

The Rent Veil

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Chapter Three The Symbolic Veil

The veil of the tabernacle was hung between the holy place and the holiest of all. Inside of it were the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy-seat, and the cherubim; outside were the golden altar of incense, the golden candlestick, or lamp-stand, and the table of shew-bread or "presence-bread," the twelve loaves that were placed before Jehovah.

Properly there were three veils or curtains for the tabernacle.

The outermost hung at the entrance of the tabernacle; and was always drawn aside, or might be so by any Israelite that wished to pass into the outer court, where the brazen altar and brazen laver were. That veil hindered no one, and concealed nothing. It was an ever-open door; at which any Israelite might come in with his sacrifice. It was at this door that the priest met the comer and examined his sacrifice to see if it were without blemish; for no blemished offering could pass the threshold; and the bringer of a blemished sacrifice must go back

unaccepted and unblest. The Priest rejected him and his victim. He must go and get another bullock, or else bear his own sin.¹

The second veil hung at the entrance of the holy place. It allowed any one to *look* in; but it prohibited the entrance of all but Priests. "Now when these things were thus ordained (arranged or set up) the priests went always (were continually going) into the first tabernacle (what we usually call the second), accomplishing the service of God" (Heb. 9:6). They fed at the royal table there; they kept the lamps burning; they put incense on the golden altar. But they could enter no farther. The way into the holiest was not yet opened; the time had not yet come when the three places should be made one; all veils removed; all exclusions cancelled; all sprinkled with one blood; open freely to each coming one: altar, laver, table, candlestick, incense-altar, ark, and mercyseat no longer separated, but brought together as being but parts of one glorious whole; divided from each other for a season, for the sake of distinct teaching and for the exhibition of sacrificial truth in its different parts and aspects; but in the fulness of time brought together; as being but one perfect picture of the one perfect sacrifice, by means of which we have access to God and reentrance into the Paradise which we had lost.

The third veil hung before the holy of holies: hiding, as it were, God from man and man from God, and intimating that the day of full meeting and fellowship had not yet come. It said to Israel, and it said to *man* (for all these things had a world-wide meaning), God is within; but you cannot enter now. The time is coming; but it is not yet.

In heathen temples there were veils hiding their holy places. But these pointed to no coming manifestation; no future *unveiling* of Him who was supposed to dwell within. These veils were but parts of the idolatry and darkness of the system; not proclamations of truth or promises of light. It was not so in the tabernacle. The veil that hid the glory was a promise of the revelation of that glory. In pagan shrines it was a signal of distress and despair; man's declaration that there was no hope of light; that the unknown must always be the unknown; nay, that the unknown was also the unknowable; and that the unapproached was also the unapproachable. In Israel's shrine the veil was a thing of light, not of darkness; it was a covering, no doubt, but it was also a revelation. It told *what* God was; *where* God was, and *how* God could be approached.

That it was *not* a gate,—of iron or brass, of silver or of gold,—said much; that it was a veil of needlework, slight and moveable, said more. For it intimated that

¹ The true Priest,—“the High Priest of the good things to come”—stands at the gate to receive all who come. He refuses none, however imperfect they and their offering may be; for it is His perfection and His perfect offering that give the right of entrance to the sinner; He receives all comers. “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”

the hindrance in the way of the worshipper's nearer approach was slender and temporary. The nature of a tent intimated among other things its *removeableness*: "mine age is departed, and is *removed from me as a shepherd's tent*" (Isa. 38:12). The nature of a veil in a tent intimates still greater slightness and removeableness. It was a thing which could easily be drawn aside, nay, which was, at the needed season, to be taken away. It was no wall of obstruction, but simply of temporary separation and exclusion, to be done away with in due time.

