



SYMBOLS OF THE GOSPEL

the veil, the cross, the cornerstone

The Veil

The Jewish Symbol of the Gospel

Mark 15:33-39

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia

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From corporate logos to political movements, symbols are everywhere. We immediately recognize Nike's swoosh and Apple's apple. Symbols are also powerful. Behind every symbol is a message. Without words, symbols express meaning and provoke emotion. Contrasting the American flag and the Nazi swastika proves that point. Symbols represent powerful messages.

When it comes to the Gospel, the Bible gives three symbols that help us understand what Jesus did for us – the veil, the cross, and the cornerstone.

The veil is the Jewish symbol of our faith. The temple veil reminded people that God was holy, and they were not. It was a physical reminder of the holiness of God and the severity of sin. Yet, the moment Jesus died on the cross, the veil was torn from top to bottom, symbolizing that we now have access to God.

The cross, of course, is the sacred symbol of our faith. It's odd that a Roman tool for execution became the symbol of our faith, yet we proudly identify with the cross. We display it, we wear it, and we decorate with it, because it is through the cross that we find salvation and eternal life. As Paul said, we "boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹

The cornerstone symbolizes the foundation of our faith. Because of His victorious resurrection, Jesus is that cornerstone.² There is no other name to whom we can turn for help. Jesus is our salvation. He is the cornerstone and foundation of our faith.

The veil, the cross, and the cornerstone are all symbols of the Gospel. So during this Easter season, we're going to look at these three symbols which remind us of what Jesus did for us.

The roots of our faith are Jewish, coming from a Jewish land, with Jewish customs, and belief in the Jewish Messiah. That's why we need to understand the Jewish symbol of the Gospel – the temple veil. The temple veil was a large curtain which hung in front of the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was a room where the ark of the covenant was kept and where the presence of God dwelled. Only once a year was a priest allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and offer a sacrifice for the sins of the nation.

But the moment Jesus was crucified something dramatic happened to the temple veil. Mark 15 records what happened.³

At the sixth hour (noon) darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour (3:00 in the afternoon). And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" – which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ... Then with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:33-34, 37-39, NIV).

The cross was the Roman tool of execution, the tool upon which Jesus sacrificed His life, and it is the sacred symbol of our faith. The veil was the Jewish symbol separating sinful man from the holiness of God, and when it was torn, it became the wonderful symbol of access to God. *The tearing of the veil means we have access to God.*⁴

VEIL

Mark 15 records the dramatic scene. “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” To understand the Jewish roots of our faith – and to better understand the Gospel – we need to understand the temple veil.

After the exodus of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery, the Lord told Moses to construct a mobile tent to house His presence as they trekked through the wilderness enroute to the Promised Land. The Lord instructed Moses, “Make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you” (Exodus 25:8-9, NIV). The last 15 chapters in Exodus record the detailed plans the Lord gave Moses to build and operate this tabernacle.⁵

The outer area of the tabernacle was a rectangle 75 feet wide and 150 feet long. The outer area was for cleansing and where the priests sacrificed animals for various offerings to the Lord. Inside the tabernacle was the Holy of Holies, a 15 by 45-foot tent where God dwelled. It was also where The Ark of the Covenant was kept, that sacred golden box which contained the Ten Commandments and several other items. On top of the ark were two golden angels. The lid was called the mercy seat, where blood was offered for the sin of the people. The wilderness tabernacle later became the template for the grand temple Solomon built, and years later, for Herod’s temple. The temple was the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem and the place where people met God.

A veil, a curtain, hung in front of the Holy of Holies to separate the unholy from the holy, to separate sinful man from holy God. Exodus 26 describes the veil the Lord told Moses to make. “You shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It shall be made with cherubim (angels) skillfully worked into it. And you shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, on four bases of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the covenant within the veil. And the veil shall separate you from the Most Holy” (Exodus 26:31-33, ESV).

The colors of the veil were the colors of royalty, meaning behind the curtain was a king. The cherubim woven into the curtain meant behind the curtain was God. The cherubim woven into the veil were a warning that angels guarded the Holy of Holies and would strike dead any who dared to enter.⁶

The veil was 60 feet tall, 30 feet wide, and four inches thick.⁷ Rabbinical writings say 84 women were charged with weaving a new veil each year. It was so heavy that it took 300 priests to hang it in place. On the Day of Atonement, called Yom Kippur, the Bible says, “Only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 9:7, NIV).⁸ The priest would enter the Holy of Holies once a year and offer a blood sacrifice as a national confession of Israel’s sin.

The temple system and the meaning of the veil were as familiar to a Jew as baseball and apple pie are to us. It was part of the Jewish way of life.

The primary purpose of the veil was to separate the holy from the unholy, and to remind the people of the holiness of God and the severity of sin. Another purpose of the veil was to prevent access. The veil was a huge “Do Not Enter” sign. It was warning that sinful man must not approach a holy God without the proper sacrifice.

