

What Happened at the Earthquake when the Graves were opened in Matthew 27:45-56

FORETASTE OF THE FINAL RESURRECTION

We do not understand certain aspects of these miracles. The meaning of the torn veil is the easiest to decipher because of the way it is developed in the Book of Hebrews. But the darkness is unexplained. So is the earthquake. And so is the miracle to which we come now: the resurrection of many of the Old Testament saints and their appearance to many in Jerusalem following Jesus' resurrection. We do not know whether these saints had died long ago or only recently. We do not know how long they remained alive. Was this a permanent resurrection? If it was, what happened to them? Were they transported to heaven, like Elijah? Or did they die again? We do not even know whom they went into Jerusalem to see or why they went or what they said to those they saw.

What we do know is that the report must be historical. Otherwise, why would Matthew have recorded such an amazing thing at all? And why so soberly and with no explanation of its meaning? What we can suppose is that the resurrection of these believers was a foretaste and pledge of the final resurrection of all who believe on Jesus. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so also will God raise from the dead those who die in him. Jesus had taught this clearly. When his friend Lazarus had died and Jesus had returned to Bethany at the request of Lazarus's sisters, Martha went out to meet him, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

That was orthodox teaching among the Jews of that day, no doubt drawn from Old Testament texts. But Martha was thinking of the future, and her reply showed that she did not connect this future resurrection with Jesus in any specific way. "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day," Martha said.

Jesus replied, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:21-26). This was comprehensive teaching, indicating that true life is spiritual life and that those who believe in Jesus have it. His words also taught about a final resurrection. Therefore, it is correct to say of those who believe that they "will never die." All this is because of Christ and is experienced through faith in him. It is why Jesus began his teaching by saying, "I am the resurrection and the life" (v. 25). By raising some to life at the time of Jesus' death, God indicated that this is the destiny of all who believe on Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Later on Jesus told his disciples, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19). And still later, Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also

through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

1 Corinthians 15:20–23

This does not mean that the resurrection of those who came out of their tombs at the time of Christ's death was their final resurrection. I imagine that they all died again. But while theirs was not the *final* resurrection, it was *a* resurrection, and it pointed to the day when all who are Christ's will be raised by him.

Paul wrote,

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:51–57

The resurrection of many of the saints who had died was a pledge of the final resurrection and an encouragement for those who wait for it.

The Greatest Miracle of All

We have examined four great miracles: the hours of darkness, the tearing of the veil, the earthquake, and the resurrection of many holy persons who had died. The fifth miracle, however, was the greatest one of all.

Standing by the cross was a Roman centurion, the leader of those who had been given the task of crucifying Jesus. We can assume he was a pagan, but when he saw what happened when Jesus died, God quickened him to spiritual life, and he cried out with true faith, “Surely he was the Son of God” (v. 54). It may not have been a full confession. It lacked much that he would undoubtedly come to know later. But it was correct as far as it went, and we cannot doubt that Matthew included it as an example of what is required of all who come face to face with Jesus. Have you made that vital confession, acknowledging that Jesus is both the Son of God and your Savior? It is the only way that anyone can be saved.¹

¹ Boice, J. M. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (pp. 626–628). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

SUBDUING DEATH

and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (27:52–53)

The sixth miracle at the crucifixion was closely related to the previous one, as the supernatural earthquake not only gave the world a foretaste of divine judgment but also caused many **tombs** to be **opened**.

The significant miracle of that event, however, was not the mere opening of tombs, as could occur during any earthquake. The great miracle was that **many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised**. After the veil of the Temple was torn in two and the earth around Jerusalem was violently shaken, the Lord selectively **raised** the **bodies** of certain believers who had died.

Matthew points out that **many**, but not all, **bodies of the saints** who had died **were resurrected**, making clear that this **resurrection** was divinely restricted to a limited number of believers. They had trusted in God during the time before and under the Old Covenant, and some of those bodies may have been in their graves many hundreds of years. When Jesus died, their spirits came from the abode of righteous spirits and were joined with their glorified bodies that came out of the graves. This was full and final resurrection and glorification, making this miracle another foretaste of God's sovereign work during the end times, when "all the dead in Christ shall rise" (1 Thess. 4:16).

It is important to note that the phrase **and coming out of the tombs** should be followed by a period, indicating the close of the sentence. **After His resurrection** begins a new sentence and introduces a distinct truth, namely, that those select resurrected saints then **entered the holy city and appeared to many**.

Those saints did not appear in Jerusalem until after the Lord's own resurrection, because He was divinely appointed to be "the first fruits of those who are asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). And just as Christ Himself appeared after His resurrection only to those who already believed in Him, it would also seem that the **many** to whom the resurrected saints appeared were all believers. We are not told what they said to their brethren in **the holy city**, but their appearance in bodily form not only testified to Christ's resurrection but also to God's promise to raise all those who put their trust in Christ (1 Cor. 15:22, 51–53).

