

# The Before And After Of Easter

## Part 2

In Israel there is a place that many Christian tourists go when they visit the places where Jesus went. The place is in Jerusalem, just off the Nablus Road, north of the Damascus gate. Behind a large stone wall is a garden, and the main feature of the Garden is a burial tomb, carved out of the rock. The tomb is not in its original state, and has obviously been repaired, but this picture will give you the idea. **(First Slide – Showing Rolling Stone Channel)**. The tomb dates from the days of Jesus, and there is some evidence that suggests it could have been the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, where they laid the body of Jesus. At the opening of the tomb is a channel carved out of the rock. That channel was used to guide a large stone, which could be rolled over the entrance to the tomb. **(Second Slide- General View of Tomb. Highlight the crack in the rock with mouse pointer)** If you look carefully at this picture on screen, you can see a large crack in the rock – the sort of crack that could have been caused by a violent earthquake. I don't want to get into a debate about where the body of Jesus was laid, but I want you to think about the things that happened in Jerusalem on the day Jesus was crucified. Here's some of what happened as Matthew describes it;

***"And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. 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!" (Matthew 27:50 – 54)***

The death of Jesus was a frightening experience for people living in Jerusalem at that time. Think of the things that happened that day. There was;

### 1. Three Hours Of Darkness.

Matthew tells us that for three hours while Jesus was on the Cross, darkness came over the whole land. Darkness in the middle of the day. If that happened at midday tomorrow, until three o'clock in the afternoon, don't you think that it would be the hot topic of conversation? Don't you think there would be a lot of worried people? Don't you think a lot of people would be asking "What's going on?" "What's happening?" There would be an awful lot of scared people.

### 2. The Earthquake.

I come from an earthquake prone country. In New Zealand we get them all the time. I've been through lots of small ones and one big one. The big one was 6.3 on the Richter scale and relatively shallow. It opened up a 7 kilometre crack in the earth that was over 2 metres deep. I've watched power poles whipping around, parked cars rolling backwards and forwards and stuff falling off shelves. It's pretty scary. There is a not a thing you can do about it. I have some appreciation for the people of Jerusalem who had 3 hours of darkness, followed by an earthquake. There's nothing like an earthquake to make people sit up and take notice.

### 3. Dead People Walking.

I guess you might be able to explain away tombs being opened if you have just had a severe earthquake. Just maybe. But how do you explain the bodies of dead people coming to life and walking around the streets of Jerusalem? And not just anyone, but holy people. Spiritual people. This was getting scarier by the minute. Any one of these things would have been enough to shake people up, but to have them happen one after the other must have led heaps of people to ask themselves if God wasn't at work here. This was more than just coincidence. You don't get darkness for three hours in the middle of the day, followed by an earthquake,

followed by a whole bunch of dead people coming out of their graves and walking around.

#### **4. The Torn Curtain.**

More than anything else, this one convinced many people it was God. For the Jews, this was the one that couldn't be explained away. At the height of the Jewish Passover, as the priests were sacrificing lambs in the temple and splattering their blood on the altar as a sin offering for the people, Jesus died on the Cross. Immediately Jesus died, God did something that was so shocking it ripped a gaping hole in the heart of Jewish religion. At the moment that Jesus died, God reached down and destroyed the huge, heavy curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Behind that heavy curtain was the most holy place, and the most holy things of Jewish religion that had been kept hidden for thousands of years. In the Holy of Holies was the Ark of The Covenant, which represented the presence of God himself. That heavily embroidered linen curtain, which had kept the people from the presence of God for generations, was ripped from top to bottom, and everything that represented the hiddenness of God was exposed.

