

Biblical Servanthood and the Torn Curtain

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November 9, 1989 still stands a vivid and cherished memory of mine. As a sophomore at Mt Carmel High School in San Diego, CA, I can recall two distinctly fantastic and historically unique events that happened on that day. The first one occurred as I sat in my German class listening to Frau Ix teaching about verb conjugation when we heard the news that the Berlin Wall had been opened. Naturally, this caused much excitement and celebration for a German class especially one with a native German teaching it.

As we ran out of class screaming and cheering, we were confronted with a second amazing event - snow. Most of us had never even seen snow before and definitely never in San Diego. Our supercharged celebration immediately quieted to a numbed wonderment. I will never forget that day.

For forty years, Eastern Germany had lived behind the so-called "Iron Curtain" of Soviet political, economic, and military control. Of course, for the Germans who lived through the events, especially those in East Berlin, snow falling in California could hardly touch the significance of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Erected at the behest of Moscow in 1961, the wall had physically separated Eastern Berliners from their brethren in the democratic and affluent West. November 1989 changed all that when the Soviet's control was removed and the East German government lifted travel restrictions.

During the next few weeks, tens of thousands of Berliners from both sides flocked to the Wall and climbed to the top with champagne and flags. For the first time in decades, East and West Berliners could exchange handshakes and hugs without the fear of being shot. East Germans after forty years of foreign communist control were once again free to travel, work, live, and vote, as they so desired.

The tearing of the Iron Curtain on November 9, 1989 was a monumentally important day for the millions of people whose lives were affected by it. On that day neighbors, families, friends, and an entire Country were reunited in political and economic freedom. However, as tremendously influential as that was, it is another day in which an entirely different curtain was torn, that stands out as the most glorious and memorable day of human history.

On that day some two thousand years ago a curtain made of “blue and purple and crimson fabrics and fine linen” was torn from top to bottom. The tearing of this curtain did not just change a nation; it altered the very nature of the relationship between God and man.

The curtain in question was extremely important not just because of the expensive materials it was made from, but because of what it both signified and protected. Hanging in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, it separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place where the Ark of the Covenant sat and the presence of God on earth dwelt. The curtain was subsequently torn as Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross. “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split” (Matt. 27:50-52).

This particular curtain’s ruin had a profound impact to very definition and application of Biblical Servanthood.

The Iron Curtain was never in actuality a real material curtain. The term was coined by then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to describe the Soviet occupation and control of Eastern Europe after World War II. Despite its intangibility however, the analogy was no less accurate. Curtains by their sheer design divide spaces. In performing their function, they also automatically divide the people in those spaces.

Hence, a curtain simultaneously both performs an actual division as well as testifies to the reason behind the division. Take for example that little annoying curtain in the first class cabin of an airplane. This particular curtain not only keeps people stuck in those tiny-cramped economy seats from coming into first class, but also signifies a division of wealth and privilege (or at the very least a division of people willing to spend that kind of money).

The curtain that separated the *Most Holy Place* from the rest of the Jewish temple was similar to and yet vastly different from every other curtain before or since. For most curtains, it is not the materials they are made from but rather the things they separate that define their importance. The holy veil, as it was also known as, was similar in that it both provided an actual partition of spaces and people.

Unlike all the curtains in history, however, the holy veil was vastly more significant because of whom it separated. The holy veil was much more than an interior designer’s whimsy, it was a divine institution designed by God to represent both the inaccessibility and the infinite separation between Him and His creation.

The Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was, at the time of Christ, was built at the command of the Persian King Cyrus the Great by Jews who returned to Israel

from Babylonian exile in 515 BC. In the Book of Ezra, God charged Cyrus with the task to build Him a house in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2-4). The temple was to replace the original temple built by Solomon in 957 BC that was destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. Both of these temples were to be God's unique dwelling place on earth where his people would come to worship him as stated in Deuteronomy 12:5-7.

Latter the second temple were built using the exact same layout as the *Tent of the Tabernacle* constructed by Moses and carried around during the Exodus. All three were divided into three main sections with an outer court, an inner holy place and then at the inner most section a place called the holy of holies. As one moved from the outer court inwards there were increased levels of restrictions and regulations of who could enter and what services could be performed.

The outer court was accessible to all Israelites (Gentiles were not permitted to enter any part of the temple) and was used for corporate rituals and worship. Entrance to the holy place was restricted to priests only where as Hebrew 9:6 states they go regularly to perform their ritual duties.

In contrast to the first two areas, only the High Priest after undergoing extensive cleansing rituals could enter the holy of holies. He could so only once a year to offer an atonement sacrifice for the sins of Jewish people (Heb. 9:7). Besides the High Priest, no one was permitted to approach the presence God by entering the Most Holy Place or they would face imminent death.

