

**AN IN-DEPTH BIBLE STUDY**

# **THE TORN VEIL**

*From Top to Bottom: The Direction That Declares Who Opened the Way*

Matthew 27 · Leviticus 16 · Hebrews 10 · John 19

*A journey through history, biblical languages, and a barrier torn from above*

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## Introduction: The Direction of the Tear

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Most Christians know that the temple veil tore at the moment of Jesus's death. Far fewer have paused over which direction it tore. Matthew 27:51 is specific: the veil 'was rent in twain from the top to the bottom' — not from the bottom, the direction a human hand pulling downward would produce, but from the top, the direction that points to an agent acting from above.

This study exists to take that detail seriously, along with everything surrounding it: the size and construction of the veil itself, what it separated and why, the annual ritual of the Day of Atonement it made possible, the author of Hebrews's striking identification of the veil with Christ's own flesh, and the historical question of what happened to Israel's sacrificial system in the forty years between the veil's tearing (around A.D. 30) and the temple's destruction (A.D. 70).

As with the other studies in this series, this study distinguishes carefully between what Scripture states explicitly, what later Jewish sources report (and how reliable those reports are), and what represents a reasoned theological inference — a distinction that matters especially here, since several popular details about the veil circulate widely in preaching without always being carefully sourced.

### Did You Know?

All three Synoptic Gospels record the tearing of the veil (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45), making it one of the most consistently attested details of the crucifixion narrative across multiple independent Gospel accounts, even though none of the Gospel writers claims to have personally witnessed the event inside the temple itself, since the tearing would have occurred in a restricted area accessible only to priests.

## How to Use This Study

Each chapter includes: (1) the central biblical text; (2) historical and linguistic context; (3) explanations of Hebrew and Greek terms; (4) cross references; (5) 'Did You Know?' boxes with historical background; (6) suggestions for maps, diagrams, or illustrations for those teaching this material in a classroom or small group; and (7) questions for personal or group reflection. At the end, you will find a consolidated summary of the main points, a list of further reading organized by theme, and a recommended bibliography for deeper study.

### Suggested Illustration

Opening page with a labeled cross-section of Herod's temple, showing the Court of the Gentiles, the Court of Women, the Court of Israel, the Court of the Priests, the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place behind the veil — useful for orienting readers to the temple's structure before beginning the study.

## Chapter 1 — The Temple and Its Courts

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### A Series of Restricted Spaces

By the time of Jesus, the temple in Jerusalem — rebuilt and dramatically expanded under Herod the Great — was not a single room but a complex of successive courts, each admitting a narrower range of people than the one before it. The outermost Court of the Gentiles was open to non-Jews; a low wall (the *soreg*) with inscribed warnings barred Gentiles from proceeding further, on pain of death. Beyond this lay the Court of Women, accessible to Jewish men and women; then the Court of Israel, for Jewish men only; then the Court of the Priests, where the altar of sacrifice stood; and finally the temple building itself, divided into the Holy Place and, innermost of all, the Most Holy Place.

### The Veil's Location

The veil (Greek καταπέτασμα, *katapetasma*; Hebrew פָּרוֹכֶת, *paroket*) hung between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, the innermost and most restricted space in the entire structure — the place where, according to Israel's theology, God's own presence dwelt above the Ark of the Covenant, discussed at greater length in a related study on the Ark's mercy seat.

### A Structure That Taught a Theology

This graduated series of courts was not merely architectural convenience; it embodied, in physical space, a theological claim about the seriousness of approaching a holy God. Each successive barrier represented a narrowing of access — Gentiles excluded from the inner courts, women from the Court of Israel, laypeople from the Court of the Priests, all priests but one from the Most Holy Place itself, and even that one priest admitted only once a year. The architecture of the temple was, in effect, a running commentary on the distance between sinful humanity and a holy God.

#### Did You Know?

The Temple Warning Inscription — a stone tablet bearing a Greek inscription forbidding Gentiles from proceeding past the *soreg* on pain of death — is not merely a detail known from ancient literary sources; actual fragments of this inscription have been discovered archaeologically, most notably one now housed in the Istanbul Archaeology Museums, offering tangible, physical confirmation of the graduated access system described in ancient sources.

