

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: Time Reckoning Methods Part 2

Of the problems that trouble the student of Scripture, one of the more puzzling is the discrepancies sometimes seen in the way time is reckoned in the Scriptures. Dates do not seem to add up, time intervals do not seem to fit, and confusion is the result. Does the Bible contradict Itself when it comes to time? How can we explain these seeming “contradictions in Scripture”?

In our last message, we examined the idea of inclusive and exclusive time reckoning, whereby one can either include parts of days as full days (inclusive reckoning), or one can exclude parts of days as not being days (exclusive reckoning). We also examined the reigns of kings, and saw that sometimes, from comparing the kings of Israel to the kings of Judah, that we can see that there were gaps between kings (caused, perhaps, by a disagreement over succession, or by a child being too young to take the throne when his father died). We also saw that there are overlaps sometimes, and suggested this was from co-regency, when a father would allow his son to take the throne and reign alongside him. In this issue, we will examine the topic of how long exactly Christ was in the grave. Did He rise from the dead on the third day, or was He in the tomb three days and three nights?

On the Third Day or Three Days and Three Nights?

How long exactly was the Lord Jesus to be dead and in the tomb? The Lord Himself says so most plainly in Matthew 12:40.

40. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The phrase “in the heart of” does not mean in the center, as we might tend to think of it in English. It means merely that he was under the surface of the ground. Thus, He seems to say that He will be buried, and then he will be a full three days and three nights under the ground before He rises from the dead. Nothing could seem clearer. And yet what, then, of His predictions that He would be raised from the dead “the third day”? Seven times He makes this same prediction, as we can see below.

Matthew 16:21. **From that time Jesus began to show to 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 the third day.**

Matthew 17:23. **“and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up.” And they were exceedingly sorrowful.**

Matthew 20:19. **“and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.”**

Mark 9:31. **For He taught His disciples and said to them, “The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.”**

Mark 10:34. **“and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.”**

Luke 9:22. **saying, “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 the third day.”**

Luke 18:33. **“They will scourge *Him* and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.”**

So seven times in Scripture the same prediction is made: that He would rise on the third day. Once His death had taken place, the fact that He was expected to rise on the third day seems to be confirmed in the words of the chief priests and Pharisees in Matthew 27:64.

64. Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him *away*, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.”

They want the tomb secured until the third day, seeming to believe that it would no longer be necessary after that, since His prediction would then have been proven to be untrue.

After He rose the fact that He did so on the third day is repeated yet again. First to repeat it are the angels who meet the women at the tomb, and who remind them of what the Lord had said to them before His death.

Luke 24:7. **saying, “The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.”**

Moreover, the two on the road to Emmaus who meet the Lord there indicate by their words that it was the third day since He died.

Luke 24:21. **But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened.**

Finally, the Lord confirms that He rose on the “third day” in Luke 24:46.

46. Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day,”

The evidence that He rose on the third day continues into the book of Acts, where Peter affirms it in the house of Cornelius.

Acts 10:40. **Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly,**

Finally, Paul affirms His resurrection on the third day in his great statement of his gospel in I Corinthians 15:4.

4. and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

So thirteen times we have confirmed for us the idea that Christ was expected to rise on the third day, and that He rose on the third day. Yet how then could He be in the heart of the earth, under the surface of the ground, three days and three nights? If He rose on the third day, would that not include only parts of three days and two nights at most?

Our principle of inclusive and exclusive reasoning does not seem to help us here. If “the third day” is exclusive, then we would expect “three days and three nights” to be inclusive. Yet He died just before sunset on Friday, so if we include that day, and then He rose before the sun rose on Sunday, so we include that night, we would still seem to only have two days and two nights in the heart of the earth in order to have Him rising on “the third day.” If “the third day” is exclusive, then we must not include the day He died, and therefore if He died on Friday afternoon, He could not have risen until Sunday night/Monday morning, and not a day earlier. Yet if “the third day” is inclusive of Friday, then there is no possible way of working Him out to have been “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

So what must be the cause of our discrepancy? When did Christ die, and when did He rise? Was it on the third day, or was it after three days and three nights in the tomb?

