

Matthew 27:45;50-54

### “The Four Silent Witnesses of Calvary”

Don't you just love it when you go to your mailbox and get a card that says, “*You have been summoned for jury duty?*” Like many of you I have served on a couple of different juries.

One jury I served on was a criminal trial on the county level and the other jury was a federal trial in Tyler for the Eastern District of Texas.



Whenever you serve on a jury the attorneys for both the prosecution and the defense will instruct you that you are going to hear the testimonies of several witnesses. The witnesses that will be brought before you will swear under oath to give truthful testimony relevant to this case. A witness will give to the best of their knowledge the facts of the case as they had seen them or heard them.

A witness is a very important player when it comes to a court of law. The witness can aid the prosecution in gaining a conviction. Or the witness can help the defense in getting an acquittal. Witnesses are very important when it comes to a court of law.

When Jesus Christ died on the cross on that Good Friday in Jerusalem, there were four witnesses at Calvary that gave testimony that Jesus was the Son of God. These four witnesses gave firsthand testimony that Jesus was the Son of God and yet these four witnesses did not speak one word. These are the Four Silent Witnesses of Calvary.

In *Matthew 27*, we have a biblical account in which four miracles—four supernatural events—took place that are only recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. In Mark's and Luke's gospels, they record two miracles that took place the moment Jesus died. But in *Matthew 27*, the gospel writer listed four supernatural events that took place when Jesus died on the cross. Despite these powerful miraculous events, despite the silent witnesses of Calvary, there were those in Jerusalem on that Friday that witnessed these acts of God, and yet they were not convinced Jesus was God's Son. Would look in your Bible to Matthew 27:45; 50-54.

## The Four Silent Witnesses of Calvary

*Matthew 27:45, 50-54 (NIV)*

*45 From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.*

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*50 And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.*

*51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.*

*52 The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.*

*53 They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.*

*54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"*

How much does it take to convince you Jesus is the Son of God? If you were alive 2000 years ago on this Friday in Jerusalem, and you witnessed these four supernatural events, would you be convinced that Jesus is who He says He is?

In *Matthew 27:35*, the Scripture tells us Jesus was crucified, nailed to a Roman cross, and the Roman soldiers began to divide up Jesus' garments by gambling—casting lots—to see who would get His clothes. As He is hanging on that cross, we see what I call:

### The Four Silent Witnesses to Calvary

(Calvary is the name of the hill upon which Jesus was crucified.)

#### I. The first silent witness to Calvary is the eclipse of the sun.

The first piece of convincing evidence that Jesus was God's Son was the eclipse that took place when He was on the cross. Look at *verse 45* – "*From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.*" This miracle is sometimes referred to as the miracle when "Midday became Midnight." For a three-hour period when Jesus was hanging on the cross, the Scripture says, "*darkness came over all the land.*" Darkness in this context was a sign of judgment.

There have been various scientific interpretations trying to explain this phenomenon of Midday becoming Midnight. Some have said this darkness was caused by a solar eclipse. Others have said the darkness was not an eclipse, because it was the time of the year for a Passover full moon, and more than likely, this solar eclipse would not have taken place. Others have said the darkness over the land was caused by a hot wind storm or dust storm that came from the Transjordan Valley, and it was so intense it was like midnight from noon to 3:00 p.m. There are all kinds of naturalistic explanations to the darkness coming over the land, but however it happened, it happened because God wanted it to happen.

## II. The second silent witness to Calvary is the veil of the temple torn in two (vv. 50-51).

### *Matthew 27:50-51*

**50** *And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.* [He died.]

**51** *At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.*

You need to understand the significance of the veil in the temple. The veil in the temple was like a national monument to the Jewish people. It was like the Lincoln Memorial to Americans or the Alamo to Texans. Every Jew knew about the veil of the temple. The veil of the temple was a heavy curtain located in the Holy of Holies. Once a year, the high priest lifted a corner of this heavy curtain and passed into the Holy of Holies. This veil was not a window curtain or a curtain for a large picture window. The veil in the Holy of Holies was approximately 60 feet long and 30 feet wide, and it was as thick as the palm of a man's hand. This veil had 72 squares that were sewn together, and this veil was so heavy that it took several priests to move it and put it in place.

