

# Three Days and Three Nights

Jesus' statement in Matthew 12:39-41 positively affirms that the Old Testament story of Jonah did actually take place as the Scriptures record it. But more than that, the event constituted a sign of Christ's own death, and burial, and resurrection. As a matter of fact, this was the only sign given to that generation (verse 39).

Today, there is a vocal minority of Christians who have made a tremendous issue out of the phrase "three days and three nights." They insist that Jesus used the expression because He was to be in the grave exactly seventy-two hours, not a second more or second less. This conviction has led them to conclude that Christ was crucified on Wednesday afternoon and was resurrected at the same hour late Sabbath afternoon. In this way they account for the full seventy-two hours which they believe Christ spent in the tomb.

On seventeen separate occasions, Jesus or His friends spoke of the timetable involving His death and resurrection.

- Ten times it was specified that the resurrection would take place on the "third day" (Mat.16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Mark 9:31; 10:34, Luke 9:22; 13:32; 18:33; 24:7,46).
- On five occasions they said, "in three days" (Matthew 26:61; 27:40, Mark 15:29, John 2:19-20).
- Twice they used the phrase, "after three days" (Matthew 27:63, Mark 8:31).
- And one time only Jesus spoke of His death as "three days and three nights" (Matthew 12:40).

Without question, all of these various expressions are used to describe the very same event. There seems to be no controversy regarding this point. "The third day," "in three days," "after three days," and "three days and three nights" are equivalent terms used in the scripture in reference to the resurrection of Jesus.

## Expressions Cannot Be Literal

Now we ask the question: Can all of these expressions be taken in a strictly literal sense and still harmonize with each other? Absolutely not! For example, "after three days" would certainly have to be interpreted as longer than seventy-two hours. "In three days" could mean anytime less than seventy-two hours, and "three days and three nights" could only mean exactly seventy-two hours to the second. And "the third day" presents even greater problems as we shall notice in a moment.

Does this sound terribly confusing? If so, it is only because **men have placed their own interpretation upon the meaning of God's Word. We must let the scripture explain itself**, and especially, we must **let Christ provide definitions** for the words which He spoke. It would be a mammoth mistake to seize upon any one of the expressions used and force its strict compliance with our interpretation without reference to the other sixteen texts on the subject.

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## Inclusive Reckoning

The only way we can harmonize all of these apparently contradictory statements of Jesus is to understand them in the light of inclusive reckoning of time. This was the method used throughout the scripture in computing time, and we must apply the same method now, unless we want mass confusion. The unreasonable insistence upon the use of twentieth century English idioms of speech to interpret first century Greek or Hebrew has led to some extreme views indeed. Jesus and His friends spoke and wrote in harmony with the common literacy usage of the day, and that usage recognized inclusive reckoning of time. In simple language, this means that any part of a day was counted as a whole day.

Before we turn to the scripture for confirmation of this principle, let us read the authoritative statement of the *Jewish Encyclopedia* on the matter.

"A short time in the morning of the seventh day is counted as the seventh day; circumcision takes place on the eighth day, even though, of the first day only a few minutes after the birth of the child, these being counted as one day." *Jewish Encyclopedia, Volume 4, page 475.*

How clearly this defines the Hebrew method of computing time. **Any small part of a day was reckoned as the entire twenty-four hour period.** It is the Hebrew form of speech and language. Scores of contradictions would appear in both Old and New Testament if this principle were ignored. **We must compare Scripture with Scripture** and use the idiom of the language in which the scripture was written. Inclusive reckoning was taken for granted by all writers of the Scripture.

## Examples from Scripture

Let us now notice a few examples of this usage in the scripture that will clarify the problem before us.

**Noah:** In Genesis 7:4, God said to Noah, "For **yet seven days**, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth." But in verse 10 we read, "And it came to pass **after seven days**, that the waters of the flood were upon the earth." The marginal reading expresses it as "**on** the seventh day." Pity the poor chronologer who tries to figure that one out! When did the flood come? **In** seven days? **On** the seventh day? Or **after** seven days? The answer is simple when inclusive reckoning is applied. The day on which God spoke to Noah counted as the first day, and the day on which it started raining was the seventh day. Even if God spoke just ten minutes before the end of that first day, it was still counted as one of the seven. And if it started raining at noon on the last day, it was also counted one of the seven.

**Circumcision:** The same principle is revealed in the circumcision of babies. Genesis 17:12 specifies "he that **is** eight days old." But Luke 1:59 reads "**on** the eighth day." Luke 2:21 uses still another expression: "When eight days were **accomplished**."