#### **Who Did It?**

God did it. No human could have done it. If it could have been done by human hands it would have been torn from the bottom to the top. But at the moment Jesus died, God reached down, and with a mighty wrench, ripped that massive curtain that had kept people from his presence – he ripped it wide open. In one brief moment, God was tearing open all of the Old Testament. All of the rules and regulations and commands that said "This is how you are to know me. He just tore it open. All the sacrificial system that required people to bring doves and lambs and animals, and have them killed to make up for their sin – God just tore that whole system apart. No more killing of animals and shedding blood as a sin offering. All the sacrificial system that said "This is the way to atone for your sin." God tore it all open. All of the rules and regulations of the Old Covenant between Israel and God – he just tore it all apart.

- **No More Sacrifices.**

Do you really grasp what God did when he tore that curtain apart? He was saying "enough!" to the constant shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sins. From now on, the blood of Jesus shed on the Cross was all that he required to cover the sins of the whole world. The writer to the Hebrews got it right when he said this **"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body .. " (Hebrews 19:19 & 20)** As far as God is concerned, the blood of Jesus Christ poured out on the Cross is the only thing that purifies us from all sin. As Jesus died on the Cross, God the Father reached down, took a hold of that curtain that had been such a barrier to people knowing Him, and with a mighty shout of "Enough!", tore it apart. No more sacrifices. The sacrifice of Jesus is enough.

- **No More Priests.**

In tearing open that curtain, God was saying "no more Priests." The job of the Priest was to act as a go-between. The priest stood facing a holy God on behalf of a sinful people, and stood before a sinful people on behalf of a holy God. That's what the Priest was supposed to do. Face God on behalf of the people, then face the people on behalf of God. But the tearing of the curtain changed all that forever. When God tore the curtain open, he tore open the priesthood. As far as God is concerned after the death of Jesus on the Cross, there is only one High Priest. His name is Jesus. Listen to this; **"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may**

**receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14 -16)** People, do you get that? This is really important. You don't need anyone to act as a go-between. You can go straight on in to the presence of God through Jesus. He is our High Priest. The curtain is open. God is saying "Come on in!" Children, you don't have to relate to God through your parents. Wives, you don't have to come to God through your husband. You can have a direct line to him through Jesus. There is now a new way to relate to God. Because of Jesus, we can be in a relationship with him that is so intimate, we can call him "Daddy" **"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (Romans 8:15 -16)**

- **No More Old Covenant.**

Now there is a new covenant. A new covenant to replace all the commandments of the Old Testament. It's a very simple command . Matthew tells us how Jesus said it; **"One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:35-40)** The way some Christians teach from the Old Testament, I wonder if they have really understood the work of Jesus on the Cross. The Old Testament is not our testament or covenant. It's an old covenant which we are not obliged to keep. None of it's laws are binding on us, unless they are renewed in the New Covenant. God still wants our loyalty. He still wants us to be in close relationship with him, but our love and loyalty to God is to be shown through our love for Jesus His Son. The Old Testament is interesting to study. It is important background. It's the inspired word of God. It does help us appreciate and fulfil the new covenant, but Jesus died on the Cross to set us free from a religion of rules and regulations.

Do you know what Easter Sunday morning is meant to be about? It's meant to be a celebration of the freedom we have in Christ. Jesus has set us free through his death on the Cross, and he wants us to enjoy our freedom.

In the book "Gods Smuggler" Brother Andrew tells of a monkey that he adopted as a pet when he lived in Indonesia. As he played with his pet monkey he noticed that when he touched the monkey around the waist, the monkey seemed to be in pain. When he investigated he found that when the monkey had been a baby, someone had tied a wire around it's waist. As the monkey had grown, so that wire had grown into the flesh as the monkey grew larger. Brother Andrew said that when he was able to cut that wire out and pull it away from the flesh, the monkey jumped up, did a cartwheel and jumped around his shoulders, pulling his hair with delight and joy. From that day on, that monkey would never leave his side.

That's the freedom we celebrate on Easter Sunday morning. Jesus has set us free. He has torn the curtain and opened the way for us to know God in a way that was never possible before. Like Brother Andrews monkey, we ought to dance and jump and shout with joy. If ever there was a day when we should be turning cartwheels and celebrating what wonderful things Jesus has done for us, this is it!

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