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Matthew 27:51b-52

## The Miracles of Calvary

### Miracles #4-5 - The Miracles of the Earthquake and Opened Graves

#### Introduction

There are two miracles here that go together. In fact it may be that the rending of the veil also was affected or assisted by the earthquake as well. But linguistically the earthquakes belong after the rending of the veil, Matt 27:51b. The same case could be made for the opening of the graves, which belongs to 27:52a. So you have three miracles clustered together here in the text. Earthquakes are not so uncommon. Literally hundreds of minor tremors take place daily around the world. It is only the big ones that are so destructive that make front-page news.

So the miracle here is not the earthquake itself, but it is the timing of the earthquake and its magnitude that point to something miraculous. Note the text in Matt 27:51b-53. What makes this a miracle of Calvary? **First**, it was not a slight tremor; it was of sufficient intensity to break rocks into pieces, although we learn in the verses following that the cross and body of Jesus were undisturbed, 27:57-61. **Second**, the timing is significant in that it occurred at the very moment of Jesus' death and His cry of victory, "It is finished," 27:50. **Third**, it occurred at the moment the veil was torn in two parts opening the way of access to the Holy of Holies. **Fourth**, it occurred at the very moment that the darkness was dispelled and the light came back, 27:45. **Fifth**, it can easily be affirmed by impartial non-Christian historians.

It is a matter of fact that the events concerning the life, ministry, miracles, death on the cross, darkness, earthquake, resurrected bodies, and all of the details surrounding the life and death of Jesus are indisputable by virtue of the testimony of secular and Jewish historians. Years ago when I was a seminary student, a close friend of mine debated an atheist. The atheist set out to prove that all the facts about the life, ministry, resurrection, and formation of the church were mythical and had no basis in fact. A friend who came with the atheist finally said, "You need to move away from this line of argument because your opponent is destroying you with historical facts." Thus, the debate was lost by the atheist because he was

unable to refute the details of secular history that affirm all that the New Testament teaches us about Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection. So what is the significance of the earthquake and the opening of the graves? Consider the following:

## I. Earthquakes in the Bible

### Earthquakes in the Old Testament

1. **Sinai - Exodus 19:18** - The first mention of seismic disturbance is found in Exodus when the Hebrews came to Mount Sinai. The text states that when God descended on the mountain, it was enveloped in smoke like the smoke of a furnace, "and the whole mountain quaked greatly." The entire event underscored the majesty and the holiness of God. No one was allowed to set foot on the mountain, 19:11-13. The people had to wash themselves and their garments as a sign of purity, 19:14. Sexual contact between husband and wife was banned, 19:15. Then on the third day, there were thundering and lightning, and a thick cloud enveloped the mountain. A loud trumpet was sounded, and all the people trembled, 19:16. Moses led the people to the foot of the mountain that was completely covered in smoke, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.
2. **Sinai - A Second Quaking - 1 Kings 19:1-10, esp. vv. 11-12** - In the ministry of Elijah, he performed courageously until he won the battle against the prophets of Baal. After receiving the threats of Jezebel, he fled into the wilderness for forty days, 19:8. He finally came to Mount Sinai where God appeared to him. There was fire and there was an earthquake, both of which were signs similar to Exodus 19. God was not in the fire, nor was He in the earthquake, neither with Moses and the people, nor in this revelation with Elijah. These physical upheavals were miraculous signs of God's power, majesty, and presence. Having gotten Elijah's attention, He spoke to him in "a still small voice," 19:12. It was likely an inaudible voice to the ear. The text states it was the voice of hammered out silence. Nevertheless, it was heard by Elijah as God gave him instructions for the next stage of his ministry, 19:15-18.
3. **Other Seismic Activity - 1 Samuel 14:15; 2 Samuel 22:8; Psalm 18:7;**  
**1 Samuel 14:15** - Saul's son, Jonathan, led the Hebrews in a military campaign against the Philistines at Gibeah. God intervened and gave them an assurance of victory over their adversaries.  
**2 Samuel 22:8** - This is a lengthy song written by David and contained in 22:2-51. If you turn to Psalm 18, you will see that this passage from 2 Samuel is duplicated there. It is a great song that magnifies the majesty and power of God. In this song, verses 8-9 use language similar to the account of God's appearance at Sinai. The verses are repeated in Psalm 18:7-8. In both places,

the song celebrates David's deliverance from the hand of Saul and celebrates the power of God in protecting David.

**Amos 1:1** - Amos mentions an earthquake that occurred two years before his call to the ministry. He uses this to establish the date of his call as a prophet. While we have no additional information about the earthquake, we can deduct at least two things from his mention of it. First, it must have been more than a minor seismic disturbance if it was used as a pinpoint in dating. Second, it gives testimony that there were earthquakes going on that were not necessarily associated with divine revelation.

