

“What Their Eyes Did Not See” is a chapter from *[Sifted But Saved](#)* by W. W. Melton, published in 1925 and 2001. It’s a clear, deeply insightful explanation of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross. Below are links to the sections as Dr. Melton titled them:

[The Mystery of the Darkness](#)

[The Earthquake](#)

[The Rending of the Veil](#)

[Christ’s Cry of Anguish](#)

[The Resurrection](#)

[The Grace of the Lord Jesus](#)

[The Silence in Heaven](#)

What Their Eyes Did Not See

And sitting down they watched him there. (Matt. 27:36)

The text describes the conduct of the crucifiers of Christ. When they had performed their official duty, and the condemned men were hanging on their ugly crosses in full view of the crowd, the soldiers sat down with a sigh of relief and fixed their eyes on the central figure, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been the subject of many remarks for the past three years. The thieves dying with him were nothing. But this man was the marvel of the age. He who had healed hopeless cripples and even raised the dead was himself condemned to die. The miracle worker could not save himself, so with curious eyes they looked on his torture and agony as a deserved fate and waited for the end to come.

THE MYSTERY OF THE DARKNESS

Some have endeavored to show what these curious onlookers saw that day, but it shall be my task to show what they missed seeing—to point out the things that transpired before their eyes, yet went unheeded. And the first mystery that passed before them was the darkness so graphically described by the sacred writers. True, the people saw the darkness, but that is all they saw. *God came slipping through that darkness*, and they failed to see him. To them it may have been seen as a very natural occurrence, merely an eclipse of the sun. And many of the enemies of Christ to this day try to explain away that phenomenon by saying that it was a solar eclipse. My answer to these critics is that it was not a natural thing at all, but the most unnatural thing that could happen at the time.

You will bear in mind that the crucifixion of Christ took place at the great feast of the Passover, which falls on the fourteenth of Nisan (March-April) on the Jewish calendar. This feast always took place at the full moon.¹ Now whoever thinks at all will know that the sun cannot be in eclipse when the moon is full. A solar eclipse is caused by the moon passing between the sun and the earth, thereby obscuring the sun for a brief time. But when the moon is full, it is at such an angle as to reflect the full brightness of the sun back to the earth!

But another reason why it could not have been a natural eclipse is the length of the darkness. Astronomers will tell you that a total eclipse of the sun cannot last over seven minutes anywhere on earth, but this darkness lasted three hours ([Matt. 27:45](#)), making it impossible to explain on natural grounds. There can be but one explanation: God hid the face of the sun so wicked eyes could not gaze on the holy sacrifice. It was the last kind act of God to his Son when he was dying. Yes, these guards saw the darkness, but they failed to see God in the darkness. ([back to Table of Contents](#))

THE EARTHQUAKE

God came in another form that day and passed before their eyes, but they failed to see him. *He visited them in the form of an earthquake.* But there have been many earthquakes, so what was different about that one? And some have maintained that the earthquake on this day was as all other such occurrences. Yet we see that if the reports of the phenomenon are reliable, it was in a class by itself. It burst open the graves of many of the righteous, woke them from their sleep of death, and sent them alive into the streets of Jerusalem to be seen and recognized by their friends.

This is unusual behavior for an earthquake. The history of such things has been to the contrary. These tremors are usually agents of death, but this one was a bearer of life. Others have filled the graves with lifeless bodies, but this one emptied the graves of their corpses. To the guards on the slopes of Calvary, it was nothing but a natural thing. To us, it was the shudder of God. Not only was the earth shrouded with darkness, but it reeled as a drunken man under a terrible blow. If this earthquake were a natural thing, it would have been harder to explain than to admit it was unnatural. But since it occurred at the time of the darkness and at the time Christ, the strangest man on earth, was being put to death, the question would naturally be raised, “How could so many natural things of such magnitude happen at the same time?” ([back to Table of Contents](#))

THE RENDING OF THE VEIL

During the darkness, at the same moment the earthquake struck, the veil in the temple was torn completely in two, from top to bottom. This heavy curtain separated the outer holy place from the holy of holies. No one but the high priest went behind that curtain where the ark of the covenant stood. There he appeared once a year with the blood of the sacrifice to make atonement for the people (see [Heb. 9](#)). But when Christ was dying, that veil was rent by an unseen hand so that not a thread was left holding it together.

