

Sermon for April 3, 2015 – Good Friday

Mark 15:37–38 (NIV84)

³⁷ *With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.* ³⁸ *The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

Have you ever wondered why the evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke all, at the moment of Christ's death, mention the tearing of the temple curtain? It is described in so few words that one can easily pass over it without giving it too much thought, and yet the fact that all three evangelist take our eyes off the cross and onto this event shows that it has supreme significance. Why did it happen? What meaning does this event have in regard to our salvation? This will be the focus of our meditation for today, under the theme: **Jesus is our sacrificial High Priest.** 1) *Whose offering of himself made atonement for all sin.* 2) *Who has opened heaven for all who believe in him.*

Part One: Whose offering of himself made atonement for all sin.

When you study the worship life God instituted for his Old Testament people, one of the first things you may notice is how bloody it was. It seems as if animals were continually sacrificed and their blood constantly used in ceremonies dedicating both people and objects to God.

A question we might ask is: why all this blood? The answer is that the LORD wanted to impress upon his people the serious nature of sin – the wages of which is death.

Sin separates us from God. Sin needs to be punished. For a person to have a restored relationship with God, sin needs to be atoned for by a special mediator whom God would provide. These are the spiritual truths God wanted to emphasize for his people. Why? So they might always place their faith and hope in that special Savior God promised to send for the forgiveness of sin.

This is why the LORD, when He gave Moses the Ten Commandments, ordered that they be placed in a special box called "The Ark of the Covenant," and had a special cover crafted for the box called "the atonement cover" or "mercy seat."

The Ark of the Covenant was symbolic of God's throne. It was a constant reminder that the LORD was truly with His people. However, since God is so holy that no sinner can stand in His presence, the people were never allowed to touch or see the Ark of the Covenant. This is why God commanded the Ark to be housed in a special inner room of the tabernacle called "the Most Holy place" behind a thick curtain. No one was allowed to look into the Most Holy Place – not even the High Priest. God threatened to strike anyone dead who tried.

There was one exception to this rule: once a year on Yom Kippur ("The Great Day of Atonement") the High priest was allowed to go behind the curtain with the smoke of incense to mask his sinful self from the LORD's righteous sight. His purpose for going into that inner room was, as God commanded, to make atonement for the sins of the people.

First he sprinkled the blood of a bull that he sacrificed for his own sins and on the special cover of the ark in order to atone for his personal sins. Having been thus purified from all sin, he would then go back a second time to sprinkle on the ark the blood of a goat which was sacrificed for the sins of the people. Thus the people would be forgiven.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you see the wonderful symbolism God provided in this ritual? The LORD is holy, righteous and just. He cannot tolerate any sin – no matter how insignificant man might consider that sin to be. He judges the whole world from His heavenly throne on the basis of his righteous law (The Ten commandments) that he not only wrote on two stone tablets, but also on every human heart. If we were able to keep God's law perfectly, we would be able to live with God in the perfect harmony Adam and Eve had with Him before the fall.

The problem is that we, like the rest of humanity, have repeatedly sinned against God's Holy Law. Sin separates us from God. Worse yet, the punishment for sin is eternal death in hell. And because God is perfectly just, He can't simply forget about our sin and forgive us. He is perfectly just and that would go against his nature. No, sin has to be punished, and unless that punishment is fulfilled, there can be no forgiveness.

Humanity needs a mediator: a sinless High Priest who can approach God on our behalf and, somehow, make atonement for our sins so that we might be forgiven. This is why the LORD, who loves all people and does not want anyone lost in hell forever, promised to send such a Savior. He would be true God – the eternal Son of the Father – who would be able to both live the sinless life we all failed to live and make His sacrifice apply to all people for all time. This Savior would also be true man, born of the virgin Mary, so that He could suffer and die in our place - covering the law that condemned us with His blood; thereby making atonement for all people of all time in order that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Good Friday is our Yom Kippur – our great Day of Atonement. Today we see Jesus, our great sacrificial High Priest mediating on our behalf before God. Just as the high priests of old would pray for the people's forgiveness, so also Jesus prayed for ours. And as He prayed, he offered the very sacrifice that could forgive our sins: the sacrifice of himself. With hands outstretched and bleeding, he offered up His blood. After announcing our complete forgiveness from all sin by saying "It is finished" (which also means: "paid in full"), Jesus offered up his life.

Since the sins of all people had been paid for through Jesus' sacred death, there was nothing left that would separate us from God. This is why, at the moment of His death, God tore open the great temple curtain from top to bottom. The LORD had reconciled himself to man. Why? All because of Jesus, our sacrificial High Priest, whose offering of himself made atonement for all sin. He has opened heaven for all who believe in him.

Part Two: Who has opened heaven for all who believe in him

We can't imagine how shocking the torn curtain was for the Jews. Throughout their history they were told that they could not come before God – that they would die because of their sins if they ever tried. But now the Most Holy Place was open for all to see. What did all this mean?

It meant that God doesn't want us to be afraid of Him anymore. He wants us to trust that He has forgiven all our sins. He wants us to know that we are at peace with Him – for He has opened the way to heaven for all who believe in him.

Now someone might notice that I said, "Heaven has been opened to all who believe in him" and ask, "Didn't Jesus die for this sins of all people? Wouldn't it be better to say that He opened heaven to all people?"

That objection is correct: Jesus did, in fact, open up the way to heaven for all people. There is nothing preventing anyone from having God's gift of forgiveness, life and salvation – except unbelief.

Let me explain what I mean with an analogy. Suppose a king opened a door to his castle and told his subjects to come and share all his wealth with him. Those who believed the king and entered through the door he opened would receive all that he promised. But those who didn't believe the king's decree and, either out of indifference, fear or stubbornness refused to enter through the open door he provided – well, they wouldn't receive any of the blessings the king offered. Even though the door is open to all, it is also only open for those who believe, because the unbeliever refuses to go through it.

Jesus is our open door to heaven, as He himself once said: *I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.*ⁱ God the Father wants all people to come to Him through this door. He promises the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and every good and gracious gift to all who do. There is no reason to be afraid. Christ's sacrifice has reconciled to God.

For these reasons, using the analogy of the temple curtain, the Scriptures encourage us: *Therefore, brothers, 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 with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*ⁱⁱ *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Brothers and sisters in Christ, because of Christ's work, heaven has been opened to us – not only so that we can go there when we die, but that we might now, through prayer, boldly approach the throne of God – trusting that He will hear us for Christ's sake. Heaven is open to us now. Rejoice in this wonderful news – announced to us the moment Jesus died when the temple curtain was torn in two. Put your faith in Jesus, your sacrificial High Priest. His offering of himself made atonement for all your sin. He has opened heaven for all who believe. Come to God, in repentance and faith in order to receive all the blessings Christ's sacrifice has won for you. Amen.

ⁱ John 10:9 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Heb 10:19-22 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Heb 4:16 NIV84