#### Suggested Illustration

A diagram of Herod's temple complex from above, with each court labeled and color-coded by who was permitted to enter, culminating in the Most Holy Place at the center — useful for visualizing the layered restrictions this chapter describes.

 **Further Reading:** *Ezekiel 44:9 (an earlier prophetic vision restricting temple access); Acts 21:27-29 (Paul accused of bringing a Gentile past the temple's restricted boundary); Ephesians 2:14 (Paul's later reflection on 'the middle wall of partition').*

### **Reflection Questions**

1. How does understanding the graduated, restrictive structure of the temple complex change the way you picture the barrier the veil represented?
2. What does this architecture suggest about how seriously the ancient world understood the holiness of God?

## Chapter 2 — The Veil Itself: What the Sources Actually Say

### Old Testament Instructions

The original instructions for the tabernacle veil are given in Exodus 26:31-33: it was to be made 'of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen,' woven with a design of cherubim, and hung to separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. These same four elements — blue, purple, scarlet, and fine linen — recur throughout the tabernacle's furnishings and priestly garments (Exodus 28:5-6), and many interpreters have found devotional significance in this material palette (Chapter 6 addresses this connection with appropriate care).

### Later Descriptions of Size and Thickness

The Gospels themselves do not specify the veil's exact dimensions. Popular claims that it stood 'sixty feet tall' and was 'as thick as a man's hand' derive from later rabbinic sources, particularly discussions in the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Chagigah 5b references the veil's thickness, and later Jewish tradition describes an elaborate weaving and handling process). These sources reflect Jewish tradition compiled centuries after the Second Temple's destruction, describing the temple as it was remembered and idealized rather than necessarily providing precise, contemporaneous engineering specifications. This study presents these figures as widely repeated, plausible tradition — consistent with what is known of Herod's temple's scale generally — rather than as facts directly stated in the biblical text itself.

#### Did You Know?

The Herodian temple complex as a whole was renowned in the ancient world for its scale and grandeur; the historian Josephus, writing in the first century, describes the temple building's impressive height and the magnificence of its construction in his own writings (Jewish War, Book 5). Given this broader context, a veil of substantial size and thickness, requiring significant material and labor to produce and move, is entirely consistent with what is independently known about the temple's construction generally, even where specific numerical figures rely on later tradition rather than the biblical text itself.

### Why the Size Matters for This Study's Argument

Whatever its precise dimensions, the veil was clearly not a lightweight, easily-torn curtain. It was a substantial, deliberately constructed barrier, consistent with its function of marking off the most sacred and restricted space in Israel's entire religious system. This context matters directly for Chapter 5's discussion of Matthew 27:51: a barrier of this scale and construction being torn in a single moment, and specifically from the top, is a detail that would have struck first-century readers, familiar with the temple's actual scale, as significant and unusual — not the kind of thing that happens by accident or ordinary wear.

 **Further Reading:** *Exodus 26:31-35; Exodus 28:5-6; 2 Chronicles 3:14 (Solomon's earlier, similarly described temple veil).*

### ***Reflection Questions***

1. How does distinguishing between what the Bible states directly and what later Jewish tradition adds affect your confidence in specific details like the veil's exact size?
2. Why might the veil's substantial construction be an important piece of context for understanding the significance of its tearing?

## Chapter 3 — The Day of Atonement: One Man, Once a Year, With Blood

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### The Ritual the Veil Made Possible

Leviticus 16 describes, in careful detail, the one occasion each year — Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement — on which the high priest was permitted to pass through the veil into the Most Holy Place. He entered first with the blood of a bull, offered for his own sins and those of his household (Leviticus 16:6, 11), then a second time with the blood of a goat, offered for the sins of the people (16:15), sprinkling the blood on and before the mercy seat atop the Ark of the Covenant.

### Strict, Repeated Limitation

Hebrews 9:6-7 summarizes the restriction plainly: the high priest entered 'alone...once every year, not without blood.' This limitation — one man, one day, one specific means of access — stood as the sole authorized channel through which the nation's sins could be atoned for and the barrier of the veil, in a sense, temporarily and partially bridged, only to require the entire ritual's repetition the following year.