What is the significance of the veil? Once a year the high priest lifted a corner of this heavy curtain and went into the Holy of Holies. He would carry into the Holy of Holies sacrificial blood which he would sprinkle on the mercy seat (covering of the ark) and he would ask forgiveness for his sins and for the sins of the Jewish people.

Notice in *verse 51* the Scripture says the veil was torn from top to bottom, symbolizing that this huge curtain was not torn by human hands, but by the hand of God.

**What did the tearing of the veil mean?** The moment Christ died, the veil was torn in two, symbolizing access to God the Father. Christ our High Priest, through His death on the cross, entered the true Holy of Holies in heaven, offering once and for all the all-sufficient atoning sacrifice of His own blood! And so, the tearing of the veil in two communicated that as Christ-followers, we no longer have to have an earthly priest to offer a sacrifice for our sins. Christ is our High Priest and offered a once-and-for-all atoning sacrifice.

I wonder what it must have been like to have been the first priest to run into the temple near the Holy of Holies and see the veil torn in two? All the mystery and all questions of what was behind that curtain must have come to mind. The Jews believed that God resided behind that curtain in the Holy of Holies, and the holiness and power of God was so great only the High Priest could go into God's presence once a year to atone for the sins of the people.

With the veil torn in two and the Holy of Holies exposed, it was a message to the Jews and to the world: **God is out of this designated space.** Every believer has access to God, every believer is a priest, and all of life is sacred and holy—not just this designated area in the temple called the Holy of Holies.

I am reminded of a young girl from Kansas who was on a journey to see a man behind a curtain: The Wizard of Oz. On this journey was the Tin Man who needed a heart, a Lion that needed courage, a Scarecrow who needed brains, and Dorothy who wanted to get home to Kansas. These



characters couldn't wait to meet the mysterious and all-knowing Wizard of Oz who resided behind a curtain. But when they got to Oz and the curtain was pulled back by Dorothy's little dog, Toto, they were disappointed. There was just a little old man behind the curtain.

When you see what's on the other side of God's curtain, you will never be disappointed. On the other side of God's curtain is our Savior. And Jesus can give you courage to face the coming days, He will give you a new heart, He will give you a new mind, and most importantly, when you die, you get to go home—not to Kansas, but to your Heavenly home.

### **III. The third silent witness to Calvary is the earthquake (v. 51).**

*Matthew 27:51 – “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.”*

Earthquakes are common in Palestine, even to this day. Palestine and this area of modern day Israel is in the middle of the Jordan Rift Valley, which is 1250 feet below sea level at its lowest point near the Dead Sea. There is a fault line that meanders through this Jordan Rift Valley, and so, some would say that the earthquake mentioned here in *verse 51* and *verse 54* would not be anything uncommon. But what are the chances this earthquake occurred at the same moment Jesus died, and at the same moment there was an eclipse of the sun and the veil of the temple was torn in two? What are the odds of that happening all at once?

If this isn't enough, we come to the fourth silent witness to Calvary:

### **IV. The fourth silent witness to Calvary was the open tombs.**

*Matthew 27:52-53 (NIV)*

*52 The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.*

*53 They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.*

If you were in Jerusalem 2000 years ago on the Friday afternoon that Jesus died, what would it have taken to convince you that Jesus was God's Son? You may have dismissed the eclipse of the sun, when midday became like midnight. You may have dismissed the veil of the temple being torn in two. You may have dismissed the earthquake as coincidental. But when graves open and dead people come back to life, and they walk into Jerusalem, if that wouldn't get your attention, nothing would! If this miraculous event didn't convince you, then nothing would!

Let's look closely at *verse 52*:

*"The tombs broke open"* – In the rocky country of Palestine, the dead were not placed into graves six feet into the ground, as is our custom. They were placed into chambers that had been carved out of rocky elevations and were closed with a stone slab. Some have said the third miracle of the earthquake may have dislocated these slabs so that the tombs were opened and the bodies within them were exposed. But I believe the opening of the tombs was not related to the earthquake. I believe this was a separate miracle of God!

