

The  
Miracles  
At  
Calvary

*Matthew 27:45—54*

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## Study 1

# The Miraculous Darkness

### Matthew 27:45

Have you noticed that our society is using more and more religious language? Ice Cream used to be advertised as rich and full flavoured - now it's divine and simply heavenly! It's the same with the word 'miracle'. It's a favourite Newspaper Headline. 'Miraculous Rescue,' you might read. Another title might state, 'It's A Miracle!' And that story will be about a person who is said to have been very 'lucky'. Maybe it was a lotto win. Other times it may be about a close shave with death.

Then there are the many times that Christians use the word 'miracles' these days. They'll even advertise it on their church billboards, and in their newspaper notices. 'Claim your miracle!' they loudly say. So anyone coming will expect something special for them that day.

All of this is a terrible pity. Miracles aren't what they used to be. And, especially, miracles the way the Bible declares them to be aren't being seen anymore.

1. What do you think the general public think is 'miraculous'?

2. Define the biblical definition of 'miracle':

### 3. How do you think miracles fit into the biblical picture?

#### **Believing in the ‘right’ miracle**

Modern miracles are portrayed as things that are special benefits to us. They occur whenever something really nice happens – like getting the right girl. “I believe in miracles,” sings Hot Chocolate, “since you came along.”

A true miracle, though, doesn’t happen anymore! How can it? The need for the miracle has gone.

Miracles did certainly happen, and when they happened they were quite unforgettable and unique. In the words of B.B. Warfield, “Miracles do not appear on the page of Scripture vagrantly, here, there and elsewhere indifferently, without assignable reason.” And then he goes on, “They belong to revelation periods, and appear only when God is speaking to his people through accredited messengers, declaring his gracious purposes.”

So all of those miracles in the Bible - the genuine ones, that is - are tied in with what God is doing in Jesus Christ. That’s what Scripture’s all about. This means that when you look at God’s Word you can expect miracles to happen more often and more powerfully while Jesus is on earth fulfilling his ministry here.

And that’s exactly what happens. There are all kinds of signs and wonders because the great Sign and Wonder himself has come. There are all types of powerful healing, including people brought back from the dead, because the Divine Doctor is there. Jesus is himself the one convincing and permanent miracle.

Considering all this, it would follow that if there was a particular time in Jesus’ life on earth when miracles appear most, it would have to be when he is at the point of doing the very thing he came for. The greatest miracle of them all was when Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross for sinners. Then the word of God’s message was that messenger himself - he was no less than the Living Word.

4 - a) What do the biblical miracles especially focus on?

b) How do they help us see what should truly matter in life?

5. Read Philippians 2:6-11. How does this help us understand who is doing the miracles at Calvary and why?

### **Seeing the sign**

There's still something more to miracles, however. You see, they do point to Jesus Christ. The greatest miracles in number and power happened when our Lord is here, when they pointed toward his coming or back to his coming. But there's also the miracle itself, because people in the past have come to believe through the working of miracles. So a miracle isn't simply something we're amazed at. "Wow - I wonder how they do that!"

Actually, a miracle tells us why God is doing all that. Through the picture we can see, it's clear what the message is. It's the most graphic sermon!

We come then to the scene of Christ on the cross. This is the high point of his coming, though it couldn't be more of a low point for him personally. There have to be miracles here. While Jesus can no longer do them himself, his Father does, confirming that this is the real reason for Jesus' saving work for mankind.

There are six of these miracles we meet at Calvary. Each of them points to the One who is hanging there. And each of them tells us something about what he is doing there.

6 – Read Matthew 27:11-56. Identify the six specific miracles shown at Calvary:

7 – What struck you about the first of these miracles?

### **This isn't natural – it's supernatural**

God's judgment upon mankind is visited on his Son. And it shows. This miracle is black and white! Jesus Christ has been on the cross three hours. From 9 o'clock in the morning till 12 noon, he's been hanging there. What he has suffered until this point has been the most terrible torment and pain. Klaas Schilder says of this point, "Christ enters upon the second phase of his suffering. From the catastrophe of the crucifixion he enters into the passion of being crucified. Gradually, but certainly, his blood ebbs. His wounds become swollen; they gave him extreme pain. His blood congeals because it cannot flow freely. Fever consumes his body. The work has been done; the social act, except for his extreme sacrifice, has been finished. The intercession for the soldiers, the opening of Paradise to the murderer, and getting John to look after his mum - that's all happened."

Then the heat of the noonday sun, and all its effects, is pulled away! The darkness covers the land like a huge blanket. At the time when the sun should have been its brightest, there's no light at all! The three hours of noise suddenly turns into three hours of terrified silence.

Listen - did you hear that blood drop? Was that the heaving chest of a man on a cross?

The contrast couldn't be greater. Something has happened. Something quite extra-ordinary! This isn't natural. But there are many who re-



fuse to say it's supernatural.

They will suggest this is a severe thunderstorm – but for three hours? And even if that long, it would not have covered the whole country. No one would think of that as special. And, besides, what about the flashes of lightning that always occur in thunderstorms? Whenever there was lightning, the complete darkness could not remain.

Others have spoken of a black sirocco storm from the desert. But, again, that couldn't make it this black and for this long, at this time of the day. Luke 23, the verses 44 and 45, appears to suggest an eclipse of some kind. Indeed, it does speak of the sun being eclipsed. But is Luke writing astronomically? If he were there would be problems. For any of us who've seen an eclipse know how short a time they last. Besides, this is the time of the Passover. This is the time of the full moon when such an eclipse would have been impossible! The best answer is that this is not natural but rather supernatural. This is a special act of God - yes, a miracle!

We come back to what we noted earlier. A miracle is a sign - it points to something. As John Stott describes it, "the darkness of the sky was an outward spiritual darkness which enveloped him. For what is darkness in biblical symbolism but separation from God who is light and in whom 'there is no darkness at all'?"

'Outer darkness' is actually an expression Jesus used for hell (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), because hell is a total exclusion from the light of God's presence. Into that outer darkness God's Son plunged for us. Our sins blotted out the sunshine of his Father's face. This was when our sins sent Christ to hell as he hung there on the cross.

8. How do you think about the passion of Christ? What do you think is the cause of it?

9. John Stott quotes from 1 John 1:5 in saying that darkness in biblical symbolism is separation from God, who is light. Read the passage that verse is found in – 1 John 1:1-7 – and discuss how this now equates to the Christian life.

10. In his poem ‘Inferno’, Dante describes a sign above the gate of hell which says, ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.’ After reading Matthew 8:5-13 and 22:1-14 answer why this is so.

### *Derivations*

11. In the Apostles’ Creed it says of our Lord that after his death and burial “he descended into hell.” Given what we have just seen about the last part of the period of darkness what do you think about that part of the Apostles’ Creed? Why do you think some churches adopt the changed word, “he descended into death – or the grave”?

12. If you were to rewrite the Apostles’ Creed to do justice to what Christ went through on the cross, what would you write and where would you write it?

13. What does it mean personally for you that Jesus took all our sins upon him?

### **This isn't incidental – it's judgmental**

We can sometimes become wrapped up with the small details in this scene, instead of the whole picture. There's been so much said about the jealousy of the Jewish leaders, the misunderstanding of the people, and the weak character of Pilate. And then there's the way that Christ's own disciples, after promising the complete opposite - just took off! Up until this point in time, the injustice of men against the God-man has been blatant. If anyone was sacrificed on the altar of human convenience, it was this One!