### The Popular Tradition of the Rope

A widely repeated detail in popular preaching holds that the high priest wore a rope tied to his ankle when entering the Most Holy Place, so that if he died in God's presence, his body could be pulled out without anyone else needing to enter after him. This detail carries real rhetorical power and is repeated frequently in sermons and devotional writing. However, it should be noted honestly: this specific tradition does not appear in the Mishnah's own detailed description of the Day of Atonement ritual (tractate Yoma), nor is it clearly attested in earlier, more contemporary Jewish sources. Its origin is difficult to trace with confidence, and many careful historians of Second Temple Judaism regard it as a later legend rather than a well-documented historical practice. This study includes it here specifically to flag this uncertainty, rather than to repeat it as established fact, since responsible teaching should not overstate the historical basis for a vivid but poorly sourced detail.

#### Did You Know?

What is well-documented, by contrast, in Leviticus 16 itself and in the Mishnah's fuller description of the Day of Atonement, is the sheer weight of preparation, purification, and precision surrounding the ritual — the high priest's extensive washing, his specific sequence of sacrifices and confessions, and the seriousness with which any deviation from the prescribed procedure was regarded. The underlying point often illustrated (accurately or not) by the rope tradition — that entering God's presence under the old covenant carried real, serious risk, and required exact obedience — is well supported by the biblical text itself, even apart from that specific unverified detail.

## A System That Could Not Finish

Leviticus 16:34 specifies that this ritual was to be performed 'once a year' — a phrase that, read alongside Hebrews 10:1-4, signals the system's built-in incompleteness: 'the law...can never...make the comers thereunto perfect,' because repeated, annual sacrifice would not have been necessary if a single sacrifice had ever been sufficient.

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 **Further Reading:** *Leviticus 16:1-34; Hebrews 9:6-10; Hebrews 10:1-4.*

### Reflection Questions

1. Why is it important, even when a vivid detail like the ankle rope makes a powerful illustration, to be honest about its uncertain historical basis?
2. What does the well-documented seriousness of the actual Day of Atonement ritual (apart from the rope legend) still communicate about the weight of approaching God under the old covenant?

## Chapter 4 — Matthew 27:51: Top to Bottom

*"Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent." — Matthew 27:50-51*

### The Precise Wording

Matthew's account is specific about both the timing and the direction of the tear. The veil tears immediately upon Jesus's death ('when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost'), and it tears 'from the top to the bottom' — a detail Mark 15:38 and Luke 23:45 both confirm using the same directional language.

### Why Direction Is a Meaningful Detail

A garment or curtain torn by human hands, pulling from a standing position, would naturally begin tearing from a point within reach — typically from the bottom or the middle, not from a point sixty feet or more overhead, well beyond any person's physical reach without extraordinary means. The specified direction, top to bottom, is difficult to explain as the result of ordinary human action, whether by a single individual or even by a determined group attempting to tear the veil deliberately.

### An Argument From Physical Plausibility, Held With Appropriate Confidence

It is worth being precise about the nature of this argument. Matthew does not explicitly state 'and this proves no human being tore it' — that inference, though widely drawn and well-supported by ordinary physical reasoning, is the reader's conclusion from the stated direction, not a claim the text spells out in so many words. This study finds the inference reasonable and well-supported, consistent with how the passage has been read throughout church history, while noting that it is an inference rather than a direct textual statement.

#### Did You Know?

Matthew's account pairs the tearing of the veil with two other extraordinary phenomena occurring at the same moment: an earthquake, and rocks being split (Matthew 27:51) — followed, uniquely in Matthew's Gospel, by an account of tombs opening and 'many bodies of the saints which slept' being raised, though not appearing publicly until after Jesus's own resurrection (Matthew 27:52-53). This cluster of unusual events, recorded only by Matthew among the Gospel writers, is treated at greater length in Chapter 9's discussion of interpretive questions.

