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# Three Days and Three Nights

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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I love a good mystery. Puzzle solving is a favorite pastime of mine. So perhaps I can be forgiven for saying in a recent radio program that God also loves a mystery.

Sometimes of course, God speaks plainly, and the Ten Commandments are plain enough, but at other times the truth is far subtler. I might offer reasons for God's subtlety and they are there, but I hardly need to prove that. Anyone who pays attention to God's actions in the world will be well aware that God prefers to be subtle, even when you're confident that when something has happened has been His intervention.

## **Bible a Collection of Witnesses**

The Bible is more than mere subtlety. It is a collection of the testimony of witnesses, and while I certainly believe in the inspiration of the Bible, I also believe that God doesn't engage in witness tampering. The Holy Spirit sees to it that the witnesses are in court and that they tell the truth. After that, we the jury have to evaluate their testimony and try to figure out the larger picture.

Now if you have ever watched a bunch of Perry Mason mysteries, or this type of courtroom dramas, you can often find your way to the truth of what happened. We know this even though no individual witness knows the whole story. You get a little bit from this fellow, you get a little bit from that fellow and you get something from a third lady and between those three things, the picture comes together.

Well something like that exists in the Bible. There is enough corroboration of the gospel accounts to support the key elements of their stories. They all saw the resurrected Christ, for example, and they are all unified. Now there may be little details, but those aren't important. The differences that you find in the accounts show us that the witnesses were not in collusion, in other words, this is important to establish the fact that there were four witnesses, not four witnesses telling one witness' story, if you follow me. There are some first-class mysteries in the New Testament and many of them have kept scholars scratching their heads for years and provided material for countless doctoral dissertations.

## **Consider a Case in Point**

Consider a case in point, the mystery of how you get three days and three nights between Friday night to Sunday morning? You know, Friday night, that's one night. Saturday that's a day.

Saturday night is one night, and you have two nights and one day. Now you probably know what I'm driving at, even if you're not a Christian, you have heard all this, because of the holidays we have.

Christian tradition has Jesus crucified on Good Friday and raised from the dead on Sunday morning having been buried just at the end of Good Friday and nearly everyone knows that Jesus said: "Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so Jesus would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). There are marvelously creative theories to account for all this. Some just prefer to declare "Well, it's just a Greek idiom and is fulfilled in a part of three separate days."

Now, I've dug out all the relevant texts and I can't make that work. It might work on a stretch if Jesus merely said, "three days", but He didn't. He used an emphatic "three days and three nights." The thing is, there is some non-grammatical evidence that needs to be considered that usually has not been. Now you can talk about Greek idioms all you want, but let's put the language on the shelf, and let's come back to the real world.

### **Clarification**

Let me start with a point of clarification. Everyone knows that the day following Jesus' crucifixion was a Sabbath day, right? What everyone doesn't seem to know is that the Jewish Holy Days, the Jewish holidays, all except one, were Sabbath days. Note, I didn't say they fell on the Saturday Sabbath, I said, they are Sabbath days. And that is so even if the calendar date for one of them falls on a Thursday. In that case, Thursday is a Sabbath, and the day before it is a preparation day.

### **A Theory for Your Consideration**

Now let me advance a theory for your consideration. Suppose that Jesus was not crucified on a Friday, but on Wednesday. He was then put in the tomb in haste, just as the sun was going down. Jewish days begin at sunset.

Now let's count out three days and three nights. You've got Wednesday night, Thursday, Thursday night, Friday, Friday night, Saturday, and there we are, three days and three nights. It works, but is that what happened?

### **Testimony of Joseph of Arimathea**

Let me put some witnesses on the stand and let's consider their testimony and see what one of them might know that the other did not. "Behold there was a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Jewish Council, a good man, a righteous man, who had not consented to their plan and to their action. He was a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, waiting for the kingdom of God. Now, this man went to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. He took it down off the cross, wrapped in a linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock where no one had ever laid. It was a preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin." You will find that in Luke 23:50-54.

Now there wasn't much of the day left when Jesus was laid in the tomb and the stone rolled across the entrance. We have firmly established that the day following the crucifixion was a Sabbath day, but which kind of a Sabbath day was it? Was it the weekly Sabbath or was it one of the annual Sabbath days that fell on a calendar date? A holiday.

