
Christian Holidays: Three Days and Three Nights

by: Ronald L. Dart

Unless you recently arrived from another planet, you already know that most Christian people believe that Jesus was crucified on Good Friday and He was raised from the dead on Sunday morning, but if you have read the New Testament with any care at all, you probably have a lingering question about this, because Jesus said plainly that "He would be in the grave for three days and three nights."

Here's what He said, it is in Matthew 12 verse 39, "Jesus answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah, {40} For as Jonah 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.""

3 Days and 3 Nights

Now how do you get three days and three nights from late Friday afternoon to Sunday morning before daybreak? You have Friday night, that is one night. You have Saturday, that is one day. You have Saturday night, that's one night. You have one day and two nights. You have to reach for it to find even a part of three days, but three days and three nights?

Yes, I know, some people think it's a Greek idiom, but you don't have to be a scholar to check that out. If you know how to use a concordance, you can run down both the Greek and the Hebrew words as they are used in the Bible and check the usage that you find there.

Now when you toss in that expression 'and three nights,' after the end of three days, you add an emphasis to the expression that really requires that third night, or at least some part of that third night.

An Alternative

Now let me suggest an alternative for you to consider. Suppose that Jesus was not crucified on Friday. Suppose He was crucified on a Wednesday, that would mean that in the year Jesus was crucified the 14th day of the first month of the Jewish calendar would have been a Wednesday. In that case Jesus would've been buried late Wednesday afternoon. Now then you can count on

your fingers, Wednesday night, Thursday, Thursday night, Friday, Friday night, Saturday, and what do we have? There it is, three days and three nights.

So why does the whole Christian world think otherwise? This is a fascinating story, so buckle your seat belt and let's take a look at the story.

The Preparation Day

Late in the afternoon on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, He finally ended his suffering and died. Here's how it goes in Mark's account, Mark 15 verse 37, "Jesus cried with a loud voice and gave up his spirit. {38} And the veil of the temple was rent in two from the top to the bottom. {39} And when the centurion which stood opposite him, saw that He cried out and died. The centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God." {40} There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; {41} (Who also, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered unto him,) and many other women that came up with him to Jerusalem. {42} And now when the evening was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, {43} Joseph of Arimathea, an honorable counselor, who also waited for the kingdom of God, came and went in boldly to Pilate and craved the body of Jesus."

So, it was the preparation, the day before the Sabbath. Now everyone knows that the Sabbath is Saturday, so it had to be a Friday, the preparation day, right? Well, not necessarily.

Switching now to Luke the 23rd chapter verse 50, "Behold, there was a man named Joseph, a counselor. He was a good man and just. {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 begged for the body of Jesus, {53} He took it down. He wrapped it in linen, and he laid it in the sepulcher that was hewn in stone, where no one had ever been laid before. {54} And that day was the preparation and the Sabbath drew on."

It was firmly established that this preparation day was followed close on the heels by a Sabbath day, very little time involved in this process. Now backing up just slightly, here is what John's Gospel says about the death of Jesus.

That Sabbath Was A High Day

John 19 verse 28, "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled said, "I am thirsty". {29} Now there was a vessel full of vinegar, and they filled the sponge with vinegar, and they put it on hyssop and put it to his mouth, {30} When Jesus therefore had received it, He said, "It's finished." He bowed his head and gave up the spirit. {31} The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath day, for that Sabbath day was a high day, besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, that they might be taken away."

Now this is often overlooked. This was not just an ordinary weekly Sabbath. This Sabbath was a high day. What does that mean? What it means is that it is one of the festivals, one of the

annual Sabbaths. The Sabbath in question is a high day because it was the first day of unleavened bread, sometimes called the first day of the Passover season. The 15th day of the first month in the Jewish calendar was a Sabbath day, no matter what day of the week it fell on. Got it? It is sort of like Christmas, if it falls on Wednesday then Wednesday is a holiday, right?

Well in the Jewish calendar, if the first day of unleavened bread, the 15th, falls on a Thursday, that day is a high day. So, Jesus was crucified on the Passover which was a Wednesday that year. Thursday would have been a Sabbath, a high day. So, all of this conversation about getting Jesus buried before the Sabbath, all this conversation about a preparation day, has to do with the preparation for the high day, an annual Sabbath, not for the weekly Sabbath.

So, we have pretty well concluded then, nothing of what we've read so far, requires a Friday crucifixion, does it? It could just as easily have been a Wednesday, because Thursday was also a Sabbath.

Why Confusing in The New Testament?

Now why is this so confusing in the New Testament? Well none of the gospel writers anticipated our problem with this some 2000 years later. The people that they were writing to understood, all these things. They knew that when John spoke of the preparation for a Sabbath, that Sabbath was a high day, He wasn't talking about Friday. He was talking about the day before that high day regardless of what day of the week that it was on.