### Earthquakes With a Message

4. **Ezekiel 38:19** - Ezekiel describes an apocalyptic battle set in the last days in which the forces of "Gog" attack Israel and are annihilated by the miraculous intervention of God. A part of God's intervention is the wrath of God including "fire" and "a great earthquake" in the land of Israel.
5. **Joel 2:10-11** - The earthquake of Joel's message is in the context of his discussion of the Day of the Lord as a day of judgment. It is a picture of God's army coming to call all the earth and all people of all nations of all time to appear before the God of creation on what Joel calls, "the great and very terrible [awesome] day of the Lord."
6. **Nahum 1:5-7** - Nahum's message is of the judgment of Nineveh and a reminder that God is a God of justice and will judge all the people who have ever lived. This verse is a preview of that awesome Day of Judgment when the power and majesty of God will be displayed. This passage is in the context of the judgment of Nineveh, and a reminder that every man and nation will have a judgment day.
7. **Haggai 2:6,7,21; Hebrews 12:26-29** - Haggai's prophecy plays off of the theme of the majesty and power of God, but here he is clearly talking about some future event in which God will again shake the heavens and the earth. This will be a quake that will literally shake the universe. He speaks of God, "Once more (it is a little while) I will shake the heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake the nations, and they shall come to the Desire of all Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory, says the Lord of hosts," 2:6-7. The writer of Hebrews quotes this passage in Hebrews 12:26-29 and applies it to a future coming of the Messiah. God will once again shake the earth and set up His kingdom which cannot be shaken, Heb 12:26-28.

### Earthquakes in the New Testament

8. **Matthew 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11** - Mention of earthquakes in these three verses are all related to the last days before the coming of Christ, and each verse communicates the same message. There will be earthquakes in various

places in the last days. This may not mean an increase in number but an increase in awareness of the existence of earthquakes.

The following data comes from the United States Geological Survey (USGS). The USGS monitors seismic activity worldwide. You can go on their website and find out about recent seismic activity. As of March 19, 2009, there have already been 15 major earthquakes worldwide. The USGS estimates that there are at least 1,300,000 earthquakes every year and 13,000 of those are a magnitude of 4.0 or better. Many will recall several earthquakes were reported in the Metroplex on October 31, 2008. There are no boundaries on where they can occur. So far this year, quakes have occurred in Indonesia, Costa Rica, Los Angeles, New Zealand, Alaska, New York, New Jersey, Washington State, the Kermadec Islands, and the Loyalty Islands. The USGS states, "There is no evidence that earthquakes are becoming more frequent, it is simply that more earthquakes are being recorded, especially small ones, as extensive worldwide monitoring networks continue to expand. From February 19 to March 13, there were a total of 380 earthquakes recorded worldwide. The number of large earthquakes, however, remains stable year in and year out," see the following website

[http://www.pdc.org/iweb/earthquake\\_increase.jsp?subg=1](http://www.pdc.org/iweb/earthquake_increase.jsp?subg=1) of the Pacific Disaster Center.

9. **Earthquake of Calvary - Matthew 27:51; 28:2** - The earthquake reported in Matthew 27:51 occurred either concurrent with the death of Jesus and the restoration of light, or immediately after it. As a result of this earthquake, graves in Jerusalem cemeteries were opened and many of the believers who had died came out of their graves, not at the earthquake, but at the resurrection of Jesus. The significance of this earthquake will be discussed in the next section. The earthquake mentioned in Matthew 28:2 was to open the sealed stone door from the tomb of Jesus and let the world inside to see that He was not there, but "He is risen!" 28:6.
10. **Philippi - Acts 16:26** - Dr. Luke reports that an earthquake occurred when Paul and Silas were imprisoned at Philippi. At midnight they were singing hymns when a great earthquake occurred, and the doors of the jail were jarred open. To the amazement of the jailor, neither Paul nor his cellmates fled. As a result, the jailor and his family were saved.

#### 11-15. **Five Earthquakes of Revelation - Revelation 6:12; 8:5; 11:13,19; 16:18**

The Book of Revelation unfolds with three series of judgments, each in seven parts. The first seven judgments are the seven seals. The second seven judgments are the trumpets. The third seven judgments are the bowl judgments. During these twenty-one judgments, there are five earthquakes. **First**, when the sixth seal is opened, there is a great earthquake, the sun becomes black, and the

moon turns blood red, 6:12. **Second**, when the seventh seal is opened, an angel will take a censer with smoking incense from the altar. There will be noises, thundering, lightning, and a great earthquake, 8:5. **Third**, after the seven seals, there will be another round of judgments known as the seven trumpet judgments. When the sixth trumpet sounds, two witnesses appear and preach the Gospel until they are killed 11:7-10. After three days they are resurrected, and there is a great earthquake, 11:13. **Fourth**, when the seventh trumpet sounds, the temple of God will open in heaven, and there will be lightning, noises, thundering, an earthquake, and great hail, 11:19. **Fifth**, the next seven judgments are the bowl judgments. When the seventh bowl is poured out, there will be noises, thundering, lightning, and a great earthquake, 16:18. Everything about these earthquakes has to do with the last judgments on the people and places of earth as we know it. The seventh bowl institutes the final stage of those judgments.