The writer of Hebrews describes (9:3-5) that the *Most Holy Place* housed the most important pieces of historical and theological significance like the *Ark of the Covenant* that contained the ten commandants written on the *Tablets of Covenant* as well Aaron's staff. 2 Chronicles 3 shows us that almost everything inside the room was overlaid with gold including the two huge cherubim and the altar. The Most Holy Place was however not a museum nor merely just for show. For within this golden room, God's distinctive presence was accessible to man, albeit with extremely strict guidelines.

The *Most Holy Place* was designated and designed by God to be his "footstool" on earth, where as 1 Chronicles 6:49 states that sacrifices were made to atone for the sins of Israel; "But Aaron and his sons made offerings on the altar of burnt offering and on the altar of incense for all the work of the *Most Holy Place*, and to make atonement for Israel, according to all that Moses the servant of God had commanded." Indeed, the whole reason for the room was to serve as way for Israel to approach God to atone for sins committed against God. In this way according to Exodus 29:45-46, that God "will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God."

Leviticus 4 and 5 gives us a detailed play by play of the ritual as well as the meanings of the atonement sacrifice. The high priest was to first consecrate

himself and then enter the *Most Holy Place* to make a blood sacrifice to God for Israel's sin by slaying an animal on the altar and sprinkling the blood within the room. Hebrews 9: 6-7 states:

These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.

The natural question is why would the killing of an animal and then the sprinkling blood over gold-laden objects lead to atonement of sin? The answer lies within the intended purpose of God desiring that God's people know Him. There is, however, a huge problem with that actually happening in and of itself which has to do with sin.

The Incompatibility of Sin and God

"The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (Hab. 2:20).

In late 1944, as France, Belgium, and Holland were being liberated from Nazi oppression and as the long dark nightmare for millions of Jews suffering in concentration camps was still raging, two British citizens took a dramatic stand for justice. Elsie Shrigley and Donald Watson created *The Vegan Society* that year to promote and coordinate non-dairy vegetarians. Taking their name from the first two and the last three letters of the word vegetarian, the *Vegan Society* seeks to "promote vegan lifestyles - that is, ways of living that seek to exclude, as far as is possible and practical, all forms of exploitation of animals for food, clothing or any other purpose."¹

Given that vegans are vehemently against using animals for any purpose, I doubt there would be any possibility that a card-carrying vegan would be working in the local butcher shop. The only way you would find a vegan anywhere near a butcher shop would be most certainly is to picket it. Why will you never find a vegan butcher? Because chopping up dead animals so other people can cook and eat them is extremely incompatible with vegan philosophy. Someone cannot be a butcher and a true vegan at the same time. He would either cease to be a vegan or else be a really ineffective butcher.

In a much more dramatic and serious way, sin and God are wholly and utterly incompatible. In fact, a vegan being a butcher is much more likely than God actually tolerating any amount of sin. Why is God so opposed to sin? The answer

¹ www.Vegansociety.com.

is found in the nature and person of God. God cannot tolerate sin because He is holy and must punish sin because He is just. Without being both fully holy and just, God stops being God and becomes something far less unworthy of our worship. Separation from evil and sin is intrinsic to God's nature. God is so other, so infinitely far above everything that he is also totally beyond and separate from sin. The prophet Habakkuk writes this about God's holiness: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, and you cannot tolerate wrong" (1:13). God is completely pure, without sin, and we are not. Logically this makes perfect sense. If sin means to miss the mark of God's law, how then could God not follow his own laws? God cannot and does not sin because he is incapable of not following his own law.

Wayne Grudem in *Bible Doctrine, Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* defines God's holiness being both a relational as well as moral separateness. He says:

God's holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor. This definition contains both a relational quality (separation from) and a moral quality (the separation is from sin or evil, and the devotion is to the good of God's own honor or glory).²

God and sin are totally and infinitely separate and incompatible. For God to sin would be to forego His holiness. He would no longer being separate from sin. God would then be reduced to a powerful and potentially evil being, which is no longer worthy of honor or worship. Holiness is more than just adjective or characteristic about God it is His very nature. J. I Packer writes in *Concise Theology* about God's Holiness, "It covers all aspects of His transcendent greatness and moral perfection and thus an attribute of all his attributes, pointing to the "Godness" of God at every point."³

Sin is a direct attack and affront to God's nature and his sovereignty. It contradicts God's character. God hates the breaking of his holy law not only because his holiness demands it but also because it is abhorrent to his nature. Theologian, Wayne Grudem explains God's feeling towards sin this way:

Yet if God loves all that is right and good and all that conforms to his moral character, it should be surprising that he would hate everything that is opposed to his moral character. God's wrath directed against sin is therefore closely related to God's holiness and justice. God's wrath may be defined as follows: God's wrath means that he intensely hates all sin.⁴

² Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* pg. 92.

