

Answer to a Question from a Christian Questions Listener

Dear David,

You questioned our on air thought on April 17th, 2011 that Jesus was dead for parts of three days, rather than three full days, as some scriptures seem to indicate. Because we did not have time to give our reasoning for our conclusion, we will do so below. We hope our explanation is helpful.

The Jews began the celebration of the Feast of Passover after the 14th of Nissan, which is referred to as the Preparation Day. Jesus was killed on the Preparation Day. (See Luke 23:54 and Matthew 27:62.) Preparation Day was when the lambs were killed for the Passover Celebration at approximately 3PM (the ninth hour of the second watch, Jewish time, since there are two 12 hour watches: the first beginning at 6PM and ending at 6AM and the second watch beginning at 6AM and ending at 6PM.) Jesus died on the cross at 3PM, the ninth hour of the second watch of Preparation Day (Matthew 27:45). Jesus was our Passover Lamb. Therefore, Jesus was dead for the three remaining hours of Friday. He was dead for the entire 24 hours of Saturday, the seventh day, which was the Feast of Passover, and arose "on the first day of the week [Sunday], very early in the morning" (Luke 24:1). If he arose at approximately 6AM he would have been dead for about 12 hours of Sunday. This is how we calculate from the scriptures that Jesus was dead for parts of three days.

The problem arises in Matthew 12:40 where Jesus indicates that he would be in the tomb for "three days and three nights." That expression in our time implies three 24 hour time periods, or 72 hours. However, the rest of the biblical record indicates that the time was considerably shorter (Friday afternoon to Sunday morning). How do we harmonize this apparent disagreement? An understanding of the Hebrew idiom is necessary to resolve the difficulty. Below are some examples of the Old Testament Hebrew idiom.

1. Exodus 19:10-11: "Sanctify them today and tomorrow ... the third day the LORD will come down ..." The third day is here defined as the day after tomorrow.

2. Genesis 42:17-18: Verse 17 states Joseph kept his brothers in prison "for three days." Verse 18 states Joseph spoke "unto them the third day," and in the following verses, he released them that same day (the third day).

3. 1 Samuel 20:12: Again, the day after tomorrow is referred to as "the third day."

4. 1 Kings 20:29: Israel and Syria camped opposite each other "seven days." Yet, "in the seventh day the battle was joined."

5. 2 Chronicles 10:5, 12 (1 Kings 12:5,12): In verse 5 Rehoboam told the people of Israel to "come again unto me after three days' " In verse 12, they return, "on the third day" and restate Rehoboam's orders as "come again to me on the third day."

6. Esther 4:16, 5:1: In Esther 4:16 Esther asked the Jews to "fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night and day. I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king." Yet, in Esther 5:1 it is stated "on the third day" Esther went into the king.

7. 1 Samuel 30:12-13: An Egyptian found by David's men "had eaten no bread, nor drunk any water, three days and three nights." In verse 13 he told David he was deserted "three days ago."

Just as in the Old Testament, we find the same idiomatic expression in the New Testament. For example, Luke 13:32 states, "I do cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected." The third day is defined as the day after tomorrow.

Hebrew reckoning is as distinct from our reckoning as is their practice of commencing the day at sunset and ours to begin it at midnight. These different modes of expression are peculiar to the respective peoples and languages and must be taken into account.

From the evidence of both the Old and New Testaments, we find it was Jewish idiom to equate "three days," "on the third day," and "after three days." Apparently, this custom was derived from the practice of counting a part of a day as a whole day-and-night. This practice is corroborated by the Rabbinic literature. Today, in the USA, if we say an event happened "on the third day," we mean it occurred sometime during the third day. If we state it took place "after three days" we mean after three days have passed. If we say "three days and three nights," we mean three 24 hour periods or 72 hours. Yet Jesus and the Apostles used all these expressions in reference to the same period of time.

Therefore, understood in the context of Biblical idiom, the phrase "three days and three nights" presents no problem to a Friday crucifixion and a Sunday resurrection, as recorded in the Gospel accounts.

Based on the idiom of the time, "three days and three nights" may be thus explained:

1. The first night and day Jesus was in the tomb was from about the tenth hour (4:00 pm) of the day of preparation, Friday, to the evening, the end of the day (6:00 pm).

2. The second night and day was from the beginning of Sabbath (Friday night) to the end (Saturday evening).

3. The third night and day was from end of Sabbath (Saturday night) to the resurrection early in the morning of the "first day" (Sunday).

We hope we have answered your question. Be sure to sign up for CQ Rewind at www.chirstianquestions.net. The service is free without obligation and will provide you with scriptural perspective on many questions and topics.

Sincerely,

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