 **Further Reading:** *Matthew 27:50-54; Mark 15:37-38; Luke 23:44-46.*

### Reflection Questions

1. Why does the specific direction of the tear matter more than the simple fact that it tore?
2. How does distinguishing between the text's stated fact (the direction) and the reader's reasonable inference (that this rules out human agency) model careful Bible reading?

## Chapter 5 — "That Is to Say, His Flesh": Hebrews 10:20

*"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh." — Hebrews 10:19-20*

### An Explicit New Testament Identification

Unlike the inference discussed in Chapter 4 regarding the direction of the tear, Hebrews 10:20 makes an explicit, direct theological identification: the veil represents, or corresponds to, 'his flesh' — the incarnate body of Christ. This is not a connection later readers have constructed from surrounding details; it is stated outright by the author of Hebrews.

### Two Readings of the Grammar

Interpreters have offered slightly different construals of exactly how 'that is to say, his flesh' relates to the preceding clauses. Some read it as modifying 'the veil' directly — the veil itself corresponds to Christ's flesh, the barrier that had to be passed through (and, by extension of the crucifixion imagery, torn) for access to be opened. Others read it as modifying 'a new and living way' — the new way of access is made 'through the veil,' and that whole phrase, 'through the veil,' is further explained as 'through his flesh,' meaning Christ's incarnate life and death constitute the way, rather than the veil itself being straightforwardly equated with His flesh. Both readings agree on the central point: Christ's own body — His incarnation, and specifically His death — is the means by which the way into God's presence has been opened.

### The Flesh as Barrier and as Bridge

Whichever precise grammatical construal is preferred, the theological picture that emerges is coherent and striking: the incarnation itself — God taking on human flesh — involved, in some sense, a kind of veiling of divine glory (compare John 1:14, 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,' immediately followed by 'we beheld his glory,' suggesting glory both veiled and, in another sense, genuinely seen). That same flesh, given over to death at the crucifixion, becomes the means by which the ultimate barrier between humanity and God is removed.

#### Did You Know?

The Greek word for 'veil' in Hebrews 10:20, καταπέτασμα (katapetasma), is the same word used in the Septuagint for the tabernacle and temple veils throughout the Old Testament, and the same word Matthew, Mark, and Luke use for the veil that tears at the crucifixion — confirming that the author of Hebrews has the same physical object in view, now developed theologically as a picture of Christ's own incarnate life.

 **Further Reading:** Hebrews 10:19-22; John 1:14; Colossians 1:19-22; Colossians 2:9.

### Reflection Questions

1. How does Hebrews 10:20's explicit identification of the veil with Christ's flesh deepen the significance of the veil tearing at His death?
2. What does it mean to you that the very barrier separating humanity from God was, in some sense, embodied and then removed through the same act — the giving of Christ's body?

## Chapter 6 — Direction as Declaration: Who Tore the Veil

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### Bringing the Threads Together

This chapter draws together the material developed so far: a veil of substantial size and construction (Chapter 2), representing the sole, tightly restricted means of access to God's presence (Chapter 3), explicitly identified by Hebrews with Christ's own flesh (Chapter 5), torn at the moment of His death in a direction inconsistent with ordinary human action (Chapter 4).

### A Declaration Made in Fabric, Not Words

Read together, these details support a theological reading many find compelling: the direction of the tear — from the top, where no human hand could reach, downward — functions as a kind of physical, visible declaration about agency. If the veil represents the barrier of Christ's own flesh, and that barrier is torn from above at the moment of His death, the most natural reading is that God himself, not any human participant in the crucifixion, is the one who tears it: an act of divine initiative, opening access to His own presence, rather than a human achievement finally breaking through a barrier from the outside.

### Consistent With the Pattern Traced Elsewhere in This Series

This 'God reaching down, rather than humanity reaching up' pattern echoes a theme traced at length in this study series' examination of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28) and the incarnation itself: God's characteristic mode of relating to humanity is descent and initiative, not humanity's ascent or achievement. The direction of the torn veil fits this same pattern precisely — the way into God's presence is opened by God's own action, from above, not forced open by human effort from below.

