

Week 6 – The Raising of the Saints – Matthew 27:52-53

Scripture Reading: 1Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction

If you have been paying any attention at all to our culture you know that there is widespread fascination with zombies

The idea of the dead being reanimated is not new – zombies have been a part of fictional literature since early in the 20th century

But since George Romero came out with his classic horror movie *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968 interest in the phenomenon of the dead coming back to life has grown steadily and has actually exploded in the last decade

We need only consider the wildly popular television show *The Walking Dead* which is watched by millions each week and was recently signed to film its tenth season which will come out in the fall

The word **zombie** comes out of Haitian folklore and originally had to do with the reanimation of the dead through the practice of black magic and until recently zombies have never been taken seriously by rationally thinking people

The very idea of the undead was understood to be fiction; but now, serious scientists, statisticians, and those who study how epidemics might spread routinely study hypothetical zombies to build informational models

And this isn't some lunatic fringe idea either as serious and sincere zombie studies have invaded major universities such as Cornell and Kent State as well as the federally run Center for Disease Control

As a public service announcement, the experts say in case we have a zombie apocalypse the best course of action is to run and to head for the Rocky Mountains – specifically in Montana and Nevada as those will be the safest places

Obviously, zombies aren't real but with all of the zombie hype surrounding us I suppose we could be forgiven for having images of zombies cross the screen of our mind's eye when reading the account of the raising of the saints before us this morning

Let's be honest this account, which was recorded only by Matthew, is strange and Matthew actually shares very little information concerning the phenomenon and that causes us to have to work a little to see what God was doing

But we know that, since this is the last of the chain of miracles surrounding Calvary, God had a divine reason for raising these saints

As we consider the verses before us we will first look at how we know this is a factual account as we examine some of the **proofs of the raising**

Then we will spend some time looking at what kind of resurrection this was or **the nature of the raising**

And lastly, we will look at why God raised these saints or **the purposes of the raising**

Let me encourage you to join me in your Bible in Matthew 27 and follow along as I read the entire passage starting with verse 48 and continuing through verse 53 (**Matthew 27:48-53**)

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. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.***

Since the account is so strange and only attested to by Matthew many have tried to discredit it so let's begin by looking at some of the proofs of the raising of the saints

I. The Proofs of the Raising

The first proof we want to acknowledge is really all that a believer should need – the account is included in God's Word

A. It's in Scripture

Skeptics have tried in vain to show that this account was a later insertion and not part of Matthew's original gospel

However, the lack of any evidence to support that assertion along with overwhelming manuscript evidence to the contrary has forced them, perhaps reluctantly in some cases, to admit that these words are genuine

No work of ancient literature has more historical support than the Bible

We have extensive, early, and consistent documentary evidence that shows the Bible has been faithfully preserved and transmitted and at no time has anything written within its pages been shown to be inaccurate

So we have every reason to believe the account of the raised is a part of Matthew's original writing and that it was therefore superintended or inspired by the Holy Spirit and true in every way

This tells us beyond a doubt that these select saints did indeed rise from their tombs and walk into Jerusalem to be seen and recognized by many witnesses

B. It Fits

But some say it is still just too fantastic, too off the wall, to be real

That isn't the case, however, because in reality it fits perfectly **with the biblical narrative** in every way

It meshes perfectly with the rest of the miracles of Calvary that we have already studied

The raising of the saints explains the miracle of the opened graves and completes the chain of events whereby the graves were opened as a result of the earthquake which was the complement to the torn curtain both of which were caused by the victory shout of Jesus who had just emerged triumphant from the suffering he experienced in the three hours of darkness

The miracles all fit together like links in a chain so either we have to accept all of them as historical or none of them

And the raising of the saints is the only logical way for the chain to end otherwise we would have to question the reason behind the open graves and on up the line until the whole chain falls apart

The raising of the saints is also in total harmony **with the biblical teaching of salvation**

As the apostle Paul writes in his marvelous treatise on the resurrection in 1Corinthians 15 (**1Corinthians 15:20**) the resurrection of believers is the obvious outcome of the resurrection of Jesus and the logical result of our salvation

So why should we be surprised that the bodily resurrection of Jesus on that long ago Sunday morning would result in the raising of saints as a form of pledge or guarantee of the glorious resurrection of all saints to come at some future date?

In reality there is nothing odd about the raising of these certain saints – **it fits**

C. Told without embellishment

The last proof I want us to consider this morning is the fact that **Matthew relates this account without embellishment** of any kind

Here we see that the frustrating lack of details that we acknowledged earlier is actually evidence that Matthew was merely telling what had actually taken place

Look again with me at what he says (**Matthew 27: 52-53**) –

The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

Just think of all the questions Matthew left unanswered

- Who were these saints that were raised and how many were raised?
- What did they do after entering Jerusalem? Did they just wander about?
- How long did they stay? Did they continue to live only to eventually die again or did they just disappear?
- How did returning from the dead affect them? Did they have stories to tell about the hereafter?