Let's Dig A Little Deeper

Now when we dig a little deeper in Mark's account, going back further to chapter 14 verse one, "After two days was the feast of Passover, and of unleavened bread, and the priests and the scribes sought how they might take him(Jesus) by craft, and put him to death, {2} But they said, "Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar of the people."

They wanted to get the death of Jesus out of the way before the 15th which was the high day. It would be a Sabbath, no matter if it was on a Thursday, which it might well have been that year.

Now we know it was very late in the day when they finally got Jesus buried. Continuing in John 19 verse 38, "And after that, we know that Joseph Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, came to Pilate and asked to take away the body of Jesus, {39} Then also came with him Nicodemus, who at the first came to Jesus by night and they brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a 100 pounds weight worth of them."

High Day Sabbath Drawing Near

John 19 verse 40, "Then they took the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. {41} Now in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein there was never yet a man laid. [42} And they laid Jesus there," Why? "Because of the Jews preparation day, for the sepulcher was near at hand."

Now why is that important? It's important that we realize that they are doing this immediately and closely because the Sabbath day was drawing near, and they had to get the work of burial out of the way before the sun went down and the Sabbath day began. It's important to realize that there's no slack in here, no time to waste, as Jesus is buried. There was no time to take Him any further.

So, our question is, was this late just before the sun went down on Friday evening? Or was it late just before the sun went down on Wednesday evening? The latter of which would give us our three days and three nights.

Two Overlooked Passages

Now let's look at two completely overlooked passages that will shed a lot of light on this question.

Now the custom of the time was that a body being prepared for burial was wrapped very carefully, mummy style, along with a number of burial spices. The problem in this case was, they had no time, because the Sabbath was drawing near, and so Nicodemus and Joseph did a hasty job of wrapping the body of Jesus with the spices and getting Him in the burial chamber and rolling the stone over the opening and they had to rush because the Sabbath was coming on. They did it close, instead of carrying Him far away, because they had no time.

In Luke 23 verse 55, it tells us, "The women who came with Jesus from Galilee followed them, and they saw the sepulcher. They saw how His body was laid."

So, they were right there through the burial process till the stone was rolled down over the opening of the sepulcher.

Verse 56, "And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments, and rested the Sabbath day according to the commandment." Which commandment? The Sabbath Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy (Exodus 20:8-12).

But if you're thinking about this, you should realize we have problem here. They were in a hurry to get Jesus in the tomb and to get the stone rolled over the tomb opening. How did these women have time to go somewhere, prepare spices and ointments before the Sabbath day?

Now there is another account of this and it's found in Mark 16 and verse one, and Mark just throws this out for us just in passing.

Mark says, "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, bought spices so that they might go anoint Jesus' body."

When the high day Sabbath (Thursday) was over, they bought spices and they prepared spices (on Friday) according to Luke and they rested the weekly Sabbath day (Saturday) according to the commandment.

Two Sabbaths That Week

Now when these two men, Luke and Mark, wrote all of this down more than 30 years had passed. Each of them told part of the story, but neither of them saw a reason to explain to us that there were two Sabbaths that week with a day in between Thursday and Saturday. Why? Well, because everybody else knew it. The people that they knew, all knew it. And so there was no reason to have a question on it.

So, the women came, saw how the body was laid, and after the annual Sabbath, they went out and bought spices, they prepared the spices and ointments, they then rested on the Sabbath day that followed, according to the commandment.

So, we have no problem at all in finding three days and three nights between Jesus' burial and resurrection. It works just fine, but in the process, we have raised another problem.

There Were No Witnesses Of Jesus' Resurrection

This would suggest that Jesus rose from the dead on Saturday evening instead of Sunday morning. How do we deal with that little anomaly? Now this may come as a surprise to you, but there is no passage in the Bible that tells us precisely when Jesus rose from the dead, and there's a simple reason for that, there were no witnesses to the actual event. There was nobody standing there watching the stone being rolled by an angel when the earthquake occurred (Matthew 28:2). There was nobody standing there and seeing Jesus walk out of the tomb. No one knew when it actually took place.

The first people who saw Jesus alive, saw Him on Sunday morning, but that doesn't mean that was the time of the resurrection.

But wait, I can hear someone asking what about Mark 16 and verse nine which says this, "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons."

Now that sure sounds like it doesn't it? That He was risen early the first day of the week, but remember this was written in Greek, not English. Now just put a comma, in the right place and everything becomes clear, "Now when Jesus was risen, (comma) early the first day of the week He appeared first to Mary Magdalene out of whom he had cast seven demons."

The first day of the week describes, not the moment of the resurrection, but the moment of the appearance to Mary. Remember, no one saw the resurrection. No one testifies as to the moment of the resurrection, because they couldn't testify to something they had not seen, so there is nothing in the gospel accounts to say that Jesus did not rise from the dead Saturday night rather than Sunday morning. There's nothing in the gospel accounts to say that the preparation day wasn't Wednesday and not Friday. Nothing at all.

