

## Matthew 27 (50-54) – And the Graves were Opened

It's the day Jesus dies on the cross. And as he hangs there, a sudden darkness covers the whole land. Vs.45 says that this darkness lasted for 3 hours. And then, as vs.50 says, Jesus cries out, and takes his final breath.

Back in the Temple, the thick veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was torn in two. It was a sign that since Jesus had entered in, all may enter in. Before Christ, only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and then only once a year. Now, the barrier between God and man has been put away. And because of Jesus, our Great High Priest, all who trust in him have full access to God.

*As Hebrews 10:19-22 says – Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.*

As we sing – To God be the glory, great things He has done; So loved He the world that He gave us His Son, Who yielded His life an atonement for sin, And opened the life gate that all may go in. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the earth hear His voice, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the people rejoice, O Come to the Father, Through Jesus the Son, And give Him the glory, Great things He has done.

*So, the curtain of the temple was torn in two.* And another sign happens...there is an earthquake. And it cracks open the tombs of dead saints. Then, after Jesus rises from the dead, these people who had also been dead come walking out of their graves and into the city.

Think about that...Who were these people? And how many? And what happened after they rose? Did they go back to life in Jerusalem, and then die again later? Or did they appear for only a moment? What was really going on here? And how is this connected to the hope of our resurrection?

Well, these weren't zombies wandering around in Jerusalem. And the text doesn't say that they appeared to everyone. Also, the New Testament uses the term "saints" to refer to followers of Jesus. Since these people were recognized, it's not likely that they were people from long ago. With no photos or videos back then, only those recent and remembered could be recognized. Matthew says that many were risen, and many saw them.

So, it was more than a few risen, and more than a few who saw them, but not necessarily hundreds or thousands. It was a limited number appearing to a select audience. For a real purpose...to fulfill prophecy...

Some say that Matthew was just symbolizing the significance of Jesus's death and resurrection. And he certainly was doing that, but he was doing so much more as well. And he was using actual historical events to do it. And he was linking it with past prophecy to show it. Matthew intends this scene to be taken as historical fact. He isn't using poetic license. This was a real event, in the present time of Jesus. It looked backward to a prophecy from the past. It looked forward as a prophecy of the future. Matthew isn't giving us a story; he is recalling history, and predicting the future.

Matthew is referring to a string of historical events. In vs.50, Jesus dies. And then vs.51 says *the curtain of the temple was torn in two...And the earth shook, and the rocks were split*. Then vs.52 says *the tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised*. Then vs.53 says *coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city*.

Matthew emphasizes the eyewitnesses. Vs.53 says the resurrected saints...appeared to many. And vs.54 says *the centurion and those who were with him...saw the earthquake and what took place*. The death of Jesus and the torn veil are treated by the other Gospel writers as historical events. Matthew is linking those events with his other accounts of what happened.

Notice that the saints did not come out of their tombs until, as vs.53 says, *after his resurrection*. Matthew says the appearances of these resurrected

saints came after Jesus, but he narrates it out of order to deal with it in general, and then he can keep the focus on Jesus. So, Jesus dies, then the tombs were opened, then Jesus's tomb opens, then Jesus is raised, then the saints are raised, and then there are eyewitness appearances of both.

Matthew isn't trying to give you all the details, or giving some lengthy explanation of all the events. And he was writing in the first century. There was no printing press, and writing was costly, slow, and tedious. Writers wanted to be as brief as possible.

You see this explained elsewhere by the Apostle John. Consider John 20:30-31, which says, *Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* John could have written more, but he wanted to stick with the main point. And consider John 21:25, which says, *there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.* The point is that Matthew isn't reporting all the details. He was describing this event and relating it to the fulfillment of Scripture.

This scene, with the sky going dark and the rock-splitting earthquake was a picture of the Day of the Lord, which is discussed in texts such as Isaiah 5:25, 24:18, Joel 2:10, and Nahum 1:5-6. And the dead raised is anticipated in many OT texts, like 1 Samuel 2:6, Psalm 16:10, 49:15, Job 19:25-26, Isaiah 26:19, and Daniel 12:2. And one key passage on resurrection is to be found in Ezekiel 37. And this is what Matthew 27:52-53 is linked to.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 provides a prophetic witness for the resurrection of the saints. It is partially fulfilled in Matthew 27:52-53. And it points toward a future, full, and final fulfillment. The evidence of this historical and bodily resurrection of the dead at the time of Jesus' own resurrection represents the impact of his finished work. While this resurrection was only temporary, it represented Jesus' death as a reversal of the fall of mankind into sin.

Turn in your Bibles to Ezekiel 37:1-14, and let's read the passage. In its immediate sense, this was about God's people coming back into their land after being held in captivity. The nation was dead, but it would live again. The vision is given in vs.1-10, and then the interpretation in vs.11-14. The vision is disturbing. The Lord brings the prophet Ezekiel to see spiritual death. And God made Ezekiel walk right into that valley of the dead. He not only saw it, he experienced it. There were only dry bones. At one point there was life, but now only death. The dry bones are a picture of just how bad it was for Israel at that time, but also how bad it is for all people apart from God. And what it can be like when someone turns away from God.