In order to try to work this out, let us consider the evidence of the Sabbath days, and the evidence of the women who went to the tomb. We find in Luke that the Lord died at some point just after three o'clock, which would be early in the fourth watch of the Hebrew day, which was divided into four, three hour watches. We can see this in Luke 23:44-46.

44. Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. 45. Then the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two. 46. And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, “Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit.’” Having said this, He breathed His last.

As these things took place, the women who followed Him from Galilee were watching, as we see from verse 49.

49. But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Joseph of Arimathea at this point came to Pilate asking for the body of Jesus, as we read in Luke 23:50-53.

50. Now behold, *there was* a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man. 51. He had not consented to their decision and deed. *He was* from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God. 52. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 53. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb *that was* hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before. 54. That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near.

According to Matthew 27:57, this took place “when evening had come.” The word evening seems to mean either again in the fourth watch (of the day, not of the night), or else in the time between 6:00 PM and when the sun actually sets (in the summer time). Since it was right around the equinox, we will assume that the former meaning applies here.

It seems that the Jews, according to John 19:31, had come to Pilate in the meanwhile and asked him that the legs of those on the cross be broken so that they would immediately die, since they did not want them to be “working” on the cross on the Sabbath day. Pilate had consented. However, the soldiers would not have had time to get there and break their legs by the time Joseph shows up before him, so he is astonished to learn that the Lord Jesus is already dead, as we see in Mark 15:44. However, he gives his permission, and Joseph returns to take down his body, then taking it to his own tomb hewn out of rock in a garden. The women were watching all this, according to Luke 23:55.

55. And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid.

At this time the Sabbath was almost upon them. They knew the location of the tomb, and in Luke 23:56, we read,

56. Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.

This point seems rather a difficult one. The women clearly watched the Lord's interment in the tomb, as Luke declares. This was all done hurriedly to complete it before the sun set and brought in the Sabbath day. Yet we also read that they "returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils," and this is said before the statement that "they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment." Assuming that some amount of work is involved in the word "prepared" (which I think is not at all a bad assumption,) this would seem to indicate that they did not do this on the Sabbath day. Yet by the time the Lord was laid in the tomb, surely the sun must have just about set. In order to do this yet that day, they would have had to dash madly home and throw together the spices and fragrant oils in a mad frenzy.

Even then, it seems unlikely that they could have accomplished it. Realize that these women are probably in the midst of suffering from shock and grief from seeing the death of their Lord. It seems most likely that they returned home slowly and wearily from the Lord's tomb. They probably did not get to where they were staying until after the sun had set. Moreover, these women were from Galilee, having followed the Lord from there. If they had any such spices and ointments (which some of them may have had), they were probably back at home. "Preparing" then probably involved buying the spices and ointments, something that they could not have done by the time they returned from the tomb. How, then, did they manage to prepare them, as the text suggests?

A solution presents itself, if we will look carefully at all the verses involved. The clue we need is in John 19:31, wherein the Jews asked Pilate to break the legs of those on the cross.

31. Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.

Notice that this verse states that "that Sabbath was a high day." What was this "high day" that the verse mentions? Was this not the normal, weekly Sabbath? If we would look carefully at the book of Leviticus, we would find that there were Sabbath days that were not the weekly Sabbath. These days were connected with the yearly feasts. The first ones we read of are connected to the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Leviticus 23:4. **"These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times. 5. On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the LORD's Passover. 6. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. 7. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it. 8. But you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD for seven days. The seventh day shall be a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it."**

So we read that the fifteenth and the twenty-first day of the first month were Sabbath days, no matter what day of the week they fell on, being the first and last day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. There was also a Sabbath day on the Feast of Trumpets, again according to Leviticus 23.

23. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 24. "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. 25. You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD.'"

Another Sabbath was associated with the Day of Atonement.

