

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, March 24, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**MARK 15:37,38**

“And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last. And the  
curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”  
(New American Standard Bible)

**THE TORN CURTAIN**

That great curtain had been hanging there for years. It looked as if it might hang there forever. For generations it had guarded its secret well. Gorgeously embroidered in blue and purple and scarlet, that massive curtain, stretched from ceiling to floor, acted as a relentless barrier. Behind it lay the inmost shrine of Jewish religion — the Holy of Holies — a chamber fifteen feet square, which housed the sacred Ark of the Covenant, the Cherubim and the Mercy Seat — the supreme symbols of God’s Presence with His chosen people. The curtain was there to fulfil a double function:

- a. On the one hand it was there to keep man out. Hanging there as a mighty sentinel, it was a stern warning to sinful humanity that where the ultimate mysteries of religion are concerned, they must keep a respectful distance.
- b. On the other hand it was there to shut God in for behind that hanging curtain there was silence deep as death, and darkness black as night, even when the sunshine was blazing down outside.

Then, suddenly, say the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, on one never-to-be— forgotten day, that curtain was ripped from top to bottom, as by a pair of unseen, giant hands. People apparently compared notes afterwards and were startled to discover that that rending of the curtain, before the inmost shrine, had happened at the precise moment when Jesus, on the hill of Calvary, had breathed His last, and gone home to God.

Immediately they connected the two events. They said it was no mere coincidence. The death of Christ outside the city wall, and the tearing of the curtain before the shrine, they said, had somehow been related. They went further; they said they had been directly related as cause and effect - it was the death of Jesus that had torn the curtain. So they dared to believe; and today the verdict of Christendom is that they were right; for that torn curtain before the Mercy Seat stands for three fundamental things, and in each of them the death of Jesus is basic.

**1. That torn curtain stands for the disclosure of a secret** — the revealing of the inmost heart of God. When the Jews worshipped in the Temple in the old days, they were always sure that there must be something there behind the curtain, but what? That was what no one quite knew — something awesome, they thought, and formidable, something that might be called “the terror of the Lord.”

It was characteristic and symbolic of temple religion that as you passed in from the outer courts, through the inner courts, toward the center, the lights were progressively dimmed and lowered, until the Holy of Holies itself was bathed in perpetual darkness.

And then, say the Evangelists, Jesus died, and the curtain was torn, and the sunshine went streaming in! It was an end to secrecy in religion; and the heart of God lay bare.

So many people today are back where the Jews were before this thing happened. They know that something lies behind the veil of sense, but what? That is what is so terribly difficult to determine; and the lights grow dimmer as you near the center!

Is there a God enthroned within the shadows? Is He the kind of God to Whom it's worth my while to pray? Is He a God Who knows anything about it when things in my little corner of the world go wrong, and my heart is hurt and sore? Is He a God Who can lay any hand of healing upon me when I'm disappointed and frustrated? Is He a God Who knows anything about the heartache of the world? And above all, is He a God Who can give me hope and a new beginning when I have done something that makes me hate myself? Has He got anything to give me of courage and forgiveness when I'm feeling wretched and miserable and ashamed?

These are the questions with which many people are grappling and finding only an impenetrable curtain. And we have to tell them that there is no answer — no answer whatsoever — except in the death of our Lord on Calvary! This does answer the question; this does tear the curtain. If you want to know what God is like, you must go to Calvary to find out.

The New Testament writers tell us on every page of their writings that God is love. But you can't prove love by mere words. Even if you could write sonnets like Shakespeare and Elizabeth Browning, that wouldn't prove it. The Old Testament prophets, and Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount, came challenging and appealing to people in tones they had never heard before to trust God's love for everything; and even that couldn't do it. And then, when it seemed that the last word had been said, and God Himself could do no more -- suddenly from top to bottom the curtain was torn, and the heart of God lay bare!

