

Graves Opened?

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[0 : 0 0] I want us to spend some time looking at it together particularly. One of the things that happened when Jesus actually died on the cross, you'll take up the reading at verse 47, and we'll read through to verse 53, 47.

And, of course, the story is about when Jesus was dying on the cross at Calvary, and the various things that happened, and the various things that were said at the time.

Verse 47, some of the bystanders hearing it said, This man is calling for Elijah, and one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink.

But the others said, Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him. And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

Now, that's the moment when Jesus died, when he actually, when his life went from him. Now look at what happens. Verse 51, Behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

[1 : 1 7] But the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming out of the tombs after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

So what this passage is telling us is that when Jesus died, three specific things happened. First of all, the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

Now this curtain was in the temple, which was the main place of worship in Jerusalem for the Jewish people. And the most sacred place of all in the temple was a place that they called the most holy place.

Simple as that, the most holy place. No one was ever allowed to go into this most holy place except one person once a year. And it was kept separate from the rest of the world by this massive, massive curtain.

Most of us have got curtains on our windows, but they were nothing compared to this massive great curtain. A heavy, made of heavy material. And here we have the fact that when Jesus, the moment that Jesus died, this great massive curtain was torn miraculously from top to bottom.

[2 : 4 0] It couldn't have been a person that did it. First of all, because no one would have the strength to be able to tear a curtain. But this curtain was something like about 40 feet high and it was torn from top to bottom.

Which means that if a person was even strong enough, he would have had to be perched up at the top. And there was nobody allowed ever to go up to the top there. So this was miraculous. God tore the curtain from top to bottom.

Now this curtain separated God from the rest of the world. And it told everybody that there is a separation between God and human beings. And that's true.

The Bible tells us that there is a separation and it's called sin. The reason we can't be right with God tonight is because of sin. The Bible tells us our sins, our wrongdoings have separated us from God.

They've come between us and God. There's a gap, there's a separation, there's a massive, like a great gulf, like a great valley between us and God. And it's impossible for anyone to cross that valley.

[3 : 43] Well, Jesus came in order to take away that separation, in order to become a bridge. So that we could come to God. So that we could cross that bridge over.

Jesus is the way to God. The first thing that happened then is the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom. The next thing that happened, the second thing that happened was this.

That there was an earthquake. Now it wasn't an ordinary earthquake. You do get earthquakes from time to time in various places. You get them today. But here was something that took place the moment that Jesus died.

And that tells us that there was a specific reason for the earthquake. That God was involved. There's only one being that can make the earth shake when he wants to. None of us can do it.

But God can. And God was involved in the death of Jesus. And this was God's way of telling the world that there was now a way back to him.

[4 : 45] In other words, God wants you to know that there is a way to God. There is a way back to him. And maybe tonight you've given up on yourself.

Maybe you feel that there is no hope for you tonight. Maybe you feel that you've lived a lifetime of sinfulness. And running away from God. And rebelling against God. And living your life in such a way that you think God couldn't possibly have any time for you.

He couldn't possibly have any forgiveness left for you. That's not true. And God shook the world in order that people old and middle-aged and young would know that this Jesus by his death had bridged the gap.

And he had opened the way. And there is now a way back to God. If you want to know how to be right with God tonight, Jesus is the way and the truth and the life.

And God wants you to know that message. He wants you to know that message. And he wants you to take that way. And he wants you to be right with him. And he wants you to come and to discover what he really is like.

[5 : 52] There's no discovery in the world like discovering what Jesus is. I don't know what plans you have for your life tonight, people. Most people have plans. They have ambitions.

They have dreams. Things they would like to do. I don't know what they are. Don't know what they are. Don't know how you want to live the rest of your life. But I want to ask the question. I asked it this morning. What place does God have?

I hope he has the central place. God wants you to know that there is a way to God through Jesus Christ. These are the first two things that happened. But it's the third thing.

The most mysterious thing, I would say, that I want us to look at this evening. And that's the verse that we have next. In verse 52 and verse 53. Will you read it with me?

The third thing that happened was this. The tombs, the graves, were also opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

[6 : 55] And coming out of the tombs, after his resurrection, they went into the holy city. The holy city was Jerusalem. They went into Jerusalem and appeared to many.

Now, I don't need to tell you that there is a certain mystery attached to that. And it's so mysterious. This event was so mysterious that lots of people have said, well, it didn't happen.

So I guess the first question is this. Did this really happen? Did it actually, literally, physically, historically happen? Did the real graves really and truly open?