26. And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 27. “Also the tenth *day* of this seventh month *shall be* the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. 28. And you shall do no work on that same day, for it *is* the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God.

32. It *shall be* to you a sabbath of *solemn* rest, and you shall afflict your souls; on the ninth *day* of the month at evening, from evening to evening, you shall celebrate your sabbath.”

Finally, there were Sabbath days on the first and the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles, which were the fifteenth and the twenty-second day of the seventh month. This is according to Leviticus 23 again.

33. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 34. “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘The fifteenth day of this seventh month *shall be* the Feast of Tabernacles *for seven days* to the LORD. 35. On the first day *there shall be* a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it. 36. For seven days you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation, and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. It *is* a sacred assembly, *and you shall do no customary work on it.*

So there were six days in the Jewish calendar that were always Sabbath days, no matter which day of the week they fell on. Notice that the first of these is the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which is the day following the Passover. Now the Lord died on Passover Day, as He and His disciples celebrated Passover on the night He died (remember that their days started at sunset and went to sunset, so the Lord died on the same day He celebrated the Passover.) Luke 22:14-16 clearly reveals that it was the Passover He celebrated with His disciples that night.

14. When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. 15. Then He said to them, “With *fervent* desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16. for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”

Thus, what He ate with them was the Passover. And according to Leviticus 23:4-8, the day after the Passover was the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and one of the days that was a Sabbath every year, no matter which day of the week it fell on. This must then be John’s meaning when he says “that Sabbath was a high day.” He means that it was the yearly Sabbath on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and not the weekly Sabbath at all!

Now this being the case, the necessity for the Lord’s death to have occurred on Friday at all is gone. If the Sabbath day before which the Lord died was the yearly Sabbath of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which it must have been if the Lord and His disciples were eating the Passover the night before, then it could have been on any day of the week, depending on what day the fifteenth day of Nisan fell on that year. If this was the case, then the women could have rested that feast Sabbath, as the law made necessary, and then prepared spices and oils on the following day, as the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was not a Sabbath day. Then, the Sabbath they rested on could have been the weekly Sabbath. As soon as that Sabbath was over, they could have come to the tomb in the fourth watch of the night on the following Sunday, intending to anoint His body with the spices and fragrant oils they had prepared during the interval between the Feast Sabbath and the weekly Sabbath.

Now if all this is true, and I think there is good Biblical evidence for it being true, then on what day did the Lord actually die? I do not believe, as I said, that it could have been Friday, for that would have left the women no time to prepare the spices and fragrant oils before the Sabbath day, even if they had been inclined to rush home from the tomb and start madly preparing them, which seems highly unlikely. Yet then the Lord could not have died on Thursday then either, for if He had Friday would have been the Feast Sabbath and Saturday would have been the weekly Sabbath, and they still would have had no time to prepare the spices and oils. Therefore, the Lord must have died at the latest on Wednesday. That would have made Thursday the Feast Sabbath, Friday the day the

women prepared the spices and oils, and Saturday the weekly Sabbath. But if this was the case, how long was the Lord in the tomb? We assume He was buried just before sunset on Wednesday day, and He rose early in the fourth watch on Sunday morning. Therefore, He was in the tomb Wednesday night (by our reckoning, *Thursday night* by their reckoning, in which night comes before day), Thursday day, Thursday night, Friday day, Friday night, and Saturday day, and then rose during what we would call Sunday morning. So how long was this? Three days and three nights, according to exclusive reckoning. Exactly like the Lord said in Matthew 12:40!

Yet what, then, of His rising on the third day? This makes sense for dying on Friday and rising on Sunday (using inclusive reckoning,) but how does it fit with dying on Wednesday and rising on Sunday? Surely Sunday cannot be called the “third day” after Wednesday, can it? Well, perhaps it could, if we use exclusive reckoning for this as well. We use exclusive reckoning for our ages. Technically, your “sixteenth summer” (assuming you were not born in the summer) would be when you are fifteen, not when you are sixteen. (If you were born during the summer, your “sixteenth summer” would actually be when you are fourteen!) Yet might we not (inaccurately) call the summer when you are sixteen your “sixteenth summer,” even though that is not, in fact, true or accurate? So why not exclusively call Sunday the “third day” after Wednesday?

