

Three Days and Three Nights

Matthew 12:38-40 *Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. (39) But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: (40) For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

Jesus' statement in v40 that he would spend three days and three nights in the grave has puzzled people through the ages. If Jesus died on Friday afternoon and was buried just before sundown and then arose before dawn on Sunday, you have only 36 hours. Some try to explain this by pointing that partial days are counted as full days, but even then we have a part of Friday day, Friday evening, Saturday day, Saturday evening, and a part of Sunday day. That is only 3 days and 2 nights. The wording of Jesus in Matthew 12:40 doesn't allow for a shortage of nights.

So our question for today is how to account for those days. The Jews, as we do today, counted a partial day as a full day. If you were to say, "*I worked all day on that project, we won't conclude that you actually spent 24 hours even though you said, "all day."*" So we concede that a partial day can be called "a day."

Let's briefly recall the final week of Jesus. John 12:1 tells us that six days before Passover, he came to Bethany. **John 12:1** *Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead.* Translating this into modern terms is more difficult that it first appears because two systems are used in accounting for time. There was the Roman style and then there was the Jewish style. The Jewish calendar is tied to the moon and follows the lunar cycles. A Jewish year consists of 12 months, and because it is based on the circling of the moon, a Jewish year has 354 days with 29 or 30 days in each month. Compare this with the Roman calendar we use today that follows solar cycles of 365 days. The Roman style of counting a day is from midnight to midnight. The Jews counted a day from sundown to sundown; typically beginning at 6:00pm and ending at 6:00pm. From sundown to sunup was called night and from sunup to sundown was called day; so a night and day made a complete 24hour period. It appears that in John 12 Jesus was using the Jewish system.

If Passover was on the Sabbath day (sundown Friday to sundown Saturday), then six days before would place Jesus arrival on the prior first day of the week sometime between sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday. It appears he arrived Saturday evening because he had supper with Martha, Mary and Lazarus (John 12:2).

The next day (Sunday) was the triumphal entry (John 12:12). Mark 11:11-12 mentions that Jesus didn't stay long and returned to Bethany. The next day (Monday) was when the fig tree was cursed (Mark 11:13-14) and the temple was cleansed (Mark 11:15). The following day (Tuesday) the fig tree is withered (Mark 11:19-20) followed by Jesus doing a lot of teaching in Jerusalem and then with the disciples on the Mount of Olives.

Matthew 26:1-2 and Mark 14:1 mention that the next series of events occur two days before Passover. **Matthew 26:1-2** *And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these words, he said unto his disciples, (2) Ye know that after two days the passover cometh, and the Son of man is delivered up to be crucified.* On Thursday there was a meal with Simon the leper, Judas betrayed Jesus and the upper room was prepared. Friday the Passover meal was eaten and the events around Jesus death were done.

QUESTION: WHAT HAPPENED ON WEDNESDAY?

There is a gap on Wednesday where nothing is recorded. Perhaps Jesus rested and did nothing or perhaps we have the wrong conclusions about the days.

For the next few minutes let's consider the Passover. The Passover meal was eaten on the fourteenth day of the first month, just after sundown. ***Leviticus 23:5 In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the LORD'S passover.*** On this day Jesus and his disciples partook of the last supper and later in the evening they went to the Garden of Gethsemane. After a period of praying Jesus was arrested by a mob and hauled to Annas' home (John 18:12-13). Next, he was taken to Caiaphas, the High Priest (John 18:24). It was at Caiaphas' home that the incident of the roster crowing took place, so we know it was near dawn (John 18:25-27).

But John 19:14 gives us a very telling point as it introduces a new thought for consideration. We learn that the events up to that point were still the day of preparation. When Pilate brought Jesus out it was the sixth hour (noon) of the Preparation day. ***John 19:14 And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!***

Joseph asks for the body of Jesus on the Preparation Day. ***Mark 15:42-43 And when even was now come, because it was the Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, (43) there came Joseph of Arimathaea, ... and he boldly went in unto Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.***

Jesus was hastily prepared for burial and put into a tomb because time was running out. ***John 19:41-42 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new tomb wherein was never man yet laid. (42) There then because of the Jews' Preparation (for the tomb was nigh at hand) they laid Jesus.*** The rush was because at sundown it became the high Sabbath and no work could be done, including the burial of a loved one. In Luke 23:50-56 we have the account of Jesus' burial and it tells of Joseph begging for the body of Jesus after which they wrapped it in linen and then place the body in the tomb. Notice v54 ***And that day was the preparation, and the sabbath drew on.***