### Earthquake Summary

As long as we stand on solid ground, there is an assumed sense of security. We don't even think about the tenuous nature of life and our human existence. One thing that an earthquake does is to remind us that the world we live in is not forever. Like the rainbow after the flood, earthquakes portend to a coming final day when the heavens and the earth will be fully and finally shaken. We are not to be attached to this world. Look around you! All that you see and all that you own will one day be but a burned-out cinder according to 2 Peter 3:9-17.

#### I. **Calvary Answers Sinai**

While there are many earthquakes mentioned in Scripture, there are three that are most significant that are in view here:

1. **First**, the earthquake at Sinai occurred when God came personally to present His covenant to Moses and the Hebrews in Exodus 19:1-25. This event revealed the majesty and power of God and affirmed His holiness. At Sinai, God made moral demands through the revelation of the Ten Commandments and its application in Exodus 20:1-24:18.
2. **Second** is the earthquake that came at the moment that Jesus commended His spirit to God the Father, Matt 27:51b-52. It was here that **Calvary answered Sinai**. What we could not do nor be through keeping the law, God enabled us to do and to be through the offering of His Son on Calvary. By keeping the law, no flesh will be justified, Rom 3:20. The law was only our teacher to bring us to Christ that we might be justified by faith, Gal 3:24. Therefore at Calvary, fear was replaced by joy; works were replaced by grace; judgment and justice were replaced by mercy; wrath against sin was replaced by redemption and covenant love; sacrifice demanded was replaced by sacrifice provided; guilt was replaced by forgiveness; the curse of sin was

replaced by the blessing of salvation; utter despair was replaced by abundant hope; uncertainty was replaced by surety; the wages of sin which results in death was replaced by the gift of God which is everlasting life, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. **Third** is the earthquake that occurs in the future as recorded by John in Revelation 11:15-19, at the sounding of the seventh trumpet, a passage which was the basis for Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." It also is the subject of 2 Peter 3:10, which reminds us this world is not the unshakable kingdom.

The first earthquake at Sinai anticipates and frames the need for the second at Calvary. The second earthquake at Calvary anticipates and makes possible the reclamation of the creation and removal of the curse in Revelation 11:15-19. These three events mark the beginning of the Old Covenant in Exodus 19, the sealing of the New Covenant in Jesus' blood in Matthew 27, and the reclamation of creation by the Creator at the sounding of the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11 as the prelude to the earthly millennial reign of Messiah that finally gives way to God's everlasting unshakable kingdom, Heb 12:25-29.

## II. **Calvary Reversed Sinai**

Not only did Calvary satisfy the demands of Sinai, it reversed the demands of the law of God from Sinai.

1. **The Curse of Sin Reversed.** The law was a spiritual mirror to show us the existence of sin in our lives. Paul says, "I would not have known that covetousness was sin unless the law had said, *You shall not covet*, Rom 7:7. In so doing the law of life became death when it identified the presence of sin and rebellion in our lives, Rom 7:9-11. The law could only show us the sin in our lives, but it could not save us, 7:12-25. The sacrifices were not efficacious for deliberate sins. They were never meant to provide a works salvation. They were to show the inadequacy of human beings to provide salvation on their own, and instead pointed toward Jesus as the perfect sacrifice who was able to forgive all kinds of sins, deliberate and unintentional, and save to the uttermost all who call upon Him in faith, Gal 3:10-13; Heb 7:25.
2. **Sin's Effect, Death Reversed.** The earthquake opened graves upon the death of Christ. After His resurrection, many came out of those open graves as a sign of Jesus' resurrection power for all believers. Note that only believers participated in this temporary resurrection. None of these people remained alive; they all died again. The graves remained open from Friday to Sunday because it was unlawful to close them on the Sabbath.

So the people could only look into the open graves and view the remains. This made their resurrection on that first Easter morning all the more dramatic. We focus on Jesus' resurrection as we should, but there also was this sign that many believers who had died and been buried came out of those open graves in testimony of the power of Jesus' resurrection to assure our own resurrection, 1 Cor 15:1-11.

