

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 22: God’s Commentary on the Finished Work of Christ—The Earthquake and Tombs Opened

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And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; 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. (Mt. 27:51-53)

Introduction

At the same moment that Jesus died and the veil was rent there was a great earthquake. This earthquake was miraculous and was probably limited to Jerusalem and its immediate vicinity or to the nation of Israel. (We have noted above that the Greek word *ge* can be translated “earth” [as in the whole world] or “land” which refers to a country or even a localized geographical area). This earthquake caused deep fissures in the rocks around Jerusalem. The Greek word *petrai* indicates that it was not detached boulders (*petroi*), but cliffs and masses of solid rock that were split apart by the violent shaking. Matthew uses the same verb (*eschisthesan*, “were split open”) to describe the rending of the rocky masses that he used to record the tearing of the veil (*eschisthe*, “was split”). The evangelist records that the violent earthquake resulted in many of the tombs in the vicinity of Jerusalem (Mt. 27:53) being opened. Unlike modern burial plots, these tombs were hewn out of solid rock. The violent shaking rolled away stones and split open stone doors and walls. This miracle serves as a prelude to the resurrection of many of the saints and their exhibition to believers in the holy city.

The miracle of the earthquake with the opening of the tombs and the resurrection of many saints is so amazing that many commentators refuse to take this section of Scripture literally. A. B. Bruce believes it may belong to “the region of Christian legend.”¹ A. Plummer thinks it has “a legendary element in it.”² R. T. France says, “It is a matter of faith; not objective demonstration.”³ Many modern scholars believe “this passage is a piece of theology set forth as history.”⁴ David Hill says these signs reflect “a primitive tradition.”⁵ Donald A. Hagner thinks that the opening of the tombs suggested a resurrection to the early Christians and that “Matthew recorded the tradition, believing that it foreshadowed the reality of the eventual resurrection of the saints.”⁶ Daniel J. Harrington believes that Matthew may have inserted “an existing apocalyptic fragment based on Ezekiel 37 to underline the decisive significance of Jesus’

¹ A. B. Bruce, *The Expositor’s Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 1:332.

² Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 402.

³ R. T. France, *Matthew*, 401.

⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-18*, 851.

⁵ David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 356.

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-18*, 852.

death.”⁷ W. C. Allen asserts that this incident “probably comes from Mt’s cycle of Palestinian traditions.”⁸ All such thinking denies the verbal plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures and must be rejected as speculations influenced by higher critical, modernist concepts of Scripture. What Matthew recorded *literally took place in history* and must not be explained away as myth, legend, early tradition or theology masquerading as history. If the events that Matthew describes did not really happen in history, then they are not real signs and are not significant at all. The fact that they really did occur, points to the earth-shattering effects of the death of Christ. “This shows that the death of the Savior had—and still is having—significance for the entire universe.”⁹

There are a number of things that need to be examined regarding these signs. (1) What is the significance of this powerful earthquake that splits apart rocks and opens tombs? Although the passage does not elaborate upon the meaning of the earthquake, the Old Testament can help us understand the message of this sign. Sometimes earthquakes were a sign of the presence and action of God in redemptive history. When God appeared on Mount Sinai to reveal His covenant law to the people, “the whole mountain quaked greatly” (Ex. 19:18). Sinai was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel (Ps. 68:9; cf. 6-7; 1 Kg. 19:11). With the death of Jesus the Mosaic covenant was fulfilled, the New Covenant established and the temple as God’s earthly throne room was abandoned for the worldwide church of Christ. It was therefore appropriate that the death of the Redeemer was accompanied by a great earthquake.

Scripture also connects earthquakes to God’s revelation of Himself as a righteous judge (e.g., Isa. 24:18-20; Jer. 10:10; Am. 8:8; Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, etc). Therefore, it makes sense that the rending of the veil and the earthquake were coterminous. Israel had violated God’s covenant to the point that she was rejected by God. Therefore, in “this way not only did the earth bear testimony to its Creator, but it was even called as a witness against the hardheartedness of a perverse nation; for it showed how monstrous that obstinacy must have been on which neither the *earthquake* nor the *splitting of the rocks* made any impression.”¹⁰ Schilder writes,

The earthquake served as a woe which heralded an advent, as a sign of the coming day of judgment, as a sign of the coming of God with eschatological intent. God took this means to say to Israel that Golgotha was not a forgotten little place in which a certain case of a certain Nazarene had been executed; but that His death is a sharply accentuated moment in the day of the Lord, and a beginning of the last judgment. An earthquake always serves as a catastrophe of the last day in all advent-prophecy. This goes to prove once more that Golgotha is indeed a place of judgment, and that it was not an exaggeration but a declaration of the truth when we chose in this book to relate the events to catastrophes of judgment.¹¹

Further, the earthquake and the rending of the rocks points to the complete victory of Jesus’ sufferings and death which will shake the heavens and the earth. Haggai prophesied about the world-transforming power of the Redeemer’s atoning death when he said, “For thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Once (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this

⁷ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 400.

