

Three Days and Three Nights

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The Day of Crucifixion

The gospel accounts all state that the day of Jesus' crucifixion was the preparation day, which was the day before the Sabbath...

- Matthew 27:62 “Now on the next day [after the crucifixion], which is the one after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate...”
- Mark 15:42-43 “And when evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea came. . . and asked for the body of Jesus.”
- Luke 23:54 “And it was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin...” (By Jewish time methods, the Sabbath actually began Friday at sunset and lasted until Saturday at sunset.)
- John 19:31 “The Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day [Passover]), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.”

Vine's New Testament Dictionary says that the word 'Sabbath' is from the Greek word *sabbaton*/4521, the root meaning “to cease, desist.” According to Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon, *sabbaton*/4521 means, “the seventh day of each week, which was a sacred festival on which the Israelites were required to abstain from all work.”

The word can also refer to “seven days, a week.” Several passages refer to the first day of the week (*mia*/3391 *sabbaton*/4521): Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 15:2. Luke 18:12 speaks of “twice in the week.” The common usage, however, is in regards to the seventh day of the week, generally corresponding to our Saturday. Therefore, the Biblical record suggests that Jesus was crucified and died on the sixth day of the week (Friday), the day before the Jewish Sabbath.

Christ to Rise on the Third Day

Jesus stated that He would suffer, die, and be raised on the third day...

- Matthew 16:21 “From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.”
- Matthew 17:23 “And they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.”
- Matthew 20:19 “And will deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up.”
- Mark 8:31 “And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”
- Mark 9:31 “For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, ‘The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later.’”
- Mark 10:34 “They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.”
- Luke 9:22 “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day.”
- Luke 18:33 “And after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again.”

It was also stated after the resurrection...

- Luke 24:6-7 “He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.”

- Luke 24:21 On the first day of the week, it was said to Jesus following His resurrection, “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened.”
- Luke 24:46 “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day,
- Acts 10:40 “God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible.”
- 1 Corinthians 15:4 “And that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

The Day of Resurrection

The gospel accounts all mention the discovery that Jesus was no longer in the tomb on the morning of the first day of the week...

- Matthew 28:1 “Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.”
- Mark 16:2 “Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen.”
- Luke 24:1 “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared.”
- John 20:1 “Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.”

Apparently Jesus had been raised from the dead earlier that Sunday morning. Mark 16:9 says concerning Jesus, “Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons.”

Historical writings of that time also show that Christians met regularly on Sunday, the first day of the week, because it had been the day upon which Jesus had risen...

- 74 AD “We keep the eighth day [Sunday] with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead” (Letter of Barnabas 15:6-8).
- 90 AD “Every Lord's day, hold your solemn assemblies, and rejoice: for he will be guilty of sin who fasts on the Lord's day, being the day of the resurrection” (Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Ante-Nicene Fathers 7:449).
- 90 AD “On the day of the resurrection of the Lord, that is, the Lord's day, assemble yourselves together, without fail, giving thanks to God, and praising Him for those mercies God has bestowed upon you through Christ, and has delivered you from ignorance, error, and bondage, that your sacrifice may be unspotted, and acceptable to God...” (Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Ante-Nicene Fathers 7:471).
- 107 AD “Be not deceived with strange doctrines, nor with old fables, which are unprofitable. For if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace... If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death (which some deny), through which mystery we received faith, and on account of which we suffer in order that we may be found disciples of Jesus Christ our only teacher, how shall we be able to live apart from him for whom even the prophets were looking as their teacher since they were his disciples in the spirit?... let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days of the week” (Ignatius, Epistle to the Magnesians, chp 9. Ante-Nicene Fathers 1:62-63).
- 130 AD “Moreover God says to the Jews, 'Your new moons and Sabbaths I cannot endure.' You see how he says, 'The present Sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but the Sabbath which I have made in which, when I have rested from all things, I will make the beginning of the eighth day which is the beginning of another world.' Wherefore we Christians keep the eighth day for joy, on which also Jesus arose from the dead and when he appeared ascended into heaven” (15:8f, The Epistle of Barnabas, 100 AD, Ante-Nicene Fathers 1:147).
- 150 AD “I [Christ] have come into being on the eighth day which is the day of the Lord” (Epistle of the Apostles 18:1).