### **Testimony of John**

Let's back up just a little bit in time to consider the testimony of John. Let's call John to the stand. Here's what he had to say in John 19:28 "After this, knowing that all things had already been accomplished in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled. Jesus said, "I'm thirsty," He is still on the cross. {29} "A jar full of sour wine was sitting there and they put a sponge full of it on a branch and brought it up to his mouth. {30} When He had received the sour wine, He said "It's finished." He bowed his head and gave up the spirit. {31} The Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so the bodies would not remain on the cross for the Sabbath, for that Sabbath was a high day, asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and they might be taken away." So the Sabbath on the next day was a "high day", it was the first day of the feast the Passover, and it need not have been on a Saturday. It could have been on Thursday, it could've been on a Tuesday, it moved through the week from year to year.

Now here is our problem, how can we tell whether it was a weekly Sabbath or an annual Sabbath?

Continuing in John's account in verse 38 "After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus." This is another interesting point. "But a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate for the body of Jesus, so he took away His body."

### **Witness of Nicodemus**

Nicodemus, another familiar name from the New Testament also came with Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:39). He had come to Jesus some time ago at night. "They brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes about 100 pounds worth. {40} They took the body of Jesus bound it with strips of linen with the spices as is the burial custom of the Jews. {41} Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden and right there next to it, in the garden, there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid, in fact it had belonged to Joseph of Armathea. {42} Therefore on account of the Jewish day of preparation and because the tomb was close, they laid Jesus there."

The clear implication is that if they had had more time before Sunset, they might well have taken Jesus to another location, but they felt it was important to get Jesus in the ground quickly, that is in complete accord with Jewish burial customs. They don't like to delay burial at all. Preferably a person should be put in the grave the same day he dies. What was important about this, is that the burial had to be done hastily, in order to be complete before the sun went down beginning the Sabbath. There is no day left of the preparation day to count.

### **Witness of Luke**

Now Luke from a slightly different perspective notes in Luke 23:55 "The women also that came with Him from Galilee followed afterward and beheld the sepulcher and how His body was laid {56} and they returned and prepared spices and ointments and rested the Sabbath day according to the commandment."

Did you catch that problem? They had to rush to get this body buried. They buried Him right next to the place of the crucifixion because they had no time to go anywhere else. How could these women have watched the burial and the completion of the burial and have time to go home and prepare spices before the Sabbath day came? There isn't any way! If you think that's difficult, I'll call in another witness who saw something else that happened.

Here's the picture. They had to bury Jesus almost in the same place, just in a little garden close to the place where He was crucified. Why? Well, because they had no time to carry the body to another place. They had to get the body in the ground before the Sabbath day began, but we are told these women stood there, watched how the body was laid, watched this all take place, then they returned and prepared spices and ointments and then rested the Sabbath day, according to the great Commandment. Now that doesn't look like it would work, but it becomes a little clearer. Now you have to wait for this, because Mark's testimony is a little different.

### **Testimony of Mark**

Mark 16:1 is not a major point, it's almost a throwaway line, he says "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices so they might go and anoint Jesus' body." Oops, they didn't buy their spices till after the Sabbath, but we've just been told that they had prepared the spices before the Sabbath. What happened? How can we understand this? Here's what took place. They bought their spices when the Sabbath was over, prepared their ointments and spices and then rested on the weekly Sabbath day. It's really easy to miss, since the details of the sequence of events are spread over four gospels.

The women saw Jesus buried in the last minutes before sundown beginning the Sabbath. Then when the Sabbath was over, they bought spices, prepared them and rested the second Sabbath day according to the (Fourth) Commandment. This second Sabbath day was indeed Saturday. But when I said this second Sabbath, I drew an inference from the facts and the testimony before us. The inference is that there were two Sabbaths that week with a day in between.

So, my theory of a Wednesday crucifixion is not entirely out of court.

### **Why Three Days and Three Nights?**

There's another important question here that bears on this. Why three days and three nights anyhow? What is the big deal about that?

Jesus is dead, they buried him, they put Him in the tomb, they rolled the stone across it, and when they turn around there stands Jesus saying, "Ah ha, fooled you didn't I?" In other words, why not an hour in the tomb? Why not over night? Why three days and three nights?

It turns out that there really is a reason for that. We can start by looking at another distinct example of a resurrection in the New Testament. There was a family in Bethany that was very special to Jesus. He loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha and no doubt he had spent a lot of time with them. So, when they sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick and dying, they plainly expected him to come to them right away and heal him. But when the word came to Jesus, he delayed for two more days, which is really kind of odd considering the closeness of that family. He told his disciples "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified." You can find this story in the 11th chapter of John's Gospel. Now after delaying these extra days, waiting deliberately for Lazarus to die, Jesus said to His disciples "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I go that I may awaken him out of sleep" (John 11:11). The disciples didn't catch the drift at first, so Jesus spoke more plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I'm glad for your sakes that I was not there to the intent that you may believe. Nevertheless, let's go to him (verse 14-15)."

