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221- The Vail

1. Introduction

A perplexing and silent element in the Tabernacle separated the final path to the presence of God from the rest of the structure and the camp. Available to only the high priest once a year on the day of atonement the Most Holy Place was beyond a final barrier barring entrance - **The Vail**. In this lesson we'll examine this barrier and its figurative connection to mercy and redemption from God.

2. The concealment of mercy

The Tabernacle represented the presence of God with the Hebrews at Sinai and throughout the wilderness wandering. Later the Tabernacle remained the center of worship to God but it was often forgotten as the people strayed from the Lord. Eventually, during the days of Solomon, the Tabernacle was replaced by the Temple but the items placed within it and their usage remained consistent.

We realize that God didn't live in the Tabernacle, nor did he live in the Temple in Jerusalem as Solomon observed (**1 Kings 8.27**) but it was the area God ordained as the place he could be reached and where sacrifices should be offered. In a sense if we think of getting closer to God in a physical sense during this time, we could trace a path from the camps of the tribes, into the court of the Tabernacle, through the Holy Place and finally into the Most Holy Place. Our journey however would end at the massive curtain at the West end of the Holy Place beyond which we couldn't pass. An attempt to do so would cost us our lives as God didn't allow this area to be violated.

The curtain, known as the Vail, might seem to be a simple divider or deterrent against trespass. Obviously there was nothing to really stop anyone physically if they were determined to cross the threshold of the Most Holy Place but that's where we would be wrong. God sanctified the Most Holy Place as the area that would house the Ark of the Covenant. It was there that the blood of the sacrifices on the day of Atonement was to be offered before the Ark and Mercy Seat. On that day God would manifest his presence and set the sins of the people aside for the next year. The Most Holy Place was therefore a sacred space shut off from all but the priests authorized to enter at the appointed time. We might see the Vail as simply an elaborate curtain but it represented one of the most significant foreshadows in the Tabernacle.

In order to understand and appreciate this barrier concealing the path to the mercy of God we'll need to review both the Old and New Testaments as we explore the figurative connections. We'll discuss:

- a. God's command and construction of the Vail

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- b. Its dimensions, materials and appearance
- c. Its installation, usage and location, and
- d. Figures contained in the Vail

Let's take a look at each of these.

3. God's command and construction of the Vail

At Sinai, God gave Moses instructions to make the Tabernacle and the items that would be used in worship and service to the Lord. The Vail appears as the sixth item detailed in the list. God stated, "*And thou shalt make a vail 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). As with some of the other objects described, there's a lack of detail other than the materials and overall appearance of the Vail.

Making the Vail is summarized as Bezaleel and Aholiab, along with the "*wise hearted*" men, fabricated each of the items. "*And he made a vail of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen: with cherubims made he it of cunning work. And he made thereunto four pillars of shittim wood, and overlaid them with gold: their hooks were of gold; and he cast for them four sockets of silver.*" (Ex 36.35-36). The silver sockets made for the Vail were cast from one hundred talents of silver gathered from the people with each socket made from one talent of silver for each of them (Ex 38.27). Exodus 40 summarizes the day the Tabernacle was setup and the installation of the items. In the last lesson I noted that this followed an inside out sequence. The Tabernacle's structure and curtains were setup, then the Ark of the Covenant was brought in, uncovered and the Vail put in place.

4. Dimensions, materials and appearance of the Vail

Precise measurements are given for some items or certain aspects of items that are made for the Tabernacle. As we read the description for making the Vail, there are no measurements provided. From the lesson on the Tabernacle we saw that the Tabernacle was approximately eighteen feet wide and fifteen feet high. In order to conceal the Most Holy Place the Vail would have to be wide enough to cover the entire area and tall enough to reach the tops of the posts or pillars that had a uniform size. The absence of specific dimensions conveys the idea that Bezaleel and the other workers, guided by God, would have this information.

The Vail, like the curtains on the inside of the Tabernacle, the door of the Tabernacle and the door of the Court, were elaborate tapestries. The cloth that these were made from is described as linen. This implies that the cloth wasn't a coarse fiber but was a skillfully woven fabric. This would set it apart as having a higher quality than what might be found in more casual uses. This

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type of cloth was of the best quality and its use in the Tabernacle emphasized the fact that only the best would be used in service to God.

We may not be able to recreate the exact appearance of the Vail but it was an intricate piece of design and craftsmanship. God specified that blue, purple and scarlet were to be combined in making the Vail and other curtains. Within the texture of the fabric, Cherubim were to be embroidered throughout as well. We don't have any idea what the Cherubim looked like but the overall effect would be a finely crafted tapestry. The linen fibers as well as the size of the Vail would most likely contribute to its weight so it resisted air flow but was still light enough to be handled and folded when needed.

5. Its installation, usage and location

The Tabernacle was made of boards overlaid with gold. These were then interlocked by a series of bars that stabilized them. There isn't enough detail to determine if the curtains for the interior of the Tabernacle were attached to the boards and posts but when it comes to the Vail we have a clearer picture of how it was installed.