But that was all necessary. You see, Jesus Christ had to stand alone. Not as the victim of Jewish spite, nor as an official injustice. He was more than that, with a perfection that made him completely 'separate from sinners.' Christ Jesus has something in him that fallen human nature, even under its best conditions, is morally unable to understand.

One preacher put it this way: "In his address to Pilate Jesus Christ distinctly points out the divine share of the marvellous transaction. He shows that he's not to be classed with the common criminals. His presence at the bar is part of a great purpose which God is working out. Human strength would have no power, and, indeed, no opportunity, to lay wicked hands upon him had he not been given by God expressly for the sins of the world."

All that had been written as satisfying God's justice is being done, for this is no cooling off time for Jesus. This was the impact of God's curse shown in physical phenomenon. The curse of God expressed in Deuteronomy comes to its fullest expression against this One on the cross. This is not only the curse of Deuteronomy 21, which was against anyone hung on a tree: this is the curse against the disobedience of all mankind.

14. Read Deuteronomy 28:29. Then look at its immediate context of Deuteronomy 28:15-29. How does that help you understand what Jesus is going through?

15. Read Exodus 10:21-29. How does this connect with what Jesus is going through here? Which symbolic and physical aspects stand out for you?

### **The sign where you don't see**

Those Israelites in Moses' time knew what such a darkness was like from their own recent history. They had been the ones who had come out of Egypt – the Egypt which had suffered the plague of darkness for three whole days, as we read in Exodus 10. This was a darkness so heavy it could be felt! Ugh! Yuck!

This is the kind of darkness the prophet Amos later confirmed, when he spoke of the coming Day of the Lord. He quoted God himself, in chapter 8 verse 9, “In that day, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.”

How graphically it is all fulfilled now. And how clear it would have been for the Jews who made up Matthew's original readers. It's their scripture being fulfilled! It is God's curse coming to rest. That's why we have to remember that a curse is the opposite of a blessing. While a blessing is an announcement of God's care, a curse is an announcement of God's punishment. Just think of the Lord's blessing that kept the night away while Joshua destroyed the five Canaanite kings and all their armies!

But the person who is cursed is abandoned by grace. He is abandoned by God's compassion and goodness. Instead, he is struck by God's powerful wrath! That's why it went so terribly dark. That's why at the end of these three hours Christ cried out so hauntingly, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" All our curses were laid on him.

There was no other way – the Light of the World was in the dark! When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem the night became day, now at his death on Calvary the day becomes night. It is that darkness Christ enters into and defeats. With his birth the whole host of angels were singing. At his death the devils are in their element. And yet despite their 'home ground advantage' he becomes more than a conqueror.

Jesus Christ soberly takes all the judgment levelled at him as payment for our sins. Remember, he refused that drink of wine mixed with myrrh. He was going into this fully conscious of what he was doing, and he was going into this completely alone. While his Father "causes his sun to shine on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45) here Christ renounced it all to be made sin for us. He had spoken earlier in Matthew 20:28 and 26:28 of himself as "the ransom for many." This was the price he had to pay, and he didn't count the cost.

The curse has come. It has come with all its effects. For on the cross the cumulative results of all mankind's sins are thrust upon Christ. Three days there was darkness in Egypt. There the first-born all died, the first-fruits of Egypt's might. There are three hours of darkness now. And here the first-begotten dies, the first-born of the power of God.

There is a line drawn down through history. No one should miss it. Whether they were from Old Testament Israel, or they are in the Church now by Christ's blood.

But there's also no comparison. The shadow can never match the substance. In fact, darkness casts no shadow.

## *Derivations*

16. Do you believe the Jews should be held responsible for the death of Jesus? Explain your answer in the light of the bigger scriptural picture.

17. How have you grown in appreciating Christ's sacrifice through this study?

## **Prayer Points**

+Praise God for the Light that shone in the darkness – and how much it lights up our lives.

+ Confess those times you have not shown God's light.

+ Thank God that Jesus humbled himself through dying on the cross for our sins.

+ Ask God to help you grow in appreciating Christ's sacrifice.

## Study 2

# The Loud Voice

### Matthew 27:46 & 50

1. Share amongst the group your different stories of being with people when they have passed away. Did they all die peacefully? What was their death the result of?

2. Read Matthew 27:45-50. How does Jesus die?

There is an expression which goes something like this, 'The way a man dies tells us a lot about the way he lived.' This is very true. A life lived in the worship and service of the Lord will end with that person knowing he is very much in the safe hands of his Master. A life lived in bitterness and hate, however, will end in much regret and sorrow.

So we turn to consider the death of the perfect man. We reflect here on what God's own Son did when he physically died, and that tells us heaps about the way he lived. Actually, the way Christ died is itself one of his miracles. Instead of pointing to the will of the Father through what he did to someone or something else, Jesus showed the miracle through himself.

Now, if the way a believer dies can be a tremendous witness to his Christian faith, imagine how much more a witness to the Lord it is when the way he dies is a miracle? For we know a miracle itself can bring someone to faith. A biblical miracle is nothing less than being confronted with what God is doing through Jesus Christ. This is something we must keep before us, as God's Word pictures it.

3. How do you think keeping the way Jesus died before us can help us in our Christian walk?

### **The voice of Jesus is loud**

Here we need to realise what time it was for Jesus. He had been on the cross for over six hours. He had been terribly humiliated by the piercing crown of thorns crammed over his head, along with the taunts and beatings that accompanied it. But that was nothing compared with the way those nails pierced his hands. And let's understand that detail correctly. Those nails didn't go through his palms, as is so often pictured. In fact, those programs on television showing the alleged 'miracles' of the stigmata get this quite wrong. For they show the holes that the nails made as being in the palms of our Lord.

Those nails, however, were actually driven through the carpels. That's where the lower arm connects with the hand. It's also where there's a major nerve - the nerve which serves the movement of the thumb. As a result, Jesus experienced a tremendous cramping and extreme pain throughout his hand.

Then Jesus, nailed now on the crossbeam, was lifted on that crossbeam to the top of the vertical pole, where it was fixed. After that, a nail was driven through both feet. Even before Jesus is put up there to hang, he has suffered terribly. But once he was hung there it became much worse.

Crucifixion is a cruel death. The man who is crucified has to contend with the force of gravity as well as the pain inflicted by being nailed to the cross. The muscles of the upper body are under a terrible



tension. The ribs are pulled up and so it becomes extremely difficult to breathe. Within ten minutes he is in terrible agony. The muscles of the upper body are seized with awful spasms. Great quantities of lactic acid are produced by these muscles and make the whole body quite acidic. Because breathing is impeded the body cannot get rid of the carbonic acid via breathing, which in turn makes the body even more acidic. All the muscles of the body are now experiencing the most terrible spasms. The victim then starts to perspire, and will finally suffocate, sometimes within half an hour.

Horrible, isn't it? But not horrible enough for those barbarous Romans. They intended to get the most out of this vividly open and public display of their justice.

That's why the feet were nailed down. That made it possible for the crucified person to push his body up a little. It was relief, he could draw breath, but relief from what? Now the full bodyweight was on the foot-nail, which added to the terrible pain. So the body would slump again, hanging on the upper nails, and the intense suffering continues.