If you can't prove love by words, how then can you prove it? Why -- by a deed, by doing something, by suffering something for those whom God has given you to love.

During a long dry summer in the pioneer days out West, a forest fire suddenly sprang up in a district where there were many settlers. It raged across the countryside, burning in its course many log cabins, in some cases the farmer and his family being unable to escape. After the fire had passed over, a relief party rode out from a neighboring town to see if they could render assistance. Riding past a charred cottage, one of the men saw what appeared to be a black hen sitting on the ground. Going up to it, he found that it evidently had been a hen, but was quite dead, the head and back being burned almost to a cinder. But the bird sat in such a striking way, with her wings partly spread out, that he gave her a kick with his foot, and as he did so, three little chickens ran out! Bravely, the poor mother hen had covered them in the face of the roaring fire; and with loving devotion and self-sacrifice she had sat still in the midst of the scorching

flames, choosing rather to be burned to death herself than that one of them should perish.

There is love proven by a deed of sublime self-sacrifice! And that is a faint picture of what Jesus did on Calvary. He Who was very God, proved God's love for us by a deed, by dying in our place. See Him, our Substitute, with His arms extended wide on the Cross, quite dead, yet providing us lost sinners with the only secure shelter from the flames of divine wrath, and from eternal condemnation.

Oh 'twas love, 'twas wondrous love,  
The love of God to me,  
That brought my Savior from above,  
To die on Calvary.

Yes, the torn curtain stands for the disclosure of a secret. It takes me past the secrecy and the clouds and darkness, and lets the sunshine in upon the Mercy Seat, and behold — God's heart is love!

**2. That torn curtain stands for the opening up of a road**, the offer of a right of way. In the Jerusalem Temple, as you made your way from the entrance gate toward the inmost shrine, it meant not only the lowering of lights, it meant also the heightening of barriers. Temple religion meant contempt for the common herd. First, you had the outer court, where anyone at all, Jew and Gentile alike, might come; then, the inner court, which was reserved for true—born Jews; and then, beyond that, the Holy Place, where only the ministering priests might enter; and finally, the Holy of Holies, which could be entered only by the High Priest; and even he could enter it on only one day in the year, the great Day of Atonement, when he went in there to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people. What an irony of fate that, in the time of Jesus, that one privileged individual should have been a Caiaphas, the one man above all others who was responsible for hounding Jesus to His death!

All the rest of the people, the humble, seeking souls, with heart and flesh crying out for the living God, were blocked and thrust back by one barrier after another, and finally by that relentless curtain which it was sacrilege and death to even touch!

Of course, one consequence was inevitable — religion had become a secondhand thing altogether. You can just picture those Jews standing outside while the High Priest alone went in; and then, when he came out, they looked at him with awe, even if he were a Caiaphas! They had never seen God, and never would, but here was a man who had; and they bowed before him as though he were half a god himself. And that was as far as religion went -- no access to the Mercy Seat for them — no clasp of God's hand. What that frowning curtain seemed to say was, "Stand back! Keep your distance! God is not for you!"

But, say the Evangelists, one day on Golgotha, between two criminals, the Friend of sinners gave His life, and that old curtain was finished, and the road of access opened up for all. I wonder what the priests thought when this thing happened! I wonder what Caiaphas thought! How they must have looked at each other in utter dismay, knowing that unless they did something about this at once, the whole face of religion would be changed forever. And no doubt

that very night they got the curtain patched up again!

People have been doing that all down the centuries. And even today there are those who pretend that the curtain is still there -- that there is no open road of access to God -- that a sinner can get to God only through a priest. It is true that "what God has joined together, let no one put asunder" (Matthew 19:6). But we must equally emphasize the opposite truth: "What God has put asunder, let no one join together again." To close up a right of way is a crime.

