

**Series:** The Seven Sayings of the Cross, Part 9

**Title:** The Miracles at Calvary

**Text:** Matthew 27:45-54

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When Jesus was crucified, several miracles occurred. The four different gospel writers all gave witness to such things. From the perspective of the Roman soldiers, Jesus may have seemed like just another religious zealot. For Jewish leaders, our Lord was a Messianic imposter who met a well-deserved fate. To common Jewish folk, Jesus was another victim of the religious and political establishment. Others recognized His death as being necessary, since a Messianic revolt could have brought heavy-handed consequences from the Roman Empire (John 11:50). Despite all of these perspectives, the Heavenly Father gave signs from Calvary to prove the otherworldly nature of our Lord. He provided miracles to demonstrate that Jesus was more than a man.

In His way of doing things, the Lord often used signs in Scripture to validate His prophets. He began this practice during the days of Moses. When the Lord commissioned the man to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, He provided him with signs of confirmation. Though Moses was timid, the Lord told him to not fear. When called to a momentous task, the prophet complained, asking, "What if they won't believe me and will not obey me but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'" (Exodus 4:1). The Lord responded by saying, "What is that in your hand?" (Exodus 4:2). Moses was holding his staff and God said, "Throw it on the ground" (Exodus 4:3). Immediately Moses' staff became a snake. The prophet received miraculous power to transform his staff (Exodus 4:4). He also received the ability to change his hand from a healthy hand to a leprous hand, and vice versa (Exodus 4:6-7).

The Lord gave Moses supernatural abilities for a reason. He told the prophet, "This will take place...so that they will believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you" (Exodus 4:5). From the time of Moses onward, God has often validated His spokespersons with confirming miracles. Signs and wonders have accompanied those who spoke directly on His behalf. The author of Hebrews spoke of these realities by saying, "...how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? This salvation had its beginning when it was spoken of by the Lord, and it was confirmed to us by those who heard him. At the same time, *God also testified by signs and wonders, various miracles, and distributions of gifts* from the Holy Spirit according to his will" (Hebrews 2:3-4).

What do these things have to do with the cross? They give a theological backdrop for the miraculous events that occurred at Calvary. Jesus was the ultimate prophet. Deuteronomy 18:15 and 18 foretold of the way in which the Messiah would embrace a prophetic ministry. The apostles confirmed that Jesus was the fulfillment of Mosaic prophecies. They indicated that Jesus was indeed the prophet of all prophets (Acts 3:22-23)!

As a prophet, Jesus performed miracles to validate His office. But His miracles were also packed with powerful messages concerning His divine nature. He healed the sick, indicating He was the Creator who made human life (Mark 1:29-34). He calmed stormy waters, demonstrating He was the Creator who had control over all nature (Mark 4:35-41). He cast out demons, showing He was the Lord who had power over the spirit realm (Mark 5:1-20). He also raised the dead, indicating He had power over death itself (John 11:1-44). All of these things validated Jesus' role as both a prophet and the Messiah.

At His death, more signs and wonders appeared. As with the miracles He performed on Earth, the signs from Calvary confirmed Jesus' respective roles as a prophet and as the Messiah. They also conveyed wonderful theological truth. Five miracles occurred at Calvary. Let's examine each one.

## **DARK SKIES**

Matthew's gospel tells of how "darkness came over the whole land" as Jesus was crucified (Matthew 27:45). The event was not a mere natural occurrence. The skies weren't black because of rain clouds, a dust storm, or an eclipse. Though natural means were surely involved, the phenomenon was of supernatural origin. The God who made all things moved within creation to perform a mighty deed.

The sign in the sky was indicative of important redemptive truth. At the cross, Jesus was judged on behalf of sin. At Calvary, the brightness of the noonday sun was extinguished for a reason. God performed a sign and wonder to validate His prophet, but He also painted a picture concerning the purpose of the cross. In Old Testament lore, dark skies were a sign of judgment (Isaiah 13:10).

At Calvary, Jesus was judged for our sin so that we don't have to be judged. In Matthew 26:57-68, our Lord was dragged before a kangaroo-court meeting of the Sanhedrin. Though they brought false testimonies against Him, none could find no real fault in Him. Eventually, He was accused of blasphemy (Matthew 26:65). His accusers spit on Him and slapped Him (Matthew 26:67-68). Because of the false charges, Jesus was condemned to death (Matthew 26:66).