Now this is really an important section here. Jesus tells His disciples "I waited until he was dead, because it was important that you understand, and believe what's going on here." Now, it's clear enough that Jesus intended to raise Lazarus from the dead right from the beginning, but this was terribly hard on Mary and Martha.

Verse 20 "When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she left the house to meet Him, but Mary stayed behind." {21} Martha said to Jesus "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. {22} But I know, that even now, whatever You will ask of God, God would give it to You." The pain of this moment is palpable, and that last phrase of Martha's seems to imply that she thought Jesus might indeed raise Lazarus from the dead and Jesus replied. {23} "Your brother will rise again." This is the answer that we hear at funeral after funeral of people that we love, "Your loved one will rise again, and you will be reunited in the day of the resurrection."

Verse 27 "I know" said Martha "that he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day", and apparently, she's implying that's not what she was asking for here. Jesus answered this plaintive's cry which is the hope that all of us carry.

Jesus said in verse 25 "I am the resurrection, and the life. he that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. {26} And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" Martha did believe, and she returned to the house and quietly told Mary that Jesus had come at last.

Verse 32, "Mary got up quickly and went to Jesus and when she found Him, she fell at His feet and said "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." That had to hurt, even though Jesus knew what He was going to do. Knowing what Mary and Martha had to suffer, this passage in John 11:33 tells us that "He groaned in the spirit and was troubled." Here was Mary crying like her heart would break and there was a collection of mourners who had followed her to the house and in verse 34 Jesus said, "Where have you laid him?" Lord come and see, they said."

Verse 35 "Jesus wept." This shortest verse in the Bible speaks volumes about Jesus' humanity, even though He knew He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, He hurt inside for the pain

that others were feeling. There is something inside all of us that no matter how well prepared we think we are for the death of a loved one, weeping follows in the face of death.

Verse 38 "Still groaning Jesus approached the cave where they had placed Lazarus, there was a stone across the entrance and He said {39} "Take the stone away." Martha protested "But Lord by this time there is a bad odor. He's been there for four days." This begins to answer the question of Jesus' delay. It had to be established that Lazarus was truly dead before Jesus raised him, otherwise somebody would have said." Well he wasn't really dead, he was just in a coma and he recovered. No, he was dead to the point that his body would have begun to decay.

Verse 43 Jesus called out "Lazarus come forth" {44} and the man who had been dead staggered out of the tomb still wrapped in his shroud." We tend to forget in this day and age when we can be more certain through science when a person is dead, but even now we're not totally sure. In ages gone by they didn't even have that.

Some held to a belief that the soul stayed with the body for three days after death. Here's what one Jewish source says. It is the Tractate Synahault which means mourning. It says, "One may go out to the cemetery for three days to inspect the dead for a sign of life without fear that this smacks of heathen practice for it happened that a man was inspected after three days and he went on to live 25 years. Still another one went on to have five children and died later." Now when you look at this you would say "Now wait a minute!" What it is saying is that, there could be the possibility that, someone could appear to be dead but aren't!

And so, it was that they waited, and did not finalize the person's death for three days.

Other Jewish sources believe that they should only use wood coffins and they do not embalm the dead. The reason offered is that as the body decays the soul ascends to heaven, and I presume that's one of the reasons the Jews do not approve of cremation either. The decay was assumed to begin after three days.

So, if Jesus had been buried at sunset on Friday, and rose while it was still dark Sunday morning, He would've been in the tomb less than 36 hours. The Jews could have argued that he had not been dead, that this was no miracle, He had merely lapsed into a coma and then recovered.

Three days and three nights really is important. It is important to establish real death. Thirty-six hours doesn't do it, but I realize in saying all this, I have raised still another problem.

### **Jesus was Resurrected Saturday Night**

Now here is the next problem. If my theory is correct that Jesus was buried at sunset Wednesday and if He was in the tomb for three days and three nights then Jesus rose from the dead, not on Sunday morning, but Saturday about sunset. The problem is with something that Mark said. It is in Mark 16:9 where it says, "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene of whom he had cast seven out demons."

It sounds like He rose early the first day of the week.