#### Did You Know?

This reading of the veil's tearing has a long history in Christian preaching and theology, frequently summarized with some version of the phrase 'God tore the veil, not man' — a memorable formulation capturing the same inference this chapter has traced from the specific, repeated Gospel detail of the tear's direction.

 **Further Reading:** *Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:19-20; Ephesians 2:4-9 (grace, 'not of works,' as the consistent pattern of salvation).*

### Reflection Questions

1. How does this reading of the veil's tearing as a divine, rather than human, act deepen your understanding of grace generally?
2. Where else in Scripture have you noticed this pattern of God reaching down rather than waiting for humanity to reach up?

## **Chapter 7 — Continued Sacrifice: The Temple From A.D. 30 to A.D. 70**

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### **A Forty-Year Gap**

If the veil tore at Jesus's crucifixion around A.D. 30, and the temple itself was not destroyed by Roman forces until A.D. 70, a real historical question follows: what happened during the roughly forty intervening years? Did temple worship, including the annual Day of Atonement ritual described in Chapter 3, simply stop?

### **What the Historical Record Suggests**

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus, in his extensive writings on the temple and its destruction (Jewish War, Books 5-6), describes the temple's sacrificial system continuing in full operation right up until the Roman siege made it physically impossible to continue. Josephus does not mention a torn veil at all in his surviving works, which is unsurprising given that his historical interests and sources were not focused on internal Christian claims about the crucifixion, and any repair or replacement of the veil would likely have gone unremarked in a general history of the Jewish War.

### **A Reasonable, Though Not Explicitly Documented, Inference**

It is reasonable to infer — though this study should be honest that no ancient source explicitly confirms it — that priests would have repaired or replaced a physically torn veil relatively promptly, given its essential function in maintaining the temple's ongoing operations, and that the sacrificial system continued largely uninterrupted in daily practice for the following four decades. This inference is consistent with everything known independently about the temple's continued operation during this period, even though it is not a detail any ancient source directly confirms or denies regarding the specific veil described in the Gospels.

### **The Theological Point, Regardless of the Precise Historical Details**

Whatever precisely happened to the physical veil in the years immediately following A.D. 30, the larger historical point stands clearly: the sacrificial system Hebrews describes as fundamentally unable to 'make the comers thereunto perfect' (Hebrews 10:1) continued to operate, by all available historical evidence, for roughly four more decades — until the temple's destruction in A.D. 70 made its continuation physically impossible altogether. Many Christian interpreters, from the early church onward, have seen theological significance in this eventual, historical end of the sacrificial system, following relatively soon after the events of the New Testament, though the destruction of the temple is best understood primarily through its own historical causes (the Jewish revolt against Rome and its consequences) rather than as a direct, singular consequence of the crucifixion alone.

### Did You Know?

Josephus does record a series of unusual omens and signs he says were observed in Jerusalem and the temple in the years leading up to A.D. 70, including reports of unusual lights and sounds around the temple (Jewish War 6.5.3). These reports come from Josephus's own historical writing, independent of the New Testament, and some early Christian writers later connected such reports to their broader theological reading of the temple's coming judgment — though this study notes that Josephus's own interpretation of these signs was not specifically Christian, and the reports themselves should be read as one ancient historian's account rather than confirmed, independently verifiable fact.

 **Further Reading:** *Hebrews 10:1-4; Josephus, Jewish War, Books 5-6; Matthew 24:1-2 (Jesus's own prediction of the temple's destruction).*

### Reflection Questions

1. How does knowing the historical gap between the veil's tearing and the temple's destruction affect your understanding of how God's decisive acts sometimes unfold within ordinary history?
2. Why is it important to distinguish between the well-documented historical fact of the temple's destruction and more speculative theological readings of specific omens or signs?

## Chapter 8 — The Colors of the Veil and Their Devotional Significance

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### A Palette Repeated Throughout the Tabernacle

As Chapter 2 noted, the veil was woven of blue, purple, scarlet, and fine (white) linen (Exodus 26:31). This same four-color palette recurs throughout the tabernacle's furnishings and the high priest's garments (Exodus 28:5-8; 39:1-3), suggesting a deliberate, consistent symbolic vocabulary running through Israel's entire worship structure.

