

Miracle at the Meadowlands

On November 19, 1978, the New York Giants hosted the Philadelphia Eagles in a football game that would become known as the Miracle at the Meadowlands. There was a lot on the line for the division rivals. The Eagles held 3rd place in the NFC East and the Giants were close behind in 4th place. If either team were to make the playoffs it would likely be the winner of this nationally televised game. For the Giants, especially, it was a must win. They had lost three games in a row and the Eagles had won their last two. The Giants were at home, where the majority of the 70,318 fans in attendance were rooting for both of those streaks to be broken.

The Giants dominated the first quarter with two touchdown passes while holding the Eagles scoreless. The Eagles continued to trail through the second quarter when they scored a touchdown but missed the extra point. Failing to score in the 3rd quarter, the Eagles began the 4th quarter trailing the Giants by a score of 17-6. The Eagles managed to add two field goals but still found themselves down 17-12 late in the fourth quarter. This is when the Giants fumbled the ball. The entire stadium felt the anxiety of a possible comeback by the visiting team, but only until the Giants intercepted a pass and crushed the Eagles hopes. The emotions flipped as the Giants regained possession of the ball, inside the 2-minute warning, with a 5-point lead. They didn't need to score. They didn't even need a first down. They only needed to run out the clock. The Eagles, having used all their timeouts, could do nothing to stop the clock. Relieved fans started heading for the exits.

With 31 seconds on the clock, the Giants set up for their last play. This is how it sounded from CBS commentator Don Criqui:

"It's Giants football now, third and two. We thank our producer Bob Rowe, our director Jim Silman, and our CBS crew, spotter and statistician John Mara and Tom McHugh here at Giants Stadium. As the clock winds out on the Philadelphia Eagles, a game they thought would project them into a possible wildcard position. It would bring them 7-5 had they won, but a late interception by the Giants will preserve a Giant victory, an upset win as the Giants lead 17-12. We're inside 30 seconds, the Eagles have no timeouts. [At this point, the snap and fumble take place.] Wait a minute... here's a free... I don't believe it! The Eagles pick it up and Herman Edwards runs it in for a touchdown! An incredible development!"

If the Giants would have simply fallen on the ball, the game would have been over and they would have won. Instead, the Giants attempted a handoff and the Eagles came with an 11 man rush. The handoff was fumbled. The loose ball was picked up by Herman Edwards of the Philadelphia Eagles. He ran 26 yards to score a touchdown. It gave the Eagles their first lead of the game and the victory.

Miracles still do happen, but the Miracle at the Meadowlands would not happen in the modern NFL. Immediately after the nationally televised final second fumble, teams avoided handoffs to run down the final seconds of a games. Instead, they would have the quarterback fall on the ball to run out the clock. This had been done sometimes before the Miracle at the Meadowlands but had been considered cowardly and even unsportsmanlike. This game highlighted why it was the better plan. By 1987 it had become such common practice that the league established the rule that the quarterback could simply take a knee and the play would be over. There are no longer any fumbled handoffs by the team with

the lead on the final possession. They simply take a knee, and the clock runs out. They call this “victory formation” (note that victory formation happens when we are on our knees).

The fans love to see a wild finish, a “Hail Mary” pass, a punt return in the final seconds, or an interception run in for a touchdown. And, so long as they win, coaches and players like those finishes too. But a team’s favorite play in all of football is to go into victory formation. At that point, there is nothing the other team can do to take the victory from them. They can’t stop the clock, and they can’t take the ball. They are left to helplessly watch the clock count down. When the QB takes a knee, he is literally untouchable. They can’t get to him in the time it takes for him to kneel. They could call a blitz but the most they would get is a penalty for unnecessary roughness. Here is the point, when a team goes into victory formation the victory is decided.

Here is a picture of a much later Giants team in victory formation.



And here is an artistic expression of heaven in victory formation.



