

# The Miracles of Calvary – The Earthquake – Matthew 27:51b

## Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:18-29

### Introduction

What images come to mind when you hear the word, “earthquake”?

Most of us probably envision the ground and buildings shaking, trees swaying, that sort of thing

You could be forgiven if you pictured the ground opening up wide to swallow anything in its path – after all, that’s the image Hollywood shows us in the movies it produces even though earthquakes don’t actually act that way

I’ve never personally been in an earthquake but they are so common on the west coast that most people in California seem to take the little ones pretty much in stride

While we seem to be pretty safe from them, there was a series of violent earthquakes centered in southeastern Missouri just over 200 years ago and scientists say it’s just a matter of time before another one comes along

According to Wikipedia:

In a report filed in November 2008, the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency warned that a serious earthquake in the New Madrid Seismic Zone could result in "the highest economic losses due to a natural disaster in the United States," further predicting "widespread and catastrophic" damage across Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, and particularly Tennessee, where a 7.7 magnitude quake or greater would cause damage to tens of thousands of structures affecting water distribution, transportation systems, and other vital infrastructure.

Eyewitness accounts of the series of quakes in 1811-12 tell of the power and damage done

As I read some of those accounts I found it interesting that the several Native American tribes in the region all had a different view of the meaning of the quakes but they all determined they had to mean *something* – although they couldn’t agree on what

The earthquake before us today also meant to tell us something and, as we’ll see this morning, it’s really isn’t a mystery as to what that something is

And as we consider the earthquake of Calvary we are going to see the wonderful continuity of Scripture and how the entire Bible is a beautiful tapestry that is all woven together to tell the story of Jesus Christ

If you’re taking notes we will first be looking at the **Miracle** of the Earthquake, then the **Meaning** of the Earthquake, and finally, the **Message** of the Earthquake

Join me in your Bibles in Matthew 27 and follow along as I read verses 45-52 and 54 (**Matthew 27:45-52a; 54**)

*Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.*

*And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened.*

*Then jumping down to verse 54...*

*When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”*

# **I. The Miracle of the Earthquake**

Since I have included the earthquake in this sermon series it should be obvious that I would consider the earthquake to be a miracle

But, earthquakes are natural events that happen from time to time along fault lines in the earth's crust as pressure builds up and is then suddenly and violently released

When pressure is released the tectonic plates shift and slide past each other along their length resulting in the familiar tremors and damage associated with earthquakes

**So a logical question to ask is why we would consider this earthquake to be special and different from all others**

By definition a **supernatural** event is one that has a cause that exists outside of nature or that exhibits characteristics that are outside the normal working of nature

So when God directly intervenes in the established order of nature, such as when he causes it to cloud over and rain as an answer to prayer, that would be considered a supernatural event –

It's God using natural phenomena in an extraordinary way

On the other hand, a **miracle** is something which is the result of God's direct intervention but without a natural cause

A miracle is caused and carried out exclusively according to an act of God's will – a miracle is beyond the laws of nature

An example would be when Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana – there is no natural process for turning water directly and instantaneously into wine therefore it was done miraculously

However, even though Jerusalem sits on top of several fault lines and, as such, is in an area that is susceptible, even prone, to earthquakes I still contend that the earthquake of Calvary is not only supernatural but an unnatural miracle

That is to say I believe the earthquake at Calvary was not only the result of God's direct intervention but that it was also **not** the result of any of the natural causes of earthquakes

I have two major reasons for believing this is true

**First, the earthquake was miraculous in its timing**

## **A. Miraculous in its timing**

**Matthew clearly places the earthquake sequentially as one of the cluster of miracles that happened at Calvary**

First, there was the three hours of total darkness that engulfed the world as Jesus suffered on the cross

Clearly, there was no natural reason for that to have occurred

Then the curtain in the Temple suddenly tore from top to bottom in front of many witnesses that could hardly be considered friends of Jesus – at least at the time of the tearing

And now Matthew continues his description of the events with the statement, "*And the earth shook and the rocks were split*" without anything to lead us to recognize a break in the sequence of events

In fact, while our English translation has the tearing of the curtain and the earthquake shown as two sentences the original Greek is all one run-on statement and the "behold" that begins the verse equally applies to both phenomena

Matthew meant for the two events to be seen in the same light

**The earthquake is undeniably one of the cluster of miracles and can only be understood in relation to its place among them**

**Then we notice that the earthquake coincided with Christ's death**

Matthew clearly implies that the earthquake was directly connected to the death of Jesus and that it would not have happened otherwise

