood about Jesus. But he did hear the taunts thrown at Jesus, and he also knew the charge. Chances are that Jesus' fame was also known to him, being that Romans were charged with knowing what was happening in their jurisdiction. Perhaps the centurion from Matthew 8:5-13 talked to this other centurion. We don't know, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility that he recognized that Jesus was God's Son.

The statement itself is what is important. θεοῦ υἱὸς – theou huios - *God's Son*. This is unique to the Greek text except for one other location (Matthew 14:22-33). It even includes the "ἀληθῶς – alethos – *truly*." Again, we cannot know for certain, but I lean toward this centurion believing in Jesus and proclaiming this truth to all those around him.

The Resurrection of the Saints

Scholars are divided on whether these saints were raised in the sense of resuscitation like Lazarus or resurrected like Jesus. Several facts point to this being a true resurrection.

1. This happened after His resurrection. Matthew made this note because we all know Christ is the first to be raised from the dead.

Matthew Chapter 26-28 – The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus – Part 11
Matthew 27:51-54 – The Aftermath of the Cross

2. The Greek word used in verse 52, *raised*, is “εγειρω,” and the Greek word for *resurrection* in verse 53 of Christ is the word “εγερσις.” These words are cognates of one another.
3. There is no theological problem with others having been raised after Christ’s resurrection. In fact, this was a divine indication of a future resurrection of all who believe.
4. These were saints; the believers in YHWH in the Old Testament were saints along with believers in Jesus in the New Testament.

Strangely, this is the only text that mentions this. So, what would be its significance? Their resurrection served as a sign to those who remained that Jesus was the Messiah. Matthew records that many bodies of the saints were raised. Were they testifying about Jesus? Were they silent? What we do have is another evidence that Jesus was who He said He was.

Other Witnesses

Matthew records that the women witnessed all of this from a distance, giving veracity and testimony to these events.

Conclusion

What was the impact on Jerusalem and Israel?

Acts 2:36-42, 3:25-4:2, 5:42, 6:7, 15:5

The Burial

Prepare for next time by reading Matthew 27:55-66.