Those are just a handful of questions that I would like to have answered and anyone who was writing a fabrication would be restrained indeed not to include some tantalizing details to try to make their story sound more credible

Matthew doesn't even tell us how the people knew that these were risen saints because it's implied in their appearing that they would have been recognized or again, what would be the point

But we don't know if they were the recently deceased or whether God simply made them recognizable to those who saw them just as **Moses and Elijah** were recognizable by the disciples at the transfiguration ***even though no one living could have possibly known what either one looked like because they had died hundreds of years earlier***

One of the telling traits of a fabricated story is that they are typically long on detail because the person telling the tale wants to be believed and Matthew's brevity and restraint point to the conclusion that he is telling the truth

But it also reveals that the raising of the saints, while important enough to mention, was far from the most important thing on the mind of the disciple

We may wish that he had shared more but he was undoubtedly more interested in the resurrection of his Lord than he was in sharing every nuance of these saints who were raised from the dead

So, the lack of salacious details in Matthews recording of the event,

The fact that the event is in perfect harmony with the salvation narrative,

And the fact that God permitted the account to be included in his Word

Allow us to say without a doubt that these select saints did indeed rise from their tombs in response to the resurrection of Jesus

We often refer to this raising of the saints as a *resurrection* but we need to be clear on just what kind of rising it was

II. The Nature of the Raising

As we consider the nature of the raising we first need to deal with a textual difficulty that appears in our English Bibles because it has a significant bearing on **the timing** of the saints being raised

A. Timing

We have spoken before about how the original Greek manuscripts of the Bible contained no punctuation and how translators need to make decisions about how to divide the words into sentences that accurately convey the intention of the writers

And in considering the entire Calvary account and reading that Jesus cried out in a loud voice and yielded up his spirit in **Matthew 27:50** the details of what happened come in a rush

If we were to look at verses 51-53 in the original Greek we would see a series of phrases that describe individual events all connected by the word “and”

It would read like this sentence up on the screen]:

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom and the earth shook, and the rocks were split and the tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

So, what the translators had to do, and what we have to do as we study the Bible, is to try to logic through how best to understand this series of events

Clearly, we can see a linear sequence of events that took place from the beginning through the end of that sentence as each event follows one after the other

The curtain was torn before the earthquake and the rocks were split and the tombs were opened as a result of the earthquake

That much seems evident enough and there is not any serious disagreement thus far

But the translators of our various English Bibles seem to have gotten hung up on what to do with the saints and whether the saints were raised at the time their tombs were opened but remained in the tombs until after the resurrection of Jesus or whether they were not raised until after the resurrection of Jesus when they immediately came forth

And the various English translations put their sentence divisions in different places leading to a bit of ambiguity over how we should rightly understand this sequence of events

Since the best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture let's look to see what other passages in the Bible tell us

In **John 11:25** we see that Jesus claimed to be the resurrection and the life and **there is therefore no resurrection and no eternal life without Christ**

And since the raising of the saints was meant by God to be **an assurance of the future resurrection** that will one day come to all the saints it seems evident that the saints would not have been restored to life until Jesus had risen

Then, once again we must remember that Paul makes it very clear in 1Corinthians 15 that Jesus is the **firstfruits** of the dead again indicating that Jesus had to have been raised first

Besides, it just seems a little odd to think of the saints being restored to life and then just hanging out inside their wide open tombs from Friday afternoon until Sunday before coming out and entering the city

In the final analysis, it seems best to consider that, since the future, glorious resurrection of all believers is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus, the raising and releasing of these many saints would be on the same basis

Therefore it is better for us to understand that Matthew intended us to see that the earthquake happened on the day Jesus was crucified.

Then, on the day he was revealed as resurrected some of the saints who had died were raised and came out of their tombs

B. Type

We also need to consider what **type** of resurrection or raising this was

Was it the same kind of resurrection that Jesus experienced where his earthly body was transformed into an immortal, heavenly body or was it like the raising of Lazarus who had his spirit reunited with his mortal, earthly body?

Once again, because the Bible cannot contradict itself, we can look to other passages in the Bible to help us understand just what type of raising makes the most logical sense

Let's look first one more time at Paul's teaching from **1Corinthians 15:20-23** where we see God's established order – *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, **then at his coming** those who belong to Christ.*

Notice in **verse 23** that God's established timeline for the resurrection states that it will happen at the time of Christ's return – not before

Then let's look just a little further down in **verses 51-52** –

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 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.

