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1-800-611-8080 / www.cgom.org
PO Box 54621, Tulsa, OK 74155-0621

Three Days and Three Nights In The Grave, Why?

by Steven Kieler

Why was Jesus in the grave three days and three nights? Why did he make such an issue out of it, saying to the Scribes and Pharisees: "... *An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas*" Matthew 12: 40?

Jesus made very specific statements that lend understanding to this situation. First, let's consider the "*Three days and three nights*" factor as it relates to Jonah.

Jonah

Jonah 1:17, "*Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*" That is very time-specific and Jesus used it to illustrate a certain point.

Matthew 12:40, "*For as Jonas [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.*"

Scripture is exacting again about time in I Samuel 30:12-13 and Esther 4:16. Phrases like "three days" are used when it is less important. But why was Jesus entombed for that length of time?

The Corruption Connection

It is clear that after three days the body begins to decay. "*Jesus said, 'Take ye away the stone.' Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto Him, 'Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days,'*" John 11:39.

Quoting David from Proverbs 16:10, who had

prophesied that The Saviour would not see corruption. Paul said in Acts 2: 31, "*He [David] seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in hell [sheol, the grave], neither His flesh did see corruption.*" (Read verses 26-31 for the complete context.)

Even the two witnesses of Revelation will, being human, see corruption as their dead bodies will lie in the streets for three and one half days. (Revelation 11:9,11) Note the words "*and one half.*"

The number three in scripture denotes complete or entire. It is clear that Jesus was in the grave not more than three days. But we also know that He was three days and three nights in the grave. It does not say "*a part of the day or night.*" Look at your calendar and see if you can get three days *and* nights from Friday afternoon till Sunday morning.

Perhaps a more important lesson here is that Jesus was uncorrupted, without sin; He saw no physical corruption but neither was he like sinful corruptible man.

But how could Jesus be buried on "Good Friday" and resurrected on Sunday morning?

From Burial to Resurrection

The fact is, He was not.

John 20:1, "*The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.*" It is not disputed that the first day is Sunday. But notice Mary, while it was yet dark, came to the tomb, and Jesus had already risen (past tense)

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sometime earlier. But when? Let us return to the crucifixion day.

John 19:42. *“There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.”*

John 19:31, *“The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the Sabbath day, (for that Sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.”*

There seemed to be some urgency to get Jesus into the tomb and it had to do with the “preparation day.” That is the day before a weekly or annual Sabbath. John notes that this was not a seventh day Sabbath; it was a High (Holy) day. Indeed it was; it was the first day of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6-8). And that could fall on any day of the week.

We now know:

- that the crucifixion was on the day before a “High Day”
- He was in the tomb three days and nights
- He was resurrected sometime before Sunday morning
- He was in the grave just before sunset on the “preparation day”

We can deduce that, if He was three days and nights in the grave, He was resurrected the same time of day He was entombed. Therefore, the latest He could have left the tomb was Sabbath (Saturday) evening as Mary was there at dawn on Sunday and it could not have been earlier or the guards would have reported it on Saturday. (Matthew 27:62-64)

Counting back three full days from Saturday eve brings us to Wednesday, the preparation day when Christ was killed. The following day would be Thursday, the “High Day,” then Friday, day two. And, finally, there is Sabbath, day three.

Interestingly, this Passover week correlates to the same

days of the week as the Passover during the Exodus. You could calculate this by counting back from the incident of the gathering of the manna on the Sabbath and the chronology in the book of Numbers.

There’s another point yet to consider.

Signs and Wisdom

Jesus, speaking to the Pharisees and the Scribes, gave them a sign. Matthew 12:39, *“But He answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas.”* That sign was the three days and three nights. It was exact so they wouldn’t miss or misinterpret it.

They had a peculiar habit described in I Corinthians 1:22, *“For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom”*.

Returning to Matthew, the theme continues: *“The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here. {42} The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here”* (Matthew 12:41-42).

See how Corinthians and Matthew are complementary. They both speak of ‘signs and wisdom’.

The sign is there for all to see and neither the sign to the Jews nor the wisdom of the Greeks would suffice to deliver them. But then the sign was only to show them they were an evil and adulterous generation.

Paul sums it up nicely: *“But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;”* (I Corinthians 1: 23).

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PO Box 54621

Tulsa, OK 74155-0621

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