### Traditional Devotional Associations

Many Christian teachers, particularly from the nineteenth century onward, have proposed devotional associations for each color, generally along these lines: blue as suggestive of heaven or the divine origin of Christ; purple as suggestive of royalty and Christ's kingship; scarlet as suggestive of blood and Christ's sacrificial suffering; and white linen as suggestive of purity and Christ's sinlessness. Together, on this reading, the veil's very material would picture the person of Christ: divine, royal, sacrificial, and pure.

### An Important Caveat

It is worth being direct about the nature of this reading: Scripture nowhere explicitly assigns these specific symbolic meanings to these specific colors. This is a devotional tradition, developed and popularized well after the New Testament period, drawing on general biblical associations for each color found elsewhere in Scripture (compare, for instance, scarlet's association with sin and cleansing in Isaiah 1:18) rather than a direct, textually stated interpretation of the veil's material itself. This study presents it as a longstanding, spiritually meaningful devotional tradition — one many find genuinely edifying — while being clear that it carries less direct textual support than, for example, Hebrews 10:20's explicit identification of the veil with Christ's flesh.

#### Did You Know?

This kind of color-based typological reading has a long history in Christian devotional literature, particularly popularized in tabernacle-study traditions from the 1800s and early 1900s (such as various Plymouth Brethren and holiness-movement writers), which found rich, systematic symbolic meaning throughout the tabernacle's structure, materials, and furnishings — a tradition still influential in much popular Christian teaching on the tabernacle today, even where its specific color associations extend beyond what the biblical text states directly.

 **Further Reading:** *Exodus 26:31; Exodus 28:5-8; Isaiah 1:18; Revelation 19:8 (fine linen associated with 'the righteousness of saints').*

### Reflection Questions

1. How do you personally weigh a spiritually meaningful but not explicitly stated tradition like the veil's color symbolism?
2. Does distinguishing between explicitly stated and devotionally traditional readings change how you might present this material to others?

## Chapter 9 — Common Questions and Interpretive Caution

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Given how many distinct claims and traditions this study has gathered around a single verse, this chapter addresses several fair questions a careful reader might raise.

### **"Is the 'sixty feet tall, hand's-breadth thick' description reliable?"**

As Chapter 2 discussed, these figures derive from later rabbinic sources rather than the biblical text itself. They are plausible, consistent with the temple's known scale, and widely repeated, but they should be presented as tradition rather than certain historical fact directly stated in Scripture.

### **"Is the story about the high priest's ankle rope true?"**

As Chapter 3 discussed directly, this specific detail lacks clear documentation in the earliest and most authoritative Jewish sources describing the Day of Atonement ritual, and many historians regard it as a later legend. This study includes it only to flag this uncertainty, and recommends caution in repeating it as established historical fact, even though it remains a popular illustrative detail in preaching.

### **"Does Matthew 27:51-53's account of raised saints have the same level of historical and textual certainty as the veil's tearing?"**

This is a fair question to raise, since this detail — 'the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose' — is recorded only in Matthew's Gospel, with no parallel in Mark, Luke, or John, and has been discussed and debated among biblical scholars regarding its precise historical and literary character. This study does not build its central argument on this detail and mentions it only briefly (Chapter 4) as part of the fuller cluster of unusual events Matthew records; readers interested in this specific question are encouraged to consult specialized commentaries on Matthew for a fuller treatment.

### **"How confident can we be that God, rather than a human agent, tore the veil?"**

As Chapter 4 stated directly, this is a reasonable inference from the stated direction of the tear (top to bottom, beyond ordinary human reach) rather than an explicit textual claim ('and no human hand did this'). Combined with Hebrews 10:20's explicit identification of the veil with Christ's own flesh, and the broader biblical pattern of divine initiative discussed in Chapter 6, this study holds the traditional reading — that God himself tore the veil — with real confidence, while acknowledging it rests partly on reasonable inference rather than a single, unambiguous proof-text.