Heaven took victory formation, not by taking a knee but by rolling the stone away. When the tomb was empty, the victory was decided. When the earth shook and a terrifyingly bright angel pushed away the stone and sat on it, and the guards trembled and the angel had to explain what was going on, and they could all see that there was no dead body in that tomb. That was victory formation. The devil could not stop the clock; he was out of timeouts. Jesus had won the kingdom, and there was no longer anything the devil could do to steal the victory.

Oh, that is good. But I didn't share that whole sports illustration just for that. You have got to catch this last parallel to the analogy. A team might take multiple kneel downs in victory formation. However, once the game clock has less time than the play clock, they don't need to take another knee. The game will be over before their play clock runs out. They all know how this works. So, after the final kneel in victory formation, the sidelines empty out onto the field. The game is not technically over. The clock continues to run as opposing coaches and players greet one another at midfield. The victory is decided, and the clock is still ticking.

When Jesus rose from the dead, victory was decided, but the clock is still ticking. Did you hear that? We have a confirmed winner, but the game isn't over just yet. Everyone who understands the game knows who the winner is. Jesus wins the kingdom, but we are not done with the enemy. He is defeated, but he is still around. When we suffer from the enemy's schemes it is not because our God has not won but because the clock is still ticking.

The devil is not a good sport like the losing coach who is respectable enough to shake hands with the coach that just beat him. Satan knows the victory is decided. He also knows the clock is still running. And, in his determination to distract from the decided victory of Jesus, he is throwing flags and challenging calls and denying facts and disputing the evidence and producing false news. He can do nothing to change the outcome of Jesus winning the kingdom but, so long as the clock ticks, he will deny defeat and delight at any success he finds in getting others to believe his denial.

The victory is decided, but the clock is still ticking.

This study of Matthew's account of the resurrection of Christ features these two points: 1. The victory is decided, 2. The clock is still ticking. We will explore these two realities through the two stories of the soldiers who guarded the tomb in Matthew 27:62-66 and Matthew 28:11-15.

The Victory is Decided (Matthew 27:62-66)

Jesus scored the winning point on the cross. He was faithful in his mission. The devil failed in his effort to drive Jesus to despair and to abandon the plan of redemption. He then turned his attention to the next point of attack. If Jesus stayed dead, there would be no savior to believe in. I don't understand what evidence the devil might have gathered that made him believe he could succeed in keeping Jesus dead. What I do understand is that the cross has no power without the resurrection. If Christ is not alive, then his death accomplished nothing. Paul affirms this.

1 Corinthians 15:14-19

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hopeⁱⁿ in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

So it makes sense that the devil would be doing all he could to keep Jesus dead. He didn't even want there to be a rumor that he was alive. It is the spirit of Satan at work in the plotting of the chief priests and pharisees to place guards at the tomb.

Matthew 27:62-66

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' ⁶⁴ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

They know that a risen Jesus would be worse for their cause than a Jesus who had never died.

"When Jesus was laid in the grave, Satan triumphed. He dared to hope that the Saviour would not take up His life again. He claimed the Lord's body, and set his guard about the tomb, seeking to hold Christ a prisoner. He was bitterly angry when his angels fled at the approach of the heavenly messenger. When he saw Christ come forth in triumph, he knew that his kingdom would have an end, and that he must finally die." Desire of Ages, p.782

For three days the armies of evil leveraged their full power to keep Jesus in that tomb. As in their plan to crucify Jesus, their attack backfired on them. In placing guards, they hired witnesses to the resurrection. It would not have been as amazing of a story if the angel came to the tomb and nobody was there to witness it. But there was an organized resistance, armed, trained, and stationed for the very purpose of keeping that rock from moving. If the angel contested with an untrained shepherd boy, that wouldn't have made the same impact as the angel dominating a guard of Roman soldiers. When that angel showed up there was not a contest. The only thing their efforts accomplished was providing witnesses to the resurrection and proof that the devil and man are no match for God.