Yet I do not necessarily think that this is what is going on with this phrase “the third day.” It seems that the Jews at the time had an idea that death was not confirmed until two full days or forty-eight hours had elapsed since death. Perhaps this stemmed from the fact that some who had been wrongly diagnosed as “dead” later woke up unexpectedly, something that happens with some regularity even today, especially in third world countries. I can pretty much know that doing an Internet search will reveal such stories at any given time. At the time I write this, a drunk woke up in a morgue in Poland just last month, and another man woke up at his funeral in Zimbabwe seven months ago. Without commenting on the accuracy of these internet reports, I would point out that diagnosis of death is not an exact science. Therefore, it could be that they had experienced enough such disturbing cases that they were cautious about pronouncing death as final until after two days.

It could also be that there was superstition involved with this idea. It seems the Jews had an idea that the spirit remains hovering over the body after death, seeking entrance back into it, and only leaves forty-eight hours after death has occurred. This idea is without Biblical support, but it seems to have been an idea that many had. This gave them a convenient explanation for the resurrections performed by Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament. Since both these prophets performed their resurrections soon after death, they could say that they only healed the bodies of these dead individuals, and that then the spirit quite naturally came back into them. After forty-eight hours, they thought that only God could call the spirit back. This made the Lord’s raising of Lazarus four days after death a much more outstanding miracle next to those of Elijah and Elisha, and even compared to His Own raising of the widow’s son of Nain, which also took place soon after death.

So with this idea of death only being finalized after forty-eight hours, we can see that the phrase “the third day” would take on the character of meaning “after death is confirmed.” As such, the common use of the phrase in the case of the death of the Lord would be much more along the lines of saying that it took place after death was considered final and confirmed, and not so much about saying when exactly it did take place relative to His death.

This also helps to clarify the words of the two on the road to Emmaus to our Lord in Luke 24:21, “today is the **third day** since these things happened.” There is no way we can work out how late in the day on Sunday could be called the “third day” since “all these things,” meaning His trial and crucifixion, would have taken place on Friday. Of course, this does not work for Wednesday either (only for Thursday.) Yet if we take this as meaning that “by now His death is confirmed, since it is more than forty-eight hours after these things happened,” then this all makes sense.

In closing, I would point out that some have tried to insist that the phrase “three days and three nights” is inclusive, or that it was a Hebrew figure for any part of three days. Since even by

inclusive reckoning, Friday evening to Sunday morning (before daybreak) would be only parts of two days (a few minutes of Friday and all day Saturday) and two nights (all night Friday and about three quarters of the night on Saturday,) this does not seem to me to work for inclusive reckoning. As far as them using the phrase for any period of time that included parts of three days, while I cannot prove this is not so, I do not see any Biblical evidence for this. Evidence that a phrase like “three days” could be used inclusively does not seem to me to be at all relevant to the much more specific phrase “three days and three nights.” Even if that phrase did not mean 24 hour days (like I contend it does,) it could only have been used inclusively for Thursday evening to Sunday morning, not for Friday evening to Sunday morning. I see no way to reconcile the exact language of the Bible to the traditional idea of a Friday death/Sunday resurrection.

So I believe that an understanding of the phrase “three days and three nights” leads us to the conclusion that Christ must have been in the tomb three twenty-four hour days. The idiomatic phrase seems to be the phrase “the third day,” which meant to them “after death is complete” or “after death is confirmed,” going back to that idea that the spirit could return within 48 hours, but not after that time. I believe that a careful study of Scripture will lead us to the conclusion that Christ died on Wednesday, was in the tomb Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and rose early in the morning on Sunday. This was after death was confirmed complete (the third day,) and it was after He had spent three twenty-four hour days (three days and three nights) in the tomb. The Bible does not contradict itself here. The Lord’s burial lasted just as long as He said it would.

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