It is after six hours of this, exacerbated by three of those hours being in the separating darkness from God's presence, that the bible text tells us, "Jesus cried out with a loud voice." That in itself is a miracle. It had to be supernatural because there was no way a person who had been hanging there so long on the cross would have had enough breath left to cry out at all, let alone loudly.

Even the angriest man, raging against the worst possible injustice, would be just a shadow on the cross at that time.

The voice of Jesus was loud because he was in complete control. Here authority shows itself in the most commanding way. He would decide when to go.

4. Read Isaiah 53:1-12. What do you note about the Messiah's part in his own suffering and death?

5. Read John 10:1-21. How does this passage confirm that Christ did what Isaiah prophesied he would do?

### **The time was right**

The prophecy of Isaiah 53:12 has come true. Jesus is pouring out his life unto death. As he himself foretold in John 10 verse 11, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” And this time is itself significant. Matthew Henry highlights how this hour between three and four in the afternoon was the time of the evening sacrifice. The time when the paschal (Passover) lamb was killed was the time Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us. To those Jewish readers of Matthew’s Gospel this is a significance that wasn’t lost. They who so carefully checked to ensure that the Old Testament prophecies were indeed fulfilled knew this. Here was the victim prophesied of old.

We hear a lot of talk nowadays about victims. It seems that society has become full of these victims - people who because of alleged circumstances beyond their control aren’t to be held responsible for their actions. Even if those actions end up taking the lives of others! That’s a lot of nonsense, of course. While people may have had difficult upbringings, all of us make our own choice about what to do with our lives. And each one of us does know which choice to make. There is no excuse.

Here, though, we have the one man who always made the right choice - who was the only true victim - taking on the responsibility for us all. The voice of Jesus is loud because he has given his life as a ransom for many. It was our Lord who declared in John 19:30, “It is finished”. So when he said at this same moment the seventh and final saying from the cross in Luke 23:46, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” he proved he had come back into his Father’s care. It was done. He had won! The voice of Jesus is loud because it’s the victor’s song!

Now, you never thought of it that way - did you? But no man ever died like this man.

## *Derivations*

6. What would you want the most if you knew you were going to die soon?

7. How could you talk with your neighbour who only has a short time to live because of cancer?

8. In the Jewish church calendar Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 is a passage not read out as part of the annual Sabbath readings in their synagogues. Why do you think this is so? And when do you think the decision was made to omit this section of scripture in their readings?

### **The soul of Christ is bowed**

When a believer dies what is it we can be very anxious about? In fact, what is it that Christians can be very concerned about if they don't think a believer dying has it? Ah, isn't it that concern that they are actually ready to die – that they are in peace in their passing away?

Young people, and especially young adults, can sometimes act as if they are going to live forever. They can even seem 'bullet proof'. But it hits you hard when one of your friends or family dies as yet another of New Zealand's devastating road toll. Life's pretty fragile

then, isn't it? (Actually, statistics show that most people die – in the context of abuse, trauma and accidents – between the ages of 15 and 25.)

Generally, when you are young, death is far away. It happens to someone else. But when it is your own friends who are dying, when it's your brothers and sisters who are passing away, you think about it a lot.

When Christians talk about being ready for death it's about realising that this is also a part of life. But being unprepared for death also means there is a special comfort from God that is missed. While many believers die with this incredible peace - the peace that passes all understanding - there can still be some believers who don't have that peace, meaning that at this crucial time they're not completely right with God.

That's why Christians should be concerned to keep their hearts and lives right with God. While they know that they are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, they don't want to be caught out when the Lord calls them home. They must be ready to let this world go.

Are you, dear friend? Would God calling you home right now find you ready and willing? Or would you have so many other things you've still got to do - that game you've just got to play, the program you just have to watch, the trip you've just got to make. But all these things aren't what life's about. You don't really know life until you've met death!

Death is the great divider. It lays bare the state of every soul – whether that is a soul with or without faith, or a soul being faithful or unfaithful. And death catches us out, whether you have been lying next to the bed of that loved one with cancer for months, or it's the most unexpected accident to the healthiest and good looking one of them all. Who or what are you living for? Is that worth dying for?

9. Is there anyone who shows us the right way to bear up to death? If so, what can we learn from his example?

### **This is not the end**

The perfect One who was most able to let his life go willingly, sacrificing himself for our sakes, proves this. The soul of Christ is bowed. Our Lord's loud voice while suffering on the cross is proof that in him is eternal life. He really knows life because he perfectly met death. In the words of Hebrews 5 verse 7, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."

And now look at what happens on the cross, immediately after Christ's cry. In fact, look at what happens across the land, as the paschal lamb is being sacrificed at this time and on this special day in the year. The Light shines! The darkness is gone! In the moment of greatest humility there is the greatest victory.

Then it is most appropriate that the word for "loud" here comes from the Greek word for "great". It is the word 'mega'. So over the land where the darkness has lifted, and the sacrifices are being made, Christ's cry brings the trumpet's sound. This is not the end - it's the most glorious beginning!

10. Read Hebrews 9:11-14. What does this tell us about the work of Christ for us at Calvary?

11. Is there any other religion which speaks of the love of God in such a sacrificial way?

12. For those that have an unloving God, what is their misunderstanding of the Christian faith?

### **Life begins with this death**

The loud, triumphant voice heard from the One dying at Calvary is now going out among the living throughout the world - and will continue on until the one who uttered it returns on the clouds of glory. There's no stopping this sound. You hear it because of the victorious sacrifice of the loving Son of God. And you keep hearing its echoes from the sons and daughters who through God's love have been adopted into his family of faith. This is the witness of the Church all over the world.

Think about what the modern philosophers said about God and then what God himself said. Sartre speaks of the silence of God, Heidegger of the absence of God, Jaspers of the concealment of God, Bultmann of the hiddenness of God, Buber of the eclipse of God, Barth of the wholly otherness of God, Tillich of the non-being of God, Altizer of the death of God. And the Scriptures? They speak of the love of God.

The Bible declares God's love in Jesus Christ. And at the height of this love's expression we hear his voice clearest of all, because it is God himself who's hanging there. And it's this saving God we must love and trust wholeheartedly, because he gave himself so willingly for our sakes. As Elaine Kilgore put it so well, "Life doesn't begin at forty, or at twenty, but at Calvary."

Our voices and our lives now must be loud. And our souls must also be bowed. In the face of such a sacrifice we cannot come away the same anymore, because this sacrifice is the ultimate miracle. And a miracle tells us one thing: God has come to visit.

## *Derivations*

13. If God has come to visit how can you be sure that you have received him?

14. How is the Church to echo this same cry of Christ in our day?

## **Prayer Points**

- + Praise God for his love shown in the victory his Son has won.
- + Confess that we have not always shown by our lives that Christ died for us.
- + Thank Jesus that his voice now is going out into the whole world.
- + Ask God that our voice and our lives will be loud for the faith.





### Study 3

# The Torn Curtain

## Matthew 27:51a

This text is found in the New Testament. Of course, you say. It's in Matthew's Gospel. In fact, it's just about at the end of his Gospel. So it's definitely in the New Testament. But when does the New Testament actually start? Has that got you thinking? Did you always think it was when you get to that break in the Bible - the blank page just before Matthew's Gospel?