And did life come back to bodies of people who were dead? Who knows for how long? Maybe years? Maybe decades? Who knows? We don't know. And if it did happen, we're going to answer that first question first of all.

Did it really happen? Then if it did happen, why did they then go, these resurrected people who were living again after having been dead, why did they go into Jerusalem?

[8 : 05] And then there are other questions. What happened to these people after they went into Jerusalem? What happened to them then? And then, of course, there's always the question then.

Why then do none of the other Gospels, Mark, Luke, or John, mention anything? Why is it only Matthew? Well, I don't really want to go into that. I mean, it's enough for me. If Matthew chose to mention that, then I don't need to.

I don't need to. But it's enough for us if one Gospel mentioned that. I was going to say one or two other things, but there's not to. The first question is this.

Did this really happen? Some people dismiss it and they say, well, it can't possibly have happened after all. Here's what one person says. Well, he says this.

Well, it is possible, he says, but unlikely that this is how Matthew intended us to read it. After all, he said that these bodies of the saints went into the holy city after Jesus' resurrection. No.

[9 : 05] Matthew seems to be giving us a meditation on what the crucifixion of Jesus means for the destiny of mankind. In other words, this person who's writing about this, he's saying, it didn't really happen.

Matthew's choosing to write about this in order to symbolically tell us what's going to happen one day as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection. In other words, this is a kind of a parable.

Matthew's telling us this is what Jesus' death is going to lead to one day and this is what our promise and our hope one day is. So that's the first view, that some people just simply don't believe it happened.

Well, I have some problems with that. And it opens up a whole area to me of what you believe in the Bible and what you don't. Because it seems to me that some people, they read their Bibles and they choose themselves what to believe.

And my problem with that is, well, if you're going to choose to believe some things and not others, you're going to just open up one page and say, well, yeah, that's okay to me. That's all right. I'll believe it. But then you open another page and you say, well, no, that couldn't possibly have happened.

[10 : 15] Where do you draw the line? Why is it that some people choose to believe that Jesus changed water into wine and that he walked on the shore, on the lake of Galilee, and that he cured the blind and he raised and he cured the leper and so on and so forth.

He fed the 5,000 and then refused to believe something like this. That's in the same Bible and it's given to us as a matter of fact. Where do you draw the line between what you believe in and what you don't?

And it seems to me to be an incredibly dangerous thing to do if we're going to start going through the Bible and literally tearing out bits that we don't believe. I remember hearing a long, long time ago about a minister who didn't believe the whole Bible.

And every time he stood in a pulpit, the first thing you would say in a sermon was, well, actually, I don't believe this chapter happened. And this woman was in the congregation listening to him every Sunday.

And every time he said that about a chapter, she would go home and she would tear out the bit that he didn't believe in. All right? So this happened for years and years and years and years.

[11 : 34] Then the woman became sick. And the minister went to visit her. And he said to her, after a while, he said, Have you got a Bible?

I'd like to read the Bible to you and with you. Because the woman was dangerously ill. So she said, Yes, I've got a Bible. I'll give it to you. So she gave him this book with just two covers and about ten pages in it.

All the other pages had been torn out. And the minister said, This Bible isn't complete. You haven't given me the whole Bible. And she said to him, Well, this is the Bible that you believe in.

Because every time you told the congregation that you didn't believe in the Bible, I would go home and tear out the bit that you didn't believe. There was hardly anything left. You see, it seems to me, We're either going to take it or not.

You're either going to believe it or not. It's all or nothing. Because otherwise, where are you going to draw the line? This is given to us as a matter of fact.

[12 : 33] And faith doesn't try to understand first. Faith listens and accepts God on the basis of his own word, even if it's strange and mysterious.

But if you don't, if you choose not to believe parts of the Bible, you see, this is opening up a whole challenge now. And I believe that some of you wrestle with this. I don't believe that everyone here is simply quite happy to believe everything in the Bible.

If that was the case, then this group of people would not represent the world that I live in. So let's rise to the challenge, and let's try and understand what is the difference between faith and unbelief when it comes to the Bible.

And let me tell you this, that if you're saying, I will make my own judgment first before I decide whether to believe this part of the Bible or any other part of the Bible, you're saying this.

You're saying, let me read it first. Then, having read it, I will ask this question, is it credible to me? Only if it's credible to me will I believe it.

[13 : 40] In other words, instead of listening to and accepting God's Word in the first instance, you're only accepting it if you happen to, in your judgment, believe it. In other words, what's more important to you is not what God's Word says, it's whether you happen to judge that it's true or not.

So you're putting yourself first. You remember that's exactly what Eve did, way back in the Garden of Eden, when God told her, in the day that you eat of the forbidden fruit, you shall surely die.

