

# The Miracles of Calvary – The Opened Graves – Matthew 27:52a

Scripture Reading: John 11:1; 17-27; 38-44

## Introduction

In our series thus far we have taken a look at the three hours of darkness that enveloped the world during the time of the Savior's suffering and the tearing of the Temple curtain and the earthquake that both accompanied the victory shout and death of Jesus

This morning we are going to be considering the fourth miracle that occurred at Calvary – the miracle of the opened graves

Like the earthquake we could be tempted to pass over this miracle because on its surface it appears to have no real significance of its own but only serves to facilitate the raising of the saints three days later

But I want you to try to put yourself in the place of the people around Jerusalem who witnessed this miracle

Consider what you would be thinking and feeling as the graves were opened wide

I would imagine the first thing you would feel is a kind of horror or revulsion at the thought of the dead being exposed

Especially if a loved one's grave was disturbed

But that would likely soon be replaced by a sense of wonder as to why only the graves were opened and nothing else was damaged by the earthquake

If you're like me your thoughts would probably then turn to trying to figure out how you were going to fix the mess because somebody was going to have to seal all those graves back up

**Really, the miracle of the opened graves serves as a kind of climactic end to the miracles that actually happened on the day of the crucifixion because the last two miracles we will consider, while a result of Calvary, actually happened three days later**

Please join me in your Bibles and follow along as I read **Matthew 27:50-52**

*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.*

I'm going to stop there and briefly discuss a matter of some importance when it comes to translating Scripture

When we read our English translations of the Bible we need to recognize two things:

First, the verse and paragraph divisions and those helpful headings that precede different passages aren't inspired

They were all added later as helps that, unfortunately, at times cause more difficulty than assistance

Second, there is no punctuation in the original Greek manuscripts so translators have to do their best to determine where to begin and end sentences

In the passage before us we have a scenario where both of those come into play and we have to decide what makes the most sense when compared to the rest of Scripture

I believe it makes the most logical sense that the graves were opened as a result of the victory cry of Jesus which resulted in the earthquake –

Then I believe it makes the most sense that the saints came forth from their tombs after the resurrection of Jesus because Paul refers to Jesus as the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" in **1Corinthians 15:20** which means that Jesus was the first to be resurrected

That seems to me to be the clearest chain of events as I understand Scripture so we will defer consideration of the remainder of verse 52 until we get to the miracle of the raising of the saints

As we consider the miracle of the opened graves this morning we will first consider the **nature** of the graves  
Then we will look at two **reasons** for the opening of the graves and then the **significance** of the opened graves  
Those are your fill-in-the-blanks for those of you taking notes

**So, as we begin, let's look first at the nature of the graves and how the earthquake was able to open them up**

## **I. The Nature of the Graves**

### **A. Rocky Tombs**

Here in the Midwestern United States we are used to graves predominately being dug into the soil [Midwest.jpg] with headstones marking their locations

In other parts of the country, such as in the swampy areas of Louisiana, graves are above-ground affairs [Louisiana.jpg]

They have concrete or stone enclosures that contain the physical remains of the deceased to keep them above the water table line

And pictures showing cemeteries in Israel today [Israel.jpg] that I've seen seem to be a mixture of both of those styles of graves

But in Jesus' day, bodies were typically interred in caves or tombs that were carved out of solid rock which then had a stone placed in front of the opening to close them up – I believe that is probably what we see in the foreground of that picture of the cemetery in Israel

We see that Jesus was laid in just such a tomb in **Matthew 27:59-60** as Joseph of Arimathea put Jesus to rest in the tomb that he had cut into the rock in preparation for his own burial

So it's not difficult at all to see how an earthquake powerful enough to break rocks as this one was reported to be also caused the stones that sealed the openings to be broken or dislodged thereby opening the tombs

### **B. Near Calvary**

We also know that the tombs in question were most likely in the direct vicinity of Calvary

Since the quake was caused by the victory shout of Jesus, Calvary would have been the epicenter and one would expect the greatest damage to be done there

It would also be the place of greatest possible testimony to the connection of the open graves and the death of Jesus

But we also see a little further down in **Matthew 27:53** that when the saints were came out of their tombs they went directly into Jerusalem where they appeared to many people

And the verbiage used indicates an immediate entry into Jerusalem and not a journey to the city

### **C. Contained Saints**

The most amazing feature of the graves, though, is their contents

When we looked at the earthquake last week we saw that it was a very powerful quake but we also saw that it was a very precise quake – both power and precision were in evidence

