

The Gospel in Curious Events and Unusual Voices (Mat.27.51-54)

WestminsterReformedChurch.org

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11-25-2007

⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Introduction

To say the least, this text presents us with some curious facts that many of us may never have thought much about before. The narrative puts us at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. Matthew mentions an earthquake (27.51) that the soldiers standing guard witnessed and to which they responded with awe (27.54). The narrator transports us back to the death of Christ, specifically, to what took place after Jesus died, to the shaking of the earth and the splitting of rocks. Interestingly, right in the middle of his report, Matthew speaks of happenings that occurred *after* the resurrection (27.53). He takes us back to the cross and while we remain there He flashes forward to some curious events that occurred after the resurrection of Jesus.

Thus, we need perspective. We need the writer's perspective as a guide to the meaning of the story. In this connection, it may be helpful to ask this question: "When did the temple curtain split in two? When did it occur in relation to the death of Christ?" To answer this question, let us compare Matthew with Luke.

Matthew 27:50-51 ⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. ⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

Luke 23:44-46 ⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.

A surface reading of Matthew suggests that the curtain event took place *after* Jesus died because he mentions it after he records the voluntary death of our Lord (Jesus...yielded up his spirit. ⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two). However, the order of the record is not necessarily the order of the event. Accordingly, Luke puts the tearing of the curtain *before* the death of Jesus. He is more precise regarding chronology. Whereas Matthew says, "behold, look," Luke says, "then." Matthew emphasizes association without chronology. Luke states that the curtain was torn in two before Jesus spoke His last saying from the cross.

This difference between Luke and Matthew informs our perspective. It enriches our understanding of the gospel and it leads us to the title for this message: "The Gospel in Curious Events and Unusual Voices." The title indicates two points of outline: the gospel in curious events and the gospel in unusual voices.

1A. The gospel in curious events

The curious events to which I refer are the earthquake, the splitting of rocks, the opening of tombs, and the resurrection of bodies that Matthew mentions when he places us at the foot of the cross. They are *curious* events because we have no other record of them. Like Matthew, Luke cites the tearing of the temple curtain, but he does not speak of these other things.

1B. A comparison of Matthew with Luke

What do we learn from these distinct Gospel accounts? What do we learn by comparing Matthew with Luke?

1C. Luke

1) We learn that Luke connects the tearing of the curtain with the darkness and the infinite judgment God poured out on Christ in our place. 2) Thus, Luke's account moves from the darkness of judgment to the splitting of the curtain. The miraculous nature of this event

shows that the tearing down is the Lord's doing (the curtain was very thick and some sixty feet high and thirty feet wide). The Lord is active in judgment that flows out of the darkness of His infinite wrath. It is a judgment on Israel's temple worship that summarized the relationship of the nation to God. This means that darkness now hovers over Israel. The nation stands under God's judgment: God took the kingdom from Israel and gave it to a new nation bringing forth the fruits of the kingdom received as a trust (Mat. 21.43). His people have now become "not my people." 3) Furthermore, this tearing down involves the removal of a separation, of a separating barrier of OT forms of worship that kept the Gentiles at a distance from worship. 4) Moreover, therefore, the splitting of the curtain was an opening to a new way of approach to God. Thus, the negative of the darkness of judgment and *the negative of a tearing down is actually an opening up of access to God in the holy of holies*. The cross opens the way of life in fellowship with God. Instead of eternal death, the people for whom Jesus died have eternal life in the most holy place in the very presence of God. They are able to come into His presence now in anticipation of entry into His presence in the "not yet" of eternal Sabbath rest.

2C. Matthew

Therefore, as we come to Matthew's account we must remember this shift from the negative of judgment in the darkness to the judgment of the torn curtain and the opening up of access to salvation, eternal life, and fellowship with God in His very presence. Matthew agrees that our sins no longer separate us from God. They do not do so in the forms of worship on earth. Those forms picture separation by giving access to the holy of holiness only to the high priest and only once a year. That yearly entry was by blood atonement. Thus, Matthew agrees with Luke that the OT forms of worship that barred Gentiles from worship no longer apply. The way is open to a new form of worship because the old is now cut in two from top to bottom.

2B. Analysis

Now, in light of this shift, we can factor in Matthew's distinct perspective.