## **And, lastly, the earthquake was caused by Christ's victory shout**

Jesus shouted forth the victory cry, "*tetelestai*" or, "it is finished!" right before he yielded his spirit up to the Father in death

And the force of his final cry caused the curtain in the Temple to tear from top to bottom and the earth to shake

It wasn't tectonic pressure or volcanic action from below the surface that caused this earthquake

It was the voice from above suddenly and forever freed from the burden of mankind's sin shouting out in victory at the completion of redemption for all mankind

## **God's Word tells us that at least some of the people present recognized the miraculous nature of the earthquake**

Look with me at [Matthew 27:54](#) –

*When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"*

**Next, we see that the earthquake was miraculous in its effect**

## **B. Miraculous in its effect**

**This earthquake was different from all others in two very interesting ways**

**First, we see that it was **precise in its effects****

Most earthquakes are indiscriminate, brutal affairs that result in mass destruction but that wasn't the case here

The earthquake was powerful enough to split the rocks and open the graves but it was very precise in its damage

It didn't cause the crosses on Calvary to tip over and it didn't damage the Temple even though it was in close proximity

This earthquake seems to have possessed intelligence as it struck with meaning and purpose to specifically accomplish the outcomes which would affirm the Son's death

**The earthquake was also miraculous in that it was **preparatory** for another miracle that was yet to come three days later when the dead saints were raised**

This earthquake exhibited great power – power enough to split the rocks apart and open the graves around Calvary wide enough to allow the saints to walk right out of their tombs at the proper moment

This was not a minor trembler; it was a very powerful earthquake that terrified the Roman soldiers

But unlike most earthquakes of any magnitude the damage was focused and only seems to have opened the graves of the saints who had been laid to rest

And the earthquake provided the way for those dead saints to come out of their tombs after the resurrection of Christ

When we look at the evidence of the precise timing and effects of the earthquake it seems obvious that it was not the result of natural cause and effect

It seems rather that nature was preempted from its natural course through a supernatural act of God

Yes, God used an earthquake which is a natural event but he caused it to act in an unnatural way with focused precision to achieve his purposes

The earthquake was obviously used by God to open the graves and to give confirmation and reinforcement to the death of his Son on the cross – but that wasn't the sole reason for the earthquake

If the earthquake didn't have a unique purpose of its own we would have to question why it was necessary

After all, the closed tombs were no barrier to God raising the saints from the grave – he raised Jesus from his sealed tomb after all and he certainly could have done the same with each of the saints

So let's next look at **the meaning of the earthquake**

## II. The Meaning of the Earthquake

As we do, we are going to see that the earthquake had meaning for **mankind** and for all **creation**

At the moment the curtain in the Temple tore down its middle from top to bottom the attending priests could not possibly have known why

Likewise, the people around the cross had no idea why the earthquake opened the graves

The tearing of the curtain and the earthquake were both signs unto themselves that had an immediate effect on those who witnessed them even though they were only more fully understood later

**So, what was the meaning of the quake for mankind?**

### **A. The quake's meaning for mankind**

As we saw in this morning's Scripture reading from Hebrews 12, there was another time that God miraculously shook the earth and that was at Mt. Sinai when he gave the Law to Moses

Keep your place in Matthew and turn with me to Exodus 19 and follow along as I read **Exodus 19:16-20**

*On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.*

Since the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden, mankind has been under the curse of sin and death – it's in our DNA

Since that day every person who has ever lived has failed to live up to their moral obligation and responsibility to God

But on Mt. Sinai God put his law into writing as he spelled out his moral code and our responsibility and duty to him

The Law plainly revealed the holiness of God, the sinfulness of mankind, and told the Israelites how to worship God

And when God gave Moses and the Children of Israel the Law he came down with thunder and lightning; under the cover of a thick cloud and accompanied by a loud, celestial trumpet blast; with fire and smoke, and the earth quaked

This display had to have been forever etched on the minds and hearts of those who witnessed it as God's relationship with and attitude toward sin was on display

But we know that the Law was never intended to save anyone and that it's futile to try to earn reconciliation with God through keeping its statutes because that was never the purpose of the law

**Romans 3:20** tells us plainly

*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

The Law made no provision that would allow mankind to break free of the bondage of sin it only serves to condemn us as it reveals to us the wickedness of our hearts

### **But then hundreds of years later Calvary responded to Sinai**

The shaking of the earth at Sinai demonstrated the separation between God and man while the shaking at Calvary revealed God's love and grace in sending his only Son to pay the awful price for the sins of all mankind

The earthquake at Calvary serves as a kind of bookend to the quake at Sinai as it shows how Christ's death satisfies the righteous demands of a holy God