There is a quote you might know, "The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed, while the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed." The difference between the two testaments is described by saying that one conceals and the other reveals.

So, when does that change actually happen? At which point does the whole mystery of the coming of Jesus Christ become open to all believers? Considering the Jewish audience he was writing to, isn't it precisely here – in this text – that Matthew gets to the heart of the matter? Here the Old is no longer concealed! The glory is no longer hidden. The veil which Moses had to put over his face when he came away from meeting the Lord has gone.

What greater symbolism could there be of the completion of Old Testament messianic prophecy than this supernatural opening up of the place where no ordinary believer could ever go? The place, in fact, where only one man could ever go - and that only once a year, through great ceremony and a cloud of smoke!

1. Read Matthew 27:45-56. What do you think the third miracle of the torn curtain means?

2. How does it fit in with everything else happening here?

3. Read Exodus 26:1-37. What does this tell us of the place of the curtain in the temple compared with everything else that made up the temple?

### **This is the worst possible tear**

The temple curtain had to be torn when Jesus died. The sacrifices were all finished, because the ultimate sacrifice had been offered. And God provided the proof in the sign of the torn curtain. Remember what the miracles in scripture were for? They all pointed to what God would do or had done in our Lord. They are, if you like, sacraments - pointing and confirming where and who Jesus Christ is. Charles Spurgeon even goes so far as to say that the torn curtain shows us the opening of the gates of paradise. That's what the loud voice from the cross did. Our bleeding Lord has the key of heaven.

This had to be the worst possible tear – nothing else could have made the point. And this was always meant to be what would happen. To understand this more we need to go back to when the Lord first

told the Israelites why there had to be a tabernacle and what it was to be made of. It was the tabernacle which became the temple in Jerusalem. At last the tabernacle tent had a permanent home. The contents of that tabernacle tent, though, were exactly what God had ordained so many years ago. The place where he would be among them was to be as special as ever. And the costliness of the materials used to make that tent proved how impossible replacing it would be.

In Exodus chapter 26, we read about the making of this special tent. The incredible detail and skill of the workmen is described, and the undeniable quality of the materials they used. It was the best – whether 1200 years BC or at the time of our passage in 30 AD. This was made to last. The length and the width certainly showed that. For where else have you ever seen or heard of curtaining this long and this thick?

Now, the thickness we have to especially note. Our curtains might at best be, what, a couple of millimetres thick – perhaps half a centimetre at the most, but the temple curtain would have been around ten centimetres thick.

Someone might say, though, that the material was different. But that still cannot account for this kind of width, because this was superior by far to anything else normally made back then.

This was the worst possible tear – simply because that tear couldn't ever possibly be there. You see, this curtain didn't come with the best five or ten or even lifetime guarantee. It was made to last for centuries.

Just in case you're doing some maths in your head, and working out the time between Exodus 26 and the time of our Lord, you'll need to remember this is the third temple. While the way it was built is the same, even grander in some respects, all the furnishings were new within the last fifty years. So there could be no tear from wear here. And even if that were possible, there would have been rips all over it, and the tearing would most likely have come from the bottom up, or across — which, as we know, is usually the case. Nor should we think this happened because of the earthquake. Matthew would have mentioned the earthquake first if that were the case.

The curtain was torn because it was in the way. Its function as the most important room divider in the world was now unnecessary, since its purpose had been fulfilled. That's why it was done away with in the most miraculous way. You see, it had been through this curtain that the

High Priest would have passed from the Holy Place to the Most Holy Place. There was also an identical curtain which separated the Holy Place from the Priest's Court and the altar.

Some commentators think that curtain may be the one referred to here. They say that because what is really being done away with here is the Levitical Priesthood. And that was a closed society. No one could simply join it. Priestly privileges were not available to anybody else. And so those glorious furnishings - while a beautiful sight to see - were never seen in earlier days. Access to the temple, previously restricted to the Levite priesthood, was now thrown open to all. And this is the reason for believing that the curtain torn apart was that priests' curtain, which kept them separate from the rest of Israel. Now it was useless, and everybody could look inside to see what was previously hidden.

Considering what the Holy of Holies had become, this is a good point. Because in the past, the Holy of Holies had had certain powerful ornaments and objects. Hebrews 9, the verses 3 till 5, describes them. They included the golden altar of incense, and the gold-covered Ark of the Covenant. It was in that ark that there were also the gold jar of manna, Aaron's rod that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. And above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the place of atonement.

But, now, in this third temple, everything was gone. The Holy of Holies was an empty room. Especially so, because the Shekinah, the glory of the Lord, was no longer there. The Rabbis acknowledge this in their historical writings. They state that these five key elements were missing in the last Temple - the ark, the holy fire, the Shekinah, the spirit of prophecy, and the Urim and Thummim.

But regardless of all this, the Holy of Holies was where the Lord God had made his presence. And if his people had returned to him in reformation he would have been there again. Yet no more – this was the worst possible tear.

Because it was only physical it could be replaced, as in fact it was. Temple worship still went on for some years after this. That, however, was now definitely only going through the motions. There could never again be in this place the presence and blessing of the Lord, as of old. The Messiah's work on earth was now finished, and the New Testament had arrived.

4. Why do you think it can be said that God is no longer in this earthly, physical temple?

5. Read Hebrews 6:13-20. How does this tell us of what has changed?

### **But it will never need repair**

Forget it! Christ's body is the true temple, living in each believer's heart through his Holy Spirit. As Klaas Schilder wrote, "This is a sign designed not to accompany the prophecy of Christ, but to seal it, and also to prepare for the prophesying of the Christ which will take place in the future by the Spirit of Pentecost... Moreover, God is not only prophesying ... He is also beginning the new dispensation. The exclusive caste of the priesthood is deprived of all its privileges. After this all those who believe and through their faith approach God, will be called priests. That which Pentecost will realise to the full has its beginning here."

How can we know this? I mean, could all this come possibly through one tear, devastating as it was?

Let's note two things in connection with this:

#### *1. The time the curtain was torn.*

"At that moment" verse 51 begins. Which moment? The moment Jesus died. The exact split second he became the slaughtered Lamb, was the precise moment the Temple went out of business! It was at that very point in time that a man had the right to enter heaven because of his perfect obedience to the Law.

When the Jews demanded a sign from Jesus in John 2:19, his answer to them was a riddle: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." To that the Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?"

John continued: “But the temple he spoke of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words Jesus had spoken.”

That moment signalled the entire fulfilment of Old Testament Messianic prophecies. It let the world know that the time for ministering to the Lord God with limited human devices was now over. Their usefulness has been subsumed by the unlimited and divine One himself.

6. Read Exodus 25:1-40. What can you see is now fulfilled in Jesus and how?

7. Why do you think that most of the Jews have not been able to accept what Christ has done on the cross and so understand the symbolism of the torn curtain?

## *2. The effect of Christ's work.*

Now the road to heaven has been opened, as shown symbolically in a way that takes true faith to a wider and greater dimension than ever before. The incident in John 4, where Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman, brings this out. You might remember that, when Jesus was getting a bit too close personally with his words, she raised the perpetual debate between the Samaritans and the Jews about where you are meant to worship the Lord. But Jesus didn't let her go then, either. Instead of letting her turn the discussion, he answered her in a way that took it further than she had ever imagined. While pointing out that the Samaritans had been quite wrong to worship on Mount Gerazim, he

said, in verse 24, that the time was coming when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Now is that time! (A time for all ages.)