As we noted earlier, Matthew records some curious and unique events: the earthquake, the splitting of rocks, and the opening of tombs, resurrections, and appearances of resurrected people in the city (holy ones in the holy city). What do we learn from Matthew? He gives us a particular angle on the gospel. What precisely is that angle? We can see it when we put the pieces of the account in front of us in light of Luke's account.

In contrast to Luke, *Matthew connects the tearing down of the curtain not with the darkness of judgment but with the physical death of Jesus*. He does not lose sight of the good news that the cross secured eternal life for us because on it Jesus endured eternal death in our place, but he emphasizes something else that is at the core of the gospel-good-news. He emphasizes that the judgment pictured by the darkness, the tearing down, and the earthquake is an opening up of the tombs of the saints.

Note how the account unfolds. Jesus died. The temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. The earth shook, rocks were split, the tombs of holy ones were opened, and later after Jesus resurrection, holy ones were raised from the dead and appeared in the holy city. In short, the *physical death* of Jesus secured the *physical resurrection* of the people for whom He died and for whom He endured eternal punishment. His death secured holiness for His people, a holiness that gives them access to the presence of God in the holy of holies (as Isaiah promised: the suffering servant shall see His seed for He shall make many righteous, 53.11).

The curious event of the resurrection of holy ones symbolizes the victory over physical death that His death secured once and for ever. The events are miraculous works of God that convey the gospel message. They are historical happenings that have symbolic significance. They add gospel by deed to gospel by word. These divinely worked events speak; they are forms of speech. They give us God's word regarding the relationship between the physical death of Jesus and the physical death of His covenant people, the holy ones made holy by the work of the redeemer.

Thus, now in part (in a not yet way) the holy ones, the saints, enter into the holy city. How is it a holy city when the tearing down of the curtain indicates that the old order of things is now abolished? There is now no holy land, holy things, or a holy Israelite people. Nor is there a holy city, which simply means that not only is this a very sinful city that crucified the Lord of glory, but Israel is no longer the covenant people under the blessing of God and holding the kingdom as a trust. Hence, the important question is “How can Matthew say that they enter into the *holy* city?” He is not just using an old title to the effect that they entered into the city, which has a long standing name, the holy city. No, the entrance into a holy city by a resurrected holy people is a great gospel symbol. The curious event tells us that there is a new nation, a new people, a new community, and a new holy city. It comes into being by the physical death of Jesus that serves as the culmination point of His sacrifice in the place of unholy people.

These events are words from God.

No one saw the tearing of the temple curtain (most likely). It was a private event over in the city in the temple away from the place of a skull. The only ones who would eventually see what happened would be the priests who had access to the holy place and once a year to the most holy place behind the curtain. Some could have witnessed it but we have no such record. Priests who later became Christians may have reported the condition of the curtain to the Gospel narrators though we have no record of this. Matthew transports us to the temple from the foot of the cross. He tells us what the Spirit revealed: God split the curtain in two from top to bottom to give a message. The event is a form of speech. By it, God says that the physical death of Jesus breaks down the old, establishes the new of the kingdom, gives access to the very presence of God in the holy of holies, secures eternal life for His covenant people, and God says that the death of Christ on the cross secures the physical resurrection of His covenant people.

2A. The gospel in unusual voices

Soldiers spoke the truth; they proclaimed the gospel with an emphatic amen. What that said was truly the truth: **Truly this was the Son of God**. Gentiles who brutalized Jesus and hung Him on the cross proclaimed the truth regarding the person they mistreated.

It is this truth that makes it all work for it is an obvious fact that Jesus is a man. As a man, He suffered and died. He endured all that was necessary to obtain an eternal inheritance for us. He had to endure our eternal punishment and He had to endure our physical death (both in our place) in order to save us. He could suffer and die physically in our place because He was a man, truly and fully human. He could suffer eternal punishment in our place because He was the Son of God, truly and fully divine: “Tis the word the Lord’s anointed, Son of Man and Son of God.”

Again, we are brought back to the wonder of the one who is our redeemer. The redeemer of God’s elect, as the WSC puts it, is one person with two natures and He continues as such forever. By taking our eternal death and our physical death on His shoulders, He guaranteed our full access to the Father. By satisfying God’s wrath against us as God and man, He guaranteed our victory over physical death in resurrection.