It may be claimed that the earthquake did it. But the temple was not damaged by the quake. The pillars that supported the roof were not moved. The building remained intact for another seventy years, during which time there is no record of rebuilding or repairs. Why should the curtain be torn apart when no other damage came to the holy place?

These men whose eyes were blinded by sin saw the rending of the veil, but they saw no hand nor power that rent it. God was in their temple, but they failed to see him. He came pushing aside their forms, ceremonies, priests, and ritualistic services and *opened access to the mercy seat to each worshiper*. God made it possible for the common people to approach him for themselves without the intervention of priests or middlemen. They need no longer bring their sacrifices, for one sacrifice has been offered for all, even Jesus Christ, who was “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” ([Rev. 13:8](#)). Each believer may come for himself, pray for himself, and present his own cause to God.

The priests of Israel were sinful (as we all are), but here is a high priest without sin. The priests of the house of Levi died as everyone does, but here is a priest from heaven who will never die. The rending of that veil was the announcement of a new day for all the world. The Christian religion was to be a matter of personal relationship of the individual with God. There is not one step in all the Christian walk that can be taken by proxy. One cannot repent for another, nor can one have faith for another. Neither can one be saved for another, nor consecrate his life for another, nor live righteously for another, nor die for

another. These are personal matters.

You have the same right and privilege to pray to God that a preacher or priest has, and God will hear you as quickly, if you come in the proper spirit, as he will these spiritual teachers. They may teach you about God, but you must trust him for yourself. They may instruct you in prayer, but you must do the praying. The rending of that veil, and the exposing of the mercy seat, demonstrated that there was nothing between the common people and God—the chasm had been bridged (see [John 1:51](#)). The day of priests, rituals, and sacrifices as a means of approaching God had been done away with, and the throne of God became within reach of every soul. ([back to Table of Contents](#))

CHRIST'S CRY OF ANGUISH

Just before Christ died, he gave a cry that was misunderstood by that group of watchers. He cried, “My God, my God why has thou forsaken me?” ([Matt. 27:46](#)). They thought he cried for physical pain and offered him a stupefying drug. But he refused it. The source of that distress was far deeper than physical pain. *God had withdrawn his presence from him*, and for the first time in his life, Christ felt the loneliness of soul that will come to the lost when they stand condemned before God. He died as the lost will die. And as surely as the lost will die without God, forsaken and alone, so Christ passed through the same dreadful experience. And just as certainly as the lost will be forsaken in death, so was Christ forsaken in his death. These men who sat down to watch him die heard the words he spoke, but how little they understood him!

When Paul wished to paint the darkest picture possible of the unsaved condition, he could think of no stronger words to use than “having no hope, and without God” ([Eph. 2:12](#)). And when Christ passed through the ordeal of his betrayal and death, he bore it without a word until he found himself cut off from God. This seemed more than he could stand and proved the greatest trial of all. It was such a blow that it wrung the only wail of his life from his lips, and it was the only experience in life for which he seemed unprepared. It was a literal hell to him. And it will be a literal hell to the lost soul to be cut off forever from the presence of God. The absence of God will be one of the pangs that will make hell indescribable. ([back to Table of Contents](#))

THE RESURRECTION

The last misunderstood fact connected with the death of Christ that I have the time to enlarge upon is *his resurrection*. They who watched him die were also assigned the task of watching his tomb after he was dead. He was one dead man the Pharisees were afraid of. They said they were afraid of his body being stolen by his friends, but we believe they were afraid he might really make good his promise to rise again. So they sealed the stone of the tomb and set an armed guard to watch for trespassers. When that trespasser came he caused such consternation among the guards that they all fainted dead away.

And when they woke up, they had a problem on their hands. They could not deny what had happened; they could not keep it secret, and they could not explain it.² Jesus was a bigger threat now than before. That empty grave mocked them every time they saw it.

Every child on the street must have twitted them because they could not keep a dead man in his grave. The embarrassment became dreadful. But this unheard-of phenomenon meant very little to them apart from the physical side and the temporary complication. It was crowded with eternal truth, which they completely missed.