*"The bodies of many holy people (saints) who had died were raised to life."* – Matthew does not say that all the tombs were opened, but only the bodies of saints, believers in the one true God were resurrected. Notice the word *"many"* of them, a certain large number who had been selected by God. And so, the significance of this miracle is this: When Jesus died, He conquered death and these risen saints prove His great victory. Death could no longer keep these saints in their tombs!

Who were these saints? No one knows for sure. Some have named Job, the Patriarchs of the Old Testament. Some have named recently deceased believers who appeared to their relatives, like Simeon and Anna, two New Testament saints listed in *Luke 2*, who blessed the Christ-child when He was eight days old. Simeon and Anna had waited faithfully for years, praying for the Messiah to come.

When the Scripture says in *verse 52* that *"their dead bodies were raised to life,"* it means exactly what it says. Their souls returned from heaven and were reunited with their bodies. They arose—not as ghosts, or like silhouettes in a movie, or a spiritual image; they arose with glorified bodies as we shall have on the final Resurrection Day!

***Verse 53 – "They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people."***

Notice the phrase, *"after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city."* Notice that they went into Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection. Why is that? *Colossians 1:18* refers to Christ as *"the first born from the dead."* *1 Corinthians 15:20* refers to Christ as *"the first fruits of those who have died."*

What that means is, when these saints were resurrected from the dead and got ready to go into Jerusalem, the person at the front of the line going into the Holy City would be Jesus! He was leading the procession into the city! [EX: "When the Saints Go Marching In"]

There is a three-day gap between when they were raised and when they went into Jerusalem? Where were these saints for three days? No one knows for sure, but after Jesus was resurrected, He remained on earth for 40 days before His ascension into heaven. If God had no trouble finding a place for Jesus for 40 days, He would have no trouble finding a place for these saints for three days.

*Verse 53 – “They appeared to many people in Jerusalem.”* Who did they appear to? Some have said they appeared to the enemies of Christ because when Jesus was resurrected, He didn’t go back and appear to His enemies, but these risen saints may have!

- A. Appearing to Pontius Pilate
- B. Appearing to the Roman soldiers

*Verse 54 – “When the Centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and **all that had happened**, they were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely he was the Son of God.’”*

Notice the phrase, “*all that had happened*.” The eclipse of the sun, the veil in the temple torn in two, the earthquake, the graves opening—they were convinced Jesus was the Son of God! **All of these events took place simultaneously.** They didn’t happen 1, 2, 3; the sky was black, and the moment Jesus died, the veil was torn, the earthquake occurred, and the tombs were opened.

Isn’t it interesting that the one man who “got it”—the one man recorded in Scripture who was convinced Jesus was the Son of God was the man who shouldn’t have “gotten it.” **A pagan Roman Soldier.** And the people who didn’t get it were the religious leaders. Even after Jesus’ resurrection, people like Caiphias, the High Priest, and the religious leaders would not be convinced. They tried to cover up the resurrection of Jesus by paying the Roman guards and telling them to say, “Jesus body wasn’t resurrected. The disciples stole His body!” It is a tragedy when people who are religious become so hard-hearted they miss God’s work right in front of them.

### **Conclusion:**

Do you believe Jesus is God’s Son? Do you believe He is who He says He is? If the answer is “Yes,” does the life you live at work, home, and in your community reflect what you say you believe? If the people you are closest to were asked, “Does Joe or Jane live his or her life in a way that says, ‘The resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ, is the center of his or her life,’ ” what would they say?

If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence before the jury to convince them you were a Christian? Many of us talk a good game, and we attend services every Sunday, but do we live convincing lives that tell people, “Surely this man who died and rose again must be God’s Son, and my life gives evidence to that fact.” Many of us need to evaluate our relationship to the crucified Lord, repent, ask forgiveness, and recommit to Him this morning. We don’t want to be like the religious leaders who are so stuck in our pious rituals that we miss the resurrected Lord who wants to be the center of our lives. Some of you are convinced today Jesus is who He says He is, and you need to make that leap of faith and commit your life to Jesus.