**In the shed blood of Jesus Christ God finally provided the answer to the demands of Sinai and the Mosaic Law**

## **And so Calvary replaced Sinai**

Gone forever are the demands of the Law that make us approach Sinai with fear and trembling as we are forced to acknowledge our utter depravity and inability to draw close to God

While the trembling of Sinai caused the people of Israel to plead to have God stop talking to them because they were terrified it did nothing to promote lasting holiness among them – in just 40 days they were found worshipping a golden calf

But we no longer come to Sinai only to find fear and condemnation; we come to Calvary and find love and forgiveness

**The earthquake reveals that Calvary and the cross have forever replaced Sinai and the law for all mankind**

## **B. The quake's meaning for creation**

We often neglect the truth that mankind wasn't the only part of God's creation to suffer ill effects from the fall of Adam

All creation was adversely affected when Adam sinned

Scripture tells us that when Adam sinned the world changed drastically and was plunged into desolation and decay

Paul writes in **Romans 8:22** that *"the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now"*

The symbiotic relationship between mankind and the rest of creation is evident so why shouldn't the earth react when the condition of mankind is so fundamentally changed?

## **The earthquake reveals the promise of redemption of all creation**

Creation was adversely affected by the fall of man and the reality of the redemption for mankind will result in redemption for all creation

It's as if the earth leaped for joy at the realization that it would not suffer forever under the curse of man's sin

## **Because God's Word tells us of creation's future regeneration**

One day the earth will be recreated and the new earth will complement the world's moral glory under the millennial reign of Christ

Look with me at Romans 8 where I will read verse 19-21 (**Romans 8:19-21**)

*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

Since Paul attributes the emotion of hope to creation it really isn't a stretch to see the earthquake at Calvary as the earth shivering with joy and leaping with delight as it anticipates the glory it will experience in the future

**The earthquake of Calvary was undoubtedly a miracle that has meaning for mankind and all creation**

**But what message does the earthquake have for us today?**

### **III. The Message of the Earthquake**

#### **A. The earthquake provides proof the significance of Christ's death**

Like the other miracles God caused the earth to quake at the moment of his Son's victory cry and death to affirm and validate his life and ministry

Look again with me at **Hebrews 12:25** –

*See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.*

God has openly demonstrated who Jesus is and there is a real and present danger for ignoring God's testimony

The author of Hebrews states with complete authority that there will be no escape for the person who refuses the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross

Anyone who refuses the work of Jesus at Calvary must face the consequences because just as there were consequences for rejecting the Word of God at Sinai there will be greater consequences for the greater work of Calvary

But when one accepts the work of Jesus on the cross they immediately receive assurance of present spiritual well-being

#### **B. The death of Christ provides stability now**

God's Word repeatedly tells us of the Father's promise to protect his children

**2Timothy 1:12** speaks of the assurance of God's protection for the believer

As does **Romans 8:38-39** which reads –

*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

And look with me at **John 10:28-29** – in fact, turn there with

*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*

And there are many other passages we could turn to as we consider the assurance of the spiritual stability we enjoy

The earthquake validates our salvation and gives evidence that nothing can shake us loose from the Father's grip

#### **C. The death of Christ provides an unshakable future**

Lastly, we see that the death of Christ provides us with an unshakable future

God is going to miraculously shake the earth again in order to separate the wheat from the chaff so to speak as we see in **Hebrews 12:27**

But he goes on to show us in verse 28 (**Hebrews 12:28**) that we have received an unshakable kingdom so that we can be assured that we have an unshakable future

This is our stability in an unstable world – it's our guarantee that when the final shaking comes we will be standing where it is safe and secure

We need not fear being cast aside as worthless

**The earthquake at Calvary serves to validate the death of Christ giving us the assurance that his sacrifice on our behalf provides us with stability now and an unshakable future once we have accepted it as payment for our sins but it also warns us of the consequences for failing to do so**

## Conclusion

At Calvary God really shook things up

When Christ gave up his life on the cross everything that was temporary was overthrown and changed forever

The law was never meant to last and Jesus himself said that he had come to fulfill the law

And by his death the law was fulfilled and is of no more effect on the earth or in heaven

The death of Jesus brought about the end to the sacrificial system as he showed the more perfect way

And God will shake the earth and the heavens one more time in the future as was prophesied by Haggai in [Haggai 2:6-9](#)

*For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.”*

This future shaking will bring about a complete winnowing until only that which is unshakable will remain and what remains will remain for eternity

And those who have accepted Christ will be numbered among the unshakable

So, as the author of Hebrews writes [[Hebrews 12:28](#)], let us be grateful for the kingdom that is ours and let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe as he deserves

Let's pray