Up until that point, up until the point that the serpent started talking to her, she believed that. That if she ate the forbidden fruit, she would surely die. And then the serpent started talking to her and said, well, did God really mean that?

He started turning around what God had said and persuading her to think about God's words in a totally different way. So that instead of accepting simply God's Word as he said it, she began to think of it in a critical way.

Well, did really God mean what he said? And that was the start of the finish. That was the start of the fall. And it seems to me that in a world full of unbelief and disbelief, what we're saying is, I'll decide myself what I believe on the basis of my judgment.

[14 : 55] That's not faith at all. And I'll tell you why. Why? Because you can go out and you can choose not to believe this. You can choose not to believe half the Bible. But let me ask you this question.

What if it did happen? Now you have a problem. You have a major problem.

Because if this happened, and if all these other things happen that you choose not to believe in, you're walking away from your salvation. You're walking away from eternal life.

You're leaving it behind. And all you have is your judgment, your opinion, whether you think it's credible or not. Let me ask you this. Do you really think it's worth it to put your opinion and your judgment, and to let it stand between you and being right with God tonight?

And the fact is, the real reason that you choose not to believe parts of the Bible is because they make you so uncomfortable. That if you were to say tonight, well, I believe the whole Bible, you would have to believe what the Bible says about you.

[16 : 01] And what the Bible says about each one of us is not a comfortable message, is it? It tells us that we're lost. It tells us that we're guilty before God. It tells us that we have to stand in front of God one day and give an account for the way that we've lived our lives.

It's far easier for me to say, no, I choose not to believe that and make an excuse as to why I don't believe it instead of listening to what God says about ourselves. But if you choose not to listen, then you're walking away from God.

You're walking away from everything that he's done for you in Jesus Christ. And you're condemning yourself to a lost eternity. That's the worst thing of all. So I'm asking you tonight, think again, stop, stop, think again and listen, listen to what God is saying to us, even in this strange passage.

I thought it would just take a little detail because it's such an important issue in today's very skeptical world. I'm going to take this part, even if it's strange, this part of the Bible at face value.

I'm going to ask some questions about it. Let's read it once again. The tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming out of the tombs after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

[17 : 18] I'm going to ask the following questions. First of all, I'm going to ask who were these people who were raised from the dead? Who were these people?

Then I'm going to ask some more questions. I'm going to ask how many were there? Then I'm going to ask, was there a time difference between them rising from the dead and going into Jerusalem?

The Bible, this passage here would seem to suggest that there was. We'll come across that in a few moments time. Then how long did they spend in Jerusalem? And then most crucially, did they die again?

See, there's all these questions that arise and that's one of the reasons why we must never ever rush a reading of the Bible. We must always ask these questions. These kind of questions are so, so important.

And if tonight just simply fires up these questions in our minds, then so be it. Who were these people? We don't know. We don't know how long they had been dead for. Could have been a year.

[18 : 16] Could have been days. Could have been more than that. It could have been centuries. Who knows? But all these people had lived lives and they had died. Same as every other person who walks the face of the earth.

There's a time to live and a time to die. The Bible tells us it's appointed unto men and women once to die. That is the end of our lives in this world. So all of these people had come to the end of their lives.

They were ordinary people except for one thing. There was one thing that separated them from the rest of their community and the rest of the world. Let me tell you what it was. The one word that separates them is here.

Many bodies of the saints. That's who they were. We don't know their names. We don't know what they achieved or what they didn't achieve.

We don't know how tall they were or how short they were whether they're married, single, whether they're children. We don't know anything about them at all except for this one crucial piece of information that they were saints.

[19 : 18] And that's all we need to know. That is the most important feature of anyone's life, says God. It doesn't matter what you achieve in this world. You can change the course of human history if you're not a saint.

You don't have anything. Let me tell you what a saint is. It is not someone who lives such an exemplary life that they get a title saint before their name.

That's not what a saint is at all. The Bible tells me that a saint is simply someone who lives for God.

That could be a housewife. It could be a school pupil. It could be a student. It could be a bricklayer. It could be a doctor.

It doesn't matter what we are in this life. It's who we serve that God, that's what God is looking for. And that's what qualifies a person to be a saint.

[20 : 24] You get some people who are saints who know what it is to fall and fail and to trip up at many times, many times in their lives. And yet, a saint is someone who wants to, when they know that they've sinned and done wrong against God, they run back to God and ask for his forgiveness.

That's what a saint is. A saint is someone who lives by faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior, an ordinary person. You don't have to work miracles to be a saint.