Ironically, those who spit on Jesus were the ones who were actually guilty of blasphemy. They were the ones who deserved death. The very Son of God stood before them, but they scorned and ridiculed Him. They were guilty of sacrilege! Jesus, however, kept silent (Matthew 26:63). He fulfilled Isaiah 53:7 — "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth."

It is easy for us to look down on those who unjustly judged Jesus. However, it is worth remembering that such things took place for our eternal benefit. In the Sanhedrin's self-righteous contempt, we find a startling reminder of the purpose of the cross. You see, all of humanity can be compared to those unjust judges. Have we not all blasphemed and committed sacrilege? Each is guilty of violating God's Law, because each has lived for other gods (Exodus 20:3), erected idols of the heart (Exodus 20:4-6), taken the name of God in vain (Exodus 20:7), and profaned the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). Yet, God who is rich in mercy assigned Jesus to be judged on our behalf.

This is the meaning of the dark skies and the message of the cross — Jesus was judged for us. Though we deserve to be enterally judged on account of our sin, Jesus stood condemned for us. The Sanhedrin passed an unjust verdict so that we might be set free. Scripture says, "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

## **THE VEIL IN THE TEMPLE**

Along with the black skies over Jerusalem, something supernatural occurred in the temple. Matthew said, "Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51). The curtain in view was one that separated the holy place of the temple from the most holy place. It restricted access to the place in which God's presence dwelt during Old Testament times. The author of Hebrews referenced the curtain in Hebrews 9:2-3. Ordinary people weren't allowed access behind the curtain. The tearing of the curtain had obvious meaning — Jesus gave access to the presence of God!

Matthew was intentional to point out that the curtain of the temple was not ripped in two by men. He said it was torn "from top to bottom." If men would have torn the curtain, they would have had to start from the bottom. The fact that the tear started from top gave the idea that the hand of God had reached down from the sky to destroy the curtain. The Lord performed a miracle!

As with other miracles in the ministry of Jesus, this one confirmed that Jesus was of God. In fact, it indicated He was God! Our Lord was more than a good man, effective teacher,

moral example, or remarkable leader. He was fully man and fully God. He was the God-man who came to Earth to both show and make a way to God.

The tearing of the temple curtain validated Jesus' ministry and message, but it did much more. It also communicated wonderful gospel truth. Indeed, in accordance with the book of Hebrews the act was a "sign and wonder" (Hebrews 2:4). In being a "wonder," the event confirmed Jesus' divine origin. In being a "sign," the event revealed important spiritual truth.

The truth intended by the sign was rather straightforward — through Jesus' work at Calvary, humanity has been given direct access to God. Paul spoke of these realities in his letter to the Ephesians. He said, "But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:13-14).

These things should move us to draw near to God. Since access has been granted to His presence, we should seek Him. Things like prayer, worship, Bible study, and the like should be our delight. The author of Hebrews commented on realities related to the torn curtain, saying, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water" (Hebrews 10:19, 22).

## **EARTHQUAKE**

In addition to the things we've already discussed, an earthquake also occurred at Calvary. Matthew's gospel says, "...the earth quaked, and the rocks were split" (Matthew 27:51). Interestingly, there are historical accounts that mention an earthquake near the time of Jesus' crucifixion. The Jewish historian Josephus mentioned one taking place at the time of Pentecost. The Talmud told of one that took place about forty years before the destruction of the temple.<sup>1</sup> Of course there is great debate concerning such things; however, such historical references are certainly interesting!

Regardless, the mighty earthquake at Jesus' crucifixion had a great purpose. It was a signpost that indicated Jesus was more than a mere man. Though many had been crucified on Roman crosses in Jerusalem, none could compare to Him. He was the Son of Man and the Son of God. The supernatural signs in nature were meant to make such things plain. They were a validation that there was something special about the man on the middle cross!

In addition, the trembling in the earth's crust was intended to provide instruction concerning important truth. In the Hebrew Scriptures, earthquakes were often associated with judgment. The prophets Isaiah (Isaiah 29:6), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 10:10), and Amos (Amos 8:8) all used them as a sign of God's wrath. With the darkened skies, the trembling ground at Golgotha indicated Jesus was judged for humanity's sin.

But there was another message in the tremors at Calvary. In Jewish tradition, earthquakes were often regarded as precursors of the coming of God's presence. Such a perspective was based on Elijah's experiences on the mountain of God. When the Lord appeared to the prophet, he sent several natural elements as a prelude to His appearing. Scripture says, "At that moment, the Lord passed by. A great and mighty wind was tearing at the mountains and was shattering cliffs before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was a voice, a soft whisper" (1 Kings 19:11-12).

Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience. His readers were well acquainted with the ministry of Elijah. The man was held up as the greatest of God's prophets. Many of Matthew's original readers would have caught the meaning of the earthquake at the cross. The occurrence of such a thing signified that Jesus brought the presence of God to man via His

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson, [CD-Rom].

death. Such truth is confirmed throughout the gospels. When Jesus' birth was announced, it was said that His name would be "Immanuel," a name that meant "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Before He ascended to heaven, our Lord said, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

The earthquake at the cross can bring great encouragement to us. Because of what Jesus has done, we have promise that God is always near. We never need to feel alone in life. The Lord is always with us. Problems and pains may beset. Friends and family members will disappoint. Troubles and trials will increase from time to time. In the midst of it all, God is with us! May we learn to live in light of His presence.

## **RESURRECTED BODIES**

Along with the mighty earthquake, something startling happened in graveyards near Golgotha. Matthew says, "The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (Matthew 27:52). To the natural man, such an occurrence seems like a fairy tale. Many who acquiesce and admit that Jesus was a good man are unwilling to accept such an occurrence was possible.

Some of a more religious sort attempt to twist the meaning of Matthew's words. They claim the gospel writer only intended to use a metaphor. In such a perspective, dead bodies really weren't raised at the crucifixion. Matthew only meant to portray that Jesus gives a qualitatively better life to all who follow His instruction.

It is important to note that Matthew did not use figurative language. He employed no similes. A plain reading of his gospel account gives no evidence of allegory or metaphor within the words of Matthew 27:52. A face-value reading of the text reveals that the author intended to speak of a real historical event. Dead bodies really emerged from graves!

Such a miracle proved that Jesus was more than a good man. He was superior to all rabbis. Though He was a prophet, He was more than a prophet. He had teaching like none other (Matthew 7:28-29), but He was more than a teacher. He was God!

Jesus was the one who was with God at the beginning when God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" (Genesis 1:26-27). The Bible says, "For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). The dead bodies that came back to life at Calvary demonstrated that Jesus was the life giver.

But the resurrected bodies pointed to more. They revealed that Jesus was Creator God, but they also revealed that He purchased resurrection from the dead for all who trust in Him. A scene from earlier in his ministry also highlighted these truths. On one occasion, one of Jesus' friends died. The man's name was Lazarus. Our Lord traveled to comfort the man's family. When He did, he told Lazarus' grieving sisters, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). After uttering such words, Jesus miraculously raised Lazarus (John 11:44)!

All of these things point to a pivotal purpose of Calvary. Through His death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus secured a future resurrection for our physical bodies. Though sin brings death to our frames (Genesis 2:17), glorious new bodies await all who have been redeemed. Scripture says, "Listen, I am telling you a mystery: We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

The signs and wonders at the cross underscore the reality of these truths. Do you have confidence in a future resurrection? Apart from Christ returning before your life is over, you will certainly face the sting of death. Do you have hope of being raised like Lazarus? If so, are you allowing such hope to comfort your heart and mind? When death hits your family and friends,

set your mind on Calvary. Remember that dead saints were raised when Christ was crucified. In similar fashion, you and your loved ones who are in Christ will be raised!

### **CONFESSION BY A ROMAN SOLDIER**

Witnessing the scene from Calvary, a Roman soldier made a startling pronouncement. Matthew's gospel says, "When the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'" (Matthew 27:54). Such a profession would have been remarkable from any bystander at a crucifixion. For a Roman soldier to utter such words was miraculous indeed.

### **Soldiers in Rome**

Roman soldiers were a hardened group. Most were trained, ruthless killers. Duties required the average soldier to spend many years traveling countless miles throughout a vast domain. Because the Roman Empire was often engaged in seizing new lands, or busy subduing previously-conquered peoples who revolted against Roman rule, soldiers were often consigned to years of endless fighting in regions far from home.

Many had volunteered for service as a way of securing a greater degree of security in life. Eking out a living through hard agricultural work, or submitting oneself to a master as an indentured slave, were often the only other options for a livelihood. Unless one was from an upperclass family, becoming a Roman soldier was the only prospect of climbing the strata of society.

