

Signs of Glory

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[0 : 00] Please turn again with me this morning to that passage we read together in Matthew 27. And these signs of glory.

Same old, same old, so the saying goes, or as the writer of Ecclesiastes so eloquently puts it, there is nothing new under the sun.

For all the advances in technology we witness on a daily basis, there is nothing really genuinely new. Human beings still have the same fundamental needs, the same basic interests as we've always had.

History continually repeats itself. Don't fool yourself into believing that we have become so advanced that anything that happened before the year 2000 is irrelevant.

Dylan once wrote, times they are changing. He may be right, he may be wrong, but history continually repeats itself. The problems of the 19th century remain problems in the 21st.

[1 : 17] But this passage is genuinely new. Nothing like this has ever happened before. At the exact moment that our Lord breathed his last and gave up his spirit, the world forever changed.

The old went, the new came. Nothing would ever be the same again. History did not repeat itself. It began again.

And a new history was born. There was a new gospel. A new life. And a new people. Wonder whether you ever get tired of same old, same old.

Has your Christian life become stale? Boring? Unimaginative? Let me encourage you to rediscover the newness of Matthew 27, 51 through 54 with its three world changing signs.

A new gospel. A new life. And a new people. Rediscover how the cross of Jesus can change your life and outlook today.

[2 : 32] As we go out with the old and in with the new. First of all in verse 51 we have a new gospel.

A new gospel. Now you will know that the temple was the grandest structure in all of Jerusalem. It was the heart of Jewish religion.

For over a thousand years Jewish people had come to that temple to celebrate religious festivals.

To make sacrifices. And to join with other righteous Jews in discussing their experiences of God.

Now the Jewish temple was divided into several courtyards and rooms. Each division fulfilling its own purpose. And many of these courtyards and rooms were divided off from the others using large curtains.

So it's unclear to which curtain Matthew is referring as being torn from top to bottom. But the two most likely are, first, the curtain which divided the court of the Gentiles from the court of the Jews.

[3 : 46] This was one of the most distinctive barriers between Jews and Gentiles in Jewish religion. The two must be kept apart.

Especially in the temple. The unclean Gentiles separate from the righteous Jews. The tearing of the curtain may be in the Apostle Paul's mind.

When in Ephesians 2.14 he talks about Jesus being our peace. Who has made Jew and Gentile one by breaking down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility between them.

But, secondly, the curtain torn from top to bottom may well relate to that curtain which divided off the most holy place from the rest of the temple.

You see, the most holy place, this small room in the temple, was considered to be the presence of God on earth. The place where sacrificial blood was sprinkled by the high priest and accessed just once a year.

[4 : 55] This curtain was the most distinctive barrier between God and man. It emphasized the separation between human and divine.

And the tearing of the curtain is definitely in the writer of Hebrews' mind when in Hebrews 4.16, speaking of Jesus as our great high priest, he encourages us saying, let us then approach with confidence the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Perhaps one curtain, perhaps two curtains. Both were torn from top to bottom. We don't really know for sure. And if Matthew wanted us to be certain, Matthew would have told us which of these two curtains was torn.

What we do know is that in this seemingly small action, we have an altogether new gospel, that we have a definite discontinuity between the way things were before and the way things are now. Before I summarize this new gospel, let me draw your attention to how the curtain was torn from top to bottom. Not from bottom to top.

[6 : 19] In other words, this is a gospel which has come from God to us, from above to below, from heaven to earth. If we should accept this gospel today, we are clutching at something extraterrestrial.

Something divinely given. It's not a rehash of worldly religion. It's not a rearrangement of Israel's culture. There's no point in treating it with the same level of academic rigor as you would talk about comparative religion.

It's from somewhat altogether different. It is a definite historic break. It is not history repeating itself. It is history beginning again and a new history born.

Well, let me, in view of all that, let me summarize Matthew's emphasis at a couple of levels. First, on the most obvious level, the fact that this curtain is torn, the destruction of the curtain is the first sign of the destruction of the temple itself.

The destruction of the curtain is the first sign of the destruction of the temple. Remember, throughout Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus has prophesied the destruction of the temple and the destruction of the curtain is the first sign of fulfillment.

