

Three Days, Third Day

Why did Jesus say he would be buried for three days if he died on Friday and rose on Sunday?

A Contradiction?

In Matthew 12:40 Jesus states “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a whale, so should the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (NKJV) Yet the church says Jesus was buried on a Friday and rose on a Sunday – which is only three days and three nights? Isn't this a contradiction?

Answer by John Mackay

If this verse was the only data available, then yes it would be a disagreement at the very least, and as portrayed in the question, it could be presented as a contradiction, since the numbers 3 and 2 are not the same. However, the Bible contains much more data on Jesus' death and resurrection than just this reference, so let's examine them in full.

As a result of reading the reference to Jonah as three full days and three full nights, some Christians have suggested Christ was crucified on Wednesday and this claim is usually accompanied by suggestions that the Catholic Church and not Scripture is the historical source of the Good Friday burial for Christ.

The New Testament repeatedly states Jesus was raised on the third day, so the apparent problem with the Wednesday view is if he was in the grave 3 full days and 3 full nights, then he seemingly should have been raised on the fourth day. Can we resolve this apparent dilemma? Was Jesus crucified and buried on what is called Good Friday or was it a Wednesday? Let's consider a few source texts (NKJV), take an in-depth look at a key issue on the meaning of the term 'day of preparation', then survey some OT history on the use of the third day.

Source: Converted Jewish Tax Collector Matthew

Matthew 16:21: From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and **on the third day be raised** to life.

Source: Greek Doctor Luke reporting on disillusioned disciples meeting the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus.

Luke 24:19: And He (Jesus) said to them, "What things?" So they (The disciple) said to Him, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, **today is the third day since these things happened.** "

Source: Converted Pharisee Paul

1 Corinthians 15:3-5: For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that **He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures**,...

The Day of Preparation

Pastor Matt White (pers. com.) has helped considerably with the background research and references for this first section on the Greek Text so many thanks to him.

Luke's Gospel informs us that Joseph of Arimathea "went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before. That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near."
(Luke 23:52-54)

Checking the Greek of verse 54 shows that the day of *Preparation* is a translation of the Greek. παρασκευή, transliterated into English as *Paraskeuē* (note the "ē" is pronounced as a long e), 'and the *Sabbath* which was beginning, is a translation of the Greek *Sabbaton*.

Luke 23:55-56: then adds that "the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the **Sabbath** according to the commandment.

Then we read in Luke in 24:1 that "...on the first day of the week (Greek: "Mia tōn Sabbatōn" literally "first of the week" in English), very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared.

The Greek word we translate as "preparation day" is παρασκευή, transliterated into English as *paraskeuē* (note the "ē" is pronounced as a long e). Walter Bauer's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* 2nd & 3rd editions are a standard Greek Lexicon used in NT Studies. The 1979 edition page 622 states "...to Jewish usage it was Friday, on which day everything had to be prepared for the Sabbath, when no work was permitted... For the Christians as well παρασκευή served to designate the sixth day of the week *Friday* ..."

First century usage confirms this.

An early first or second century AD Greek treatise labelled the *Didache* (literally "teaching") in discussing what days Christians should fast states: "But do not let your fasts coincide with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Monday (Gk. deutera or "second") and Thursday (Gk. Pemptē or "fifth"), so you must fast on Wednesday (Gk. Tetrada or "fourth") and Friday (Gk: Paraskeuē)" – *Didache* 8:1. (Holmes, Michael. 2007. *Apostolic Fathers: 3rd edition*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.)

We do need to note that the author of the *Didache* was able to write Christians no later than the second century AD, correlating days with numbers, but when writing about Friday did not use the Greek term for "sixth", but rather the word *paraskeuē* meaning day of preparation. Even today in Greece the spoken language (Demotic Greek) the term παρασκευή refers only to Friday, which you can easily check with an online translator.

Additional Data from John's Gospel

In the Gospel of John 2:19-22 Jesus is recorded answering His Jewish critics with, *"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."* The rest of the text tells us he is referring to his body and we need to note his reference is to in three days and not to a fourth day. We also need first ask: how did those who heard Him, understand his words?