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**Joseph:** Further proof for inclusive reckoning is seen in Joseph's dealing with his brethren. Genesis 42:17-19 says "He put them all together into ward **three days**. And Joseph said unto them **the third day**, This do, and live; ... go ye. ..."

**Taxes:** Consider also the tax issue between King Rehoboam and the people. 2 Chronicles 10:5,12 says, "Come again unto me **after three days**. ... So ... all the people came to Rehoboam **on the third day**."

## Christ's definition of Time

Now we are ready to apply this clearly established rule to the time Jesus was in the tomb. At least a part of three days had to be included in the period He was actually dead. The most frequent expression Jesus used in describing the resurrection was the "third day." He defended His repetition of the term on the basis of the Scriptures. "And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus is behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead **the third day**" (Luke 24:46).

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus employed the same expression when they spoke of the terrible events surrounding the crucifixion. Unconscious of the fact that they were talking to Jesus, who had been resurrected earlier that same day, one of them said, "**To day is the third day** since these things were done" (Luke 24:21).

Clearly, those people understood how to count the days and to determine which was the third one. They knew because it was a common idiom of their language. But Jesus did not leave any question in the matter. It almost seems that He anticipated the perplexity of later Christians who might not know about inclusive reckoning. Therefore, He gave such a plain, conclusive explanation of how to locate the third day that no one would ever need to doubt again. "Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures **to day and to morrow, and the third day** I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk **to day, and to morrow, and the day following**" (Luke 13:32, 33).

How simple Jesus made it! Even a child can figure when the third day comes. The third day will always be the day after "to morrow" from any certain event. The first day is counted in its entirety (no matter when it begins during that day), the whole of the second day, and the third day in its entirety (no matter when it ends during that day).

Now we can understand the conversation Jesus had with the Jewish leaders and why they interpreted it as they did. He said, "Destroy this temple, and **in three days** I will raise it up" (John 2:19-21). Later, after the crucifixion, the chief priest said to Pilate, "Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, **After three days** I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure **until the third day**, lest his disciples come by night and steal him away" (Matthew 27:63, 64).

With Christ's definition of time before us, the picture snaps into clear focus. Speaking prophetically of His own death and resurrection, He said, "**To day** (crucifixion) and **to morrow** (in tomb), and **the third day** (resurrection) I shall be perfected" (Luke 13:32). There are all three days in their sequence. Even though He died in the late

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afternoon, the entire day would be counted as the first day. The second day would span the Sabbath when He slept in the tomb. Even though He was resurrected in the early hours on the third day, inclusive reckoning would make it one of the three days. Thus, Friday, Saturday and Sunday = Three Days!

## The Resurrection on Sunday

Now the time has come to pinpoint the actual days of the week when these events took place. Again, we are amazed at the perfect harmony of the Scriptures on the subject. There can be no question but that He arose on Sunday, the first day of the week. Mark emphatically states, "Now when Jesus was risen early the **first day of the week**, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene" (Mark 16:9). Sunday is the first day of the week, and that is when He was resurrected. Words could be no plainer. Even the original Greek construction of the text will allow no other meaning. He did not rise from the grave on Saturday, as some contend. Neither was He crucified on Wednesday. There is not a scintilla of scripture evidence that He died on the fourth day of the week.

According to the inspired record, Christ was put to death on the "preparation day," and the preparation day was not Wednesday. In all the pages of biblical history, the preparation day has been Friday. Please read Mark 15:42, 43, "And now when the even was come, because it was the **preparation**, that is, **the day before the sabbath**, Joseph of Arimathaea ... went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus."

The day following the crucifixion was not only the weekly seventh-day Sabbath, "**that sabbath day was an high day**" (John 19:31). This means that a yearly Sabbath in that particular year happened to fall on the weekly Sabbath. In this case it was the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Matthew 26:17, Mark 14:1), which was called the Passover (Luke 22:1). Luke clearly identified that preparation day as the one immediately preceding the weekly Sabbath (Luke 23:54 - 24:1).

Surely there can be no question as to the time elements involved. He died on the preparation day, or the day before the weekly Sabbath. The next day is designated as "**the sabbath day according to the commandment**" (Luke 23:56). Since the commandment says, "**The seventh day is the sabbath**" (Exodus 20:10), we know that this had to be the day we call Saturday.

Jesus was raised from the tomb anywhere between sunset on the Sabbath day (roughly 6PM Saturday) to sunrise the first day of the week (6AM Sunday), which encompassed the first 12 hour period of the third day.

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## Spices and Ointments

Furthermore, after describing the events of the preparation day in Luke 23:54-55, the next verse says:

Luke 23:56, "And they returned, and **prepared spices and ointments**; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment."