[7 : 48] A fulfillment which will be finalized some 40 years later when in AD 70, the Romans march in and burn the temple to the ground. In other words, from the moment Jesus breathes his last, the temple in Jerusalem is doomed.

That temple which was the center of the religious life of Israel and the heart of Jewish religion, it was there all the sacrifices were made and the priesthood had their headquarters.

For righteous Jews, that's where God was. God was to be accessed by ornately dressed priests with complicated religious ceremonies. God was there, appeased by the offering of blood, slaughtered.

Many of those gathered at the foot of the cross to mock Jesus were probably temple priests. The temple was at the heart of Jewish religion.

And by beginning to fulfill the destruction of the temple, therefore the death of Jesus is also the beginning of the destruction of the Jewish religion, of priesthood, of sacrifices, of ceremonies.

[9 : 12] No longer will a temple and its religion be at the heart of God's people rather it shall be a crucified and risen Jesus.

It is in him God and man shall meet, not in a building. The heart of the Christian religion shall be located not in a building, not in ceremonies, not in sacrifices, but in the crucified Christ.

Jew and Gentile shall meet as one in him. Christ in him crucified, Matthew was telling us, he is the center of our religious lives.

He is the heart of our religion. But then at the second level, the destruction of the curtain in the temple is the final sign of new access to God.

New access to God. In the Old Testament, the predominant motive is God as separate. God is hidden behind that curtain in the most holy place in the temple, a room which can be accessed only once a year by only one man only, the Jewish high priest.

[10 : 34] Yes, we can point to certain examples of intimacy. For example, Moses on top of Mount Sinai. But even there, God was hidden in cloud and smoke.

God was inaccessible in the temple except by one man once a year, and I should have said earlier, by sacrifice.

Because without the lifeblood of sacrifice, God could not be accessed. human sin must be atoned for. But now this curtain, which has separated man from God for over a thousand years, is destroyed from top to bottom.

The presence of God can be accessed by anyone at any time without the shedding of any blood. The God who is love and righteousness draws close to us just as we draw close to him. It is not just that we may approach him, but that because Jesus has shed his lifeblood, he may approach us.

[11 : 47] At the moment of Jesus' death, that curtain is torn in two, God's people now may come close. any one of us, at any time, on the basis that Jesus has already shed his blood for us.

The key motif of our gospel is not the separation between man and God, but the intimacy between man and God through Jesus Christ.

And that's great news for sinful men and women like us. No longer do we need to come to church, as it were, with a bull in a trailer behind the car to sacrifice.

No longer are we separated from God by the great cloud of unknowing and the curtain of the temple, but through the blood Jesus has shed on the cross for us, we may know him as he is.

Let me reiterate, this is not history repeating itself. This is a new history beginning again a new history born.

[12 : 57] From now on, through the proclamation of this gospel, sinful men and women, Jews and Gentiles, may know God for themselves, not by traveling to Jerusalem and observing the ceremonies of Judaism, but by simple faith in the cross of Jesus Christ.

over 150 years ago, the great English missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, was used in the conversion to Christianity of a very old Chinese man in the interior.

And having himself become a Christian, this old man asked Hudson Taylor, how long have you had this gospel in England? to which Taylor replied, well, over a thousand years.

That Chinese man's eyes opened wide and said, over a thousand years? My grandfather searched his whole life for God and died having never found him.

And you have had this gospel in England for over a thousand years? Why didn't you come sooner?

The gospel of a torn curtain, you see, is the only way to know God as he truly is.

[14 : 21] That which all men everywhere have always searched after. Billions today still live separate from God by this great cloud of unknowing and by the curtain of their sin.

They think they can get to know God by their own religious efforts. By tearing the temple curtain from bottom to top. By observing the ceremonies of their religion.

By offering the sacrifices of their religion. By praying the prayers of their religion. But with this tearing of the curtain, God is proclaiming to the whole world there is no other way to him than through faith in Christ's sacrificial death on the cross for our sins.

Well, what do we call it? The gospel of the torn curtain. In Christ's death, we now have new access to God and a new relationship with one another.

And I suppose the best way to apply this text to each and every one of us, whether here, physically, or online, the best way to apply it is to remind you of the words of that old Chinese man.

[15 : 36] Why didn't you come sooner? Why didn't you come sooner? By and large, our people here in Scotland still live with the curtain intact.