We find out when Jesus' enemies, the Pharisees, presented to Pilate, their scheme to prevent any rumours about Christ resurrecting after His burial. They stated that Jesus had prophesied "after three days I will rise again" (Matthew 27:63), and then showed their understanding of what Jesus meant by requesting a Roman guard to be placed at the tomb until the third day. At this point it is very evident that in their Jewish mind, the phrase 'after three days' was not in any contradiction with an event which happened "on the third day". If they had understood any other meaning for the Jonah reference or anything else Jesus had stated about the three days and three nights, they would have requested a guard to be placed until the fourth day.

We also find several Old Testament uses of this concept transfer where 'three days and three nights' is clearly used to refer to events culminating on a third day. In 1 Samuel 30:12-13 David meets an Egyptian who claims "... we had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and three nights," but in the very next verse the same person states; "my master left me behind... 3 days ago."

Similarly in Esther a period described as "for three days, night and day" (4:16) is concluded "on the third day" (5:1).

Even further back in Old Testament history, Joseph who had imprisoned his brothers in Egypt for 3 days, spoke to them in Genesis 42:18: Then Joseph said to them on the third day, "Do this and live, for I fear God". Joseph released them on the third day which is a good indication that to an Israelite mind, the phrase "after three days" and the concept "on the third day" were not considered contradictory to each other, but had simply become interchangeable terms that had entered cultural acceptance as a mode of Israeli/Jewish thought at least 1,800 years before Christ. .

This is further confirmed in extra scriptural writings of the Jews, such as "The Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish commentaries which relates that "a portion of a day is as the whole of it" (Mishnah, third Tractate B.Pesachim, page 4A). Likewise the even older Jerusalem Talmud similarly says "We have a teaching, a day and a night are as an Onah and a portion of an Onah is as the whole of it" (Mishnah Tractate J. Shabbath chapter IX paragraph 3). Onah simply refers to a period of time. For those who want further reading on this, the context of the time under discussion in these documents which date many centuries prior to the crucifixion, concern when, what and how long a man can have sexual relations with a woman. Perhaps you don't want to go there eh?

Time frame shift – a further factor!

The original Jewish method of measuring the day as sunset to sunset, is based on Genesis chapter 1:1-5, where God's created time commenced with "the evening and the morning were the first day". This six hour shift forward in time from our western 'midnight to midnight' based day does causes confusion.

So let's clarify this. The Roman trial of Jesus, beginning "when morning came" (Matthew 27:1) around 6am on our clock, becomes the first day of our time line. As recorded in Mark's Gospel 15:25 Christ was then crucified (using the Jewish time frame) on the third hour which makes it 9am of that first day. So Jesus was on the cross between 12 noon and 3pm our time, which is also recorded as a period of intense darkness.

That first day on the cross concluded just before the 6pm sunset prior to commencement of the Sabbath, which is why the Jews were so keen to get him off the cross and buried. They couldn't work on any Sabbath, let alone their 'revealed' first 7th day Sabbath of rest, which was given by God to commemorate their 'rest' from the slavery of Egypt, which is therefore associated with the first Passover, given to Moses back in Leviticus 23, and which is the one being referred to when we read of Jesus celebrating the Passover prior to the crucifixion.