⁸ W. C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1977), 296.

⁹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 975.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:324.

¹¹ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 518.

temple with glory,' says the LORD of hosts" (2:6-7). (The author of Hebrews applies vs. 6 explicitly to Jesus Christ.) The Savior's propitiatory death achieved a definitive victory which will be progressively accomplished in history and completed at the second coming. As a result of His redemptive obedience, our Lord is progressively establishing a new heavens and a new earth. The Mediator is removing those things that are being shaken and establishing a kingdom which cannot be shaken (cf. Heb. 12:26-28). Thus, the earthquake speaks judgment and doom to those who refuse to bow the knee to Christ, while it speaks victory, grace and peace to believers. Jesus' great power and sovereign authority are gloriously manifested in the earth-shattering change that His completed work wrought by: the binding of Satan; the abrogation of the shadow ceremonies; the coming of the Holy Spirit; and, the promulgation of the gospel.

(2) The resurrection of many saints raises a number of important questions that merit our attention. First, when did the resurrection of these saints occur? Commentators are divided on this issue because the Greek is somewhat ambiguous. The phrase "after His [Christ's] resurrection" (v. 53) can be taken with the preceding participial clause and thus could mean that these saints were raised and came out of their tombs *after* the resurrection of Jesus. Those who favor this interpretation point out that 1 Corinthians 15:20 refers to our Lord as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Further, Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5 identify the Redeemer as "the firstborn from the dead." Therefore, according to this view, it would be theologically inappropriate for these saints to arise *before* the resurrection of Christ.

The phrase "after his resurrection" could also go with the verb that follows. This would mean that the saints were raised the moment Jesus died, but did not enter the holy city until after the resurrection of the Savior. Those who object to this interpretation usually raise a question regarding the whereabouts of these saints from 3:00 pm on Friday to Sunday morning. What did they do before they went into Jerusalem? (Some commentators argue that after the saints were raised they remained concealed in their tombs until after the resurrection of Christ.)

Although both views are possible and acceptable interpretations, the second interpretation is to be preferred for the following reasons. a) Matthew is setting forth signs that are clearly associated with the death of the Redeemer. His account leaves the impression that all these signs occurred virtually simultaneously. The appearance of the saints to believers in Jerusalem was not in itself a miracle, but rather was the exhibition of a miracle. b) The objection that these saints could not rise until after our Lord's resurrection is not tenable. Even if these saints arose before Christ's resurrection they did so because of the efficacy of His death. "Jesus remains 'the Firstborn from the dead' (Col. 1:18) because he alone conquered death, and even these saints arose only through the blessed power of Jesus."¹² We must remember that the Savior's own resurrection is not an event unrelated to the cross, but was achieved and guaranteed by it. The Redeemer's sacrificial death is the cause while the resurrection is the effect. "[T]he triumphant death and resurrection of Jesus remain the legal basis for the glorious resurrection even of the saints. Besides, the comparison in 1 Cor. 15:20, taking its point of departure in Christ's resurrection, looks to the future, the second coming: in relation to all believers who will *then* arise, Jesus is the firstfruits."¹³ Further, Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kg. 2:11) both escaped

¹² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1131. "The phrase *meta ten egerstin autou* [after His resurrection] is placed before *eiselthon* [they entered] because of its emphasis. Already the death of Jesus brought resurrection to these saints, hence the account of this occurrence is properly connected with the death of Jesus and not with his resurrection. The main point is the resurrection of these saints; secondary to this is their appearance to people in the Holy City. This occurred after the resurrection of Jesus because this appearance was a sign-testimony to the resurrection of Jesus" (Ibid).

¹³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 975, footnote 894.

death and ascended directly to heaven. This proves that the efficacy of the Mediator's death and resurrection was not bound by time. These Old Testament saints escaped the jaws of death because of the Savior's merits and not their own "good works."