But while it was slight it was very beautiful. It is thus described:—"And thou shalt make a veil of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine-twined linen, of cunning work: with cherubims shall it be made: and thou shalt hang it upon four pillars of shittim wood, overlaid with gold: their hooks shall be of gold upon the four sockets of silver" (Ex. 26:31, 32). Of the veil made by Solomon for the temple on Moriah it is said, "He made the veil of blue, and purple, and crimson, and fine linen, and wrought cherubims thereon" (2 Chron. 3:14).

The temple-veil seems to have been thicker and of course larger every way, than that of the tabernacle. It is said to have been about twenty feet in height, and as much in width, strongly wrought and finely woven. It was never drawn, or at least only so much of it was moved aside once a-year as to admit the High Priest, when he approached the mercy-seat with blood and incense. For ages it stretched across that awful entrance, a more immoveable barrier than brass or iron: no Priest, or Levite, or Israelite venturing within its folds. Torn down again and again in different centuries, by the Babylonian, Persian, Grecian, and Roman invader, it was often replaced, that it might hang there, to teach its wondrous lessons, till God's great purpose with it had been fulfilled.

To the Jew of old there must have seemed something mysterious about that veil. It was not hung up merely to conceal what was within, as if God grudged to man the full vision of His glory, or had no desire to be approached. Many things connected with its texture and place showed that this was not the case. The unspiritual Jew of course was very likely to misjudge its use and import; and the historian Josephus is a specimen of that class. He seems to have had not the most distant idea of its use.² But the Israelite who had discernment in the things of God would see something far higher and nobler than this, though he might not understand it fully in connection with Messiah. Still he would see in that veil something glorious; something which both attracted and repelled; something which hid and revealed; something which spoke of himself and of his Messiah; for he knew that every thing pertaining to that tabernacle, and specially these on

² The veils, which were composed of four things, declared the four elements; for the fine linen was proper to signify the earth, because the flax grows out of the earth; the purple signified the sea, because that colour is dyed by the blood of a sea shell-fish; the blue is fit to signify the air, and the scarlet will be an indication of fire."—*Antiq.* b. iii. chap. 7. sect. 7.

which cherubim were wrought, had reference to Messiah the Deliver, the seed of the woman, the man with the bruised heel.

All the curtains of the tabernacle had more or less the same reference. For on all of them the same devices were wrought. "Thou shalt make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine-twined linen, and blue, and purple, and scarlet: *with cherubims of cunning work shalt thou make them*" (Ex. 26:1, 36:8). The cherubim-figure was to be seen everywhere. That mysterious device which was first placed in Paradise, and which for ages had disappeared, was now reproduced in connection with the tabernacle. Since the garden of the Lord had been swept away (probably at the flood), the cherubim had not been seen; though doubtless tradition had handed down the memory of their appearance, and to Israel they were not strangers. Moses is now commanded to restore them. From Noah to Moses the Church had been a wanderer, with no sanctuary, only an altar to worship at. Yet, doubtless, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew well about the cherubim; and when Moses was instructed to replace them he does not require to have their nature explained. They are now to be *inwoven into the sanctuary*,—that sanctuary which symbolized nothing less than Messiah Himself; teaching us that (whatever these cherubim might mean) the cherubim and Messiah were all "of one." The Church is represented in the tabernacle as one with Christ, "members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones." Israel was taught that "the Church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38) was as truly the body of Christ as the Church at Pentecost.

But however vague might be the ideas of the old Jew regarding the veil, it could not but be viewed as very peculiar, something by itself; part of the tabernacle furniture no doubt, yet a singular and unique part of it; in texture, in position, and in use, quite peculiar: exquisite as a piece of workmanship,—every colour and thread of which it was composed being symbolic and vocal. But still it was the frailest part of the fabric,—a strange contrast, in after days when the temple was built, with the massive marble walls and cedar beams, with which it was surrounded. For the temple was in all respects magnificent,—even as a piece of architecture. Its enormous foundations were let in to the solid rock; its vast stones, each in itself a wall, rose tier above tier; its gates were of solid brass, so weighty, that one of them required twenty men to open and shut it. It thus presented a solid mass to view more like a part of the mountain than a mere building upon it.