Reverend James Hannington, brilliant Oxford graduate, and first Bishop of East Equatorial Africa, stood one morning in 1886 before a group of blood-thirsty Africans, whose king had sworn death to any white missionary who should attempt to enter his territory. "Tell the king," said the brave bishop, as they came upon him to murder him, "tell the king that I open up the road to Uganda with my life!"

Isn't that what Jesus did? He opened up the road to God with His life! This is the holy faith which it is our proud privilege to proclaim to all the world. The road to God is open to all who care to travel it. I'd like to add this: that it is an open road for sinners; it is the sinner's highway.

Dr. John Duncan, who taught Hebrew in New College, Edinburgh, many years ago, was sitting one day at the Communion in a little Highland church in Scotland, and he was feeling so personally unworthy that when the elements were being passed round, he felt he could not take them -- he would allow the bread and wine to pass. And he was sitting there feeling absolutely miserable when he noticed a girl in the congregation who, when the bread came 'round, allowed it to pass, and then broke down into tears. And that sight seemed to bring back to the old saint a shining truth that he had somehow forgotten; and in a carrying whisper that could be heard across the church, he exclaimed, "Take it, lassie; take it; it's meant for sinners!" And he himself partook.

Listen to these magnificent words of the writer to the Hebrews: "And so, dear brothers, now we may walk right into the Holy of Holies where God is, because of the blood of Jesus" (10:19, Living Bible). The road to God is open!

**3. That torn curtain stands for the confirming of a hope.** Listen again to the writer to the Hebrews: "This hope we hold as an utterly reliable anchor for our souls. It is a hope which enters the Holy of Holies, behind the curtain, where Jesus, our High Priest, Who went before us, has already entered on our behalf" (6:19). Now what that means is this: When Jesus died on Calvary, the curtain was torn, and we are now able to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond the grave. We can now see the eternal glories streaming through from the other side! And even if sometimes the curtain comes back again and hides the future from our eyes, everything is different — it's a torn curtain now! And for one clear moment we've seen right past it into heaven.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" said the Apostle Paul; and immediately he went on -- "Shall death..." -- as much as to say - "Don't you know that the fear of death was destroyed when Christ went through that curtain, and rose again from the dead?"

"Death's cold stream hath lost its chill

Since Jesus crossed the river.”

“This,” said Perpetua, when they took her out into the arena to be killed by the wild beasts, “This is my day of coronation!”

“There was a great calm,” says John Bunyan, “when Mr. Standfast went down into the river.”

Never a congregation meets for worship but some people are there who can never think of death except as a robber and an enemy, the destroyer of human love and hope, something that brings an inner deep resentment. Some folk have never been reconciled to life and providence since death came in and took their dearest.

In December 1666 Hugh McKail, the youngest and most gallant of the Scottish Covenanters, was brought to his trial in Edinburgh. He was given four days to live and then marched back to the Tolbooth Prison. And the crowd in the street -- many of them were weeping that one so young and so gallant should have only four days more to see the sunshine, but there were no tears in the eyes of this young Galahad of the faith. “Trust in God,” he cried to the crowd as he marched past. And then, suddenly, he saw a friend of his standing on the edge of the crowd, and he shouted to him, “Good news! Wonderful good news! I am within four days of enjoying the sight of Jesus my Savior!”

And so, they have gone across the river, those valiant hearts, and so some of our own dearest have gone, and the trumpets have sounded for them on the other side. And so for us too

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When death these mortal eyes shall seal,  
And still this throbbing heart,  
The rending veil shall Thee reveal,  
All glorious as Thou art!

I’ve spoken of the three things for which the torn curtain stands -- the disclosure of a secret, the opening up of a road, and the confirming of a hope. But none of them are valid apart from the death of Jesus; and none of them are valid for us unless we trust Jesus. And I only know that by far the best result of this service today would be that all of us should kneel before the Cross and allow the crucified and ever-living Christ to come down into every nook and cranny of our being, and that we should “crown Him Lord of all”!

“Oh house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” (Isaiah 2:5).

**AMEN.**