And Jesus, by talking to a woman of that despised, mixed-blood nation, demonstrated that many other nations, not just Jews, would come into that Kingdom. The tearing of the curtain ripped away not only the Old Testament ceremonial law, it also took away the barrier that had stood between Jew and Gentile. Everyone now had access to the throne of grace, through the one great atonement and mediator, Jesus Christ!

Hebrews 10, the verses 19 till 21, rings this out. It says, “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

The way directly to heaven has been opened up - and what a line that is! No interference ever on this line! Nothing and no one else can get in the way. For we go through him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In the words of the early Church Father, Chrysostom, “The veil was rent. Thus our Lord showed his power and wrath, and at the same time his love. He intimated that what was before inaccessible, was now made easy of access, and that Heaven would be opened, and that he our Great High Priest would now enter the Holy of Holies. They had said, ‘If he be King of Israel, let him come down from the cross;’ but he proves himself the King of the World.’ They had derided him, saying, ‘You that destroys the temple,’ He showed that it - the temple - would be desolate, by rending the Veil.”

8. What practical difference does it make that we no longer need an earthly temple to go through to commune with the Lord in the closest possible way?

9. Read Hebrews 4:14-5:10. How does this passage point us to the way we commune with the Lord now?

**This makes all the difference for God's own**

At the end of this study we come back to its beginning. The change is devastating. This was the beginning of a whole new dispensation. It makes the most amazing difference for our personal lives. But it was always on the cards, or rather, I should say, it was always in his Word. Jesus, the One who every time he was in the temple during his life on earth cleansed it in one way or another, has now cleaned it up for ever!

10. Read Matthew 21:12-17. How is what our Lord did in this passage foreshadowing what he would do through the tearing of the curtain at his death?

*Derivations*

11. In what ways has Jesus cleaned you up inside?



12. How does that relate to this third miracle?

### **Prayer Points**

+ Praise God that the Gates of Paradise have been opened up for us through Christ's work.

+ Confess that we have treated lightly the sacrifice God has made for us in his Son.

+ Thank the Lord that his purpose for the earthly temple is complete and now he makes his temple in each one of his own through the Holy Spirit.

+ Ask God to continue cleansing us on the inside through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.



## Study 4

# The Violent Earthquake

### Matthew 27:51b

1. If a large earthquake were to strike, how would you react?  
(Remember it is completely unexpected!)

An earthquake isn't really such a unique thing. Having been brought up and lived at various times on the shaky isles, as some call New Zealand, we got the odd tremor or two - or three or four. We have even had the bigger quakes. Napier city was devastated by one in the 1930's. And just recently Christchurch was even more devastated by a series of earthquakes, with one in particular decimating the Central Business District and coastal suburbs. Here, on the eastern side of Australia, we're on an earthquake plate as well. I'm sure you've occasionally felt tremors. There was that earthquake that struck Newcastle at the end of 1989. The Middle East is also a similar geological area. That is part of one of those fiery rings, with volcanic activity, earthquakes, and so on. The frequent earthquakes in Turkey show this.

So earthquakes weren't anything the people of Jesus' time didn't know about. They would have experienced them before. But certainly not on this scale. Why should there be a quake just now, and such a violent one at that? Of all the times that an earthquake had to strike, why just then? And why in this precise place?

There had been so much going on at the time when Jesus died.

There was that incredible darkness – so heavily black you could feel it! Then there was the loud voice. No one had ever heard someone cry out with that much force after six hours on the cross. At that moment also, the temple curtain tore from top to bottom. A curtain of the most carefully constructed skill and strength. It was less than fifty years old - while it was made to last for centuries. And it was ripped clean! That curtain was ripped with unearthly strength from top to bottom, in a way that was totally against normal wear and tear.

And then: “The earth shook and the rocks split.” Could this have been a coincidence? Well, as any detective will tell you when investigating a number of very unusual events that have happened at the same time, “There are no such things as coincidences.” And how much more so isn’t this true, especially at this time? Do you think we can dismiss any of these unusual events we see here as just normal, or coincidence? Definitely not!

This is where our modern, rationalist age can blind us. For in previous centuries, people have been very quick to see something special in these kinds of happenings. And you can still find parts of the world now where people will see a connection. In our society, though, there’s a scientific explanation for everything and that blinds us. We can begin to think the answer can be rationally explained, by present day human logic and understanding. And that is something this earthquake is definitely not telling us.

2. How do you think the people of other religions view an earthquake?

3. Read Matthew 27:45-54 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:18-25. How does this tell us what the Jews would have thought an earthquake was?

### **The earthquake proves God's Word is true**

For a moment here let's consider how all those other pagan religions in the world see natural disasters, such as earthquakes. What do they mean for them? Well, it's not good news, is it? Their gods are angry. Somehow they have displeased their powerful gods, and this disaster has been sent as a punishment.

In our Christian faith, we know we could never do enough to please God. The Lord reminds us of that often in his Word. But he also tells us we will be accountable for whatever we do. So many Christians view this earthquake as a judgment. They say that God addresses the Jews in their own language – they who looked for signs, as Paul tells us in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 1, certainly got one! The earthquake to them serves as a 'woe' which heralded an advent, but an advent this time not of Jesus as the Saviour, but of Jesus as the Judge.

The difficulty with this view is that while it is true there is a coming judgment, and there are events which characterise that coming Day, this event is testifying to a different coming. This is a miracle at the end of Christ's first coming - not a catastrophe pointing to the beginning of his second coming. We need to ask, instead, how this represents the saving work of our Lord. And while you will find passages tying in earthquakes with judgment, particularly when Jesus speaks of the time before His second return, you will find even more passages, especially in the Old Testament, describing this particular earthquake as a covenant confirmation.

David pictures such a situation in Psalm 18. When the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, he used the scene of the earth shaking to show the power which delivered him. The Lord would keep his covenant with his own. Isn't that what we

read in Exodus chapter 19? When God came down on the Mount of Sinai, and gave Moses the First Word (the Ten Commandments), there was darkness because of the dense cloud, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Would we imagine, then, when God gives his Final Word, that he wouldn't confirm it again in the same way?

The Church today so often forgets the Old Testament. It is treated like a hiccup, an obstacle, or at best giving a few handy moral lessons. You will find many churches saying that it is completely out of sync with the New Testament and ignoring it in their teaching. They say the Old Testament is all about the Law while the New Testament is all about grace. But when the letter to the Hebrews begins with the words, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways," the writer is describing a line of grace right through to the Messiah who will fulfil the law. What is happening here is nothing new. The Jews had to see and acknowledge that line. That's why Matthew wrote about the earthquake.

Here we can draw in the Berean Christians mentioned in Acts 17:11. They searched intently through their Hebrew Scriptures when the apostle Paul preached to them. And the only scriptures available to them at that time were what today's Christians know as the Old Testament. But what a witness they are! They clearly state who the Messiah is and how we can recognise him.

We read the same in 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1 verse 19. There the apostle says, "...we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

The word of the covenant laid before the people at Mount Sinai was fulfilled in the One on the cross at the Mount of Calvary. He was the man greater than Moses. He was not to be left outside the Promised Land, but he went all the way in. The majesty of Christ rests on the Mount. In the further words of Hebrews 1, in verse 3, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

This is no coincidence. The unique features of this particular

earthquake prove that it was sent by God to proclaim the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.