They neither know God nor do they have that fraternity and equality between peoples and races Christ died to give us.

the only answer is the gospel of the torn curtain. The only answer when it comes to sharing it with them, there is no such thing as too soon.

There is only not soon enough. Second thing I want to explore with you this morning is in verses 52 and 53, new life.

New life. After a round of golf, golfers love to talk through the shots they had and the bad luck that they endured, so they say, they call it a golfer's post-mortem.

[16 : 47] The thing is that Matthew 27, 51 through 54, although following on immediately from the death of Jesus Christ, looks forward, not back.

They are forward-facing verses describing not what was but what will be and all because Jesus has died on the cross as sacrifice for our sin.

New gospel and new life and a new people. These verses aren't a golfer's post-mortem. They are the birth of a new history, a first look at what the future holds.

The challenging thing about this second sign is to pin down times and places because at first glance it would appear that the emphasis rests upon those who were dead being raised and appearing to the people of Jerusalem at first glance.

the problem is that however according to Matthew himself this did not happen until the resurrection of Jesus some three days distant. The problem clears up when we get our punctuation right.

[17 : 59] In other words where we place the ands and the full stops in this sentence. Let me give you the literal translation. And behold the curtain of the temple was torn from above to below in two and the earth shook and the rocks were split and the tombs were opened and many bodies of holy people who had fallen asleep were raised out of the tombs and they went after his resurrection into the holy city and appeared to many.

So what happened there and then as Jesus died was not that the bodies of the saints were raised and they went into the holy city of Jerusalem. What happened was there was a great earthquake and the rocks split and the tombs were opened.

Matthew includes these resurrection accounts because he wants us to understand the consequence of these tombs being opened and these rocks being split by the earthquake.

The central emphasis of the sign isn't upon the resurrection of the holy people of the past it's upon the opening of the tombs. That's the central emphasis.

Tombs will be opened. In a sense they amount to the same thing but in the interest of faithfulness to the text that's us being grammatically and theologically precise.

[19 : 27] It's the opening of the tombs which is the central thought. the death of Jesus on the cross does not just result in the tearing of the curtain it results in the opening of the tombs curse.

The tomb represents death and its power and the death of Jesus breaks the curse of death and its dominance over us as a human race.

In other words Jesus' death does not just bring in a new gospel it brings in a new life. The opening of the tombs is not history repeating itself it is a new history beginning a new history being born.

Nearly 400 years ago the great English Puritan John Owen wrote a book with the amazing title The Death of Death and the Death of Christ that's what the death of Christ meant the death of death.

In light of Jesus' death on the cross we look at death in an entirely new way not as the end of existence but as a necessary servant to eternal life.

[20 : 46] You know humanists never cease to amaze me especially humanist celebrants who want us all to wear bright clothing and not to cry at a funeral.

Who are they kidding? Will their nice words bring this person back to life? What possible hope can they give us for the future? That person who we loved and is gone has been is gone forever in the greatest tragedy of being in the universe.

They're gone they ain't coming back and I'm sorry humanists wearing clown costumes you're just denying the obvious and sugar coating our grief.

By contrast Matthew 27 52 and 53 tell us of the death of death in the death of Christ.

There is hope not in nice words and fluffy memories. There is hope for those we have loved and lost through the cross of Christ.

[22 : 01] Their tombs will be opened. The death of Christ means the defeat of death. The sting of death has been drawn. That's why we as Christians can offer genuine hope at a funeral not the empty platitudes of a humanist.

That person who has died has not just got into another room and we can't just that's not the way it is. The Christian offers new life. But that person we are now committing to the earth will rise again. That their existence has not been forgotten. They are not gone. Rather their tomb will be opened and all because Jesus reigns victorious over death.

I'm strange but not that strange. I don't really like graveyards. Back in my home village when I visit my father's grave I walked past hundreds of gravestones and of course these were people I knew in my youth, local characters, some of them lovely Christians.

Visualize the scene on the day of Jesus return. Those lonely graveyards, so sinister, will be places not death, but of death, but of new life, where God's people shall be raised on mass.

[23 : 26] They shall not be as we remember them, emaciated and deathly. They shall have new bodies, gloriously majestic. What a day that shall be and what a picture to fill our minds with.