You don't have to be a preacher to be a saint. You don't have to be a missionary to be a saint. You can be a saint where you are by believing. If you're following Jesus, that's what the Bible calls you.

It calls you a saint. The Bible tells us that saints follow Jesus. The Bible tells us that saints are in Jesus.

It tells us that because they trust and believe in him, all their sins are forgiven. Not because they're better than other people in the world, but because Jesus has washed them from all their sins.

[21 : 40] That's what makes you a saint. Whether you're washed from all your sins by the blood of Jesus. We know that they are saints. In other words, these were people who didn't know as much as we do.

They had never perhaps seen Jesus. We don't know whether they died during Jesus' time or we don't know whether they died before, whether they presumably died before Jesus' time. We don't know, but we know that they lived by faith.

How many were there? I have absolutely no idea. If you're following Jesus, that's what the Bible calls you. It calls you a saint.

The Bible tells us that saints follow Jesus. The Bible tells us that saints are in Jesus. It tells us that because they trust and believe in Him, all their sins are forgiven.

Not because they're better than other people in the world, but because Jesus has washed them from all their sins. That's what makes you a saint. Whether you're washed from all your sins by the blood of Jesus.

[22 : 46] We know that they are saints. In other words, these were people who didn't know as much as we do. They had never perhaps seen Jesus. We probably don't know whether they died during Jesus' time or we don't know whether they died before.

Presumably died before Jesus' time. We don't know, but we know that they lived by faith. How many were there? I have absolutely no idea. That's what it says.

Many bodies. Many bodies. So there was more than one or two. There was more than a handful. But beyond that, we simply cannot say anything more than that.

Now the third question. Third question is, when exactly did they come to life and rise from their graves again? Because if you read it very carefully, you can either come to one of two conclusions.

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

[23 : 52] Now that's strange, isn't it? Because you're not quite sure what to believe. You're not quite sure how to understand this. Whether these people rose at the time that Jesus died and waited somewhere until he rose from the dead and then came to Jerusalem or whether they were raised at the time of his resurrection.

The fact is that the original language can mean either. So we're left with two choices and you have to decide for yourself which one you're going to believe because the original language can mean either. Either these people rose from the dead the moment that Jesus died on the cross but waited somehow somewhere for three days until Jesus rose from the dead before going into Jerusalem.

That's one option. Or you can believe that they rose when he rose. that it was his resurrection that triggered their resurrection and it was then that at the same time they went into Jerusalem.

You see what I mean? There's a difference between what you believe. You have to choose which one. Now if you believe that they died that they rose again when he died that seems to be what Matthew's implying because it says this and Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit then there was the curtain then there was the earthquake then there was the raising of the dead.

So it seems that Matthew's saying to us that it was when he died that these people rose again. The problem is if you believe that where were they in the three day period between his death and his resurrection?

[25 : 26] We don't know. But if that is what happens very interesting is it it's thrilling because it means that there is a connection between his death and their resurrection.

it means that they rose because he died. The moment that he died that he laid down his life on the cross they came to life again.

And that's the connection I believe Matthew wants us to see and it's the connection that is the good news for everyone tonight that Jesus in his death means he promises our resurrection from the dead.

Now let me tell you something I've said so many times before but I don't care how many times I say because there will probably be some people here tonight who have never heard this before and I want you to hear it. I really so want you to hear it.

If you don't if you don't go away with anything else this evening please listen to this. Please lay hold upon this that Jesus rose from the dead because that is the foundation of everything.

[26 : 35] You see you think about the Christian when you think about the Christian faith tonight you might think about boring church. Many people tonight they think the first thought they think about when they think about the Christian faith is boring church.

Or they think about the way that I was brought up. Maybe some of you have been brought up in Christian families and perhaps you've been brought up too strictly or to your bay rose or whatever else it is. We all have in other words we all have perceptions of what it means to be a Christian.

And we live in a world where there's so many different opinions in the world. Some people choose to be one thing some people choose to be another some people choose to be something else. And so the question is tonight why should I be a Christian?

Why am I a Christian? Surely that is the question that and I'm asking you to think about this question so clearly because it is so crucial. Why is it?

Is it because I was brought up in a Christian home and I happen to submit to my parents rather than rebelling against them? I don't believe it is. Is it because I happen to like being a minister more than anything else?

[27 : 46] I don't believe it is at all. That's not the reason why I'm a Christian. I'll tell you why I'm a Christian. Simply because of this that Jesus rose from the dead.

Do you know what that means? It means that if I listen to Jesus he tells me that he says this I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will never die.