³ J. I Packer, *Concise Theology* pg. 43.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* pg. 94.

We experience wrath every day, from our spouse when we forget to take out the trash, from the driver we just cut in front of, and from the co-worker we just argued with. We also deal with our own anger repeatedly each day. My point is all this anger can numb us to far more potent and just anger of God. We think we know what anger is and how it can affect us because we see anger frequently. However, when it comes to God's wrath we simply have no corollary. God's wrath is in its own category. It is unique in its potency, totality, and holiness.

God's wrath is extremely potent. He hates sin to the point that a single infraction leads to the ultimate punishment, death. "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). R.C. Sproul in the *Holiness of God* writes that even the slightest sin is an affront to God and an act of cosmic defiance. Sin in any amount or form is an insult to His holiness. The extreme severity of the punishment is a testimony to just how much God hates sin. His pervasive holiness demands pervasive justice for sin that manifests itself in pervasive wrath against both the sin and to one who committed the sin. Romans 2:6-8 states:

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

The death the Apostle Paul writes about in his letter to the Roman church is not only a physical death, but also eternal spiritual banishment from God sight. Although the physically dying is not a pleasant idea, God's banishment of sinners to an eternity without him is far, far worse. His holiness demands that he be without and far removed from sin. Therefore, both sin and sinners must be kept apart from God.

This banishment is not like the questionable conduct of being sent to sleep on the couch by an angry spouse (Eph. 4:26), which no matter how mad they may get, you will see them tomorrow. Despite their anger, your spouse is in close proximity and there is hope for reconciliation when everything calms down. Nor is it akin to being sentenced to jail, where you loved ones come to visit and where television shows from the cafeteria. No both of those are the mere segmentation of life not the separation from life. The consequence of the wrath of God is the true and unyielding meaning of separation. Sinners will not see, not hear, nor feel, nor perceive the slightest inkling of God or his people. Absent are his goodness, mercy, love, grace, and presence. God's wrath results in the total removal from Himself. To be found guilty of sin is to be sentenced to an eternity apart from holiness, apart from peace, apart from God. "His "wrath" that is, his active judicial hostility to sin, is wholly just in its manifestations and his particular

“judgments” (retributive punishments) are glorious and praiseworthy.”⁵ The curtain separating the *Most Holy Place* symbolized the separation because of sin of God from mankind.

Here in lies the problem God desires that his people know him, but they are justly separated from him because of their sin. Somehow this must be rectified in order for Israel to know their God. So how does God do it? How does he allow sin to be in presence or does he somehow cleanse his people so that they may draw near? God will not do the former against his nature, so he performs the latter option. He makes a way so that his people can come into his presence so they may know him. That way is through blood. “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” - Hebrews 9:22. The shedding of blood leads to the atonement and cleansing of sin.

A Curtain Torn

In order that a sinful people may approach and know God, blood must be shed. However, just whose blood are we talking about? Only pure and sinless blood can be an acceptable payment to the forgiveness of sinful people. However, who fits into that category? Who can be an acceptable payment? In the Old Testament, the only acceptable blood was found in an unblemished animal like a ram or calf. In a totally un-*PETA* friendly way, the High Priest would slaughter the animal use the blood as atonement for Israel’s sin (Hebrews 9:18-21). However, even under this system, a problem still existed. Animal blood was only atonement for sins committed in past, so as new sins were committed animals must be continually sacrificed. The cycle seemingly never ended as the atonement merely cleansed God’s people temporally and did nothing to change the source and cause of sin in their hearts. The writer of Hebrews (9:8-10) explains the temporal nature of this atonement:

By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

Therefore, this was an imperfect solution to an eternal problem. God’s people needed a permanent solution that would not only atone for sin once and for all but change their hearts as well. Therefore, God solved that dilemma in coming of the Jesus Christ, Emmanuel “God with us.” He came to earth both fully God and fully man to shed his blood to purchase the forgiveness for our envy. He was the

⁵ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*.

perfect spotless lamb who sacrificed himself for us because we were guilty of sin. Christ came to be that final solution to reconcile once and for all God and man so that we may know Lord our God.

As Christ died on the cross, the curtain separating the *Most Holy Place* was torn asunder. “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split” (Matt. 27:50-52). The destruction of the curtain was not done arbitrarily or randomly. It was a correlated and subsequent result of the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who humbled himself by taking the form of a man and become the acceptable sacrifice for the sin of man.

As Jesus hung on the cross after a lifetime of perfect obedience and love for God, he endured the wrath of God as payment for the sins of the elect. He suffered in our place so that we may be cleansed of guilt and be found acceptable before God:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Ephesians 2: 13-16).

