

## **“WHAT JESUS OPENED AT THE CROSS”** **(Matthew 27:51-61)**

It's never fun to arrive at a store or place of business and see a sign that says, "Closed." It may be bank, a pharmacy, or some other place that you really need to go, but you get there a few minutes late and you're shut out. When I was on a study tour of Europe in college, one of the places I was most looking forward to visiting was the Louvre – the most famous museum in the world – but the week we were in Paris it was closed for repairs. Didn't they know I was coming?

Living on the coast we are very familiar with signs that say "Road Closed." Four or five years ago Sharla and I went to pick Matt up at the San Francisco airport, and we had a beautiful plan all laid out to leave Gold Beach around nine in the morning and arrive in San Francisco in the early evening, enjoy a few sites, and settle into our motel room – just a few miles from the airport – and enjoy a good night's sleep. A little south of Garberville some construction cones diverted us off the highway and onto an off-ramp where a construction worker told us there was a rockslide and they were closing 101 in both directions, and it could take a week or two for it to reopen. Oh my. We had to backtrack 50 miles back up to Fortuna and then take a 220-mile detour over Hwy. 36 to I-5. It was a long day.

Whether it's highways or stores or museums, we love things to be open and unobstructed. We don't like signs that say "Closed." One of the wondrous effects of the Jesus' death on the cross is that it opened up things that had long been closed, and are still open to us today. Last week in our study of Matthew, we left off in verse 50 of chapter 27, where it says that after six grueling hours on the cross Jesus "gave up His spirit." He drew His last breath and died. Today we are going to look at some amazing events that happen immediately after Jesus dies, in that window of time between three in the afternoon and six in the evening when the sun sets and Sabbath begins.

We begin reading in verses 51-53... “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.”

The moment Jesus draws His last breath and gives us His spirit, Matthew says the earth shook. When earthquakes take place in the Bible it's often associated with the power and presence of God. Earthquakes come without warning and remind us of how little we control. Earthquakes shake us and get our attention, alerting us that something bigger than ourselves is going on. The earthquake causes several things to happen.

The first is that the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. What is this curtain and why is it being torn significant? To understand we need to go back in time to when the Children of Israel are set free from captivity in Egypt and begin their journey to the Promised Land. God instructs them to build a portable tabernacle to take with them wherever they travel, and to set it up in the middle of their camp and take it down when they moved to the next place. The word "tabernacle" means "dwelling place" and emphasizes God's desire to be near and to live with His people. God told them that His presence would dwell in the innermost, most sacred part of the tabernacle called Holy of Holies that was separated from the rest of the tabernacle by a thick curtain. Behind the curtain, in the Holy of Holies, is where the Ark of the Covenant was kept – a constant reminder of the presence of God.

Years later, after Israel had settled in the Promised Land, King David has a vision of building a permanent temple, and his vision became a reality through his son Solomon, who built the first temple in about 900 BC, and spared no expense. His temple was the pride of Israel and whenever people approached the city of Jerusalem, they would look up and see this magnificent temple up on a hill and marvel. Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, but it was rebuilt 70 years later. Just prior to Jesus coming to earth, in 20 BC, Herod restored the temple into one of the most glorious buildings in the world. The temple was the centerpiece of Israel's cultural and spiritual identity.

On this slide of what the temple once looked like, you see the temple in the middle, laid out like the tabernacle. To the far left is what is known as Solomon's porch, the place where Jesus threw the money-changers out who were inflating the prices of those paying a temple tax and turning God's house in to a den of thieves.

On either side of the temple are two courts called the Court of the Gentiles. The purpose of the Court of Gentiles was to give "outsiders" to the Jewish faith an opportunity to enter the temple and learn from Israel about the true God. But no Gentile could go past the wall surrounding the temple – it was off limits. If you were a Jew, you could enter into the temple, but if you were a Jewish woman you could only go so far – you had to stay in the Court of Women. This was also the place where you came to present your offerings, and this is where Jesus saw the widow who gave her mite.