And all because of the death of death, in the death of Christ. So we may call this second sign the gospel of the open tomb, where we have a foretaste both of the open tomb of Jesus on the third day, and how to, through his death and resurrection, we too shall be raised from the dead and enjoy new life in him.

But then you ask, what must I do for this new life to be mine? What must I do? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall have eternal life.

believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you too shall hear his voice on that last day calling you forth from your grave to new life with him. Believe, trust, and have faith.

That's all. And then lastly, new gospel, new life, and in verses 54 and 55, we have new people, new people.

[24 : 38] Thus far we've had the gospel of the torn curtain, the gospel of the open tomb. But same old, same old, for whom is this gospel? Now as you know, Matthew's writing to first generation Jewish Christians who are facing all kinds of challenges.

Their countrymen don't have to. They're being persecuted. But another challenge is that of having an increasing number of Gentiles flooding into the early church.

Christianity, by the time Matthew is writing, has spread from Jerusalem and is now making headway over the entire Roman world. Some of these Jewish Christians viewed the increasing number of Gentiles becoming Christians as a threat to their Jewish purity.

They still had not managed to shake off the legalism of the rabbis with which they had been brought up. So time and time again, Matthew has been challenging these first generation Jewish Christians to reassess their attitude toward Gentile Christians flooding into the church.

And that means that throughout his gospel, Matthew's included many episodes of Jesus meeting with Gentiles where Gentiles demonstrate sincere and genuine faith in Jesus. And now even here at the cross, those Gentiles to whom Jesus had been handed over to be crucified, even they now demonstrate the sincere faith which is demanded of every follower of Jesus.

[26 : 13] In verse 54 we read, that 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.

These Gentile soldiers did what all those religious Jews gathered around the foot of the cross could not and would not do. Now these were hard men. They had the worst job in the Roman army, executing criminals.

They were used to blood and guts and gore, to tears and crying and tragedy. They were callous men who played dice over the garments of their victims.

But they did what all these religious Jews could not and would not do. They publicly confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. Now these soldiers were Gentiles.

Having spent time in Judea, they would have been aware of the local religion. So they would have known that the Son of God is the way the Jews spoke about the Messiah.

[27 : 24] And now these Gentile Romans did what these religious Jews could not. Having experienced the darkness and the earthquake, they were filled with fear.

Now they knew all about power. They lived with it every day, the military machine that was the Roman Empire. But they had never seen anything like this. For all Tiberius was emperor at the time.

He could not darken the sun. He could not shake the earth. But this naked, dying man on the cross, man on the cross.

They had tormented him. Now they worshipped him and they confessed their faith. Truly, this was the Son of God. This is not history repeating itself.

History is beginning again and a new history is being born. The first to profess Jesus as Messiah after his death were Gentiles.

[28 : 30] from then on, Gentiles would flood into the church. The gospel would make its way across the whole Roman Empire. It would move as Jews would become Christians migrated to far off countries.

It would move as evangelists and apostles went on missionary journeys. It would move as Roman soldiers like these men who had become Christians during their tours of duty in Judea were posted elsewhere.

Who knows? This is a thought. Who knows? But the men who made up this guard may have had as their next posting the Roman occupied island of Britannia.

Are you tired of same old, same old? Has your Christian life become monotonous, boring, and unimaginative?

Is your boredom leading you to become disillusioned with the faith? It is time to reinvest and recommit to the gospel of the torn curtain.

[29 : 37] It is time for you to renew your interest in the gospel of new life.

It is time for you to recommit yourself to the gospel of a new people. We're better to begin than at the beginning of a new history. The cross, the signs of the newness of the gospel.

We're better. No, we're better. Start here. Start now. Let us pray. Lord, we recognize hearing that loud exhaust going up Pitt Street there that Satan will use anything, anything, even a loud-mouthed kid in a fast car to stop the proclamation of the gospel.

Because he knows that this gospel is the power of God and the salvation of all who believe. And he'll use anything. Short-circuiting electric circuits in this building, providing distracting noises outside, sending all kinds of weird thoughts into our heads because he knows that this is the power of God unto the salvation of all who believe.

So, Lord, for every one of us who are here, gathered in this building this morning, and all of us who are at home, we pray that you would help us to take these words very seriously indeed.

[31 : 19] These signs of glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.