3. **Justice Called and Mercy Answered.** While Sinai showed us human sin and human inability to provide salvation, Calvary shows us God's mercy and redeeming grace that overcame the power of sin and provided for us salvation and everlasting life. The wages of sin is death, but God's gift to all who believe is not only forgiveness now, but forgiveness forever, Rom 6:10; Heb 9:12; 10:10; Jude 3. The law demanded justice in that we all were under the curse of sin. At Calvary the justice of God was satisfied, and the mercy and grace of God were dispensed by Jesus' death for us on the cross, Isa 53:6-10; Acts 8:32-33; Heb 4:14-16.

## II. **Calvary's Unshakable Message in Haggai & Hebrews: God's Final Earthquake**

1. **Calvary's Earthquake Identified.** In order to understand the message of the earthquake at Calvary, we must go to the prophecy of Haggai the prophet. The Hebrews had returned from captivity in Babylon and laid the foundation of the Second Temple. But when they realized that it would not be anything like the grandeur of Solomon's Temple, they fell into despair and abandoned the project altogether. God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to encourage the people to rebuild.

Haggai preached five messages that comprise the two chapters of the book that bears his name. In his third sermon, he issued a call to support the rebuilding of the temple. He called upon the people to remember God's former blessings, vv. 1-5; to remember God's ability to protect them, vv. 6-7; to remember God owns all things, v. 8; and to remember God's future hope of glory, 2:9. Especially significant is his reference to God's intent to "once more shake heaven and earth" and "to shake all nations," vv. 6-7a. Then he offers the wonderful messianic promise that the "Desire of All Nations," shall come to the Second Temple. God personally came to the Second Temple in the person of our Lord Jesus. So the glory of the Second Temple would be greater than the first, Haggai 2:9.

2. **Final Earthquake's Announcement.** But what about the shaking? The writer in Hebrews quotes Haggai 2:6 in Hebrews 12:26. He tells us that this phrase from Haggai, "*Yet once more*," indicates the removal of those things being

shaken, as things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain," 12:27, see also 1 Cor 3:11-17. The writer of Hebrews 12:26-29 quotes Haggai 2:6 and explains that the "yet once more" also indicates the third shaking. The first shaking was Sinai, the second at Calvary, and "yet once more" is the third shaking of 2 Peter 3:10 at the return of the Messiah as King of Kings and Lord of Lords and Righteous Judge of heaven and earth!

The writer of Hebrews then announced, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire," 12:28-29; Dan 2:44; Matt 22:44. But if we hold to Him when He shakes the heavens and the earth, we shall not be moved! (see Ps 16:8; 62:2, 6). Calvary answered Sinai to announce that Jesus had established an unshakable kingdom.

- 3. The Final Earthquake's Lesson.** This then was Christ's earthshaking miraculous message on Calvary. By His death on the cross, Jesus destroyed the power of sin, the reality of death, reversed the curse of sin, satisfied the law, and completed our atonement. The prison bars of the grave were broken, and believers were released from the power of the grave. Jesus came to redeem all creation (His created universe), see Rom 8:22-23, and all those who come to Him by faith. Because of Calvary, there will be a new heaven and a new earth that will be free from the presence and power of sin and the adversary. This was the final act of God's redemptive plan to save us from the power of sin. He announced His plan in Genesis 3:15 and completed His plan at Calvary, John 19:30.

### Lessons

1. Earthquakes in the Old Testament and the New Testament all carry the same message. The universe and our present world are a shakable kingdom that will soon be replaced by the eternal kingdom of God.
2. Earthquakes remind us of the present and coming judgment of God on our sin- cursed world. The whole creation groans and travails in anticipation of its coming redemption, Rom 8:22.
3. The earthquake at Calvary answers the earthquake at Sinai. At Sinai God came down and presented the Law and the sacrifices as pictures of His plan for redemption of His creation and of all humankind who will come to Him by faith.
4. The earthquake at Calvary announced the end of the Law and the sacrifices and announced the goal of the Law which was to lead us to receive salvation by grace through faith in His Son, Jesus, Gal 3:24.

5. The earthquake at Calvary was a reminder that one day this present universe will be redeemed and replaced by His eternal kingdom, Rev 11:15.
6. Calvary reversed the curse of sin, Gal 3:10-13.
7. Calvary reversed the result of sin, which is death, 1 Cor 15:1-11.
8. Calvary satisfied the justice of God by condemning sin in the death of Christ and opened to us the mercy and grace of God in Him, Isa 53:6-10; Acts 8:32-33; Heb 4:14-16.
9. Calvary's earthquake announced the coming final shaking in the initiation of the kingdom of God in and through His Son, Jesus Christ, see Hag 2:6-9.
10. Calvary's earthquake was a reminder of the coming eternal kingdom of God which will be an unshakable kingdom, Hag 2:6; Heb 12:26.
11. Calvary's earthquake announced the destruction of the curse, the end of sin, the satisfaction of the Law, the consummation of salvation, and the completion of God's redemption announced in Genesis 3:15; John 19:30.