Whereas Matthew records that only a select number of saints were raised in the Calvary miracle Paul states that when Jesus returns *all* the saints who have died will be raised along with *all* the saints who are still alive when Jesus returns

And the bodies of all believers from all times will all be changed at the same moment from perishable to imperishable

To see the Calvary miracle of the raised saints as anything but the same sort of resurrection Lazarus experienced would require an exception that Scripture just doesn't support

And as we saw when we considered the earthquake and the resurrection of Jesus, the opening of the graves gives evidence as to the fact that these saints were not resurrected as Jesus was

Just as with Lazarus the graves had to be opened to enable the saints to come forth whereas the stone was only rolled away from Jesus' tomb to allow the witnesses to see that he was gone – not to allow him to escape

So, when all the evidence is considered, it seems best to determine that these saints had their spirits reunited with their natural bodies more as a revival or resuscitation and likely lived for a time only to die again rather than being resurrected in their glorified, spiritual bodies to live forever

Since God saw fit to include this account in his Holy Word and since he tells us that all parts of his Word are profitable and useful we need to see if we can figure out why exactly God raised these saints and then preserved the account for his people

III. The Purposes of the Raising

The purposes of the raising of the saints seem to be threefold

A. Call attention

The first reason has been a large reason for all of the miracles in this series – **to call attention to the death, burial, and resurrection of God’s only Son, Jesus**

When we considered the three hours of darkness we saw how God demonstrated his holiness by turning away from the sin that Jesus bore for us and how the darkness shielded the suffering of the Son from human observation

We saw how the tearing of the Temple curtain from top to bottom at the moment Jesus cried out in victory gave proof to the fact that the way had been opened for individuals to approach God

We saw how the earthquake was an unnatural demonstration of power and precision that revealed how all nature reacted with joy at the redemption of mankind

And Matthew records that the centurion and his men were terrified and understood that Jesus was the Son of God

We considered how the miracle of the opened graves, which was largely preparatory for the miracle of the risen saints, would have caused the people to ponder the meaning behind the specificity of which graves had been opened

Then last Sunday we looked at the empty grave clothes and saw how they revealed so clearly the miraculous nature of Jesus’ resurrection and how they guarantee that we will likewise share in the same kind of resurrection on some future day

And now as we consider God’s raising of the saints we see that all of these miracles that surrounded the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus serve to illustrate that this was the most momentous event in history

No other person has ever, or will ever, have such a great impact and all these miracles call attention to who Jesus is and what he did

And the miracles of the torn curtain and the raising of the saints showed that mankind had entered into a new relationship with God and now had a potentially bright future through the redemption and reconciliation that was completed on the cross

B. A symbol of the resurrection to come

This particular miracle also serves as a symbol of the future, glorious resurrection to come

When Jesus arrived in Bethany he said, “I am the resurrection and the life” and then proved this truth by raising Lazarus from the dead

The proof didn’t lie in what kind of body Lazarus was raised in – the proof lay in the undeniable fact that Lazarus was restored to natural life at the command of Jesus

No one can deny that the raising of Lazarus was a miracle that had no natural cause or explanation – he had been dead for days

But the raising of Lazarus was only a shadow of the true resurrection to eternal life that we are still waiting for

It was a symbol that visibly displayed the omnipotent power that is necessary for both types of resurrections

And so it is with the raising of the saints after Calvary

Along with the other five miracles this raising serves as a symbol of greater truths even as it completes the harmonious chain of miracles

C. Gives us assurance

When we consider this powerful scene and what it symbolizes we can't help but be impacted by the reality of our future resurrection

I am a big fan of maps – I really like to look at maps and imagine the places shown on them

But a map is never the same as the territory they depict – they are at best a pale representation of something that can only be experienced by being present in the actual place

But still the map lets us know something even as it points to something greater

Likewise, these saints who were raised likely lived for a time only to die again and are now awaiting the final resurrection long with all of the saints that have ever lived

But when we consider that God was able to raise these many saints we are assured that he is able to raise us as well only we will be raised differently

The bodies of these now long dead again saints were raised still in their natural weakness but we know that what is sown in weakness will one day be raised in power as Paul tells us in **1Corinthians 15:43**

And by the reality of their being raised to life at the resurrection of Christ we have assurance that we will one also be raised just as he was

Conclusion

As we conclude this series on the *Miracles of Calvary*, we need to recognize that throughout this chain of miracles we have seen ample evidence of who Jesus is, who God the Father is, and how he works all things to his glory

We've also seen how God has demonstrated his ability to do exactly as he says he will do and how that guarantees our security now and for our eternal future

But we also have to be aware that this glorious future will not be enjoyed by all

Everyone who dies not having recognized Jesus as the Messiah and not having accepted his sacrificial death on their behalf as the only way to be reconciled to God will forfeit the eternal bliss promised at the resurrection of God's children

And they will instead be raised to face judgment and the eternal death that is made necessary by their unredeemed sins

This reality should spur us on to share the truth of the gospel with everyone we can

Jesus has taken on the curse of sin for all humanity, paid the price for it, and risen victorious from the grave and the miracles that surround Calvary serve as historical validation of that fact

Only saints were revived from the dead in the graveyards around Jerusalem and only saints will be raised to eternal life when the Lord returns

Therefore, let's determine to rededicate ourselves to the task of giving the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ to as many as we can while the Lord tarries

Let's pray