The question is whether the phrase "Early the first day of the week" refers to the time of the resurrection or the time of his appearance. Now the Greek does not have any punctuation, but if you move the comma, this is what you get. "Now when Jesus was risen, (comma) early the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene out of whom He cast out seven demons." Now there's another important fragment of testimony here. He appeared first to Mary Magdalene.

What this tells us is that no one witnessed the time of His resurrection. Only the time of Jesus' first appearance. So, my theory of the case seems to hold together through this small difficulty, and the Friday to Sunday period seems unlikely from the evidence.

Now there is a question that someone's going to come up with: what was Jesus doing all night Saturday night? Well there is no witness in the Bible to answer that question.

### **The Wave Sheaf Ceremony**

There was at this season a little noticed ceremony in the Temple service, that was also about Christ. This was the season of the first ripe barley, but the people were not allowed to eat any of that year's crop until a small portion of it had been offered to God by the priests. It is called the Wave Sheaf Offering in the King James version and the ceremony is described in Leviticus 23. This could not be done on the Sabbath because it was an act of work. They had to harvest the grain. They had to prepare it and they did it during the night. This work was done when the weekly Sabbath ended. It is described in Alfred Edersheim's well-known book "The Temple, Its Ministry and Services" on page 204-205. The ceremony took place right after the Sabbath day, according to the law.

It was an act of work to harvest the wave sheaf. So just after sunset, a little group of people wound their way down to a field that had been prepared ahead of time. The crowd found one of the sheaves that was there. Three men, each with a sickle in their hands, shouted a series of questions to the crowd gathered around them. Now I remind you that this is just after sunset. They shouted their answers, in the affirmative, back at them. They said, "Has the sun gone down?" and the crowd answered "Yes." "With this sickle?" "Yes." "Into this basket?" "Yes." "Shall I reap?" "Yes." And with a stroke they cut the sheaf of the firstfruits from the ground and that may have been the moment when Jesus, who is also called the firstfruits (1 Corinthians 15:23) in the Bible opened His eyes in the tomb.

Through that night the sheaf was prepared for an offering. The grain was threshed from it, parched in a pan over fire and early the next morning it was presented to God in the Temple. This sheaf is the very first of the firstfruits from the fields around Jerusalem. This seems to be the imagery that Paul is driving at in the beautiful resurrection chapter of First Corinthians 15.

Let's begin in verse 20 where Paul says "Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept {21} For since by man came death by man came also the resurrection of the dead {22} As in Adam all die. Even so in Christ shall all be made alive. {23} Every man in his own order, Christ, the firstfruits, afterward they that are Christ's at his coming."

Paul understood all this, and it is a clear allusion to the harvest, of that first fruit of the barley from the ground, as a symbol of Jesus, being the first of many that would be resurrected ultimately to stand before God. For some reason this image of the harvest is repeated again and again in Jesus' ministry to try to impress upon people's minds that what He was doing is harvesting people from this life for God's kingdom.

When Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, the first time after His resurrection, she grabbed Him by the feet and He said "Don't touch me. I have not yet ascended to my Father. Go tell my brethren saying I ascend to my Father and your Father to my God and to your God" (John 20:17).

Later that same day Jesus would allow His disciples to touch and hold Him (John 20:20) and the plain implication is that between the time that Mary saw Him and the time He met with his disciples, He had ascended to the Father and returned. No doubt He was presented before the Father at the same time that the Wave Sheaf was being waved in the Temple. The first of the firstfruits of the dead was Jesus.

Funny thing about this verse Mark 16:9. It is consistently called 'the first day of the week' in all translations, but in the Greek, it is 'the first day of the weeks.' It is day one of the seven weeks that count down to the feast of Pentecost, which is indeed the feast of the firstfruits.

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*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](http://RLDEA.com) where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.*

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. Have you ever asked someone how you can get three days and three nights from Friday to Sunday?
2. If you have, what was their answer?
3. Have you ever studied the history of why Jesus' crucifixion remembrance became a Friday to Sunday thing?
4. Do you agree one reason some maybe confused is because many Christians do not realize that God's Holy Days are also Sabbath days, even though, they don't necessarily fall on a Saturday?
5. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's explanation of why three days and three nights?
6. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's idea of Jesus being crucified on Wednesday and rising after sunset on Saturday?



7. Have you ever studied the Wave Sheaf Offering?
8. What are your thoughts about the Wave Sheaf Offering and Jesus' resurrection and ascension?
9. Do you find it fascinating how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus fulfilled many of God's Holy Days and that the rest will be fulfilled at His return?
10. Is there anything new that you learned from Mr. Dart's sermon?