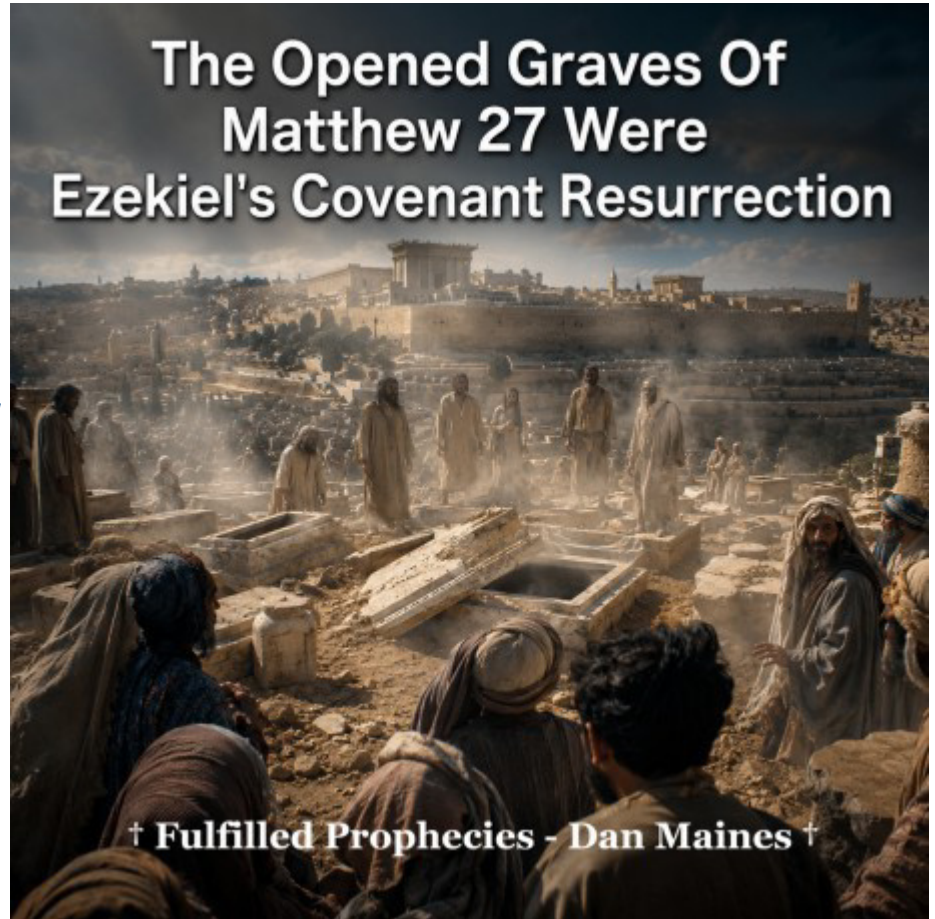


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The Opened Graves Of Matthew 27 Were Ezekiel's Covenant Resurrection



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† Matthew 27:52-53 has puzzled many Bible students because it appears to describe a literal resurrection of numerous Old Testament saints. Yet Scripture interprets Scripture. The language Jesus' audience would have recognized comes directly from Ezekiel 37, where God used opened graves and restored life as prophetic imagery for the restoration of covenant Israel, not the resurrection of individual corpses. When read

within its Old Testament context, Matthew 27 becomes one more fulfillment of God's promise to restore His covenant people through Christ.

Ezekiel 37:11-14

Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the entire house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'This is what the Lord GOD says: "Behold, I am going to open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. And I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it," declares the LORD.'"

† God identifies the vision before explaining the symbolism. The dry bones are the whole house of Israel, making this a prophecy of covenant restoration, not individual bodily resurrection.

(Hosea 6:1-2)

† The opening of graves represents God bringing His covenant people out of their national death and separation from Him.

(Isaiah 26:19)

† The promise of His Spirit points directly to the New Covenant established through Christ. (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21)

Matthew 27:51

And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.

† Matthew records the torn veil, the earthquake, the split rocks, and the opened graves as one continuous event. Together they announce the end of the Old Covenant order and the inauguration of the New Covenant. (Hebrews 9:8-10; Hebrews 10:19-20)

† The tearing of the veil signified that access to God was no longer through the temple, preparing the reader to understand

the covenant significance of everything that follows. (Matthew 23:38; Hebrews 10:19-22)

† These signs fulfilled the prophetic expectation that God would shake the old covenant order before establishing His unshakable kingdom. (Haggai 2:6-7; Hebrews 12:26-28)

Matthew 27:52-53

Also the 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 intentionally uses the same covenant resurrection imagery found in Ezekiel. His Jewish audience already understood the symbolism of opened graves. (Ezekiel 37:12-13)

† The focus is Jerusalem, the holy city, because this was the center of the Old Covenant that was passing away. (Hebrews 8:13)

† Christ's resurrection began the fulfillment of God's promise to restore His covenant people from death into life. (Romans 11:15)

† Matthew specifically says they came out of the tombs after Christ's resurrection, preserving Christ's place as the firstfruits and the preeminent One in God's redemptive plan. (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

† Matthew never says these saints were glorified, immortal, or permanently living on earth. He simply states that they appeared to many, leaving the focus on the covenant significance rather than satisfying later speculation. (Luke 24:27)

† The emphasis of the passage is not on individual biographies, but on God's visible testimony that the promised covenant restoration had begun through His Messiah. (John 5:24-25)

Isaiah 26:19

Your dead will live;

Their corpses will rise.