As you move closer to the main temple building, there is a little gate into another court called the Court of Israel and this is where Jewish men could go, but they had to stop there if they weren't a priest. If you were a priest you could enter through a door into what was called the Holy Place. And behind the Holy Place was the Holy of Holies – a perfect cube-shaped room 30 feet by thirty feet by thirty feet. This room was only entered one time a year by the high priest who would enter with the blood of a bull that he would pour out on the Ark of the Covenant for his sin and the sin of his family. He would also enter with the blood of a goat, which would cover the sins the people.

Between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies was a curtain four inches thick, thirty feet high, and thirty feet wide. The curtain said, "Stay out – unless you're a priest with a blood sacrifice to atone for sin – you may not enter." So holy was the Holy of Holies that when the high priest went into it a rope was tied around his foot or his waist, with bells attached, so that if he did something wrong and God struck him dead, they could drag him. No one but the high priest would dare set foot in the Holy of Holies.

As Jesus draws His last breath, this massive, thick curtain is torn in two from top to bottom – which obviously has a supernatural caused. It was said that two team of oxen hitched to each side could not tear it apart. It's something only God could do, and through this tearing God is saying something earth-shaking. He's saying that through Jesus' death, the way to God is now opened. The sin that had separated sinful people from a holy God has now been removed through the blood our great high priest, Jesus, and through Him our fellowship with God has been restored.

Hebrews 10:19-22a puts it this way, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God."

Everything in the Old Testament – the tabernacle, the sacrifices, the priests, and precise way Israel was instructed to approach God – all of this was fulfilled by Jesus' death on the cross – and His death revolutionizes the way you and I relate to God in several ways.

- When we come to church, our building is not laid out like the temple with various courts and a Holy of Holies, because God no longer dwells in a temple. The New Testament tells us that He dwells in the lives of believers, and that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit.
- When you come to church you do not need a high priest to make a sacrifice to God on your behalf and act as a mediator between you and God. 1 Timothy 2:5 says that Jesus is our mediator between God and man, and we have direct access to God through Him.
- When you came to church this morning, you did not come with a lamb or goat under your arm to sacrifice to God as a substitute for your sin. Jesus Himself is your sacrifice – the perfect Lamb of God – who died once-for-all in your place.
- And because of Jesus' death, you have immediate access to God through prayer- anywhere, anytime. Hebrews 4:16, speaking of Christ being our great high priest, says, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Instead of approaching God with fear, we can approach boldly, as someone who loves and cares deeply for His children.

When the curtain was torn God was saying, "No more boundaries, no more fences. Through my Son's death the way to me is now wide open – you have direct access."

But that's not all that happens as a result of this earthquake. Verse 51 says, "The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people." This is one of the most interesting and mysterious events in the Bible. None of the other gospels mentions this miraculous event, and Bible scholars have long wrestled over what exactly happened.

Matthew says that at the moment Jesus' dies, the earth shakes, and the shaking breaks open nearby tombs in Jerusalem. In Jewish culture, people who could afford it were buried in tombs, and the bodies of the dead were laid inside the tomb. A year later, after the flesh had decayed, the bones were collected and placed in what was called an ossuary box. After burial, the tomb would be sealed shut with a rock to keep animals and robbers out. Tombs symbolized the sadness and finality of death.

The earthquake splits open the rocks in front of these tombs, opening them up, and dead people come out – the walking dead. They're described as "holy" people and refer to God-fearing people who died before the cross. These saints are raised to life after Jesus' resurrection, and appear to many people in Jerusalem. Imagine you had a relative who died a few years earlier, and then you see them walking around Jerusalem... Uncle George, I thought you were dead.

This raises all kinds of questions: How many were raised? We don't know, but it was at least a select few. Why would Matthew imply that these people were raised to life as soon as the earthquake hit on Friday afternoon, and then say they didn't rise until Jesus' resurrection on Sunday? Why doesn't Matthew wait to write about this in chapter 28 when He describes Jesus' resurrection? It's probably because he wants us to immediately see the link between Jesus' death and His resurrection – kind of a sneak preview of what is to happen.

Yet another question is: Why? Why does this miracle happen and what is God communicating by it? To start with, when you see formerly dead people alive and walking around, it tells you that they have power over death. Death could not keep them in the grave – something supernatural is taking place. It's also a way to say to all those who trust in Christ, "This is what's going to happen to you someday – this is your future – just as Jesus rose from the dead, so will you be raised."