Logically, three days and three nights from the burial of Jesus, would naturally take us to an evening. Wouldn't it? But there's something else that is highly suggestive.

The Wave Sheaf Offering

Remember, I have been telling you that the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread are all about Christ.

There was at this season, a little noticed ceremony in the Temple service that was also all about Christ, but you very rarely hear about it.

This was the season of the first ripe barley, but the Israelites were not allowed to eat any of that year's crop until a small portion of it had been offered by the priest. You don't come out to the table and start eating before everybody else, you wait. In this situation, He says, "I want you all to wait, not harvesting this crop until the very first sheaf of it has been presented to God as an offering of thanksgiving, for all that He has done." It is called the first fruits of the barley harvest. It's also called the 'wave sheaf' in the King James version.

The ceremony of the 'wave sheaf' is described in Leviticus 23 and begins in verse nine, "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, {10} Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, "When you have come into the land that I will give you, and you will reap the harvest thereof, you shall bring a sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest unto the priest, {11} and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD to be accepted for you, on the morrow after the Sabbath shall the priest wave it.""

That would be about where you and I would place Sunday morning, wouldn't it? Now this cannot be done on the Sabbath, because it was an act of work. They actually had to go out and cut the grain, prepare it and get it ready, so it was done when the Sabbath ended, and that's why it was on the morrow after the Sabbath.

The ceremony is also described in Alfred Edersheim's well-known book on 'The Rites and Services of the Temple in the time of Christ.' The ceremony had to take place right after the Sabbath, according to the law. It was an act of work to harvest the wave sheaf.

Edersheim tells us that "Just after sundown," this is at the end, by the way, of three days and three nights that had passed since Jesus was buried, "a noisy little procession of people made their way down from the Temple, carrying torches and passing around a little wine."

This was a festival, by the way, a harvest festival to boot and they were having a good time doing this. "They came to a field that had been selected ahead of time where there were several bundles of grain already tied together, but not yet cut from the ground."

Remember this is Saturday evening, after sunset, this is three days and three nights after Jesus Christ would have been buried, if he was buried on Wednesday evening.

"One of the sheaves was selected and a man stood over it holding a sickle over his head, and he shouts a series of questions out to the crowd gathered around him and they shout their answers back at him" and I imagine since there was a little wine being passed around, it was a pretty boisterous crowd.

"He shouted out, "Is this the field?" The crowd would shout back, "Yes!" "Is this the sheaf?" "Yes!" "Is the sun down?" "Yes!" "With this sickle?" "Yes!" "Shall I reap?" "Yes!" they all yelled, and with a stroke, he cut the sheaf from the ground."

And you know, that may have been the moment that Jesus who was also the first of the first fruits, opened His eyes in the tomb.

Through that night, the sheaf was prepared for offering, the grain was threshed from it and parched in the pan over fire. Early the next morning they took it in the Temple, an Omer, as it was called, a little pot of parched grain, and the priest actually waved it back and forth before God in the Temple. This sheaf was the very first of the first fruits from the fields around Jerusalem.

Jesus Is The First Of The First fruits

Now I want to bring you back to the New Testament to a very, very New Testament concept.

First Corinthians 15 is the great resurrection chapter of the Bible, where Paul talks about, not only the resurrection of Christ, but our own resurrection as well.

In verse 20 of first Corinthians 15, Paul says this, "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept."

Notice the idea of the harvest. It is a harvest of people who have died and, in a resurrection, and they are in their own order.

Paul says, {21} "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection from the dead, {22} For just like Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive, {23} But every man in his own order, Christ the firstfruits, afterward they that are Christ's at his coming,"

No grain could be harvested until the wave sheaf of the firstfruits was presented to God. Jesus Christ, according to the book of Revelation was the firstborn, first begotten from the dead (Revelation 1:5). He is the first of the firstfruits of God.

Don't Touch Me

Now there is a striking instance on the morning Jesus appeared to Mary, the first time after His resurrection.

John 20 verse 11, "Mary stood outside the sepulchre crying and as she wept, she stooped down and looked inside the tomb, {12} And she saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head,

and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. {13} And they said, "What are you crying for?" She said, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." {14} And when she had said that, she turned back and saw Jesus standing and didn't know that it was Jesus. {15} Jesus said, "Woman, what are you crying for? Who are you looking for?" She thought He was the gardener, and she said, "Sir. If you have taken him away from here, tell me where you laid him and I will take him away."

Mary thought that somebody had found Him in the sepulchre and said, "This man is not supposed to be here ," and had taken the body out of there.