You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy,

For your dew is as the dew of the dawn,
And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.

† Isaiah also speaks of resurrection using prophetic language describing God's restoration of His covenant people after judgment. (Isaiah 25:6-9)

† The imagery of awakening from the dust is consistent with the prophets' description of Israel's restoration. (Daniel 12:1-3)

† Matthew's account fits naturally within this established prophetic pattern. (Romans 9:24-26)

John 5:24-25

"Truly, truly, I say to you, the one who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

Truly, truly, I say to you, a time is coming and even now has arrived, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

† Jesus declared that resurrection life had already begun during His earthly ministry. (John 11:25-26)

† Those who believed had already passed from death into life before the destruction of Jerusalem. (Ephesians 2:1-6)

† This fulfills the prophets' promise that God would raise His covenant people through the Messiah. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

Ephesians 2:4-6

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our wrongdoings, 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,

† Paul applies resurrection language to believers who were spiritually made alive with Christ. (Romans 6:4-5)

† Believers were raised with Christ into the blessings of the New Covenant. (Colossians 2:12-13)

† This fulfills Ezekiel's promise that God would raise His covenant people and place His Spirit within them. (Ezekiel

Romans 6:3-5

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection,

† Paul explains that believers participate in Christ's resurrection through union with Him, showing that resurrection is a present covenant reality for those in Christ. (Colossians 2:12-13)

† Being raised with Christ fulfills God's promise to bring His covenant people from death into life through the New Covenant. (Ezekiel 37:14)

† Resurrection language consistently describes the believer's participation in Christ's life, not merely a future expectation. (Ephesians 2:5-6)

Romans 11:15

For if their rejection proves to be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

† Paul uses resurrection language to describe Israel's restoration, demonstrating that covenant resurrection remained a biblical theme throughout the New Testament. (Ezekiel 37:12-14)

† "Life from the dead" reflects the fulfillment of God's promise to restore His covenant people through Christ rather than introducing a different definition of resurrection. (Hosea 6:1-2)

† This confirms that Matthew's resurrection imagery belongs within the broader prophetic theme of covenant restoration. (Romans 9:24-26)

Historical References

† Josephus records numerous extraordinary signs surrounding the years leading to Jerusalem's destruction, demonstrating that

first-century Jews understood prophetic symbolism connected with covenant judgment and restoration.

† The Old Testament prophets repeatedly used resurrection, graves, dry bones, and restored life as covenant imagery describing the restoration of Israel rather than individual bodily resurrection.

† Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience already familiar with Ezekiel's prophecy, making the connection between the two passages natural and expected.

† Jewish literature before and during the first century frequently used resurrection language as a metaphor for Israel's national restoration, demonstrating that Matthew's readers were already familiar with this prophetic imagery.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We should always allow the Old Testament to define the prophetic language used in the New Testament.

† Scripture becomes much clearer when we recognize covenant resurrection imagery instead of assuming every reference describes physical resurrection.

† Christ fulfilled God's promise by bringing His people out of covenant death into everlasting life through the New Covenant.

† We should allow Scripture to interpret Scripture instead of building doctrine from one difficult passage while ignoring its Old Testament foundation.

† Keeping Matthew 27 connected to Ezekiel 37 protects us from reading later theological assumptions back into a first-century Jewish text.

† Christ fulfilled every promise God made concerning the restoration of His covenant people, giving believers confidence that His promises are trustworthy.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Does Ezekiel 37 explain Matthew 27:52-53?

A: Yes. God explicitly identifies the vision as the whole house of Israel, showing that opened graves symbolize covenant restoration. (Ezekiel 37:11-14)

Q: Did Jesus teach resurrection had already begun?

A: Yes. Jesus said the hour "now is" when the dead would hear His voice and live. (John 5:24-25)

Q: Why were the saints seen in the holy city?

A: Because Jerusalem was the center of the covenant that Christ came to fulfill before its passing. (Matthew 27:53; Hebrews 8:13)

Q: Were these glorified, immortal bodies?

A: Matthew never says they were glorified or immortal. He simply records that they appeared to many. The passage should be understood in light of Ezekiel's covenant resurrection imagery rather than assumptions imported from later theology. (Ezekiel 37:11-14; Matthew 27:52-53)

Q: Why did they come out only after Christ's resurrection?

A: Because Christ is the firstfruits. Matthew intentionally preserves Christ's preeminence by showing that everything begins with His resurrection. (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

Q: What do the opened graves mean?

A: The opened graves symbolize God's covenant restoration of His people, just as Ezekiel 37 explains. God identified the opened graves as representing "the whole house of Israel," showing that the imagery points to Israel being brought out of covenant death and into new covenant life through Christ, not simply to individual bodily resurrection. Matthew intentionally uses this prophetic language to show that God's promised restoration had begun through the Messiah. (Ezekiel 37:11-14; Matthew 27:52-53; Ephesians 2:4-6)

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies. †

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Source Index

† Matthew 27:51-53, Ezekiel 37:11-14, Isaiah 26:19, John 5:24-25, Ephesians 2:4-6, Romans 6:3-5, Romans 11:15

† Josephus, The Wars of the Jews; Josephus, Antiquities of the

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