But the veil was a thing which a child's hand could draw aside; and it was hung just where we should have expected a gate of brass or a wall of granite,—at the entrance into the holiest of all,—to guard against the possibility of intrusion. Its frail texture in the midst of so much that was strong and massive, said that it was but a temporary barrier,—a screen,—in due time to be removed. The worshipper in the outer court, as he looked towards it from the outer entrance of the holy place, would see something of its workmanship, and might perhaps get some glimpses of the glory within shining through its folds. He would learn this much, at

least, that the way into the holiest was not fully opened; yet it was only stopped by a veil, no more. He would conclude within himself, that though shut out now he would one day be allowed to enter and worship at the mercy-seat, or at something better than that mercy-seat, at the heavenly throne, in the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, and not man, when the High Priest of good things to come should arrive, and as his forerunner, lead him into the very presence of that Invisible Jehovah who was now by symbols showing how He was to be approached and worshipped.

The veil! It hid God from man; for till that should be done which would make "grace reign through righteousness" (Rom. 5:21), man could not be allowed to see God face to face. It hid man from God; for till this "righteousness" was established by the substitution of the just for the unjust, God could not directly look upon man. It hid the glory of God from man; it hid the shame of man from God. It so veiled or shaded both the shame and the glory, that it was possible for God to be near man, and yet not to repel him; and it was possible for man to be near God and yet not to be consumed.

The veil! It was let down from above, it did not spring up from below. It originated in God, and not in man. It was not man hiding himself from God, but God hiding Himself from man, as His holiness required, until it should become a right for a holy God and unholy man to meet each other in peace and love.

And it was sprinkled with blood! For though the expression "before the veil" (Lev. 4:6) does not necessarily mean that it was sprinkled *on* the veil, yet the likelihood is that this was done. "The seven times, (says a commentator on Leviticus), throughout all Scripture, intimates a complete and perfect action. The blood is to be thoroughly exhibited before the Lord; life openly exhibited as taken, to honour the law that had been violated. It is not at this time taken *within* the veil; for that would require the priest to enter the holy of holies, a thing permitted only once a year. But it is taken very near the mercy-seat; it is taken 'before the veil,' while the Lord that dwelt between the cherubim bent down to listen to the cry that came up from the sin-atoning blood. Was the blood sprinkled on the veil? Some say not; but only on the floor close to the veil. The floor of the holy place was dyed with blood; a threshold of blood was formed, over which the High Priest must pass into on the day of judgment, when he entered into the most holy, drawing aside the veil. It is blood that opens our way into the presence of God; it is the voice of atoning blood that prevails with Him who dwells within. Others, however, with more probability, think that the blood was sprinkled *on the veil*. It might intimate that atonement was yet to rend that veil; and as that beautiful veil represented our Saviour's holy humanity (Heb. 10:20), oh, how expressive was the continual repetition of the 'blood-sprinkling' seven times. As often as the Priest offered a sin-offering, the veil was wet again with blood, which dropped on the floor. Is this *Christ bathed in the blood of atonement?* Yes, through that veil

the veil was opened to us, through the flesh of Jesus, through the body that for us was drenched in the sweat of blood."³

We speak of the blood-sprinkled mercy-seat, and the blood-sprinkled floor, on which that mercy-seat stood; but let us not forget the blood-sprinkled pavement, the “new and living way” into the holiest, and the blood-sprinkled veil. For “almost all things under the law were purged with blood, and without shedding of blood is no remission.”

Nor let us forget Gethsemane, where “His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” At His circumcision, at Gethsemane, at the cross, we see the blood-sprinkled veil. And all this for us; that the blood which was thus required at His hands should not be required of us.

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³ Dr. A. A. Bonar's *Commentary on Leviticus*, pp. 68, 69.