We learn that Jesus was buried on the Preparation Day and that the Sabbath drew near; the special Sabbath of the Passover; the fifteenth day of the month. Everyone rested on the Sabbath, whether it was the special Sabbath or the actual seventh day of the week Sabbath, or both. ***(56) And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment.***

When was the Passover? Most people assume the Passover that year fell on Saturday due to the use of the word Sabbath, not realizing that the Passover events were considered a special Sabbath. Which day of the week the Passover falls varies from year to year, just as the fourteenth day of the month does on our calendars today. The Jewish Passover was a seven day period and was referred to by had two names. It was called the Feast of the Passover or the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. Sometimes this week-long festival is simply called the "Passover." It was in the first month in the Jewish calendar which was called Nissan and occurred during the months of March thru April in the Roman calendar. The 14th day of Nissan was called the first day of the Passover and people still worked on this day. It marked the beginning of the week-long festival.

This day became a day of preparation. The Passover meal is eaten after 6:00pm on the 14th day of Nissan. The 15th day of Nissan was the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread and also was known as a high Sabbath. The high Sabbath was a holy day for the Jews and no work could be done on this day. All roads and bridges leading to Jerusalem had been cleaned the day before from garbage and the corpses of dead animals were removed. Furthermore, all graves had been whitewashed so that the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem would

not be defiled. This was the reason the Jewish leadership did not want to have anyone hanging on a cross on the high Sabbath.

But here is a point that you need to grasp. *John 19:31 The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.* Notice that John specifically mentions that it was still the Preparation Day and the following day was a Sabbath which he calls A HIGH DAY SABBATH – or what the Old Testament called a holy convocation. The NIV and a few others refer to this Sabbath as a “special Sabbath.”

Whichever day of the month it fell, the special occasion was treated as a special Sabbath day which was sometimes called a “holy convocation and sometimes called “high Sabbath.” On this day, the same rules for a Sabbath day applied. *Leviticus 23:6-7 And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread unto the LORD: seven days ye must eat unleavened bread. (7) In the first day ye shall have an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein.* A little later in Lev 23 we find (v24) that holy convocations are sometimes called Sabbaths. At the crucifixion, there was concern about having the deaths completed before sundown because of the “high day.”

Wikipedia says there were seven annual High Sabbath festivals and rest days. This is an extension of the term “*high day*” found in John 19:31. As already noted, these seven festivals do not necessarily occur Saturday but rather on a particular day of the month. Two of the “*special Sabbaths*” occur on the first and last day of the Feast of unleavened bread.

Placing the Passover on Saturday leaves you with the last week described in rich details, except that one day, Wednesday, is left out and we don’t have three nights in the grave. However, if we accept that the Passover fell on Thursday and the following Friday was the “High Sabbath”, then there is no gap in the records. Each day is accounted for with little happening on Friday or Saturday because both days were days of rest; one due to the High Sabbath and the other due to being the seventh day of the week.

(see the chart below) Using this reasoning, the meal with Simon and the betrayal of Judas would have occurred on Wednesday night. Wednesday day the disciples would have arranged for the upper room and prepared the Passover meal. The last supper would have been on Thursday evening followed by the crucifixion on Thursday day. Using the Jewish counting for days, this would put Jesus in the tomb Thursday afternoon before 6:00 pm (day 1). From 6:00 pm Thursday evening to 6:00 am Friday morning we have night 1. Then from 6:00 am Friday morning to 6:00 pm Friday evening we have day 2. 6:00 pm Friday evening to 6:00 am Saturday morning is night 2 and 6:00 am Saturday morning to 6:00 pm Saturday evening day 3. Finally from 6:00 pm Saturday evening to Sunday morning is night 3 during which Jesus arose before sunrise Sunday.

Jesus arose the first day before dawn. *Mark 16:1-2 And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. (2) And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.* Does the “*rising of the sun*” have a new meaning to you? This would be the beginning of Sunday “day.” *Luke 24:1-3 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came unto the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared. (2) And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. (3) And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus.* Prior to the dawning of Sunday morning, Jesus arose.

The point of the entire lesson is to help us understand a part of scripture that some go to in an attempt to discredit the Bible. But I think a careful study will reveal that there is no contradiction at all if you understand the word Sabbath on occasion means a time other than Saturday.

Jesus did all of this so that you and I might be saved. Have you obeyed the commands of Jesus?
 Invitation