Second, what kind of resurrection is described by Matthew? The evangelist describes a real bodily resurrection. He uses the expression, "many bodies" (*polla somata*), which refutes all those who view the resurrection in purely spiritual or metaphysical manner (e.g., Gnostics, neo-platonists, modernists, full-preterists, etc). The people who were raised are described as "the saints" (*hoi hagioi*). "The expression (*hoi hagioi*) is found nowhere else in the Gospels; and elsewhere in the N.T. it is used always of Christians (Act. ix.13, 41; Rom. xii.13, xv.25, 26, 31, etc)."¹⁴ It may be that these resurrected saints were Jewish Christians, such as Simeon, Anna, Zacharias and Elizabeth, who had recently perished. If these kinds of people were resurrected they would have been immediately recognized by friends and loved ones. It also could have been a sampling of believers from many periods of history. Matthew doesn't elaborate on who these "holy ones" were. If the saints raised were notable historical persons such as Job, Moses, Abraham or Isaac, it is likely that they would have been identified by name. "[T]hose who lived and died before the death and resurrection of Christ, had saving benefit thereby, as well as those who have lived since; for he *was* the same *yesterday* that he is today, and will be *for ever*, Heb. xiii.8."¹⁵

Regarding the specific nature of this resurrection Matthew is silent. Therefore, commentators are divided as to whether these saints were resurrected like Lazarus, who resumed a normal earthly existence and died of old age, or whether they received glorified spiritual bodies which were eventually received up into heaven. Given the fact that these saints were resurrected as a sign of the victory of the Redeemer's sacrificial death and as a token of all believers, it is likely that they were resurrected with glorified bodies that could not die. "[I]t would appear to be absurd to suppose that, after having been once admitted by Christ to the participation of a new life, they again returned to dust."¹⁶ According to Hebrews 11 (cf. 11:13-16, 35, 39-40) the Old Testament saints all died looking forward to resurrection and a better life in a heavenly country. For a select group, this hope now comes to fruition with the death of Jesus.

Third, why did God only raise some saints to life when He could have raised all, now that the Redeemer's vicarious suffering and death was accomplished? The answer to this question lies in the purpose of this resurrection. The purpose of this resurrection was to testify regarding the efficacy of the Savior's suffering and death. It was designed to give the people of God an *example of the new life* which they ought to expect. "[I]n order that the minds of believers might be more quickly raised to hope, it was advantageous that the resurrection, which was common to all of them, should be tasted by a few."¹⁷

Further, the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that the final resurrection of the saints and their receiving glorified bodies occurs at the second bodily coming of Christ. Therefore, a resurrection of all would be premature. God ordained that in the salvation of His elect, which occurs over a long process of history, the final act in the application of redemption in the broadest sense of that term comes at the very end of human history. Therefore, in this resurrection of "many saints" around Jerusalem, God was giving His people a taste of the result of Christ's redemptive work. Although their appearance on Sunday testified to the Redeemer's

¹⁴ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 403.

¹⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:432.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:325.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

resurrection, it also gave the church, which would soon be sorely persecuted, a glimpse of the end of history. Therefore, this resurrection looks back at the death of Jesus and looks forward to the complete victory of the cross at the consummation. This exhibition of the resurrected saints ought to give the church a great optimism as it battles the forces of evil and suffers affliction. It would be akin to the British troops at Dunkirk in 1940 getting a glimpse of the end result of World War II and seeing themselves marching in a victory parade in London.

Fourth, why is it significant that only believers were raised? Our Lord is showing us that the benefits of His death and resurrection are applied only to His people and not unbelievers. The cross opens the prisons of our graves. It takes rotten flesh, old bones and even bodies obliterated into nothing but dust and makes them into perfect, beautiful, flawless, glorified, incorruptible bodies. Adam was formed from the dust of the ground and we shall be re-formed from the dust of death. Modernists, skeptics and full-preterists cannot accept this truth. But the eyes of faith know that our omnipotent Savior will have no difficulties with this miracle.

This miracle demonstrates the efficacy of Christ's death to spiritually resurrect His own people. If the Redeemer can take the dust of a dead man and give it new glorified life, then can He not also raise up dead hearts of stone? These miracles that accompanied the death of the Savior prove that the resurrected, glorified Mediator will continue to exercise His great saving power throughout history until He comes again. "Rocky hearts are rent, graves of sin are opened, those who have been dead in trespasses and sins, and buried in sepulchers of lust and evil are quickened, and come out from among the dead, and go into *the holy city*, the New Jerusalem."¹⁸ "This is the wondrous work of the cross: it is by the death of our Lord that regeneration comes to men. There were no new births if it were not for that one death. If Jesus had not died, we...[would have] remained dead. If he had not there on the cross passed from among the living, we must have remained among the dead for ever and ever."¹⁹ "Christ died and was buried, not to remain under the power of death and the grave, but to quicken the dead and to raise them out of their graves."²⁰ He didn't die for Himself. He died to redeem His own from death and to give them resurrection unto life eternal.