What great doctrines sprang out of the Resurrection? Several, but we shall enumerate four. *It gave us a new book, the New Testament.* Before the Resurrection, the world had just half a Bible, the Old Testament. It was a book of promises and prophecies but still just part of the story of God's redemptive efforts on our behalf. After the Resurrection of Christ, historians began to record what happened, and the good news spread everywhere. And in time the most accurate of these writings were gathered into the New Testament.

It is the story of the risen Lord. If he had never come from the grave, these books would never have been written, for the world would not be interested in the story of a dead Christ. But the fact that he lives again charges the world with hope as lightning pierces the sky. That empty tomb is the source, fountain, and authority of a new message. It is the foundation of a new hope. It is the promise and guarantee of a new life. It is the inspiration of a new zeal. It is the appeal for a new consecration.

The second great doctrine that sprang out of the resurrection of the Lord was *a new holy day*. For ages, the Jews observed Saturday as the holy day. The followers of the risen Lord had no thought of changing the custom. They doubtless met according to tradition on the regular Jewish Sabbath. But on Sunday morning, a week after the Lord had come from the tomb, they must have met in a kind of celebration of the great event that had taken place a week before. This did not take the place of their worship on Saturday, neither did they decide to put aside that holy day. But another week passed, and by agreement they came together again on Sunday morning to worship him on the anniversary of his resurrection. This followed week after week until it became a custom by which they were known and by which they eventually bound themselves.

That rule has prevailed for almost two thousand years. The fact that we observe Sunday rather than Saturday is the testimony of our belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These watchers by the tomb looked upon an empty grave, but they did not know what that vacant sepulcher would mean to the generations to come. Little did they think that the map of the world would be remade around it, and the divisions of time would be rearranged over its door. How little they saw compared to what they failed to see!

A third voice from the empty tomb is *a new institution, the church*. The Jews had been bound together by national ties, and their pride was in the unity and exclusiveness of their race. It was a thing to be gloried in that God was their God and not the Gentiles' God. They had no message and no hope to offer the other races of earth.

But following the resurrection of Christ, his friends and followers found themselves bound by new ties into a new brotherhood, with a new vision of life and a new obligation. They no longer looked for racial differences but threw their doors open to Gentiles as well as Jews, on the condition that those who came to accept this Christ as Lord believe in his resurrection from the dead and be willing to accept his teaching as the standard of life (see [Gal. 3:28](#)).

This little band of worshipers came up against bitter and stubborn opposition, but they continued to give the message of his resurrection to every person they met and to provide for its being told to unborn generations. This was a new institution with a new task and a new sense of responsibility and direction. How different it was from the Jewish national

order based on forms and ceremonies rather than on a personal, spiritual contact of the individual with God. But when these armed guards looked into that bare vault from which the Lord had so recently come, they figured the excitement would soon die down and that the rolling years would blot out every trace of it.

But not so. After the stretch of centuries, skeptics are still busy trying to cover up that empty grave or explain its emptiness. But the more they explain, the more explaining they have to do, for the church with its millions of believers has circled the earth and has told the story of his resurrection in almost every land. An army of freedmen has discovered its truth.

This new, missionary, altruistic band of believers is one of the results of the raising to life of the slain Lord. And this institution would have never existed had Christ remained dead. If it is objected that the church was organized before the death of Christ rather than after his resurrection, let the answer be that it was invested with the authority and message of the risen Lord. Had he never been raised, the organization would have died before another convert was made.

The last voice of the open grave is *a new ordinance, baptism*. This is a New Testament ordinance, springing out of a New Testament condition and teaching a New Testament doctrine. Given in advance of the death of the Lord, it was a prophecy and pledge of his death, burial, and resurrection. And during the following years, the Christians took this means of publicly proclaiming their belief in his resurrection, by being submerged in water and raised up again.