Through those six miracles the Father was saying that the cross is the only hope for eternal life. When one's sin is carried away by Christ's atoning death, the wrath of God is appeased for that believer, and he is delivered from the death and condemnation that the Lord endured on his behalf. For those who believe in the Son, access to God is open wide, and they are assured of living in His eternal and indestructible kingdom in eternal and indestructible bodies.²

Then Jesus shouted, "It is finished! Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit!" The fact that Jesus shouted with a loud voice indicates that He was in complete control of His faculties. Then He voluntarily yielded up His spirit and died.

Though He was "crucified through weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4), He exercised wonderful power when He died. Three miracles took place simultaneously: The veil of the temple was torn in two

² MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (Mt 27:51–52). Chicago: Moody Press.

from top to bottom; an earthquake opened many graves; some saints arose from the dead. The rending of the veil symbolized the wonderful truth that the way was now open to God (Heb. 10:14–26). There was no more need of temples, priests, altars, or sacrifices. Jesus had finished the work of salvation on the cross.

The earthquake reminds us of what happened at Mount Sinai when God gave the Law to Moses (Ex. 19:16ff). The earthquake at Calvary signified that the demands of the Law had been met and the curse of the Law forever abolished (Heb. 12:18–24). The torn veil indicates that He conquered sin; the earthquake suggests that He conquered the Law and fulfilled it; and the resurrections prove that He defeated death.

We are not told who these saints were; they were simply believers who had died. The *King James Version* suggests that they did not come out of the graves until *after* His resurrection; the *New American Standard Bible* agrees with this. It is difficult to believe that they were given life on Friday afternoon and yet remained in their tombs until Sunday. The *New International Version* suggests that these saints were resurrected immediately and came out of their tombs, but that they did not visit in Jerusalem until after Jesus had been raised from the dead. It is not likely that many Jews would be in the cemetery on Passover, since they might be defiled by the dead. These resurrections could have taken place with nobody finding out at that time.

The result of all of this was the testimony of the centurion and those watching. “Truly this was the Son of God.” Did this indicate saving faith? Not necessarily. But certainly it indicated hearts that were open to the truth.

The only disciple at the cross when Jesus died was John (John 19:35). But many women were watching from a distance, undoubtedly those who had assisted Him in His ministry (Luke 8:2). Three women were named: Mary Magdalene, who had been delivered of seven demons (Luke 8:2); Mary, the mother of James and Joses, who also was at the tomb on Resurrection morning (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1); and Salome, the mother of James and John. Salome had asked Jesus for special thrones for her sons. We wonder how she felt as she saw Him hanging on a cross.³

In Luke 19:47 the same word is used to describe “the principal men of the people” (ASV). Here again the term is used to describe those first in status. Thus the first resurrection means the chief or best resurrection in contrast to the awful resurrection in store for the wicked.

How many divisions are there of the first resurrection? Here is a suggested list. Perhaps it is not exhaustive:

1. Enoch. “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him” (Gen. 5:24).
2. Elijah. “And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11b).
3. Christ. “Christ the first fruits” (1 Cor. 15:23). If Christ is the first fruits how could he be preceded by others? The answer is in 1 Corinthians 15:20—He is “the first fruits of them that slept.” Enoch and Elijah were translated apart from the sleep of death.
4. Some saints immediately after Christ’s resurrection. “And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 103–104). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

went into the holy city, and appeared unto many” (Matt. 27:52, 53). Most commentators believe that this describes a real resurrection, and not just a restoration to the mortal state.

5. The dead in Christ at the rapture. “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thess. 4:16).
6. The living saints at the rapture. “Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17). Note that the living are not resurrected at the same time with the dead, but “the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thess. 4:16c). The living constitute another division chronologically and also as to the nature of their experience.
7. The two witnesses during the tribulation. “And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies beheld them” (Rev. 11:12). Note that not all of the tribulation martyrs are raised at the same time.
8. The other martyrs of the tribulation. “And I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev. 20:4b).
9. The saints who die during the millennium. Revelation 20:12, 13, doubtless describes the resurrection of the righteous dead of the millennium as well as the resurrection of the wicked.
10. The living saints at the end of the millennium. There is no specific passage for this group but how else can they enter the eternal state?

This list assumes that the resurrection of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is before the tribulation. If, for the sake of argument, this assumption should be dropped—there would yet remain nine divisions of the first resurrection. The common assumption of a one-stage first resurrection is clearly unbiblical and the key argument of the posttribulation position loses its force.⁴

⁴ Aldrich, R. L. (1971). Divisions of the First Resurrection. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 128, 118–119.