4. Why would rocks splitting add emphasis to what is happening in this earthquake?

5. How does Luke 19:40 help us here?

6. In what ways do events during this earthquake draw our minds back to Genesis 1?

### **The rocks splitting are also a confirmation of prophecy**

Seismologically speaking, there are tremors occurring all the time. The real worry is that big one. And it's certainly coming. Japan experienced a vivid example of such a quake in 2011. That was a 9 on the Richter scale! And how many didn't perish as a result of that – not to begin counting the huge property damage bill! That is the kind of quake that splits rocks. For a tremor will move them round a little, but to actually split rocks takes a very powerful force.

It's interesting, then, that the words for “shook” and “split” in our text are passive in the original Greek. So this is something

which is done to the earth and to the rocks. And the One who does it to them is certainly no mere man. This is no early experimentation in underground explosions. Those rocks split at God's command.

Some see this as the fulfilment of what Jesus said in Luke 19:40. In reply to the Pharisees who were condemning the disciples for praising him, Jesus said, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." But while these stones are now crying out their confirmation it's not because the disciples weren't any longer praising him, even though at this point most of them had deserted him. There is a connection, however, because any genuine response to God's grace in Jesus Christ cannot be stopped. It will come out. Nothing can stop the effects of the great victory Christ has won – the "Amen" will be sung! In the words of the apostle Paul in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 1:20, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God."

As a biblical miracle, the earth shaking and the rocks splitting are tied in with what Jesus Christ is doing. This sign appears because the great Sign is present. It points to what is happening to him there and then. And you know why he's there!

It comes home to us all. None of us can get away from the fact that this miracle is testifying of Christ's dying for his own on the cross. Therefore each one of us is asked this: 'Are the shock waves hitting you?' You know they ought to – you know they won't skip past you. These are not little tremors – this gigantic quake shakes your whole life through and through!

Look at a few verses further down. Verse 54 leaves us in no doubt of the way this has to strike human hearts. As Matthew writes there, "When the centurion, and those with him who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake, and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'"

The power that splits even the hardest rocks is shocking them, too. They can't get away from it. This miracle is a true miracle - because it's got the message! The Gospel is being shouted out! And they're hearing it - loud and clear! The hardest rocks of all - their hearts - are being broken!



With this covenant confirmation, God's people should be in no doubt. The Lord himself has come down. And now through his doing and dying his people are empowered to break through. While under the old covenant Moses and Aaron were the only people allowed to communicate with the Lord, now he himself opens the way for us all to come through. There's nothing holding us back because Christ's Spirit lives in us.

7. Read Acts 16:25-26. What did this violent earthquake mean for Paul and Silas?

8. Read Romans 8:18-27. If earthquakes are showing us creation's groaning what assurance can we have when we experience them today?

### **The believer's victory**

What for anyone else is a disaster becomes the believer's victory. What reminds others of judgment for their sin points us to being free from that sin forever. The earth shaking and the rocks splitting proclaim creation's joyful response to our triumphant Lord, whose victory over Satan has changed the world forever. It is not the same anymore.

While Israel knew what they had to do, their history constantly showed that they couldn't do it. Their sacrifices were never enough. Having God's Law before them only proved that they could never manage to keep it as they should. But now it is all

done. Jesus Christ, Lord of all creation, is God's one and only Son.

*Derivations*

9. In what way does this miracle of the splitting rocks tie in with what God did in creating this world?

10. What will you be thinking of the next time an earthquake shakes up your world?

11. How could you use that earthquake to speak to your unbelieving neighbour or friend?

## **Prayer Points**

- + Praise God that he is in control of all things – so all natural events are part of his supernatural working.
- + Confess that we have not always taken to heart his warnings in the past.
- + Thank the Lord that this earthquake was no disaster but confirms his victory over sin and death and the evil one.
- + Ask God to make us open to speaking about his power in creation to those around us.



## Study 5

# The Open Tombs

### Matthew 27:52-53a

Could there be a more depressing scene for those of this world than that of an open grave? They who had so much hoped and trusted in what they could do have got nothing left they can do. “Dust to dust, and ashes to ashes” is so true. For them it is as Aristotle confessed, “Death is a dreadful thing, for it is the end!” And Rousseau bluntly affirmed it, “He who pretends to face death without fear is a liar!”

Perhaps we have been very sad then, too. We miss those who have died. There will always be that empty gap in our lives. But if they are fellow believers we know where they are now. We are not afraid of death, as the world is. By faith we say confidently those words of the twenty-third Psalm. As it says in verse 4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

1. Read Matthew 27:45-53a. Which are the miracles you have seen at Calvary so far? What is different about the fifth one?

2. Why is it that a funeral is the one place people will still be formally dressed? Why is black the predominant colour worn by the majority of people attending a funeral?

There is an eternity of difference between the funeral of a Christian and that of an unbeliever. For the one it leads to unending anguish and suffering; for the other it opens up to unending bliss. As the apostle Matthew describes for us in 'The Miracles at Calvary' he comes to this same ultimate distinction, for he has told us of the miracle which symbolised the darkness of God's curse. And he graphically pictured the supernatural cry from the cross. Then there was the torn curtain - ripped from top to bottom - symbolising that the former separation between God and his people had now gone because of his Son. That happened at exactly the same time as the violent earthquake, which expressed God's power in creation singing out its 'Amen' to Christ's death on the cross. And now it is through the Church herself that God finally confirms the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Just imagine how strongly Matthew's account of Christ's crucifixion would have affected his Jewish readers. They had been taught about the genealogy of the Messiah King from their earliest years, had his Kingdom presented to them throughout Matthew's Gospel, and, now, on reading this account of his passion, they are confronted with the knowledge that Jesus was indeed the Christ they had been looking for all these years!

You might be wondering here, though. You're thinking: 'How can I presume to say all this?' Well, where else apart from the Gospel of Matthew do you find the story of this particular miracle? In Mark, the Gospel which is so similar, there is no mention of it. And Luke, the other synoptic gospel, does not record it either. Nor does John's Gospel, the one so different and yet the same, allude to this

miracle.

Yes, Matthew's Gospel is the only one writing of this miracle. But it's here in all its truth, and for the best of reasons. You see, these people rising from their graves are citizens of the King of all creation. And not just ordinary citizens; they are the King's own ambassadors from the past, here again for a short time to represent their Lord.

### *Derivations*

3. Why do you think these departed saints would have rejoiced to have been raised up with their physical bodies again?

4. How does this help you understand what will happen at your resurrection?

### **What a way to wake up**

This is indeed what physically happened to them. Their souls, already in heaven with the Lord, were now rejoined with their bodies, which had been in their graves. When verse 52 begins, "The tombs broke open," they were broken open by the same force which produced the earthquake and split the rocks. Remember, these tombs were set into the side of the hill. And it was a large stone which was rolled across to close the entrance.

In that breaking open, the bodies of many of them were reunited with their souls by the will of their Lord, whose divine force

generated so much activity over this definitive period of time. Those bodies in the ground had no say over the proceedings. It is as Ezekiel prophesied from the Lord in chapter 37, verses 12 and 13, “O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them... Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.”

Now, some have thought this was rather cruel of the Lord. Imagine their souls having enjoyed the fellowship up above, now being sent again to their earthly surroundings. So there must be a very good reason for this.