This became the symbol of his discipleship. It was the pledge of a new life to be patterned after his and a prophecy of a new hope that one day all his believers would be raised up from the grave by his power. For centuries it has been a uniform custom that when one accepts Jesus as Savior, he submits to the ordinance of baptism as a public announcement of his belief in the risen Lord. The form of this ordinance is as valuable as the authority of the church, the New Testament, or the Lord's day, for they all derive their origin and authority from the empty grave. One cannot be changed any easier than another, since they all sprang from the same sepulcher. ([back to Table of Contents](#))

THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS

When the Roman officers sat down to watch him on the cross, what did they see? They saw a defenseless man die with hardly a word. No complaint, no criticism for anyone, no denial of the charges made against him, no justification of his claims, no rebuke of any kind. Such silence and such behavior were far from human. They publicly displayed a grace not known among men. Humans would have gone to the grave denying the false charges and with their last breath declaring their innocence. But he was silent, because he was a willing sacrifice.

In like manner, he proved the merit of his teachings by living up to his own standards. He turned the other cheek to those who struck him, which proved his teaching was not a mere theory but a practical rule of life. He also prayed for those who persecuted him, again establishing his authority to teach others to do likewise. He taught us how to treat our enemies, how to forgive, how to bear insults, how to behave in trouble and sorrow.

Poets have caught his spirit and have clothed it in words that have become immortal. Artists have expressed it on canvas in pictures of undying fame. Singers and musicians have moved their audiences to tears with the thrill of it. Those disinterested soldiers watched a man die that day who made such a profound impact on the world that his influence spreads and deepens every decade. How little did they know they were participating in a world event! How little did they think their actions would be read about by every succeeding generation and that their victim would be worshiped in every nation on earth! ([back to Table of Contents](#))

THE SILENCE IN HEAVEN

But they failed to see another thing. The angels were witnesses of that same scene, and we are not wholly in the dark as to their behavior during that time. A little passage in [Revelation 8:1](#) tells us that “there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.” Certain Bible scholars have interpreted this to refer to the time of the Crucifixion. Whether this is the interpretation or not, it is a reasonable thing, for it is natural from the human point of view.

The thought of the passage sends a thrill through every believer’s heart. It is as if angels were singing their songs of praise, unconscious of what was taking place on earth. But the Father was watching every cruel step, and when the death struggle was on, he could stand it no longer. He turned to the happy throng of worshipers and hushed them into silence, saying, “It is no time to sing, but a time to be silent, for my Son is dying.”

Or if the thought may be pictured in a slightly different way, God seemed to part the curtains of heaven to allow the angels to look on that scene, and when they had seen the pallid face of Christ on the cross, they hushed their merry-making and hung their heads in silence (see [1 Pet. 1:12](#)).

This is the most human and natural thing possible. Some months ago I was called from my bed in the night to go to a home where a mother was dying. I found the room filled with relatives and friends who were walking on tiptoe and speaking in softest whispers. Then the end drew nearer, the last breath came—a struggle—and all was over. A moment of intense silence followed. Not a whisper, not a move of any kind. Every head was bowed, and that scene of Revelation was in the room of death.

This is no unusual thing. After Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, died, on the day he lay in state every Bell telephone in the United States was disconnected for one minute at twelve o’clock. The whole system was dead for one minute. In like manner, when E. H. Harriman, the great railway magnate, died, his entire system of roads suspended service for one minute. Every train stopped, whether it was in the city or in the desert. And every employee bowed his head in silence for a brief moment.

It seems only fitting that the angels should hush their songs and bow their heads when their Maker and Master hung—a lifeless body—on the cross.

Those heartless Roman executioners shouted with the mob, but they did not weep with the angels. They howled like wolves for his blood, but they did not rejoice as the redeemed in the salvation it purchased. They saw a victim hang helpless and dying before them, but they failed to see a fountain opened for their cleansing ([Zech. 13:1](#)). They saw a

prophet rejected, but they did not know he was the cornerstone of God's kingdom ([1 Pet. 2:4-8](#)). He looked to them like a worm dangling from a pole, but they did not know he was charged with a power that would send light into every dark corner of the world. What they saw was nothing compared to what they missed seeing. ([back to Table of Contents](#))

Notes:

1. See Zola Levitt, *[The Seven Feasts of Israel](#)* (Dallas: Zola Levitt Ministries, 1979). [back to text](#)
2. The guards' official explanation as recorded in Matthew 28:13 was that Jesus' disciples stole his body while they slept. This scenario falls apart under scrutiny. How could the guards know what happened while they slept? [back to text](#)