Four pillars of acacia wood were created to support the Vail. These would have had the same dimensions as the other posts to cover the area. Its logical to conclude that these would have been placed at the far ends, eighteen feet apart, with remaining pillars spaced evenly across the opening. Gold hooks were used to hang the Vail which would have been at least fifteen feet high to match the height of the Tabernacle.

When we reviewed the dimensions for the Tabernacle we have the width, height and length. Inside the Tabernacle the length of the Holy Place isn't provided and without that information we can't determine the length of the Most Holy Place either. Within the biblical record the absence of information can be as significant as what we're given. The absence of exact floor space for the segments inside the Tabernacle simply points us in the direction of examining its figurative connections and foreshadows.

6. Figures contained in the Vail

The first figure we can identify is the concealment of the Ark and Mercy Seat. This was the place where God manifested his presence once a year on the day of atonement but it wasn't to be seen. The Vail, in a very literal physical sense, invokes the idea of mystery or concealment. At the time the Tabernacle was erected and sanctified the children of Israel would only have been familiar with God's commands contained in the Law. They wouldn't immediately see the Vail as a figure suggesting there was more to come or a barrier that implied the containment of prophecy of a day when the mercy of God would no longer be hidden. Their faith in the Lord would have to be anchored in the things they saw; the miracles, manna, parting the Red Sea and other events.

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They would have to trust the Lord and be content with what had been revealed. Within the texture of the Vail was a hint that the curtain was more than just a door.

God told Moses that the Vail was to be made with “*cherubims*” (Ex 26.31). These were present on top of the Ark of the Covenant and surrounded the space known as the Mercy Seat where God communed with Moses and later accepted the blood of atonement. Cherubim also appear in the vision of Ezekiel as powerful beings accompanying God in the prophet’s visions (Ezek 10, 11 & 41). David calls on the Lord to “*shine forth*” and describes him as the one “*that dwellest between the cherubims...*” (Psm 80.1). This image, recorded by divine inspiration, draws on the figure of the Mercy Seat with Cherubim facing each other with wingtips touching, shrouding the area. In our time the idea of the Cherubim has been turned into a cute image of a smiling winged child hovering around. The actual description of the cherubim in the scriptures however is somewhat different.

David supplies information about these beings. He writes, “*The Lord reigneth; let the people tremble: he sitteth between the cherubims; let the earth be moved. The Lord is great in Zion; and he is high above all the people. Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy.*” (Psm 99.1-3). This passage let’s us know that God is great and fierce in power and majesty and while the cherubims may refer to the mercy seat, its obvious that these beings exist, are servants of God and are powerful. The visions of Ezekiel are symbolic but the actions and appearance of the cherubim in those visions lets us know that they’re connected to God, work in accordance with his power and authority and are not beings to be taken lightly. Outside these references we can’t dwell on any heavenly beings or speculate about their activities because that’s not an area God has provided information on. What we can conclude from the presence of the cherubims in the fabric of the Vail is that the curtain is as much a guardian of the presence of God as the cherubim were on the Mercy Seat.

I noted a few minutes ago that the Vail in a sense is the embodiment of prophecy in a physical form. In that sense the Vail is a type of prophecies that point to the mercy of God and its eventual completion in his plan to save mankind. In order to understand that we have to connect all of this to Christ and his sacrifice on the cross. The Vail is a powerful figure that signals that the work of God was completed and the Law was finished. We can take a look at the death of Christ to see this.

Christ stated he had come to finish the work of his father (John 5.36) and not one part of the Law would be taken out of the way until it was fulfilled (Matt 5.18). On the day Christ was crucified we see the plan of God being completed in the final sacrifice for the sins of the world for all time. Note what happens when the Lord died. “*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...*” (Matt 27.50-51). We

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sometimes read this passage and are aware of this event but we need to take a moment to appreciate the gravity of what's revealed.

The Vail was in place in the Temple blocking sight and entrance to the Most Holy Place into which the high priest alone could enter one time a year. No one was to see the Ark, the Most Holy Place or have access to them. This was one of the most sacred places on the planet. As Christ died the Vail was ripped in two from top to bottom (**Matt 27.50-51, Mark 15.37-38, Luke 23.44-46**). Whenever I read that I can't see how the priests and Levites in the Temple couldn't understand what had just happened. Maybe they were still too filled with hate for Christ that they wouldn't allow themselves to see it but the bottom line was that in a single act God took the barrier away, opening the door to the Most Holy Place putting an end to the Law of Moses. The scriptures help us see the depth and importance of this.

Throughout these lessons we've discussed the scheme of redemption, God's plan and blueprint for saving mankind from eternal death and destruction. We've reviewed symbolism in the scriptures and I've demonstrated how the figures, symbols and other things ultimately point to Christ. From the time that man was separated from God until the moment Christ died, everything centered on the accomplishment of this task. As we look at the Vail we find it has a profound connection to Christ. The writer of Hebrews brings this out.