And what better reason could there be than to do it for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ? His was the perfect life of love. In his words in John 5 verses 21 till 23, “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.”

At this point it is relevant to mention that there have been two quite different views about what’s happening in our text. These views are reflected in the two different possible translations of the text. Both agree that these saints arose at the same time the tombs were opened. The difference arises as to when those bodies came out of the tombs. One view says that the bodies came out after Christ’s resurrection and then went and appeared to people in Jerusalem. The other view says that these saints came out of the tombs when they were opened but did not appear to anyone until after Christ’s resurrection.

Does it make such a difference? Yes, it does, because such a startling event as all those tombs being opened would have meant people going and looking at the strange sight.

There is a possible objection to this, though. It says that being around about the time of the Sabbath, there would not have been many people at the cemetery. They say the Jews would not have wanted to be unclean at such a time.

There are two possible responses to this. The first is that people



only became unclean when they actually touched a dead body and merely visiting a graveyard would have no effect on their being clean or unclean. We must remember that since Passover was a major feast, there would have been Jews visiting from all parts of the known world. Some would have been paying their respects to the deceased relatives and others. And it wasn't the Sabbath yet, in any case: that was still some hours away.

Then, secondly, where was Jesus buried that afternoon? As he was already dead, he had to be buried before the Sabbath day. And there's every indication that would have been in the cemetery – the cemetery where Joseph of Arimathea had his own new tomb, which he used to bury the Lord. It's a bit hard to not notice all the open tombs when you would have been burying him! And what would those at the cemetery that afternoon have seen? What kind of scene would they be greeted with?

Do you see what I mean? If they had risen but not gone out of the tombs, they would have been seen alive in those tombs before the three days were completed. And then the game would have been up! Yet, if all those curious people had noticed many empty tombs among those that remained undisturbed, what then would they have been thinking?

Adding everything up, many of those onlookers may have noticed similarities in the characters of those whose bodies were no longer there. As William Hendriksen points out, "Is it reasonable to believe that these saints, with glorious resurrection bodies, remained in the darkness and corruption of the tombs from Friday afternoon until Sunday morning?"

5. Read Ezekiel 37:1-14. Which verses in that passage prophesy of what is happening here? What specific prophecies are being fulfilled here from that passage?

6. Who are the holy ones referred to as rising up here? How would they have been treated if they lived during the time of Jeremiah or Malachi?

7. How does this miracle prove the lie to those taunting Jesus in Matthew 27:42?

### **Notice who did rise up**

Have you caught on yet? What did all these people raised from the dead have in common? Let's join those who are looking at the empty tombs. It might seem a morbid exercise, but we too are curious as they were. We want to see exactly who it was who got left behind.

Firstly, whose are the tombs that are left untouched? All the rich and famous, with their grandiose tombs, remain as they were, while the majority of the empty tombs belong to normal folk who led everyday lives. But those who loved and understood their scriptures could recognise this miracle as a fulfilment of another prophecy regarding the promised Christ.

This is all because Jesus Christ has brought them back. He has conquered death. And so he exposes as liars those who had taunted him on the cross. They had shouted out at him, as we read in Matthew 27 verse 42, "He saved others, he can't save himself!" "He's the king of Israel!" they insulted him. "Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

But do you think they really would have believed he was the

Son of God as they said and did come down from the cross? No, they would still have denied him – even in the midst of all those miraculous stories swirling around. There should have been more than enough signs to convince zealous Jews that here was the Messiah, but the eyes and minds of many were blinded to the truth.

8. Read Luke 16:19-31. How does this story by Jesus help us understand the reaction of many Jews to these signs?

9. Compare the figure of Lazarus the beggar with those saints who had been resurrected. What would that mean for many in Jerusalem at this time?

It is likely that a number of those resurrected saints were men and women that they had persecuted. As was done with the prophets of old, so it had been done to their most recent saints. They had not been well received. John the Baptist is but one example.

It has been argued that because the saints were recognised when they went into Jerusalem, they must have just recently died. It's a good point, but that didn't stop Peter and John and James recognising Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:32-33).

Because “many holy people” are mentioned, it is likely they were from across the centuries. Of course they had to be those who had been buried in Jerusalem, but that cemetery had been there for a long time.

This is the truth Jesus had spoken of in John 8 verse 56. In speaking to the Jews there he had said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” And now saints just like Abraham were tremendously joyful. This was the day they had so much looked forward to in their own life-time. And now they had their physical life returned to them so that they could testify that Jesus is the Messiah. So those ‘holy people’ were already a witness three days before anyone got to see them, because their graves were empty!

Imagine, then, the suspense across the ‘holy city’ for those three days. People were openly saying, ‘What’s happened to those bodies?’ ‘Who could have taken that many?’ ‘This must be a miracle!’

Remember where we began this study? It was by the graveside. This is the open hole in the ground which either shows the end of a life or the most glorious beginning. In Jerusalem, the Jews were being confronted by many open graves. Those graves faced each of the onlookers with the question of their own eternal destination. There was no getting away from this.

Today those tombs are still open before you. They are testifying to you the fifth miracle at Calvary, because there are no bodies in them. Go on - have a look! The same mighty power that shifted those heavy stones which closed the tombs, has given new life to many of those who were in them.

And, you know, they are still prophesying. In this miracle God is giving us a foretaste of nothing less than the resurrection of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ himself. It’s the door of Christ’s tomb which is the way by which you enter the Kingdom of God. In the words of the apostle Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:20, Jesus is the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. All those scriptural signs and other fulfilments of prophecy point straight to the promised Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, and what God plans to do through him.

*Derivations*

10. Read John 5:16-30. How does the fifth miracle confirm what Jesus speaks of here?

11. Have you received this same new life? How can you know this?

12. Read 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:12-28. How does this passage confirm the teaching about the fifth miracle?

## **Prayer Points**

- + Praise God for his power shown in opening the tombs and resurrecting the saints.
- + Confess those times we depended on our weakness instead of looking to God's strength.
- + Thank the Lord Jesus that we are already now resurrected to a new life because he rose victorious.
- + Ask God to empower us with his Holy Spirit to demonstrate the new life.

## Study 6

# The Glorified Saints

### Matthew 27:53b

1. Read Matthew 27:45-56. What is a question that could have been on your mind after the last study? What do you think happened to those resurrected saints after all these events?

Reading through the verses 52 and 53 may have reminded you of that question again. Or perhaps it's come to you now for the first time. And just why has this particular question come into your mind? It's not directly related to the text. And yet you just couldn't help wondering, "Where did they go?" Yes, where did those resurrected saints end up after this?

Of course, that's not the point Matthew is making here. He simply records this miracle, the miracle of the open tombs, as a further proof that death has been defeated. The Advent Church returns to symbolise the fact that because of Christ's death they are in glory.

But this question still bothers you: 'Where did these men and women end up?' And, for that matter, 'Where were they in the three days between the supernatural opening of the tombs and their appearance in the city?'

There will be other questions, too. This is a unique story. But it is undeniably true. And here is why...

## **The time these saints reappeared**

This is where our text says, “and after Jesus’ resurrection.” These resurrected saints had not actually been seen as yet. Up to this point, their witness to Christ’s death lay solely in the fact that they were no longer in their tombs – their bodies had gone! And the onlookers seeing those empty graves soon figured out that all those missing bodies belonged to people who had believed and prophesied that the promised Messiah was coming.