God asks Ezekiel, "*can these bones live?*" And Ezekiel answered, "*O Lord GOD, you know.*" The prophet knew he didn't have anything to help, the situation was too far gone, there was nothing to work with but death. He was insufficient. But he also knew that the Lord could do it. Ezekiel trusts God. And at God's command, Ezekiel prophesies to this valley of dead, dry bones. And then the impossible became possible. A defeated army, completely lifeless, with no hope, just a valley of dry bones, begins to transform. The bones come together, and Ezekiel watches the tendons, the muscles, and the skin appear. And then Ezekiel prophesies again, and the breath enters these dead bodies, and they live again, as a great army of God.

It was God who did the work, but God used Ezekiel in that work. God is the potter; you are the clay. God wants to remove your fear of failure. Your responsibility is to trust. God will be responsible for the results.

On your own, you are insufficient. But God is all-sufficient. God wants you to see the truth of this vision for yourself. First, he wants you to lose all hope. You cannot make your own dry bones live. Do you see that? Have you seen that? God wants you to see and experience your hopelessness. But not just to leave you there, but to encounter him there. To find your hope in him.

The Bible declares in Ephesians 2:1-3 that all people are born spiritually dead in their sins. And that everyone is driven by the direction of the world, the

designs of the devil, and their desires of their sinful nature. However, Ephesians 2:4-6 says, *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”* Spiritually speaking, the whole of humanity is in a valley of dry, dead bones. But God can make dry bones live. Your spiritually dead, dry bones live. You can be born again.

Some people claim to have a hope in Jesus. But it’s not a real hope. It’s just a “put it on the shelf and take it down once in a while when you feel the need” kind of hope. An “in case of emergency” kind of hope. They haven’t actually seen their utter hopelessness without Jesus. They don’t think their dead, they don’t know they live in a graveyard, they haven’t been to the valley, they haven’t seen the vision, they haven’t walked around in the middle of the dry bones, they haven’t answered God who asks can these dry bones live.

God gives Ezekiel a few commands. He prophesies to the bones, then to the breath, and then to the whole nation. Imagine that. Speaking to a bunch of bones. What can come of that? Nothing, unless God does something. And God still does these things today. When the text says “breath” it is a reference to the Holy Spirit, which you see in vs.14. It takes the Spirit of God to transform a person from dead to alive, and to transform the dry bones of a spiritual graveyard into a living army of God.

It’s like someone sharing Jesus today. There are many times when you are speaking to spiritually dead people. It may seem like a worthless and fruitless pursuit. It may get you mocked, scorned, beaten, martyred. But it is worth it. It is not fruitless. God’s word doesn’t come back void. God uses the foolishness of preaching to shame the wise, and raise the dead.

Only God can make those dry bones live. But I have seen it happen. There is a lot of skepticism and criticism of Christianity, and we may be marginalized and eventually criminalized. But no matter how bad it may get, no matter whatever else happens, God will still be making dry bones live. I have been

to that valley of dry bones many times. I was those dry bones. But my grave was opened. I've been born again.

You can be a born again Christian and still feel like you're cut off from any hope in your current situation. God can make your dry bones live. He can resurrect your life and give you a new sense of redemption. Sometimes, God wants you to see how bad things are so you can see how great he is. He might allow you to lose your hold on other hopes so that you will cling only to him. Sometimes, when you feel like you're buried, God is just waiting to say, "Behold, I will open your grave and raise you from your grave." Resurrection power is not only for eternity, it is for this life as well...*that I may know him and the power of his resurrection* (Philippians 3:10). Your life might feel like a living death right now, but God can make your dry bones live again. You can live as the fulfillment of prophecy!

The prophecy of Ezekiel 37 had a near fulfillment, a far fulfillment, and a forever fulfillment. It was talking about the restoration of God's people into their land. That's the near fulfillment. It was also talking about the coming age of Christianity and being born again. That's the far fulfillment. It was also talking about the eternal state, the physical resurrection of our bodies. That's the forever fulfillment. In Matthew 27:52-53, you see this prophecy in a temporal, partial, and symbolic fulfillment. It is a sign of the ultimate power of the resurrection of Jesus. The power of sin and death being overcome by the power of Jesus Christ, rising from the grave.

The raising of the saints relates directly to the coming eternal kingdom. Jesus was crucified and buried. But in that tomb, something was being birthed. The tomb was the womb of a whole new creation. And on that third day, as Christ came bursting forth from that tomb, that womb, the new creation was just beginning. Jesus was the firstborn from the dead, the firstfruits of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus was the beginning, the promise of a new heavens, and a new earth, a whole new and perfected universe. God will bring his perfected people into the Promised Land, and all of God's born again, perfected people will live with Jesus, in blessed joy, forever. Amen.