Another purpose of the temple veil was to protect people from the holiness of God. My son Andy was a construction superintendent and oversaw the building of Northside Hospital. While the hospital was under construction, Andy showed me the radiation vault built for cancer treatment. The concrete walls of the vault are 5 feet thick, and the ceiling above the radiation source is 6 feet thick. And the entrance to the vault is sealed with a steel door that is 2 feet thick and weighs 5,000 pounds. It was built to protect those outside. In a similar way, the temple veil was meant protect sinful man from the intensity of God’s holiness and to prevent sinful man from approaching a holy God in an inappropriate way.

The Jewish symbol of the Gospel is the temple veil, and the veil reveals the truth about us. And the truth about us, as the prophet Isaiah said, is that “your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear” (Isaiah 59:2, NAS). The veil reveals the truth about all of us.

CROSS

After all these years as a Christian, I still understate the severity of my sin. I think most of us do. Yes, we’re children of God; and yes, we’ve been forgiven. But we tend to understate the severity of our sin and take grace for granted. When we do, we fail to understand how utterly offensive sin is to a holy God. But just like the veil, the cross reveals the truth about us.

British theologian John Stott writes, “Our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross.”⁹ The cross exposes us. The cross reveals the truth about us. Yes, we’ve been forgiven, and the Bible says, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1, NAS). But when we sing or talk or think about the cross, it should be with utter humility.

Back to Mark 15. “When the sixth hour came (noon), darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour (3:00 in the afternoon).” Biblically, darkness represents the judgment of God. The prophet Amos records the words of the Lord. “In that day ... I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight” (Amos 8:9, NIV). Darkness was not the absence of God. Darkness was the presence of the holy wrath of God being poured out on His own son. When Jesus absorbed the sin of the world, the judgment of God fell on Him.

Then “at the ninth hour (3:00 in the afternoon) Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34, NIV).¹⁰ The moment Jesus took our sin, His Father turned away. Jesus felt the same separation from His Father that is a reality for everyone who has ever lived. That’s why three times Jesus

prayed in the garden, “Father, if it is possible, remove this cup from Me” (Matthew 26:39). He knew what would happen and He dreaded it. For Jesus, the emotional agony was worse than the physical agony. The moment He took our sin, His Father turned away.

Isaiah 53 says, “All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all” (Isaiah 53:6, NLT). The stinging indictment upon humanity is that “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23, NAS). All of us. The Bible says what we already know. “There is no one who does not sin” and “there is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.”¹¹ Our sin acts prove our sin nature.

And the result? “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear” (Isaiah 59:2, NAS). Let that sink in. Before we knew Christ, we were utterly separated from God. And that’s true for anyone who does not know and believe in Jesus today. Separated. No relationship. No access. No one listening to your prayers. No peace within. No blessings. No help and no hope. Without Christ, everyone is tragically, completely, and personally separated from God.

Mercifully, Isaiah 53 says, “The Lord laid on him the sins of us all.”¹² Jesus did not merely carry our sin and nail it to the cross. He became our sin. He absorbed our sin, and nailed Himself to the cross. And by doing so, He became our substitute and died in our place.

But why was it necessary for God to sacrifice His own Son? And why such a violent act? Because the holy justice of God required punishment of sin, and the holy love of God desired forgiveness of sin. The cross is perhaps the clearest picture of who God is. His character includes both justice and mercy. He is both the judge who condemns us and the sacrifice who saves us. One person wrote, “In the cross of Christ God’s justice and love are simultaneously revealed.”¹³

But why blood? The blood theme runs throughout the Bible, and the Lord explains why. “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement” (Leviticus 17:11, ESV). Blood is life. The shedding of blood is death. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Hebrews 9 explains, “All things are cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22, NAS).

During Passover, an estimated 250,000 lambs were sacrificed. Imagine the amount of blood poured on the altar! Biblical historian Robert Coleman describes the scene of Passover. “Picture the vast throng of worshipers, the bleating of frightened animals waiting to be sacrificed, the flash of the knife, the spurting blood, the priests in their immaculate white robes quickly passing the bloodstained bowls, the splash of the blood on the altar, the blood streaming over the altar, spilling upon the marble pavement of the temple floor, the reek of blood in the air – all this going on while the choirs and people sang in unison the praises of God.”¹⁴

The Old Testament system of animal sacrifice was a preview of the ultimate sacrifice to come – the sacrifice of Jesus Himself.¹⁵ “But when Jesus appeared ... not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:11-12, NAS). Through His blood. He entered the holy place. Once for all.

Why blood? Because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22). And through the gruesome act of the cross and through the complex theology of blood, is the love of God. Romans 5:8 says, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (NAS).

ACCESS

Mark 15 describes that moment. “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mark 15:37-38, NIV). The moment Jesus died was the same moment the veil was torn. The same moment something dramatic happened on the cross, something dramatic happened in the temple. The veil was 4 inches thick, and the Bible says it was “torn in two from top to bottom.” Only God could do that.

The cross was a Roman tool of execution, the tool upon which Jesus sacrificed His life for us. It is the sacred symbol of the forgiveness of our sin. The veil was the Jewish symbol separating sinful man from the holiness of God, and when it was torn, it became the wonderful symbol of access to God.