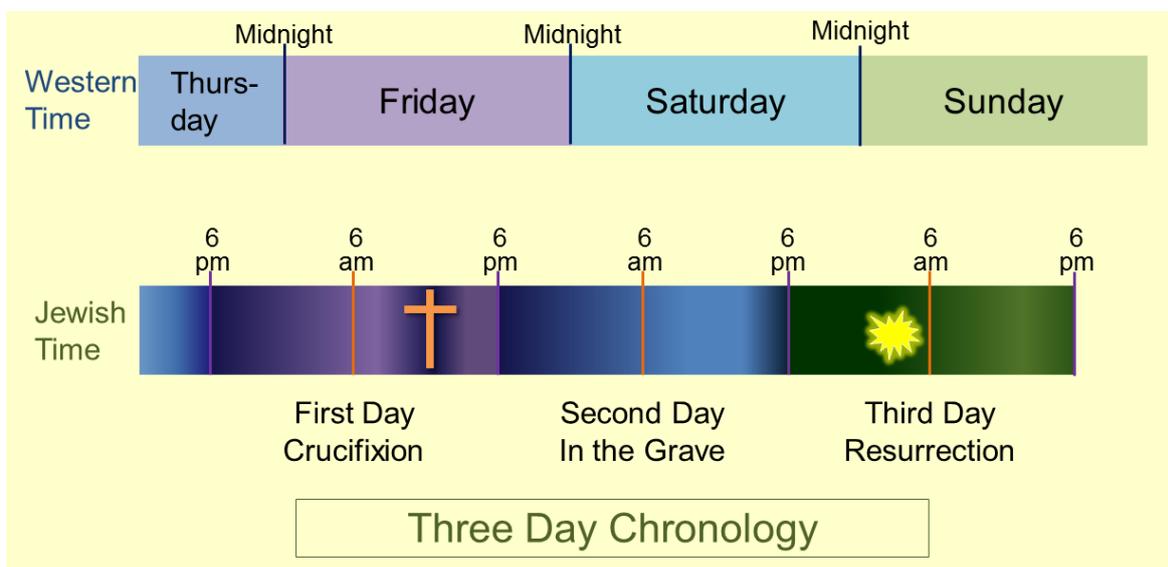
It is of interest to note that Jesus had been on the cross for only a portion of the day prior to this special first Sabbath. Now add to your western understanding, the historical Jewish time concept of Onah, so by the time Jesus was removed from the cross, the time involved provably qualifies in Jewish understanding as 'one whole day and one whole night'.

Christ's second day began when he was taken off the cross and placed in the tomb of the rich man, prior to commencement of the 6pm Sabbath. He was still in the grave around 24 hours later, just prior to the 6pm start of the first day of the week (our Saturday evening) which commenced His third day. Then after a maximum of 12 hours of the first day of the week had passed, He rose very early on the morning just after sunrise, so the time passing was now into a third day. Again according to both Jewish and Babylonian Talmuds this also qualified as being a third onah (or third day and night), along with being the basis for the oft repeated New Testament statement in the Gospels and the Epistle writers that 'Christ rose on the third day'. (See reference list at end)

Both the Jewish calendar sixth day, seventh day and first day, and the western calendar time frame of Friday, Saturday and Sunday meet all requirements of the data listed in Scripture and have no need of any change. Claims that they should be suspected as false because they have been promoted by the Catholic Church are no more valid than rejecting Jesus is the Son of God or the Trinity is false simply because it has historically been taught by Roman Catholics.

Similarly the Wednesday/Thursday crucifixion concepts which commence with a "non-Jewish mindset" reading of the statement by Jesus about Jonah referring to three whole days and three whole nights, then attempt to raise Jesus before sunrise on the first day of the Jewish week, just simply don't fit. The mental gymnastics required to add new meaning to day of preparation, extra non seventh day Sabbaths, etc., in order to accommodate this view or the drawing of elaborate time diagrams to join the dots are simply unnecessary.

The diagram below may help understand the chronology of the crucifixion and resurrection:



Appendix

Note on the road to Emmaus

Christ did not correct the disciples statement (Luke 24:21) that it was the daylight portion of the third day after 'the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him', and that this meeting on the road to Emmaus is described as having happened on the Jewish first day of the week. (Luke 24:1)

Christ commenting to the disciples after his resurrection.

Luke 24:45-48: And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus **it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day**, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things.

Note: Jesus use of the word 'necessary' adds to the statement of Paul below (1Corinthian15:3-5), that a third day resurrection was predicted in the Old Testament Scriptures. See associated cross reference below.

Note on 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 15:3-6: For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that **He rose again the third day** according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.

It is of interest that the converted Pharisee and therefore Old Testament Legal expert Paul adds a phrase 'the third day **according to the scriptures**' .which in this context means the Old Testament writings, which therefore means this third day event was expected. Paul's reference here is undoubtedly to the resurrection spoken of in Hosea 6:1-2 which is very enlightening on how the Holy Spirit unwraps truth to a Jewish mind, and as with Matthews use of 'a virgin will bring forth a child,' it is not the way our western minds would see it at all. It makes for challenging discussion.

