
The Voice of the Open Tombs

“And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints of who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many” (Matthew 27:50–53).

Matthew reported that when Jesus breathed His last there was an earthquake that split rocks and shook the earth, and some “tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many” (Matthew 27:52, 53). Both Mark and Luke joined Matthew in recording the rending of the veil of the temple (Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45), but only Matthew mentioned the earthquake, the opening of the graves, and the appearance of the saints in the city of Jerusalem.

Significantly, there were two miracles in connection with the breaking open of the graves, the first being the actual opening of the graves themselves and the second being the resurrections that would follow Christ’s resurrection. Although they are inter-connected, they stand as independent signs of the completion of Christ’s sacrifice.

The opening of the graves was more than a natural consequence of the earthquake that shook the earth and brought fissures to it. At least two facts justify this conclusion. First, it is clearly stated by Matthew that only selected graves, the graves of some saints, were opened. Second, these graves were opened on Friday and remained opened until after the resurrection of Jesus, when the occupants of the graves arose and appeared in Jerusalem. We naturally ask, “Why were the graves opened on Friday afternoon, if the bodies were not to be raised for three days? Why were the graves opened and the bodies of the saints left unmoved until

Sunday?” Matthew said that there was a “severe earthquake” on Sunday morning (Matthew 28:2), but God did not use it to open the graves. Had He done so, He would not have fulfilled His divine purposes for the sign that He wanted to give the world.

What, then, is the meaning of this opening of some graves of the saints? The breaking open of these tombs stands as a singular, miraculous sign from God concerning the death of Jesus.

First, the opening of the graves surely symbolized that Jesus’ death brought immortality and life to those who come to Him in faith. Our hope of life comes from the death of Jesus. He died that we might live. What more appropriate sign of this truth could God give than the opening of graves in and around Jerusalem at the moment of Jesus’ death?

Paul wrote that Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). Jesus Himself declared at Lazarus’ tomb: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die” (John 11:25, 26a). With dramatic power, the opening of the graves voiced a witness to the victory that Christ has given us over the grave. The bursting open of these graves shout, to use the words of Paul, “Death is swallowed up in victory. ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’” (1 Corinthians 15:54b, 55).

Second, the opening of these graves proclaimed that Jesus won the victory over the principalities and powers of the devil. The Evil One in a

unique sense had been holding the human race in the grip of death. The writer of Hebrews said, "Through death He [Jesus] might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (Hebrews 2:14b, 15). In Jesus' death, all the powers, dominions, and controls of Satan were destroyed. Paul wrote, "And He has taken it [the certificate of debt] out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14b). Further, Paul said that at the moment that He nailed this certificate to the cross, that was also the moment "when He had disarmed the rulers and authorities," and "made a public display of them, having triumphed over them . . ." (Colossians 2:15). When Jesus died, the cosmic battle of the ages was ended, with Jesus having won the victory over all the powers of evil and death. What better symbol of this fact could God have chosen than the miraculous breaking open of graves?

Third, the opening of the graves implies the fact that Jesus' death in the final analysis is for those who believe and obey the Lord. Not all the graves around Jerusalem were opened, for only those of some saints were opened. The word "saints" refers to people who had lived and died before Jesus' death as people committed to doing God's will. In other words, the message of the open tombs was that His death had brought or would bring redemption to those who had died or would die in faith.

Yes, Jesus did die for everyone. Hebrews 2:9 says, "But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone." However, not everyone will be saved. Jesus said that "many" would enter the broad way that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13, 14). The clear teaching of the Scripture is that Jesus is "to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (Hebrews 5:9b). His blood cleanses through the obedience of faith. No more vivid symbol of Jesus' death being for the obedient could be selected than the opening of the graves of saints!

Fourth, the opening of the graves declared the eternal nature of the salvation that was brought into the world by Christ. Only the tombs of saints

who had lived and died before Jesus' death were opened. All of the Old Testament looked forward to the death of Christ. When Jesus offered Himself for the sins of the world, the efficacy of His blood went backward as well as forward—back to all the saints who preceded His death and forward to all those who would come to Him in the future.

The writer of Hebrews said that those faithful ones under the first covenant, the Old Testament, were saved by His blood: "For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:15). He further wrote that Jesus, as our great high priest, did not need to offer up sacrifices daily, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people. No, he said, "because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself" (Hebrews 7:27b). Jesus' death is a once-only death: "So Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him" (Hebrews 9:28). As God testified to the universality of Jesus' death, He chose to miraculously open the graves of some of His saints from the Old Testament period of time.

Fifth, this powerful opening of tombs expressed that God had accepted Jesus' sacrifice for our sins. Our victory was not won through Jesus' resurrection. It was won at the cross. The resurrection confirmed the validity of His death. Three miracles occurred immediately after Jesus breathed His last—the earthquake, the rending of the veil of the temple, and the opening of these graves. All of them declare in different and unique ways that God the Father had accepted the sacrifice of Jesus as the atonement for the sin of the world. The resurrection ultimately declared its acceptance.

What then is the testimony of the open tombs? At the point of Jesus' death, God opened the graves of Old Testament saints. This miraculous sign corroborated His death. God said through this miracle that Jesus died to give us life, to take the power of death from Satan, to imply that His death will affect only those who believe and obey, and to show us that

His death towers above time, people, nations, and dispensations. It was and is the event of all events, the very heart of God's revelation to man.

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The grave cannot withstand the power of God. The earth cannot hold its dead. The sea cannot retain its captives. No power on earth nor in hell can hold the bodies of those for whom Christ died. The power

of the grave was broken once and forever on the cross. This is the testimony of the opened graves.¹

"Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (Hebrews 2:14, 15).

¹Gordon H. Girod, *Words and Wonders of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1962), 139.