The reason the death of a loved one hits us so hard is because death is not normal. God created us to live eternally, and death is the great interrupter. Death was not part of God's original design in creation, but death is the result of sin. In the Garden of Eden there were two trees: The tree of life, which Adam and Eve were allowed to eat, and which symbolized eternal life. There was also the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God said you must not eat from or you will surely die. One tree meant life; the other tree meant death. When Adam and Eve sinned by eating from the forbidden tree, sin entered the world and death came to all men.

But Jesus' death reverses the curse of death, so that when we believe in God's Son, John 3:16 says, we will not perish, but have everlasting life. Through Christ, the tomb of death is opened, and just as He was raised to life, one day we will be raised as well. This gives us a whole new perspective on dying. Death is no longer a punishment for sin, but a transition to glory. Death is not the end of life, but the start of a whole new, glorious life – and the tombs being opened after Jesus' death declare that the way to eternal life has been opened.

But there's more. Not only is the curtain torn, opening up the way to God; and not only are the tombs opened, giving hope of life beyond death; but after Jesus' dies, we see that the hearts of people – from all walks of life – being opened to the gospel. Beginning in verse 54 we read how Jesus' death effects and transforms a group of Gentiles, a group of women, and a Jewish leader. I find this fascinating because who is kept out of the Holy of Holies? Gentiles could only go into the outer courts and no further. Jewish women could only go in the Court of Women and no further. And Jewish men could only go up to the Holy Place, but no further. Matthew now records the dramatic effect Jesus' death has on all three groups of people.

He begins with a Roman centurion and some of his soldiers in verse 54, "When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'"

The first converts to Christ after His death, amazingly, are some of the very same people who put Him on the cross. A centurion – meaning a Roman commander who was over 100 men, as well as some of his soldiers – are spiritually shaken by all these supernatural events. They see the miraculous darkness that falls over the land for three hours, they feel the earthquake, and they sense God's judgment of sin. They also see the grace and dignity with which Jesus dies. They see Him treat the thief next to Him with grace and kindness. They hear Him say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." They watch as He cares for His mother from the cross and entrust her to the care of John. They watch Him die with dignity, willingly laying down His life even though He had committed no crimes. They know that something supernatural is taking place, and that Jesus is no ordinary man. Their hardened hearts melt and they confess that Jesus is who He says He is – truly, He is the Son of God.

The centurion and his soldiers illustrate how the good news of the gospel opens the hearts of “bad” people. These guys were pagans through and through – they knew nothing of God and lived hard, depraved lives. We know this because of the way the soldiers mocked Jesus and played games at His expense. They beat Him and made Him suffer. They had presided over numerous crucifixions and had grown callous to death. Of all those standing around the cross, they are by far the least likeliest candidates to confess Christ as the Son of God.

Sometimes we might look at someone who is far from God, someone who is totally immersed in the world, someone who sins openly and blatantly, and wonder how they can ever be saved. God has His ways. He will sometimes shake their world – through a death, through a divorce, through a tragedy – that awakens them to their need for a Savior. If you’ve been trying to reach someone for Christ and are met with resistance, don’t stop praying for them. Pray that God’s grace would break through and melt their hearts.

Not only do we see the gospel break through to *bad people*, but in verses 55-56 we see those, who in first century culture, were *marginalized people*. Verses 55-56... “Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.” We also know from John’s gospel that Jesus’ mother Mary was at the cross watching. Unlike the centurion and his soldiers who had beaten and mocked Jesus, these women were devoted followers of Jesus, who watched silently from a distance as Jesus suffered and died on the cross.

The first woman mentioned is Mary Magdalene. Mary was one of Jesus’ most loyal followers, and whenever the gospels list the names of women who followed Jesus, Mary’s name is always listed first. Mary was from the small village of Magdala on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, and we know from the gospel of Luke that Jesus cast seven demons out of her in early in His ministry. From that moment on her life was radically changed and she became a fervent, devoted follower of Jesus. She had experienced the power of Jesus firsthand, and followed Him all the way from Galilee to the cross.