Continuing in verse 16, "Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and looked at him and said, "Rabboni," which is to say, Master." Now listen carefully at this little exchange, {17} "Jesus said to her, "Don't touch me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father, but go to my brethren and say to them, "I ascend to my Father and to your Father, and to my God, and to your God."""

Now I think many people reading that think He's talking about His ascension that will take place some 40 days later. No, No!

Later that day, verse 19, Jesus would allow His disciples to touch Him, and there was no hurry at all. But in Mary's case, "Don't touch me, don't hold me back. I'm not ascended to my Father yet, but go tell them, "I ascend to my Father.""" The implication plainly is between the time Mary saw him and the time the disciples saw him, He had ascended to the Father and returned.

The parallel with the wave sheaf of the firstfruits is inescapable. Jesus was raised from the dead when the sheaf was cut, prepared during the night, whatever that might mean, and presented to the Father the next morning.

So, if Jesus was crucified on Wednesday, very late Wednesday afternoon, just before sunset, we have solved our three days and three nights problem, and not only that, we've also connected to some deliberate symbolism in the ceremonial law dealing with the cutting of the firstfruits from the ground and the presentation of the firstfruits to the Father on Sunday morning.

Do you see what I mean about the reason the early church was observing these holy days, because they saw Christ in all these holidays.

First Day Of The Week

Now there is another curious thing about this incident. It took place on what you find in your Bible called the 'first day of the week', right? Well, yes, but there's more to it than that. Remember that these people were Jews and nowhere in the Bible, do they refer to Sunday as the first day of the week. You may not have realized this but if you study your Bible for a while, it will come to you too. To a Jew, Sunday would be called the day after the Sabbath, if I were going to say to you on Wednesday, "I'll meet you on Sunday morning," if I were saying it to you as a Jew, I would say, "I will meet you the day after the Sabbath," or "on the morrow after the Sabbath."

Matthew 28 verse one, I am reading from the New American Standard Bible, "Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the grave."

The normal way a Jew would've said this would be, "Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave."

So, there must be some special significance to this, "the first day of the week" business. What is it? Literally, there is no word for "week" in this passage. Literally the passage says, "On the first of the sabbaths," and it is plural not singular. Now you would have, if you are a Jew at that time, and oftentimes refer to seven weeks, you would say "I will see you seven sabbaths from today" because that is the way they would normally have talked about these things.

So, when it says, "After the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first of the weeks (Sabbaths (plural)), Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave."

Now where do we have a series of sabbaths described in the Bible? Well it happens to be in Leviticus 23 where we were before, where it was talking about, this grain that was going to be harvested and how you weren't allowed to eat any of it, until a certain day.

In Leviticus 23 and verse 14, "You shall not eat bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that you have brought an offering to your God: it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. {15} And you shall count to you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: {16} Even to the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall you number fifty days; and you shall offer a new grain offering unto the LORD."

This fiftieth day, Christians know this as Pentecost, for indeed the word Pentecost means 50th.

So, the day of the wave sheaf or firstfruits offering was day one of the seven weeks (or Sabbaths) of harvest leading up to Pentecost, also known as the 'feast of weeks' because it comes at the end of seven weeks.

So, when we find this expression in the New Testament, Matthew 28 verse one, "Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the sabbaths, Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary came to look at the grave," it is a reference to the 'first day of the seven weeks' leading up to Pentecost. It is not talking so much about a day of the week, but a singular day of the year.

Now most people when they read this passage, look to this as the origins of the observance of Sunday by Christian people, it is the day of the resurrection, and they met together on the first day of the week, and on the first day of the week they broke bread, and so forth.

The problem is, this expression doesn't really mean just Sunday, it means a particular day of the year, the day the firstfruits were offered to God.

How come Christians observe Easter, instead of the day of firstfruits with all that that implies? Well the answer to that is long and involved and it will have to wait till the next program.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. What explanations have you heard to explain the discrepancy between 3 days and 3 nights and Good Friday to Easter Sunday?
2. Have you ever noticed the mention that the particular Sabbath coming right after Jesus' crucifixion was a 'high day' Sabbath?
3. Could the lack of understanding God's high days be the reason that majority of Christians do not understand the different types of Sabbaths?
4. Does it matter to you which days you chose to honor and remember the crucifixion of Jesus?
5. It is important to you for there to be a literal 3 days and 3 nights between the crucifixion and the resurrection?
6. Have you ever noticed that there are no passages in the Bible that let us know exactly when Jesus was resurrected?
7. When exactly did the 'first day of the week' begin back in the Biblical times in regards to our time? (Hint sundown to sundown was their days, not midnight to midnight)
8. Have you ever studied the Wave Sheaf Offering?
9. What are your thoughts in regards to possibility that just when they cut the sheaf, Jesus may have opened His eyes, since He is the first fruit?
10. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's point that in the passage that says the "first day of the week", there is no word for 'week', the word actually is 'sabbaths'?