But now there was no room left for doubt. All thoughts and wondering about their disappearance vanished, because they were right there to be seen! And they became visible at the exact moment of Christ’s resurrection.

2. Read Matthew 17:1-13. How does the story of the transfiguration help us understand what is happening here?

3. Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-28. In which way does our text support what Paul is declaring about Christ’s resurrection?

## **Whose fruit are these saints?**

A similar event occurred at the time of Christ’s transfiguration. There was a definite purpose behind that. That was a foretaste of the glory of the Messiah. The three key disciples were pointed clearly to where it was all going. And the transfiguration happened at a particular time in the ministry of Jesus.

In the same way, there’s a clear purpose in these saints appear-



ing now. They give a foretaste of the glory of believers. We realise we're being joined with them in the Church.

The Jewish rabbis had taught that in the messianic era many righteous would arise from the grave. They had even gone so far as to name which patriarchs would appear. Now those righteous people were here and were seen by many in Jerusalem at the time.

The word of prophecy is falling into place. It's all coming at the right time, because these saints only appear after Christ has risen. They could only be witnesses when the Great Witness himself had testified. The first Sunday of the Christian church, the first Sabbath of the New Testament, is here acknowledged and kept by the dead before it's discovered and celebrated by the living. The words of Romans 14:9 become shown, for the apostle states there, "Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of the dead and the living."

This makes the ultimate difference. The people of this world go to the cemetery to mourn. And some of them spend the whole day there doing just that. But Easter Sunday, for the Christian, turns the cemetery into the greatest reunion in history. Man's way leads to a hopeless end – God's way leads to an endless hope!

Together with Christ, who is the first-fruit, there comes all this other fruit! It's the beginning of the most incredible harvest in the world! That's why this sixth miracle tells us about the time these saints reappeared, because it could not be any other time. This is God's perfect time - the right time.

4. Why must it be in Jerusalem where these saints reappear?

5. Where do you think they had been during the three days between Christ's death and his resurrection?

6. Why do you think this scene could be said to show heaven has come down?

### **The place where these saints turn up**

Now we will see why this could not have happened anywhere else but in Jerusalem. "They went into the holy city," verse 53 says. And because of what we've read before, it seems they came from the cemetery outside the city. Not necessarily, though. As these saints appear to have risen from the dead and come out from their tombs on the Friday afternoon, it all depends on where they had been since then.

This is commonly acknowledged by the commentators to be a mystery. They say it is part of the unexplained - something we might get to know about in heaven, if we're really that interested in it then!

Could it be, though, that in their glorified state they had been in heaven itself for that time? That's where a number of other equally glorified saints are - like Enoch, and Moses, and Elijah. Then, when it was time for them to reappear, they did indeed go into the holy city. The holy ones entered the holy city to testify to the Holy One!

We may wonder why Jerusalem is in verse 53 called "the holy city". It is in this place that there had been the persecution of the prophets of the past. And now she had murdered God's own Son - the greatest prophet of them all!

Yet, she is still the holy city. By God's sovereign grace she was the place where he had been among his people. Not by virtue of the people themselves, mind you. We could never look to them. As indeed we could never depend now on the leaders and members of the Church universal. But because Jerusalem is God's chosen city, she is holy.

While we may despise what people in the church do, let's never disparage the Church. She is our mother. And God is our Father. In Christ he is the husband who, like Hosea, has been the faithful husband, constantly saving her from the deadly consequences of her sins. And, in the end, he paid his own life for her. Christ has a purpose for his Church that she is yet to fulfil.

In Acts 1:8 the Lord Jesus, as he was about to ascend back to heaven, tells his disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Thus it is in this city that it starts. This is the capital city of the King. From here the Gospel goes throughout the whole world.

Matthew's readers would have been overwhelmed. Heaven had come down to earth - the soldiers of the King tell us that D-Day has come. The battle has been won. They come in the Name of the Son. What may have been before the place the Lord had his presence, was now only the first of all the places his presence would be. And it will be in Jerusalem that everything for us will end - the new Jerusalem.

As the apostle John pictures it in his vision in Revelation 21, the verses 2 and 3, "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'"

The Jews have an expression which has passed down through the generations. They say it to their fellow Jews when they take their leave. For when they say goodbye, they say, "Next year Jerusalem!"

Christians, let's look to enter the holy city, too, because we are going to the One up above – the One who we will live with forever!

7. Why do you remember some people and yet not others?

8. How does the departure of Moses and Elijah in the transfiguration help explain what happened to the resurrected saints here?

### **The way these saints come back**

The time and the place these saints reappeared is vital. It points to what Christ has done and the difference that will make - all over this world and for all eternity! Look at the last phrase in verse 53: “After Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.”

Over the years we can meet all kinds of people. Many of them we won’t remember at all in times to come. So what would be the kind of thing that makes us remember them? Why do we recall certain people and not others? Wouldn’t it be something that stands out about them? Perhaps the way they look, the way they talk - maybe it’s that unusual name they have!

So what could it be about these men and women that not only would make them unforgettable, but would right then and there make them quite recognisable? Even if they had died hundreds of years before!

The account of the Transfiguration helps us here. There it is quite clear who Moses and Elijah are. Jesus becomes glorified before them there in the presence of two old covenant saints who are already there – they whose brightness is awesome! It’s so obvious who they are that Peter wants to put up shelters for them. But that’s when

the voice from the cloud speaks. Then they realised why Moses and Elijah were there. They were gone when Peter, James, and John looked up after humbling themselves before the voice. Those two saints from the past had performed their prophesied witness to their Lord.

And it's the same in our text. As soon as these resurrected saints had testified to the Lord they went up to heaven. Let's not think otherwise, for they couldn't have lived their lives ever again amongst us. Just think of the confusion and disruption that would be for those who had died only a few years before. Would their spouses have to take them back, even if they'd remarried in the meantime? Besides Hebrews 9 verse 27 is very clear, "man is destined to die once." That's God's order for us. There is not even the hint of reincarnation here!

These saints didn't live human lives again. Neither did they stay until Pentecost, as some have suggested. Then we would be sure to find other references to them in scripture. And, anyway, what could that add to their purpose for being here?

These holy ones came back as a further confirmation of the reason for Christ's death and resurrection. They proclaimed that he is the One they had been waiting for – the Messiah. What was sown in weakness, to use the words of Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:43, is now raised in power. We've got something out of this world to look forward to!

This is all due to the One those ancient saints witnessed to during their short time in Jerusalem. We must remember that to take our eyes off Jesus for a moment while we ponder this strange story, is to forget its chief character – the One it is all about.

He is Christ the King; he rules everything because he has conquered death's sting; he never sinned.

### *Derivations*

9. What is it in the future that you look forward to?

10. How would you sum up all these six miracles?

11. What has particularly encouraged you through these studies? How does verse 54 guide us here?

### **Prayer Points**

+ Praise God for the miracles at Calvary – they have indeed been signs pointing us to his Son and what he has done for us.

+ Confess that we have not always shown the fruit that we should have.

+ Thank the Lord for his Church – he is keeping and blessing her and no one comes to him but through her.

+ Ask that we would respect those over us in the Church and treat our fellow believers as if they were our own physical brothers and sisters.