(3) Whatever opinion one holds regarding the moment these saints were raised, there is no ambiguity as to when they made their appearance. Matthew says that "after His [Christ's] resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared unto many" (27:53). This appearance raises a number of questions.

First, why did these saints wait until after Jesus arose to make their appearance? Apparently, God was teaching the believers in Jerusalem to view these saints' resurrection as logically and theologically dependent upon Christ's resurrection. "The disciples were thus taught to look on that resurrection, not as an isolated phenomenon; but as the 'first fruits' of the victory over death (1 Cor. 15:20), in which not they themselves only, but those also whom they had

¹⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 408.

¹⁹ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Miracle of Our Lord's Death," 34:703. It is interesting that throughout history men have usually been very careful, respectful and ritualistic regarding the disposal of their dead. The almost universal use of grave plots with monuments and sepulchers that are often beautifully adorned reveals that man as a rational creature created in the image of God realizes deep down that: a) human remains ought to be respected and not treated as garbage; and b) there is some type of existence beyond the grave. The souls of men exist even when the physical body is dead. But, even given this recognition, men apart from a supernatural work of grace, do not prepare their souls to meet God by looking to Christ. It is the height of foolishness and absurdity when men take great care and expense to prepare a place where their bodies will rot, putrefy and then turn to dust but make no provision for the resting place of the soul.

²⁰ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1886] 1990), 576.

loved and lost were to be sharers.”²¹ Christians are always to look to the Redeemer as the Captain of salvation—the Lead Climber who opened the path into heaven before them. “These saints that arose, were the present trophies of the victory of Christ’s cross over the powers of death, which he thus *made a show of openly*.”²²

God waited until the humiliation of His Son was ended before exhibiting the victory party in Jerusalem. If (as most commentators believe) these risen saints appeared only to Christians in Jerusalem, then their appearance after the glorification of the Mediator would be a celebration of victory by the saints in heaven and on earth. God brought together the saints from two separate realms to exult in the victory of Christ. The Redeemer, who now has all authority in heaven and on earth, brings heaven to earth and then earth to heaven. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:22-24). Thus it happens that the first Sunday of the Christian church, the first Sabbath of the New Covenant era, is acknowledged and kept by the dead who were brought to life. And these glorified saints who died under the Old Covenant administration instruct the living by example and by teaching of the significance of this Christian Sunday-Sabbath and the restoration of all things by Christ’s victory.

Second, to whom did these risen saints make their appearance? Matthew simply says that the many which were raised went to the holy city and appeared unto many. Most scholars believe that the risen saints only appeared to believers because after His resurrection Jesus always appeared to Christians. He never showed Himself to unbelievers. Interestingly, unbelievers could look upon the cross and see the humiliation and suffering of the Savior. But they were not given the privilege of beholding the glorified exalted Redeemer. They will only see the Mediator on the final day of judgment as He sits upon His lustrous, white throne. They received the evidence of the empty tomb, Pentecost and the gospel preached. If these appearances followed Jesus’ pattern and example, then these risen saints would have appeared to believers to increase their faith, to lift up their sad hearts and to explain the accomplished redemption of the Lord. One can infer from the fact that all these saints went to the same city at the same time, that they were following specific instructions from Christ.

If these resurrected-glorified believers did appear to all, whether Christian or non-Christian, it would have caused widespread astonishment in the population and severe panic among the leadership. A reading of the early history of the church in Jerusalem in the book of Acts gives the distinct impression that the resurrection saints were not seen by unbelievers. If they had, it would have figured into the discussions of the Sanhedrin on how to stop this new, vibrant movement.

Third, why did these resurrected saints only appear in the city of Jerusalem? One reason is that this city had been set apart by God and chosen as the place for His special presence. It had been chosen by God and thus Matthew calls it the “holy city.” Its holiness obviously did not derive from the character of its populace, the vast majority of whom were wicked, but from its adoption by God. It was the center of the Jewish religion and the capital of the Hebrew nation. Therefore, Jesus designated this city as the starting point for the spread of the gospel after His resurrection. “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Ac. 1:8). According to Luke this is precisely what happened: powerful gospel preaching began

²¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:432.

²² David Dickson, *Matthew*, 400.

in Jerusalem (Ac. 2:1); then went into Judea and Samaria (Ac. 8:5); and, subsequently went deep into the Gentile world (Ac. 8:26ff.).

Another reason is that Jerusalem and its immediate vicinity is the stage in which the whole passion of Christ was played out. His arrest, trial, conviction, torture, crucifixion and death were well known in the holy city, but not yet in the countryside. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that the great victory of the Savior's death and resurrection was first explained to people who were the immediate witnesses of these redemptive events.

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