#### **Did You Know?**

This chapter's consistent practice of flagging uncertain or later traditions (the veil's exact dimensions, the ankle rope, the raised saints) alongside more firmly grounded claims (the veil's tearing itself, its explicit

identification with Christ's flesh in Hebrews) reflects the same three-tiered approach to interpretive confidence applied throughout every study in this series.

 **Further Reading:** *Matthew 27:51-53; Hebrews 10:19-20; Mishnah, tractate Yoma (for the Day of Atonement ritual as actually documented in early rabbinic sources).*

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Which of these questions had you already wondered about, even if only vaguely, before reading this study?
2. How does this study's willingness to flag uncertain traditions affect your trust in its more solidly grounded claims?

## **Chapter 10 — Practical Applications for the Christian Life**

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The torn veil, understood in its full historical and theological context, carries direct implications for how believers understand their access to God today.

### **1. Access to God Is a Gift, Not an Achievement**

If the direction of the tear indicates divine rather than human agency, the entire picture reinforces one of the New Testament's central claims about salvation: access to God's presence is opened by God's own initiative and gift, not earned or forced open through human religious effort. This grounds confidence for believers prone to feeling they must somehow qualify themselves before approaching God.

### **2. Boldness, Not Hesitancy, in Approaching God**

Hebrews 10:19-22, the very passage identifying the veil with Christ's flesh, draws the practical conclusion directly: 'Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.' The torn veil is not merely a historical curiosity but the stated ground for confident, ongoing access to God in prayer and worship.

### **3. The Weight of the Old System Should Not Be Minimized**

Understanding the genuine seriousness of the Day of Atonement ritual — even setting aside the unverified ankle-rope legend — helps believers appreciate what has actually changed. The old system was not casual or safe; it involved real risk, meticulous preparation, and a single, tightly restricted channel of access. Recognizing this weight makes the openness now available through Christ all the more remarkable, rather than something to be taken for granted.

### **4. Careful Handling of Tradition Honors, Rather Than Undermines, the Text**

This study's willingness to distinguish well-documented Scripture from later, less certain tradition (the veil's dimensions, the ankle rope, color symbolism) models a practice worth carrying into all Bible study and teaching: enthusiasm for a passage's meaning should not lead to overstating the certainty of every supporting detail, since inflated claims, once discovered to be poorly sourced, can undermine confidence in a passage's genuinely well-supported core truths.

### **5. History Confirmed What Theology Declared**

The eventual, historical end of temple sacrifice in A.D. 70 — occurring within the lifetime of many who had witnessed the events of the Gospels — offers a sober reminder that God's declared purposes, even when their full outworking takes years or decades, are not merely abstract theological claims but find real confirmation within actual history.

 **Did You Know?**

The phrase from Hebrews 10:20, 'a new and living way,' has become a well-known expression in Christian hymnody and devotional writing, frequently used as shorthand for the whole theological picture this study has traced — access to God opened not through repeated ritual but through the finished, once-for-all work of Christ.

***Reflection Questions***

1. Which of these five applications feels most relevant to how you currently approach prayer and worship?
2. How might 'drawing near with a true heart in full assurance of faith' (Hebrews 10:22) look different in your life if you fully internalized that God himself tore the barrier open?

## A Closing Reflection: The Direction That Remains

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Every detail this study has gathered — the temple's graduated courts, the veil's substantial construction, the strict limits of the Day of Atonement, the specific direction of the tear, Hebrews' identification of the veil with Christ's own flesh — converges on a single, simple fact that is easy to state and endlessly worth sitting with: the way to God was opened from above, not forced open from below.

This matters for more than historical curiosity. Every system of religious effort, ancient or modern, operates on the assumption that access to the divine must be earned, negotiated, or achieved through sufficient human effort, ritual precision, or moral accumulation. The direction of the torn veil stands as a permanent, physical rebuttal to that assumption: the barrier did not wear thin from centuries of human striving reaching upward. It was torn, in a single moment, from the top down.

Whatever remains uncertain about the veil's exact dimensions, or the historical basis for certain popular details examined and set aside in this study, one thing does not remain uncertain: the way is open, it was opened by God himself, and it remains open still, for anyone willing to draw near 'with a true heart, in full assurance of faith' (Hebrews 10:22).