They prepared spices on the preparation day, then rested on the sabbath day. Now notice what the very next verse says:

Luke 24:1, "Now upon the **first day** of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, **bringing the spices which they had prepared**"

Please take note that after preparing the spices on the afternoon of the crucifixion (Friday), and resting over the Sabbath (Saturday), they came to the tomb with the spices on the first day of the week (Sunday) to do the work of anointing. This was their first opportunity after the Sabbath to carry out the preparations made on Friday afternoon. This is when they discovered that Christ was risen.

If the crucifixion took place on Wednesday, how can we explain why the women waited until Sunday to come to the sepulchre? Why didn't they come Thursday or Friday to anoint His body? Did they not understand that after four days His body would be decomposing and their work of love would be in vain? **The answers to these questions constitute the strongest case against a Wednesday crucifixion.**

In view of the amazing weight of biblical evidence to the contrary, how can some still cling to the Wednesday crucifixion idea? **The entire scheme is based upon the twisted interpretation of a single scripture text.** The "three days and three nights" phrase is forced into artificial conformity with current English forms of speech, instead of the common usage of the people living at that time.

## Matthew 28:1

Those who believe that Jesus died on Wednesday and rose on Saturday base much of their evidence on Matthew 28:1, "In the **end of the sabbath**, as it began to **dawn** toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre." Figuring that the first day of the week "dawns" at sundown Saturday night as the Sabbath ends, these people assume that the women discovered the empty tomb in the twilight moments of the Sabbath, just before sundown. They count backwards exactly seventy-two hours and arrive at Wednesday evening just before sundown for the crucifixion.

Is this a valid conclusion? Or is there evidence that the women could not have visited the empty tomb on Saturday evening? There is indeed positive biblical proof that

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they did not. We find that evidence in Mark's account of the visit to the sepulchre in Mark 16:1-3.

Mark 16:1-3, "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**. And very **early in the morning the first day of the week**, they came unto the sepulchre at the **rising of the sun**. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?"

There is no question about this being an early Sunday morning visit. It is at sunrise. The very same women are named as in Matthew's account. Can we correctly assume that these same women had been to the tomb the night before and found Jesus risen? Impossible. Why? Because of the question they asked as they approached the garden on Sunday morning, "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?" (Mark 16:3). If they had been there Saturday just before sundown and found the tomb empty, they would have known that the stone was already rolled away from the door. This is **absolute proof** that they had not been to an empty tomb the day before. It also proves that Matthew's "dawn" refers to the dawning represented by the sunrise and not sunset. There is no contradiction between the two accounts.

Now, some may ask "Why does Matthew 28:1 say the women came to the tomb at the **end of the sabbath**?" This is a legitimate question. Well, the answer is because the Greek word for "Sabbath" can also mean "week." This Greek word, *sabbaton* is word #4521, and means "the sabbath" as well as "a week." As a matter of fact, this same Greek word is translated as both "sabbath" and "week" in Matthew 28:1!

Matthew 28:1, "In the end of the **sabbath**, (Greek word #4521) as it began to dawn toward the first day of the **week**, (Greek word #4521) came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre."

In other words, the correct translation should be, "In the end of the **week**, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the **week**." This same Greek word that's translated as "Sabbath" is also translated as "week" in these passages; Mark 16:2,9; Luke 18:2; 24:1, John 20:1,19; Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2, so it is not hard to see that the correct translation in Matthew 28:1 is "week" and not "sabbath."

This makes sense because, as was shown above, these women could not possibly have gone to the tomb on both the Sabbath **and** Sunday, because they would have known that the stone was already rolled away from the door. Besides, if they did go to the tomb on the Sabbath, this would directly contradict this passage in scripture, which says the women **rested** on the Sabbath:

Luke 23:56, "And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and **rested the sabbath day** according to the commandment."

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## Seventy-Two Hours Not Biblical

Those who insist that Christ was in the grave a full seventy-two hours contend that the three days and three nights must be taken in the fullest literal sense. But such a contention is absolutely contrary to the testimony of the Scriptures. An example of the way the scripture uses the term is found in Esther 4:16. Do not overlook the fact that they were to fast "three days **and** three nights." Yet Esther 5:1 tells us, "it came to pass **on the third day**" that they ended their fast. Here is a perfect example of how three days and three nights terminate **on** the third day!

We have already learned how Jesus explained the third day. He said "to day, and to morrow, and the third day" (Luke 13:32). Please think for a moment! When Jesus walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on Sunday afternoon, after the resurrection, Cleopas said, "**To day is the third day** since these things were done" (Luke 24:21).