"So weak men counseled and planned. Little did these murderers realize the uselessness of their efforts. But by their action God was glorified. The very efforts made to prevent Christ's resurrection are the most convincing arguments in its proof. The greater the number of soldiers placed around the tomb, the stronger would be the testimony that He had risen. Hundreds of years before the death of Christ, the Holy Spirit had declared through the psalmist, "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His anointed.... He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in

derision." Psalm 2:1-4. Roman guards and Roman arms were powerless to confine the Lord of life within the tomb. The hour of His release was near." Desire of Ages, p.778

The victory is decided; Jesus is alive. Praise God! Resurrection is the reality we live in. The guards failed in their assignment. Satan failed to keep Jesus in the grave. The victory is decided, but remember, the clock is still ticking.

The Clock is Still Ticking (Matthew 28:11-15)

Both God and Satan have a purpose and a plan for this time while the clock continues to tick.

Peter tells us, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 1:9)

John tells us, "Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Revelation 12:12)

The efforts that Satan once applied in an attempt at prevention he now applies in a campaign of damage control. As the clock continues to tick, he is no longer fighting to win but to lessen the weight of his defeat.

These plans are made clearer in the text of Matthew 28. In preparing this message it occurred to me for the first time that Matthew ends his gospel with two great commissions. One given by Jesus. The other is Satan's commission is spoken through the mouth of the chief priests and appears immediately before Jesus' Great Commission.

Let's read it in Matthew 28:11-15 and then consider how it parallels the commission we are familiar with.

Matthew 28:11-15

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers¹³ and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

	Devil's Commission (28:11-15)	Great Commission (28:17-20)
Motivation to perform	Bribe money	Authority of Jesus
Message	Lies that deny the resurrection	Truth that makes disciples of the living Christ
Audience	Spread among people	All nations
Comfort	Keep you out of trouble	Jesus is with us always

After the victory of the empty tomb, the battle between Christ and Satan centered on what to “tell people” about the risen Christ. Notice again, the devil’s strategy as it comes through the mouth of a chief priest, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’” His weapon of choice is words, words that give a false report of the news that Jesus is alive. He can’t change the true story, so he retells it with lies, denials and coverups. If he can control the media, he can deceive the masses.

It is no coincidence or thoughtless strategy for the devil to work through what is told. He is simply counterfeiting God’s strategy of giving his people the great commission to spread the good news. Notice the heavenly emphasis on **telling** in the verses that surround the false report of the guards. Twice in the resurrection account, the disciples are told to “go and tell” about it (28:7, 10). We are to celebrate that Jesus is alive, to tell of it, and to live like it is true.

God has a plan for how we should live while the clock runs out. The plan is to tell people that Jesus is alive. The devil has a plan too. His plan is to tell people that the disciples came and stole his body. He wants people to believe that it is all a myth made up by religious people and that you can’t trust the creditability of the gospel. While the clock ticks it has become a media war. There is the good news and there is the false news. The devil knows that it doesn’t matter how true it is if that truth is not believed. He can’t change the fact that Jesus is alive, but he can keep people from living with the benefits of a risen savior if he can control the narrative.

Let’s Review

We have seen two stages of the contest between Christ and Satan. In the **first** contest, Jesus said he would rise from the dead, and the devil attempted to keep him in the grave. Did Satan succeed? No. With the resurrection the victory is decided, but the clock is still ticking. In the **second** contest, Jesus tells his followers to spread the good news so that we can all live in a relationship with a living savior and Satan tells his followers to spread false news so that we won’t live in that reality. Is Satan succeeding? He stood no chance in the first contest but in this second contest there are some points of victory. When we live as though Jesus is not alive, Satan triumphs. When we live in the reality of our risen savior, Jesus feels the reward of his decided victory.

When Jesus rose from the tomb the victory was decided! When our lives tell that Jesus is alive the victory is celebrated. In these the devil suffers a double defeat.

