

What Happened At The Earthquake When The Graves Were Opened? Matthew 27:45-56?

In Hebrews 2:14 God tells us that through death Christ destroyed the Devil's power of death. That event was spiritual, invisible, and would have escaped notice except for God's amazing illustration.

POINT-1: JESUS SHOWED DEATH WAS SUBDUED

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. (Matthew 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.¹

POINT-2: JESUS GAVE A 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

¹ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (Mt 27:51–52). Chicago: Moody Press.

in him. Jesus had taught this clearly².

POINT-3: THE SAINTS RAISED WERE THE FIRST FRUITS OFFERING

Lazarus (John 11:43–44), Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8:52–56), and the widow of Nain’s son (Luke 7:13–15), they too passed through physical death again.

But these were probably raised with glorified bodies like the Lord’s.

Walvoord suggests this event was “a fulfillment of the Feast of the Firstfruits of harvest mentioned in Leviticus 23:10–14. On that occasion, as a token of the coming harvest, the people would bring a handful of grain to the priest. The resurrection of these saints, occurring after Jesus Himself was raised, is a token of the coming harvest when all the saints will be raised” (Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 236).³

POINT-4: JESUS IS THE JUDGE WITH THE FINAL VERDICT FOR EVERYONE

John 5:22-29 (NKJV) For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son,²³ that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.²⁴ “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.²⁵ Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.²⁶ For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself,²⁷ and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.²⁸ Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice²⁹ and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

Acts 17:31 (NKJV) because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

POINT-5: PAUL EXPLAINS THREE STAGES OF

² J. M. Boice

³ Barbieri, L. A., Jr. (1985). Matthew. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 90). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

RESURRECTION

1 Corinthians 15:20–23 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:

1. Christ,
2. the firstfruits;
3. then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

POINT-6: OTHER STAGES OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE SAINTS

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. 15:20, 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. **“The first fruits” (1 Cor. 15:23).** 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 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. **“Then, when he comes, those who belong to him” (1 Cor. 15:23).** 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?⁴

POINT-7: JESUS VISITED THE GRAVE

Ephesians 4:9 *ascended*. Jesus' ascension from earth to heaven (Acts 1:9–11), where He forever reigns with His Father. *first descended*. This refers to Christ's incarnation, when He came down from heaven as a man into the earth of suffering and death. *the lower parts of the earth*. These are in contrast to the highest heavens to which He afterward ascended (cf. Ps. 139:8, 15; Is. 44:23). The phrase here does not point to a specific place, but to the great depth, as it were, of the incarnation, including Christ's descent, between His crucifixion and resurrection beyond the earth, the grave, and death, into the very pit of the demons, "the spirits in prison" (*see notes on Col. 2:14, 15; 1 Pet. 3:18, 19*).⁵

POINT-8: JESUS MADE A SPECTACLE

Col. 2:15 Having disarmed. In yet another element of the cross work, Paul tells that the cross spelled the ultimate doom of Satan and his evil host of fallen angels (cf. Gen. 3:15; John 12:31; 16:11; Heb. 2:14). **principalities and powers**. *See note on 1:16*. While His body was dead, His living, divine spirit actually went to the abode of demons and announced His triumph over sin, Satan, death, and hell. *See notes on 1 Pet. 3:18, 19*. **made a public spectacle ... triumphing over them**. The picture is that of a victorious Roman general parading his defeated enemies through the streets of Rome (*see notes on 2 Cor. 2:14–16*). Christ won the victory over the demon forces on the cross, where their efforts to halt God's redemptive plan were ultimately defeated. For more on that triumphant imagery, *see notes on 2 Cor. 2:14–16*.⁶

POINT-9: JESUS PROCLAIMED HIS TRIUMPH IN THE ABYSS

1 Peter 3:19 preached. Between Christ's death and resurrection, His living spirit went to the demon spirits bound in the abyss and proclaimed that, in spite of His death, He had triumphed over them (*See note on Col. 2:14, 15*). **spirits**

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

⁵ MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., pp. 1808–1809). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

⁶ MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., p. 1836). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

in prison. This refers to fallen angels (demons), who were permanently bound because of heinous wickedness. The demons who are not so bound resist such a sentence (cf. Luke 8:31). In the end, they will all be sent to the eternal lake of fire (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10).

3:20 disobedient ... in the days of Noah. Peter further explains that the abyss is inhabited by bound demons who have been there since the time of Noah, and who were sent there because they severely overstepped the bounds of God's tolerance with their wickedness. The demons of Noah's day were running riot through the earth, filling the world with their wicked, vile, anti-God activity, including sexual sin, so that even 120 years of Noah's preaching, while the ark was being built, could not convince any of the human race beyond the 8 people in Noah's family to believe in God (*see notes on 2 Pet. 2:4, 5; Jude 6, 7; cf. Gen. 6:1–8*). Thus God bound these demons permanently in the abyss until their final sentencing.⁷

POINT-10: PROCLAIM JESUS AS CREATOR, REDEEMER & JUDGE

Acts 17:24-31

⁷ MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., pp. 1945–1946). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.