No one denies that this was on Sunday. But listen, if Jesus had been crucified on Wednesday afternoon, Cleopas would have had to say "To day is the **fifth day** since these things were done." Count it for yourself - Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and most of Sunday! Later the same day - the first day of the week - Jesus made this statement: "Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead **the third day**." Luke 24:46. Who was right? Jesus was right and Cleopas was right! But those who claim the Wednesday crucifixion are wrong. Christ died on Friday, the preparation for the Sabbath - that was the first day. He rested in the tomb on the Sabbath according to the commandment - that was the second day. He arose on the first day of the week which was Sunday - that was the third day! How simple!

The proponents of a Wednesday crucifixion use a devious argument to explain away the words of Cleopas on the road to Emmaus. They contend that he was not counting the three days from the time of Christ's death, but rather from the sealing of the tomb by the Roman authorities the day after he was crucified. For this theoretical conjecture there is not a fragment of evidence in the scripture. Cleopas did speak about the trial of Jesus and certain events leading up to His crucifixion. By taking a bit of exegetical license one could possibly reach back to those events from which to reckon the third day. But by no stretch of the imagination could any point beyond the death of Christ be used in computing the three days.

In every related text, the third day is counted from the time of His death on the cross.

Matthew said He would "be killed, and be raised again **the third day**" (Matthew 16:21). Mark wrote that He must "be killed, and **after three days** rise again" (Mark 8:31). Luke's account reports that He must "be slain, and be raised **the third day**" (Luke 9:22).

Repeatedly, the Scriptures emphasize the death of Jesus as the starting point of the three days. To begin counting a full day after the crucifixion is not only unbiblical but grossly imaginary. The sealing of the tomb is never once referred to in connection with the period of time He was dead.

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The expression "three days and three nights" does not indicate a precise computation of hours, minutes, seconds. We read that "forty days and forty nights" were spent by Christ in the wilderness of temptation. However, the writers of two of the gospels state it simply as a period of "forty days," showing that inspiration was not pinpointing the hours or minutes.

## The Four Days of Cornelius

Now let us consider a final clear-cut example of inclusive reckoning that should lay this point to rest with every open-minded reader. It is taken from the New Testament and reveals graphically how days were numbered in the days of Jesus. The following is an account of a 72 hour period, and it calls 72 exact hours "four days," not three days!

**Start at Ninth Hour:** In Acts 10:3, Cornelius "saw in a vision evidently about **the ninth hour** of the day an angel of God coming in to him." Follow the story carefully now. He was instructed in the vision to send men to Joppa and call for Peter. "And when the angel which spake unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and ... he sent them to Joppa" (verses 7-8).

**One Day:** "**On the morrow**, as they went on their journey, and drew night unto the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray" (verse 9). While praying he had a vision, and the men knocked at his door when his vision ended (verse 17). Please notice that this is one day after Cornelius received his angel visitor. Peter invited the men to come in and lodged them (verse 23).

**Two Days:** "... And **on the morrow** Peter went away with them, and certain brethren from Joppa accompanied him" (verse 23). Take note that this is now the second day since the men were dispatched by Cornelius.

**Three Days:** "And **the morrow after** they entered into Caesarea. And Cornelius waited for them" (verse 24). This is the third day since Cornelius had his angelic vision. But don't miss this point - a few minutes later, in talking to Peter, Cornelius said, "**Four days ago** I was fasting until this hour; and at **the ninth hour** I prayed in my house, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing" (verse 30).

**Three Days = Four days???** Now we get the picture in mind. It had been **exactly three days**, to the **very hour** (the ninth hour). Yet Cornelius said, "**Four days ago.**" How could he say it was four days when it was only three days? Because he used inclusive reckoning, which meant that parts of four days were involved.

For example, in Jewish time, the ninth hour is 3PM. Now, scripture does not say which day Cornelius saw his vision, but it does not matter. Let us hypothetically start on Wednesday. Cornelius saw his vision at 3PM Wednesday (Acts 10:3). Thursday, the men knocked on Peter's door (verse 17). Friday, Peter went with the men (verse 24). And Saturday at 3 PM, Cornelius said he received his vision "four days ago." Even though it was 72 hours ago (three days ago), Cornelius said it was **four** days ago. Count in for your self! Wednesday (1), Thursday (2), Friday (3) and Saturday (4)

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= Four Days! This is the scriptural way of keeping track of days, which goes contrary to the modern way of keeping track of time.

Now, If Jesus was put in the tomb on Wednesday, and resurrected on Saturday, scripture would have said it was four days. But it describes Jesus' resurrection as only three days. This is the way scripture describes the length of time Jesus was in the tomb. Even though it was only a part of those three days (part of the 6th day, the entire 7th day, part of the 1st day), it is counted as three full days! Friday (1), Sabbath (2), and Sunday (3) = Three Days!