We don’t know anything about Mary the mother of James and Joseph, but she was likely well-known in the early church. Then there is the mother of Zebedee’s sons – the sons of Zebedee are James and John – two of Jesus’ key disciples. We’ve already met their mother back in chapter 20 where she approaches Jesus and asks that her sons be placed to the left and right of Jesus’ throne in the kingdom, in the seats of honor. Jesus said, “You don’t know what you are asking... before the crown must come the cross.” Now she knows what Jesus meant, and she’s no doubt humbled.

All four gospels highlight the loyalty of these women, and it’s noteworthy because in Jesus’ day, as with most of history, women were marginalized. They had no legal rights and were seen more as a possession than a person. In the temple, they were allowed to go only so far. But once Jesus dies and the curtain is torn, a whole new world is opened to the marginalized. Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Through Christ’s death, every person is equal and has access to God. You don’t have to be somebody or do something, you simply believe in Christ.

Christianity gave women a freedom and dignity they had never known before. Throughout His ministry Jesus treated women and children completely differently than the rest of society. He reached out to the kind of women others avoided, and many women were part of inner circle of disciples. Women were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb, and women in the book of Acts were instrumental in the building of the church. We take all of this for granted today, but in the first century it was truly revolutionary.

We not only see the gospel breaking through to bad people, marginalized people, but we also see it breaking through to those considered the *“good” people*. No one was more “good” in Israel than the members of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling council of 70 men. They included priests, Pharisees, and Bible experts. These men were considered the cream of the crop in Israel and morally righteous in every way. Yet it was these “good” men who plot to have Jesus killed, who trump up false charges against Him, and mock Him as He suffers and dies. They illustrate that even good, respectable people need salvation – and they can sometimes be the hardest to reach. These religious leaders saw no need for salvation, no need to repent because they trusted in their outward morality and could not see the sins in their hearts. This kind of attitude made them further from the gospel than the Roman centurion and soldiers, who knew full well how sinful they were and responded to God’s grace.

But the gospel did break through to one member of the Sanhedrin. In verses 57-62 we read... “As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.”

In the other gospels we are told that Joseph of Arimathea was a godly man and that he was eagerly awaiting the kingdom of God. We also find out that he was a secret disciple of Jesus. Somewhere along the line he began to see that Jesus truly was the Messiah but he kept his faith hidden out of fear. If his fellow members of the Sanhedrin found out he believes in Jesus – whom they’re trying to kill – Joseph risked losing everything – his job, his status, perhaps even his life.

But during Jesus’ trial, Luke says that Joseph did not consent to the decisions and actions of his colleagues. He takes a stand for Christ. As he watches Jesus die, he says, “If Jesus did all of this for me, the least I can do is step forward and give Him a proper burial. I have the wealth, I have a tomb, and this is something I can do for Jesus.” Matthew tells us that late on Friday afternoon Joseph gathers up the courage to go before Pilate – whom he would know as a member of the Sanhedrin – and asks for the body of Jesus.

Joseph doesn’t realize it, but he’s being used of God to carry out a very important detail that will give us assurance that Jesus’ resurrection really did take place. If Joseph had not stepped forward to take Jesus’ body, the Romans would have simply discarded Jesus’ body in the city dump. Because Jesus was placed in a tomb – a newly hewn tomb that no one had been laid in – it would be a clear and unmistakable miracle if Jesus’ body were not there three days later. And we’ll talk more about this next week when we gather to celebrate Easter.

The earthquake that shook Jerusalem at Jesus' death continues to shake the world today. Because the curtain is torn, the way to God – the way to be right with Him – is opened. Because the tombs are opened, eternal life is assured. And because the good news of the gospel is opened to every person, salvation is made available.

Imagine Disneyland opening their gates and saying, "Everyone is free to come in with no charge – with unlimited rides with no waiting – and all the food and drinks are free." What would keep you from walking through the gate and enjoying all that is freely offered? The cross of Christ opens up vast spiritual riches for us to enjoy – some now and some in the future. But you have to come to Christ, just as you are, and trust Him as your Savior – and when you do, the things that were once closed are opened wide for you to feely enjoy.