Concluding applications

Matthew records some curious events that are speech acts of God. They are historical events that are *like* enacted parables of restoration. God speaks in these symbols to give us the gospel. He does what no man can do; He brings old temple worship to an end. In the same act of tearing the old down, He opens the way to new temple worship. In a word, the gospel-good-news is that the death of Christ secured the salvation of a holy people who will enter the holy city of glory with resurrected bodies. Applications (some suggestions as a beginning) flow naturally out from this good news for us as that city now in the making.

- 1) Take up weekly worship with wonder

His death tore down the old way of worship. Therefore, we ought to put it aside; we do not have priests today or sacrifices (Rome is retrogressive; it discounts the cross and its glory). Instead, we have a simple worship. Consequently, you should thankfully anticipate the privilege of coming each week into the holy of holies. Corporate worship is a grand blessing because we pass through the curtain into the very presence of God.

2) Look to the future with hope

These curious events contain the good news. They reveal in part (in a temporary way) what is coming in fullness (in an eternal way). They represent the presence of the future. They underscore the promise and certainty of the resurrection yet to come. Just as God opened a few representative tombs by a power that turns judgment into blessing, likewise, the day is coming when He will open all the tombs of His holy ones; He will open the tombs of all the covenant people that Jesus makes righteous by the power that made His judgment our blessing.

This text tells us how this hope takes shape. Jesus endured eternal and physical death that He may be the first born of many brethren and the firstfruits in kind and guarantee of our physical resurrection. Matthew ties the physical death of Jesus with holy people entering the holy city with resurrected bodies. He accents the physical side of this story. God brought these events to realization in history, on this earth, and in a bodily way to picture for us what He is going to do when the kingdom of Christ comes in its consummation. He tells us that physical death is like going to sleep and waking up the next morning; He will see us through to resurrection morning and the noonday sun of heaven's glory.

Accordingly, if we absorb into our hearts the "*a fortiori*" of Matthew 6, then we will replace worry with hope. Jesus points to the lilies and how beautiful they are, even more beautiful than the glorious clothes of king Solomon and says, **if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?** Therefore, our loving Lord says, "Do not be afraid or worry because I am with you now on the way and I will give you a new, and glorious, resurrection body."

Hope of resurrection in His promise is backed by His person and work, by the work this unique person did for us, for you and for me. He endured eternal death and physical death in our place, because He loved us, not because we loved Him. He loves, seeks, finds and keeps and that is why we own Him by saying, "He is mine." If you absorb this good news of His love into your hearts, then you will have a spring in your step. He is faithful and He will do what He promises. He will see to it that the goals of His suffering are attained. We have hope because our hope rests in Him and not in ourselves.

3) Pursue holiness

Thus, by the cross, He begins the formation of the New Jerusalem. He gave Himself to build His church, a new covenant people, a new community, a new city, and the bride of Christ. That is the holy city that old Jerusalem symbolizes.

Revelation 21:1-4 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Everything that unfolds in the history of redemption now anticipates that city in glory. We are that city in the making. We look for the city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God. It will have a new name: **Ezekiel 48:35** And the name of the city from that time on shall be, **The LORD is there.** Everything in it will be holy: **Zechariah 14:20-21** ²⁰ And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the LORD." And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar. ²¹ And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.

His sacrifice on the cross calls us to aim at what He aimed at: the city of holy people with hope of resurrection from physical death in bodily resurrection. How can you look at Him on the cross with this goal of having holy people and not dedicate yourself to Him as a living sacrifice? Holiness means set apart, dedicated. At bottom, it means that you dedicate your life to Christ in all things; offer Him your body, your hands, and your feet (cf. "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee").

4) Practice abounding love

With expectation about the future, and with holiness as your great goal, make love for the new city the context in which you move forward toward holiness. Jesus died to form a holy city, a community of saints who show one another love. How can we work toward anything less? We need to display compounding love to one another (Rom. **12:9-11** ⁹ **Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.** ¹⁰ **Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.** ¹¹ **Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.**). This pleases our Lord because He died on the cross (both eternally and physically) in order to make us a new family of brothers and sisters. We cannot over stress the importance of this aspect of our Christian walk with our elder brother who died to secure access to God and eternal resurrection life for a holy people in a holy city. Love one another, He tells us, as I have loved you.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God with a sense of awe that the man who died the ultimate death on the cross is truly the Son of God. May the Holy Spirit grant us clear vision of the holy city made up of holy people with resurrected bodies, and may He instill in us hope as expectation and anticipation, holiness as daily dedication, and love as our family bond because our loving redeemer went through death in our place in order to bring us safely to the holy city of glory, amen.