- 150 AD “The command of circumcision, again, bidding [them] always circumcise the children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision, by which we are circumcised from deceit and iniquity through Him who rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath, [namely through] our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first day after the Sabbath, remaining the first of all the days, is called, however, the eighth, according to the number of all the days of the cycle, and [yet] remains the first” (Justin Martyr, Dialogue of Justin, 41).
- 150 AD “But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration” (Justin Martyr, The First Apology of Justin, 67).

“Three Days and Three Nights”

Matthew 12:40 “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

This singular verse has caused confusion among some Bible students. The sections and passages above seem clearly to indicate that Jesus was crucified on Friday, was in the grave Friday night, Saturday, and Saturday night, and part of early Sunday morning. However, this obviously does not add up to our modern concept of three days and three nights, that being in total 72 hours.

The key to understanding the supposed discrepancy is to understand the Jewish terminology regarding time. Notice that Jesus said that He would be “three days and three nights” in the grave “just as Jonah was three days and three nights” inside the great fish. In other words, when Jesus referred to the amount of time He would be in the grave,

He was using the same Jewish terminology that had been used to refer to the amount of time Jonah was in the great fish, terminology that would be most familiar to the Jewish audience.

So what would “three days and three nights” mean to a Jewish audience? Would it mean 72 hours as it might to a modern English-speaking audience? No, it would not. It would simply refer to a period of time involving at least a part of three separate days.

You see, the Jews had no word corresponding to our natural day of 24 hours. Rather, their custom was to use the terms “day” or “night and day” to refer to a complete natural day or any part of a day!

Around the end of the 1st century, rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said, “A day and night are an Onah [‘a portion of time’] and the portion of an Onah is as the whole of it” (*Jerusalem Talmud: Shabbath ix. 3*). In other words, he stated the Jewish terminology regarding time, that being that even a part of day, even “a portion of time,” is considered to be the same “as the whole of it.”

There are several examples in Scripture which demonstrate this interchangeability regarding expressions of time in Jewish terminology...

- Compare Genesis 42:17 with v18. V17 says that Joseph put his brothers in prison “for three days.” But v18 indicates they were released “on the third day.” Both “three days” and “on the third day” meant the same thing in Jewish terminology (this book being later written by Moses).
- Compare 1 Samuel 30:12 with v13. V12 says that the Egyptian had not eaten “for three days and three nights.” But, v13 speaks of the beginning of the same time period as “three days ago.” Both “three days and three nights” and “three days ago” meant the same thing in Jewish terminology.
- Compare 1 Kings 20:29a with 29b. V29a says the two armies camped for “seven days.” However, v29b says that the battle began “on the seventh day.” Both “seven days” and “on the seventh day” meant the same thing in Jewish terminology.
- Compare 2 Chronicles 10:5 with v12. In v5, King Rehoboam told Jeroboam and the people, “Return to me again in three days [KJV: “after three days”].” However, v12 states that they returned “on the third day” because “the king had directed, saying, ‘Return to me on the third day.’” Both “three days” and “on the third day” meant the same thing in Jewish terminology.

- Compare Esther 4:16 with 5:1. Esther told the people in 4:16, “Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.” After she had done the same, 5:1 says that she went before the king “on the third day.” Both “three days, night or day” and “on the third day” meant the same thing in Jewish terminology.
- Compare Luke 1:59 with Luke 2:21 in regards to the Jewish practice of circumcising males on the eighth day. Luke 1:59 speaks of John’s circumcision being “on the eighth day,” whereas Luke 2:21 speaks of Jesus’ circumcision being “when eight days were completed before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.” Both “on the eighth day” and “when eight days were completed” meant the same thing in Jewish terminology.
- Compare Matthew 27:63 with v64. According to v63, the chief priests and Pharisees recalled Jesus prediction, “After three days I am to rise again.” V64 says they therefore asked “for the grave to be made secure until the third day.” Notice that even the enemies of Jesus understood that “after three days” and “until the third day” meant the same thing in Jewish terminology.

Conclusion

As seen in the many verses cited above, Jesus spoke often about His coming death and resurrection. Sometimes He said He would be raised “after three days,” sometimes He said He would be raised “three days later,” and sometimes He said He would be raised “on the third day.” It is obvious that He was always referring to the same period of time.

In each of these instances, using various expressions as would be consistent with Jewish terminology, Jesus was simply referring to the time period of three consecutive days (Friday evening, all day Saturday, and the early part of Sunday) in which He would be in the grave.