After he paid our penalty and while still on the cross, he physically died. It is at this moment and not before that the curtain in the temple is torn. Immediately (and significantly) upon Christ's death, God removes his presence from the temple and signifies the alteration in access to mankind. As G. K. Beale writes, “Thus, the rending of the veil indicates both a cosmic and cultic reality: the in breaking destruction of the old creation and the inauguration of the new creation, which introduces access for all believers to God's holy presence in a way that was not available in the old creation”⁶ and that, “The special revelatory presence of God, formerly contained in the holy of holies of the tabernacle and temple, has now burst forth into the world in the form of the incarnate God, Jesus Christ.”⁷

Under the Old Covenant, only certain priests could approach God after a series of rituals and multiple cleansings. However when Christ died, rose on the third day, and ascended to throne in heaven, everything changed. The change was not found in God or his character, but rather the accessibility of man because of the permanent cleansing of sin through Christ. Since atonement sacrifices were

⁶ G.K Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* pg. 190.

⁷ G.K Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* pg. 195.

no longer necessary as Christ's was permanently efficacious, a physical temple building became obsolete.

An astoundingly mysterious thing happened. God's presence was poured out via the Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who believed making their body a temple and them priests. 1 Peter 2:4-5 explains:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9).

This is why the holy veil being torn is so significant. If Biblical servanthood starts and ends with us knowing and worshiping God, then how can that happen when we are separated from him by our sin and his holiness? Christ tearing of the curtain signifies that God has solved this problem through Jesus and now we can enter into his presence. The writer of Hebrews states (9:11-12):

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

In one fell swoop, God changes the relationship and access to man by cleansing them through his own sacrificial blood. The tearing of the curtain means that Biblical Servanthood is possible for all of God's people.

Servanthood's New Access

With the work of Christ, the throne of grace has been made accessible for everyone. Author G. K. Beale explains that this open access to God was seen in both the Old and New Testament writings. He states:

In the Mosaic era, only prophets, priests and kings were bestowed with the gifting function of the Spirit to serve usually in the temple or in conjunction with the temple. Joel and Acts [2:1-12] do not have in mind primarily the regenerating function of the Spirit but that function which would enable people to serve in various capacities. Joel foresaw a time, however, when everyone in Israel would be given this gift...The Spirit's gifts, formerly limited to prophets, kings and priests, usually for service in connection with the temple, are

universalized to all God's people from every race, young and old, male and Female.⁸

Each person that has placed their faith in Christ and had their sins forgiven has become a recipient of the Holy Spirit thereby transforming into a living breathing temple.

Furthermore, we can boldly approach without fear of messing up detailed rituals or uncleanness. We have the perfect holy substitute in Christ that purifies us completely and eternally regardless of action or failure on our part. Christ is sole reason that we can stand spotless and accepted before a holy God so much so that he sends his Holy Spirit to indwell in us:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh ,how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God (Heb. 9:13-14).

Christ's atonement and the Holy Spirit also provide the motivation for us to serve. This new access to God through Christ does not change God's serious nature towards service. Rather it should infect us with a greater passion for Christ and new passion for the commands to Christian Service. For Jesus is one "who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Tit. 2:14).

Chapter 10 of the Book of Hebrews addresses this question by examining the change in covenants and the subsequent effect in on our ability to serve God. This passage explains the monumental shift in access to God between the Old and New Covenants. It shows that all believers are free to serve because Christ abolished all of the rules and regulations surrounding service in the church.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Heb. 10:19-23).

Each one now has the privilege and pleasure of serving God according to the gifts they have been given. The point of the new access to God is not so that we may kick up our heels and rest on our laurels. Instead, it is that now all of us can

⁸ G.K Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* pg. 209-210.

serve in different ways because Christ has purchased our atonement and the Holy Spirit empowers us. G. K. Beale summarizes this by saying:

In response to their inclusion in God's unshakeable kingdom and temple, Christians are to 'show gratitude' by performing the priestly duty of 'offering to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe' Hebrews 12:28.⁹

Thus, when the curtain was supernaturally slit from top to bottom; it represented more than just the power of God to rip drapery. It signified that the temple in Jerusalem was no longer the main access point to God's unique presence on earth. Instead, God, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, granted personal and unlimited accessibility of His presence to all of those who placed their faith in Christ regardless of race, gender, or age. He literally blew the doors off the temple, declaring it obsolete.

In place of temple made of stone, God beckoned humanity, through faith in Jesus Christ, to become living temples. In these new living temples, he promised to place his Spirit and through which magnify His glory on earth. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you" (1 Cor. 3:16).

Inherent to this new bond is a radical shift in how these new living temples could serve in the presence of God. Although the serious magnitude of serving in the local church/temple remained, the restrictions of lineage, location, and frequency were dramatically abolished. The pleasure, honor, and responsibility of serving the church was now extended to all those who placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.

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⁹ G.K Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* pg. 306