Hosea wrote:

Come, and let us return to the Lord;
For He has torn, but He will heal us;
He has stricken, but He will bind us up.

After two days He will revive us;

**On the third day He will raise us up,
That we may live in His sight. "**

Time Questions

Old Testament usage of three days

R.T. France's Commentary on Matthew adds: "...in Semitic inclusive time-reckoning these do not denote different periods as a pedantic Western reading would suggest" (France 2007, 491).

“The same phrase, “three days and three nights,” occurs in 1 Samuel 30:12 to denote a period which began (literally) “today three days,” the day before yesterday (v. 13). Similarly in Esther a period described as “for three days, night and day” (4:16) is concluded “on the third day” (5:1) ... Underlying this flexible usage is the Jewish tendency to speak of a period of twenty-four hours as a day and a night, so that Jesus’ time in the tomb can be said to embrace (parts of) three “day-nights”” (France 2007, fn12.p491).

France, R.T. 2007. *The Gospel of Matthew*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Thanks to Pastor Matt White for the above quote and for help with the Greek section on the day of preparation

Another instance where the terms “three days” and “the third day” are used to describe the same period of time is found in 2 Chronicles:

2 Chronicles 10:5: Rehoboam tells the people “Come to me again in three days.” 2Chronicles 10:16: “So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam on the third day, as the king said, ‘Come to me again on the third day.’” Here it is clear the people considered “in three days” to mean “on the third day”.

When did Mary come to the tomb?

After sunrise on the first day of the week.

Mark 16:1-6: Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. **Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen.** And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away — for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. **He is risen! He is not here.** (See also Matthew 28:1-6)

When did the angel roll away the stone?

Matt 28:1-4: **Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn,** Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for **an angel of the Lord** descended from heaven, and came and **rolled back the stone from the door**, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.

When Did Jesus Rise?

He had arisen before Mary arrived at the time shortly after sunrise on the first day of the week, so any time after the Sabbath had finished after Saturday 6pm and before Sunrise 6am on the first day of the week qualifies. No further detail is available.

How many hours was Jesus in the grave?

From before sunset on the day before the high Sabbath, to before sunrise on the first day of the week - a minimum of 37 hours.

Of interest: The day of the crucifixion had included that very unusual three hour darkness which by stretching the Genesis definition “God called the darkness night,” you may be tempted to use it as a third night, but there is no real necessity to resort to this.

All New Testament References to Jesus resurrection “on the third day.”

Matthew 16:21, Matthew 17:22-23, Matthew 20:18-19, Matthew 27:62-64, Mark 9:31, Mark 10:33-34, Luke 9:20-22, Luke 18:31-34, Luke 24:1-8 (angels’ testimony) Luke 24:19-21 (Road to Emmaus) Luke 24:26, John 2:19-21, Acts 10:39-41, 1Corinthians 15:3-6.

These are quoted on the following two pages

Matthew 16:21: From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, **and be raised the third day.**

Matthew 17:22-23: Now while they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, **and the third day He will be raised up.**” And they were exceedingly sorrowful.

Matthew 20:18-19: Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. **And the third day He will rise again.**

Matthew 27:62-64: On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘**After three days I will rise.**’ **Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day,** lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.”

Mark 9:31: For He taught His disciples and said to them, “The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, **He will rise the third day.**”

Mark 10:33-34: Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. **And the third day He will rise again.**

Luke 9:20-22: He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered and said, “The Christ of God.” And He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, **and be killed, and be raised the third day.**”

Luke 18:31-34: Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. **And the third day He will rise again.**” But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken.

Luke 24:1-8: Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. And it happened, as they were greatly perplexed about this, that behold, two men stood by them in shining garments. Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, ‘**The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.**’” And they remembered His words.

Luke 24:19-21: And He said to them, “What things?” So they said to Him, “The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. **Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened.**”

Acts 10:39-41: And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up **on the third day**, and showed Him openly.