The victory is decided, but the clock is still ticking. It matters what we tell of that victory while the time runs out. What is your life telling about the resurrection? What do you tell yourself? What do your actions speak to those around you? Do they glow with the victorious truth that Jesus is alive? Or do they testify that our professed hope is a fraud? That it does little to benefit our life? What report do you carry to other people? If they were to hear the gospel and the only evidence they had to assess if Jesus was alive was the way you lived your life, what would they conclude? Do they see in you joy that is not related to earthy circumstances? Do they see in you an attitude of victory no matter how hard the situation? Do they see hope, endurance, and courage, and wonder where it comes from?

Too often God would need to ask of us what the angel asked those who came to the tomb, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” (Luke 24:5). The angel then emphatically states, “he is not here!” How often have we failed to find Jesus because we looked for him among the dead, with no expectancy to find a living Christ?

When our lives tell that Jesus is alive the devil is defeated. This reality has impact on every aspect of life. For a small sample of how the resurrection impacts our life, consider again 1 Corinthians 15:14-19.

1 Corinthians 15:14-19

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Now convert each exclamation into the positive.

1. Since Christ has been raised, preaching is not in vain!
2. Since Christ has been raised, our faith is not in vain!
3. Since Christ has been raised, we are not misrepresenting God!
4. Since Christ has been raised, we are not stuck in our sins!
5. Since Christ has been raised, those who have fallen asleep in him have not perished!
6. Since Christ has been raised, we are not to be pitied for having hope!

A life that tells that Jesus is alive will be fortified with this hope in the hardest of situations. What are you going to tell yourself while the clock is still ticking?

When you feel you are not going to make it, what do you tell yourself?

Tell yourself, “I can do all things through the living Christ who gives me strength”.

When you feel you are all alone and that nobody cares what you are going through and nobody will be coming to help you through it, what do you tell yourself?

Tell yourself, “Jesus is with us always even to the end of the age.”

When you anticipate your own death with fear or lose a loved one to the grave, what do you tell yourself?

Tell yourself, “Jesus has conquered the grave. He is the one who was dead and is alive and lives forevermore and he holds the keys to death. He will come in the clouds of glory and when he gives the signal the graves will explode with life. Death still stings now, but in a moment, at the last trumpet, death will lose its sting!”

When the worries of tomorrow are too much for you to carry, what are you going to tell yourself?

Tell yourself, “Because he lives I can face tomorrow. Because he lives all fear is gone.”

When you have lost a sense of purpose and feel like your life doesn't matter anymore, what are you going to tell yourself? Tell yourself that “life is worth the living just because he lives”.

Oh, there are other messages you could tell yourself and others. But these messages are lies made up by Satan to distract from his defeat while the clock still ticks.

After the Miracle at the Meadowlands, the Eagles went on to make the playoffs. The Giants lost three of their four remaining games, ending the seasons 6-10, and missing the playoffs. Their offensive coordinator lost his job the next day and never returned to the sport. Not only was that play a turning point for the league, but it was also the defining point in the season for these two teams. Herman Edwards, who picked up the fumble, later told reporters, "One play gets you feeling like you have confidence. You're not worried about losing anymore; now you're thinking about how you can win."ⁱⁱ The resurrection is this **"one play"** for the believer. It is the **single event** we can look to that changes how we process all other events. Believers have momentum on their side. When we believe in the resurrection and begin to live like Jesus is alive, we approach life with a winner's mindset. We stop worrying about losing and start thinking about how we are victorious in Christ.

In his victory formation Jesus didn't take a knee. But the victory is so sure, that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ has won the kingdom!

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miracle_at_the_Meadowlands#cite_note-25th_anniversary-10

ⁱⁱ Barber, Phil (November 12, 2003). "Miracle of Meadowlands Turns 25". National Football League. Archived from the original on December 14, 2006. Retrieved May 21, 2007.