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 **Further Reading:** *Matthew 27:50-51; Hebrews 10:19-22; Ephesians 2:8-9.*

## Summary of Key Points

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- The temple veil separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, the innermost, most restricted space in Israel's entire worship system, where God's presence dwelt above the Ark of the Covenant.
- The veil's often-cited dimensions (roughly sixty feet tall, a hand's breadth thick) derive from later rabbinic tradition rather than the biblical text itself, though they are consistent with the temple's known grandeur and scale.
- The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) permitted only the high priest, once a year, to pass through the veil with sacrificial blood; the popular detail of a rope tied to his ankle lacks clear support in the earliest Jewish sources and should be treated as unverified legend rather than established fact.
- Matthew 27:51 (with Mark 15:38 and Luke 23:45) records the veil tearing 'from the top to the bottom' at the moment of Jesus's death — a direction inconsistent with ordinary human action and widely read as indicating divine agency.
- Hebrews 10:20 explicitly identifies the veil with Christ's own flesh, giving the tearing of the physical veil a direct theological correspondence to the giving of Christ's body in death.
- Read together, these details support the traditional conclusion that God himself, not any human participant in the crucifixion, tore the veil — consistent with the broader biblical pattern of divine initiative traced elsewhere in this study series.
- Historically, the temple's sacrificial system continued operating, according to Josephus's independent account, for roughly forty years after the veil's tearing, until the temple's destruction by Roman forces in A.D. 70 made its continuation physically impossible.
- The veil's traditional four-color symbolism (blue, purple, scarlet, white linen, corresponding to Christ's divinity, kingship, sacrifice, and purity) is a longstanding, spiritually meaningful devotional tradition, though it carries less direct textual support than Hebrews 10:20's explicit identification.
- Practically, this study grounds confidence that access to God is a gift rather than an achievement, encourages boldness in approaching God, honors the genuine weight of the old covenant system, models careful handling of uncertain tradition, and highlights how God's declared purposes find confirmation within actual history.

## Further Reading by Theme

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### **On the Temple's Structure and the Veil**

Exodus 26:31-35; Exodus 28:1-43; 1 Kings 6:1-38; Ezekiel 44:1-9.

### **On the Day of Atonement**

Leviticus 16:1-34; Leviticus 23:26-32; Hebrews 9:1-14.

### **On the Crucifixion Narratives**

Matthew 27:45-56; Mark 15:33-41; Luke 23:44-49; John 19:28-37.

### **On Access to God Through Christ**

Hebrews 4:14-16; Hebrews 10:19-25; Ephesians 2:11-18; Ephesians 3:12.

### **On the Temple's Historical Destruction**

Matthew 24:1-2; Luke 21:5-6, 20-24; Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Books 5-7 (for the historical account of the siege and destruction).

## Bibliography and Recommended References

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The works below are recommended for readers who wish to go further than this introductory study, whether through academic commentaries or accessible reference resources.

### Commentaries on Matthew

- FRANCE, R. T. The Gospel of Matthew. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- CARSON, D. A. Matthew. Expositor's Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

### Commentaries on Hebrews

- BRUCE, F. F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- KOESTER, Craig R. Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Yale Bible. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- LANE, William L. Hebrews 9-13. Word Biblical Commentary. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

### On the Temple and Its History

- EDERSHEIM, Alfred. The Temple: Its Ministry and Services. Peabody: Hendrickson (a classic, though sometimes dated, popular treatment worth reading alongside more recent scholarship).
- LEVINE, Lee I. Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- JOSEPHUS, Flavius. The Jewish War (various translations, including the Loeb Classical Library and Penguin Classics editions).

### On the Day of Atonement and Levitical Ritual

- HESS, Richard S., and WENHAM, Gordon J. Leviticus. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- MILGROM, Jacob. Leviticus 1-16. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday.

### Dictionaries and Original-Language Tools

- BROWN, DRIVER, BRIGGS. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB).
- KITTEL, Gerhard (ed.). Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), entry on *katapetasma*.
- VINE, W. E. Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.

— End of Study —