When one enlisted in the Roman Army, he normally had hopes of two things. First, he was interested in the benefits that came with being a soldier. At the completion of service, he was granted a piece of land and a government pension. Such things made one relatively wealthy in the ancient world.

On top of these things, Roman soldiers usually had aspirations of receiving honor and prestige. Amongst the Roman military, the word "glory" was used for the fame and renown that conquering soldiers received. When a young Julius Caesar went off to battle in his day, his zeal was for the applause of his nation. Eventually the soon-to-be emperor ascended to power because of his exploits. It is thought that part of Emperor Commodus' madness was based on his zeal to get glory for himself. He performed as a wannabe gladiator in the coliseum, slaying hamstrung animals and ill-equipped slaves who were unable to defend themselves.

All of these things provide a profile of a typical Roman soldier. Men in the Roman army served for the glory of Rome, but they also served for their own glory. Most were interested in gain and recognition. Considering such realities puts the confession of the Roman soldier at Calvary into a better perspective.

### **Soldiers At The Cross**

In addition to the profile of a typical Roman soldier, one can consider the actions of the soldiers responsible for Jesus' death. Moments before the crucifixion, a band of soldiers had cruelly beaten Jesus. Matthew gave record:

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the governor's residence and gathered the whole company around him. They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet robe. They twisted together a crown of thorns, put it on his head, and placed a staff in his right hand. And they knelt down before him and mocked him: "Hail, king of the Jews!" Then they spat on him, took the staff, and kept hitting him on the head. After they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him (Matthew 27:27-31).

Because they had time to kill between Pilate's verdict (Matthew 27:15-26) and the actual crucifixion (Matthew 27:32-44), the soldiers used the dead time to have some fun. They made

sport of Jesus by stripping Him naked, mocking Him, spitting on Him, and punching Him repeatedly. Such actions had not been prescribed by Pilate. The cruel soldiers simply used Jesus for entertain themselves. Their actions gave witness to the hardened depravity that was common amongst the Roman army.

As if these things weren't enough, the soldiers continued with even more vile behavior. As our Lord hung naked and exposed, they gambled for His clothes. Matthew said, "After crucifying him, they divided his clothes by casting lots" (Matthew 27:35). Such gambling was customary, as Roman soldiers were rewarded for their duty by being given the right to criminals' personal possessions. Still, great moral callousness was displayed through their actions.

In addition to the gambling, the soldiers at Calvary created a sign to mock Jesus. Matthew said, "Above his head they put up the charge against him in writing: This Is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:36). The placard above the cross reeked of sarcasm. Romans often despised Jews, but Roman soldiers despised them more. The average soldier in Canaan had spent countless hours suppressing riots and results from pesky Jews. Romans thought the Jewish system of religion and politics was foolish. Hebrew zeal for independence and freedom was annoying to say the least. The monotheism of the peculiar people was absurd. Roman soldiers were sick of Jewish customs, culture, and rebellion; thus, the soldiers at the cross took great delight in mocking Jesus through the sign they affixed over His head. Through their actions, they demonstrated their wholesale disdain of all things Jewish.

### **A Humble Profession of Faith**

Despite all of the cultural tapestry associated with the Roman army, one soldier made a marvelous profession concerning Jesus at the cross. He said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). The man who made the profession wasn't just any soldier. He was a centurion. Such an individual was a leader entrusted with responsibility over a large group of soldiers. The title contained the word for the number one hundred. It was the word from which we get our "century." Despite the meaning of the word, it is commonly believed that centurions oversaw around eighty men.

For such a leader to publicly refer to Jesus as "the Son of God" was indeed a miracle. The man exhibited a great degree of humility. While his cohorts mocked our Lord, he revered Him. The skies went dark, the temple was drastically altered, the earth quaked, and dead bodies emerged from tombs; however, the greatest miracle of all was the changed heart of a hardened Roman soldier!

Church tradition says the name of the centurion was Petronius.<sup>2</sup> The man's recognition of Jesus' divinity stands as a perennial confirmation of Jesus' divine nature. It also serves as a lesson concerning the faith that brings salvation. To be saved from sin and death, one must confess that Jesus is the Son of God. Scripture says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). Remember these realities. If you are not certain of forgiveness of sins and eternal life, do like the Roman soldier at Calvary. Call out to God, confessing Jesus as Lord. If you have been born again, remember that confession of Jesus is what gives you hope in life and death.

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<sup>2</sup> Robertson, [CD-Rom].