We read, "***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..***" (**Heb 10.19-20**). Sin came into the world as a result of Adam and Eve's transgression in the garden. This severed our relationship to God without remedy until the time that Christ died. God appointed Christ as the only acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the world, representing the final statement of mercy and redemption. In this passage we see Christ who was sinless and alone was able to enter the presence of God, offer his own blood as the final atonement and make reconciliation with God a reality. The writer refers to Christ as the new and living way who passed through the veil represented by his flesh. Christ in the form of a man was able to live a sinless life and when he died on the cross the barrier between God and man was removed. The Vail in the Tabernacle and later the Temple represented a barrier to accessing the mercy of God. This was an impenetrable obstacle for humans but Christ was able to pass within that veil, becoming the fulfillment of all God planned, and made the final peace with his sacrifice. As the Vail was torn in two, the way to the presence and forgiveness of God was revealed. That which was hidden in a mystery was now known and available.

The Most Holy Place and Ark inside were mysterious. The Vail served to enhance this air of mystery concealing God's eventual act that would fulfill his promise to undo the work of Satan. Paul talks about this in his address to the Colossians. Paul states that, "***the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the***

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Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus... (Col 1.26-28). God concealed how he would achieve his plan since ***“none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”*** (1 Cor 2.8). The Vail represented the concealment of God’s plan. In a physical sense the Vail itself was a mystery that hadn’t been explained. When Christ died and the Vail tore, the mystery was no more, the Law was finished, the prophets were fulfilled and salvation became a reality.

Another connection with the Vail is that only the high priest was able to enter the Most Holy Place and then only once a year. The priest had to be accompanied by the blood of atonement, the holy incense burning over coals from the altar of burnt offering, wearing the garments specified for the occasion. Failure to meet these requirements would lead to the priests death. As we compare this to Christ we find that he was able to pass through the veil of his flesh, offering his own blood for atonement, clothed in sinless perfection as the ultimate sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews discusses this point as well.

First, we have confirmation that Christ is our high priest. ***“Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”*** (Heb 4.14-15). The writer goes on to illustrate the importance of Christ in his role as our high priest. ***“But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.”*** (Heb 7.24-25). Now we can put all this together and connect Christ with the Vail.

Christ was the sacrifice for sin that was ordained by God. He came into the world at the time God selected and completed the work of his father which fulfilled the Law of Moses and the prophets. In one series of actions surrounding his death, Christ was sanctified as the high priest of the new law. He offered himself with unleavened bread in the institution of the memorial we know as the Lord’s supper. He was also the sacrifice and was able to offer his blood to God as an atonement for mankind. He passed into the heavens, the true most holy place where God recognized his sacrifice. The Vail marked the way to the mercy of God and it was the only path to receive this. Christ told his disciples, ***“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”*** (John 14.6). Christ was the point at which God’s mercy was obtained and made available for all humanity for all time. When Christ was fully revealed and the work completed, the Vail tore, signifying the end of the Mosaic era and the Law.

A final image that stands out for me is the color of the threads used to create the linen from which the Vail was made. God specified that blue, purple and scarlet were to be used and as

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the cloth was made the cherubim would be embroidered. The colors scarlet, or a deep red, and blue can be combined to create the color purple. The color purple was a sign of royalty and was valued highly even in the first century. When Christ was being prepared for execution, the Roman soldiers placed a purple robe on him, placed a crown of thorns on his head and mocked him as a king. In the King James version the robe is rendered as scarlet (**Matt 27.28**) and as purple (**John 19.5**). In spite of the rendering the colors are represented in the Vail which can be regarded as an indirect foreshadow of Christ.

Another aspect of this is that the combination of the two colors into a third is reminiscent of the complementary nature of the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament would have no meaning without the New, and the New would have no foundation without the Old. This is a strong reminder that the Old Testament is relevant and needs to be studied today.

A final observation concerning the colors used in the Vail is that the combination of red, or scarlet and blue can form purple, but in the right proportions will also create black. We don't know what the Vail looked like but from the description it may have had a dark somewhat shadowy presence until viewed closeup. This is consistent with the embodiment of a mystery that would be revealed in the future and that today can be understood by a detailed study and analysis of God's word.

7. What we've learned

We can summarize what we've learned about the Vail and how it serves as a powerful but silent foreshadow of what was to come.

- a. The Vail represented a barrier preventing access to God's presence and mercy
- b. The Vail remained unexplained and therefore represented concealment of God's purpose
- c. The Vail represented a single path to reconciliation with God
- d. When Christ died and the Vail was torn, the path to God's mercy was now open
- e. Christ passed through the "*veil*" of his flesh so that in death he became the final sacrifice for sin, the high priest of the new law and the door to reconciliation with God
- f. The tearing of the Vail at Christ's death represented the end of the era governed by the Law of Moses

These are the major points that we can see in the Vail. Once more we see the wisdom and engineering of God expressed in a physical form that signaled the end of the Mosaic dispensation in a clear and unmistakable way.

8. Next

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Worship to God included a number of sacrifices that were made daily, weekly and annually. When we think about this we don't always stop to consider what this entailed. In the next lesson we'll discuss **The Altar Of Burnt Offering** as we examine the brutal nature of the sacrifices, foreshadows connecting them to Christ and the significance of the altar as the focal point where these were made.