When we lived in Washington, DC, one of Nancy Reagan’s secretaries attended our church. One night, when the Reagans were out of town, our friend gave us a nighttime tour of the White House. She flashed her badge and Secret Service agents let us walk through the door of the West Wing. We walked down every hallway in the White House, in every ceremonial room, in the press room, and in the dining room. We walked inside the Cabinet Room and then walked into the Oval Office. Because we were with her, we were allowed access. Without her, we would have never been allowed in. In a similar way, through Jesus, we have access to God.

The tearing of the veil means we have access to God.¹⁶ We have constant and immediate access to the Creator of the universe who just happens to be our Father.¹⁷

Hebrews 10 says, “We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us ***through the veil, that is, His flesh***, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:19-22, NAS).¹⁸

Romans 5 says, “We have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained ***access by faith*** into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2, NIV).¹⁹ Grasp what this means. The veil has been torn, and we have access to God! Accepted. Welcomed. Loved.

Now let me ask you, what does the tearing of the veil and all this theology have to do with what you’ve been going through recently? All of us have problems and carry burdens that weigh us down. All of us have things that worry us. So what does the tearing of the veil and all this theology have to do with you’ve been going through recently?

Here’s my answer to that, and I hope you agree. The strength to endure sickness, the comfort of a broken heart, the wisdom to work through your problems, the peace to calm your

worries, the joy of waking up every morning, and the hope of heaven all come through faith in Jesus Christ. And that faith is based on the resurrection of Jesus, which proves He is the Son of God and that everything He said is true. He is the Son of God, and we can trust every promise. That means Jesus is the healing of every sickness. Jesus is the comfort of a broken heart. Jesus is the wisdom for every problem. Jesus is the one who calms our worries. And Jesus is our hope and our help! He is our hope for eternity and our help for today.

The blessing of salvation, and all our many blessings, are possible because of Jesus, the Lamb of God, sacrificed His life for us. Prepare your communion elements as we worship the Lamb.

NOTES

¹ See Galatians 6:14. Also 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2:2.

² See Acts 4:11, Ephesians 2:20, 1 Peter 2:4-8.

³ This is also recorded in Matthew 27:45-46, 50-54 and Luke 23:44-46.

⁴ The Greek word for “access” – found in Romans 5:1-2 and Ephesians 2:18 and 3:12 – is προσαγωγή (*prosagone*). It means access, introduction, permission to approach, the right to approach someone of higher rank. The idea of confidence is implied in this word. First Peter 3:18 has the phrase “bring us to God.”

⁵ Exodus 40 states, “The cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could no longer enter the Tabernacle because the cloud had settled down over it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Now whenever the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out on their journey, following it. But if the cloud did not rise, they remained where they were until it lifted. The cloud of the Lord hovered over the Tabernacle during the day, and at night fire glowed inside the cloud so the whole family of Israel could see it. This continued throughout all their journeys” (Exodus 40:34-38, NLT).

⁶ See Daniel M. Gurtner, *The Torn Veil: Matthew’s Exposition of the Death of Jesus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pages 58-59, 69.

⁷ These details are not recorded in the Bible, but in historic rabbinical writings.

⁸ See Leviticus 16:29-34. Also see chapter 2, “The Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16,” from Mike Dever and Michael Lawrence, *It Is Well: Expositions on Substitutionary Atonement* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

⁹ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), page 83.

¹⁰ Jesus was quoting Psalm 22:1, when David cried out the same phrase, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” David felt separation from God on a human, emotional level. Jesus felt separation from God on a divine, spiritual level.

¹¹ 1 Kings 8:46 and Ecclesiastes 7:20.

¹² See Isaiah 53:4-5, 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:24.

¹³ Stott, page 131, quoting G. C. Berkouwer. Stott goes on to write on page 159, “The cross was an act simultaneously of punishment and amnesty, severity and grace, justice and mercy.”

¹⁴ Robert E. Coleman, *The New Covenant* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1984), page 66.

¹⁵ In the old covenant, as the animal was bound to the altar, the worshiper placed his hands on the head of the animal, confessed his sin out loud, thus transferring his sin to the sacrificial animal. The animal’s throat was cut, blood collected in a bowl, and poured onto the altar. By this act, sin was forgiven and relationship with God restored. In the new covenant, Jesus became that lamb. In a way, Jesus was bound to the altar, to the cross, and we placed our hands on His head and confessed our sin out loud, thus transferring our sin to Him. It’s as if we cut Jesus’ throat, collected His blood in a bowl, and poured it onto the altar. By this act, our sin was forgiven and relationship with God restored.

¹⁶ The Greek word for “access” – found in Romans 5:1-2 and Ephesians 2:18 and 3:12 – is προσαγωγή (*prosagone*). It means access, introduction, permission to approach, the right to approach someone of higher rank. The idea of confidence is implied in this word. First Peter 3:18 has the phrase “bring us to God.”

¹⁷ Hebrews 4:16, “Therefore let us *draw near with confidence* to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Also, 1 Peter 3:18 says, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might *bring us to God*, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.”

¹⁸ See also Hebrews 6:19, 9:3.

¹⁹ See also Ephesians 2:18.