It was a supernatural event unlike any other earthquake as it focused its power with unnatural specificity

The opened graves all contained God's children; Old Testament saints who believed in Jesus Christ and died before his crucifixion

Not one grave that was opened contained a person who didn't have a saving interest in death of Christ

But we need to also note that not every saint had his or her grave opened

Look with me again at the latter part of **verse 52b** where we see that "*many*" were raised; not "*all*"

God made a further distinction and purposely selected a certain number – we can't be sure how many – of his saints to be raised to satisfy what God wanted to do to get the attention of those present so that he could teach them something. And God wasn't playing favorites in only raising some of the saints but just enough and just the right graves were opened to place a powerful emphasis on the meaning of the cross and teach a lesson that would continue to reverberate for all time.

So let's look next at two things God wants us to see from this miracle or **two reasons for the opening of the graves**

## **II. Two Reasons for the Opening of the Graves**

### **A. Preparatory for the Raising**

The most obvious reason for opening the graves was so the saints could come out of the graves after they were raised.

The opening was preparatory for the raising.

But what isn't so obvious is the fact that the necessity of open graves tells us just what kind of raising this was.

What these particular saints experienced was what Lazarus experienced which is totally different from the resurrection of Jesus.

In fact, it wasn't a proper resurrection at all; it was more a revival or resuscitation of their natural bodies.

When Jesus rose from his tomb he did so in his glorified, spiritual body and he was already gone before the stone was rolled away to reveal his absence.

His spiritual body was a true body.

We read in Luke 24 that Jesus' glorified, risen body had substance that could be touched and he still had the ability to eat food but it also had spiritual properties.

Look with me at **Luke 24:36-43** –

*As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.*

And as we see in **John 20:26** his glorified body allowed Jesus to appear to his disciples when they were assembled in the upper room behind closed doors.

**But these saints, like Lazarus, were raised in their natural, earthly bodies so they needed a way out of their graves.**

Also like Lazarus and unlike Jesus, we have every reason to believe these saints all died again and their bodies returned to their graves in due time to await the glorious resurrection of all the saints at the Lord's return.

### **B. Demonstration of God's Intentions**

The second reason for the opening of the graves that I want to highlight is that it served as a demonstration of God's intentions.

The graves were opened at the moment of Christ's death and would have not been touched on the Sabbath (Saturday) so they would have remained open for all to see.

In fact, it would have been unlawful for anyone to have worked to close the graves back up on the Sabbath so the open graves gave lingering testimony to the effects that the death of his Son had wrought.

Only in hindsight the people would have come to understand why the graves were opened when the saints who were raised returned to their friends and families.

However, if the only reason for the graves to be opened was to allow the saints to walk out of them; they could have remained sealed until the moment the saints were to be raised

When we remember that this all happened at the time of the Passover when Jerusalem was filled to overflowing with worshippers we realize it's likely that thousands of people took note of the open graves

And it seems incredible to think that no one noticed that only some of the graves were affected and that no one began to make the connection as to whose graves were opened even before the saints came forth from them

God meant for those open graves to be seen and pondered over – it was a kind of mystery whose solution would be revealed in three days

And although it wasn't understood until afterwards, God's opening of the graves of his saints foreshadowed the resurrection of his Son

**And the opened graves have significance for believers of all times**

### **III. The Significance of the Opened Graves**

#### **A. Death Was Overcome**

It was the death of Christ that opened the graves – the earthquake was merely the tool used to do so

And in the opening of the graves his death destroyed once and for all time the power of death over the believer

The tendency of most people, and even we as believers at times, is to attribute to death a sense of permanence

We refer to the grave as a “final resting place” and we put “Rest in Peace” on tombstones

I live right next to a cemetery and I see the steady traffic as people come to visit the graves of their loved ones as if the grave is where they are residing

Death is unnatural and the enemy and we struggle to know how to think about it

We know that death entered the world through the sin of Adam as Paul reminds us in **Romans 5:12** where he wrote – *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*

Death then is the natural consequence for sin because God's Word says the soul that sins must die

But death isn't punishment for the believer – Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross and there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (**Romans 8:1**)

For the believer, death is simply the final outcome of living in a fallen world

God, in his great wisdom, decided not to apply all the benefits of Christ's redemptive work to us all at once

For instance, God has chosen to allow evil to continue until the final judgment and mankind, even believers, must continue to live in a fallen world and wait to experience the complete reality of the salvation that is ours

And as Paul writes in **1Corinthians 15:24-26**, the last aspect of this fallen world to be removed will be death

*Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

So death remains a reality for all, even Christians and, for as long as the Lord tarries, believers will continue to die

Because even though death doesn't come as a penalty for the individual sins of the Christian, because that debt has been paid by Jesus, it does still come as a result of living in this fallen world where the effects of sin have not all been removed

**But the open graves at Calvary signify that the power of death over the believer has been overcome by the death of Christ**

When the believer dies, his or her body goes to the grave while their spirit goes to be with the Lord (**2Corinthians 5:8**)

However, while death is inevitable, the grave cannot ultimately hold us

There's an old song that's been around a long, long time and its chorus goes:

Ain't no grave gonna hold my body down  
There ain't no grave gonna hold my body down  
When I hear the trumpet sound  
Gonna get up outa the ground  
There ain't no grave gonna hold my body down

That's the reality for everyone who is trusting in the Lord and who dies before the Lord's return

And the reason no grave can hold the believer's body down is because Jesus Christ destroyed the power of death

By his death Jesus removed the barriers and cleared the way to being raised again to that new and perfect life

It's just one of those "already but not yet" things we find throughout God's Word

It's a wonderful truth that is certain but not fully realized just yet

## **B. Points to the Final Resurrection**

The miracle of the opened graves also points, therefore, to the final, glorious resurrection to come

We're focusing on the opened graves this morning and we'll get to the actual raising of the saints in our last sermon of this series in a couple of weeks

But we do want to take just a moment to begin to understand how the symbol of the opened graves helps us understand the resurrection yet to come

I think we would all admit that bodily resurrection is a difficult thing to grasp – especially when we consider saints who died centuries ago and whose bodies long ago turned to dust

We find it difficult to understand how a body that has long ago ceased to exist in any tangible way can be raised again

But in the opened graves and the raising of the saints that followed, we see that nothing is impossible with God – even if we can't explain how it can be possible

After all, some 20 centuries after those once dead saints walked out of their tombs we still don't know how it is possible to reunite spirit and body once they have been separated

Since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* the idea of the reanimation of a dead body has been the stuff of imagination but never achieved except in the pages of fiction or played out on movie and television screens

How it might be done remains a mystery in spite of all our scientific advancement

Even organ transplants must be carried out within a narrow window of time or the organs begin to break down and ultimately die

But from our Scripture reading this morning we saw that Lazarus had lain in his tomb for four days and his body should have already been well into a state of decay – yet Jesus raised him from the dead uncorrupted

And the same is true of the saints mentioned here in Matthew's gospel

We aren't told who these saints were or how long they had been dead in their tombs and many people have speculated over their identification to no avail because it can't be known

But the case of Lazarus shows us that time was and is not a factor for God

And when we really think about just who God is it becomes impossible for us to think of anything that would keep God from fulfilling any promise that he has made

Whatever barriers we see that would prevent the future, glorious resurrection of our bodies and to our spirits and bodies being reunited are not barriers to God

The graves near Calvary were not a barrier; neither were the bodies that should have been in the process of decay

Nothing can stand in the way of God doing what he has told us he will do

And the opened graves stand as a testimony to the fact that the only thing we are waiting for is God's appointed time for the final resurrection to take place

Turn with me to 1Corinthians 15 and let's look at what Paul writes starting in verse 52

*...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:*

*"Death is swallowed up in victory."*

*"O death, where is your victory?"*

*O death, where is your sting?"*

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

## **Conclusion**

The opened graves serve as tangible evidence that death's hold on the believer has been broken and there "ain't no grave gonna hold our bodies down"

Admittedly, this miracle is a difficult one and many people have tried to discredit it as fiction or Matthew's over-active imagination put down on paper

Again, though, as we've already stated in previous sermons Matthew wrote his gospel while the witnesses were still alive and no one – including the other gospel authors – seem to have challenged his reporting

And the opened tombs have a great deal to teach us and they serve as an encouragement to believers of all generations

Jesus conquered death by his death so that believers no longer need to fear the grave and they give silent witness to the assurance of our future resurrection and the reuniting of our bodies and spirits

The work is finished

At the instant of Christ's death our sins were paid for and the barrier of the grave was overcome

There is nothing left for us to do to achieve our reconciliation to God

As the hymn says, "Jesus paid it all; all to him I owe; sin had left a crimson stain; he washed me white as snow"

If you have accepted Christ's payment for your sins your salvation is complete and your resurrection to eternal life is assured

What an amazing truth that is to reflect on as we enter the Easter week ahead of us

Let's pray