That's why I'm a Christian. Because I'm not going to die. How do I know that I'm not going to die?

You know how I know? Because Jesus died for me and rose again from the dead. And because he rose from the dead I know that I will rise from the dead one day.

That's the only reason. That's the reason that stands at the root of everything. And if it wasn't for the resurrection there'd be nothing in this Bible. It would just be a complete waste of time.

[28 : 56] It would be a waste of time also if Jesus didn't die. Jesus' death is everything. Why? Why is Jesus' death so important? Why is it so important? Because the Bible tells us that death is the wages of sin.

In other words the reason that you and I are going to die tonight is because we've sinned. We've wronged God. Our relationship that God created us with at the very beginning has become broken. And that brokenness results in our death.

But God because He so loved the world that's what the Bible says. I can't understand why God would want to love the world. That's what He does. He loved the world. That He sent His Son into the world and His Son died.

He really truly actually died the most horrible awful death on a Roman cross. The Bible tells me that in His death He died so that my sin could be taken away and removed and washed by believing in Him.

And that's why God's promise is that if we believe in Jesus and if we follow Him we too will rise from the dead. And here it seems to me that this verse is saying just that.

[30 : 10] Matthew says when Jesus died the curtain of the temple was torn in two the separation is gone there is now a way to God the earth shook God shook the world in order to tell the world look there's something you need to listen to and these people rose from the dead in order to show us that His death means my eternal life.

Do you see the connection between His death and their life? Connection between His death and my life and your life if you trust and you believe in Him as well. And it's the same if you believe the alternative about them rising from the dead after He rose from the dead.

In other words there's a connection there between His resurrection and our resurrection. but the strange thing is the thrilling thing is that both of these are true.

If I look up 1 Thessalonians and chapter 4 it tells us Paul puts these two things together. He says this listen to what he says you don't need to look it up listen to what he says we do not want you to be uninformed brothers about those who are asleep in other words those who have died in Jesus that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope for since we believe now listen to this since we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in other words that eternal life God promises on his word he promises everlasting life to those who believe in Jesus death and his resurrection that's what his death and his resurrection mean and that's what these people proved by themselves bodily physically actually rising from the dead it's the most thrilling message in the whole world because it is absolutely certain and the certainty lies with

Jesus himself just as sure as he died and he rose again so those who die believing in him and trusting only in him will also rise and never die again the last question there is about these people who rose again was this did they ever die again how long did they spend in Jerusalem what did they do there did they just kind of resume everything back to normal go back with their wives and their homes and start working again I don't believe so because all it tells us is that they appeared to many that's all it says it doesn't say that everything went back to normal in other words that they just appeared temporarily as proof of what Jesus death will one day mean and I would put it to you that these people did not die again but somehow or other

[33 : 36] God took them to be with himself just as he promises to take all of his people those who trust in him to be with him forever and ever where there is no death and where there is no sin and no sadness and no guilt and no fear where we shall forever be with the Lord with new resurrected bodies and the reason we can be so sure this evening is because Jesus paid the price of our sin and his death and he rose once again to give us new life do you have that new life tonight only Jesus can give you it I can't give you it the church can't give you it the church can only explain it to you can only open the Bible and try and make as clear as we possibly can what is in the

Bible if you've never read the Bible before please begin to read it if you've never prayed before come to God in prayer that's what he promises he asks us to come to him to ask maybe the only prayer you have tonight is Lord I just don't understand this that minister tonight he's talking about this weird verse in the Bible about people rising from the dead and just so it seems so incredible so seems so incongruous I just don't understand and yet there's something in this there's just got to be something in it maybe your only prayer is Lord I just don't understand this please open up my heart and help me to understand it and show me you may be ashamed to read your Bible in front of anyone else that's ok you carry on reading because the day will come when you won't be ashamed for the moment you might read your Bible in secret that's fine you carry on doing that the day will come when you won't be but you carry on listening to God carry on asking him to show you show you himself and if you ask the

Lord to show you himself he'll do that I promise you he'll do it because he's a personal God because he loves sinners because he loves to save and he loves to open up people's hearts and to change people's lives and the one thing we need tonight is that change of life that new beginning that you know you need you need that new beginning and only he can give you that let's pray together Father in heaven that's our prayer tonight as we try to get our minds around such a difficult verse and yet it's a verse that shows us so much about the gospel and shows us why Jesus died and what his death means Father we need your washing and your forgiveness we need new lives and we ask Lord for anyone here tonight who hasn't had that new life who hasn't started with that new life in Jesus and we pray that you'll come into their lives and change them now for we ask in Jesus name

Amen you before you text you