

# Three days and three nights

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In the New Testament Matthew reports that Jesus says

## Matthew 12:38-40

- 38** Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You."  
**39** But He answered and said to them, "**An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;**  
**40 for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**

Jesus tells us He will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. How can we reconcile this with the traditional Friday-Saturday-Sunday scenario? This tradition says that Jesus died late in the afternoon on Friday, the day of crucifixion and rose at dawn on the Sunday morning. This is clearly inconsistent with the three days and three nights that Jesus described. Friday night, Saturday day and Saturday night comprise only two nights and one day, clearly thirty-six hours short.

How do we find the true situation? Let's start with what we do know for sure.

- A We know that Jesus died late afternoon on the day He was nailed to the cross. *Matt 27:46-50*  
B We know that He spent approximately 72 hours in the heart of the earth. *Matt 12:38-40*  
C We know that the tomb was empty at dawn on Sunday. *Matt 28:1. 5-6*

*The passages for A and C appear overleaf. The passage for B is above.*

What can we determine from just these three facts?

From A and B together we see that He must have risen in the late afternoon.

That resurrection must have been on Saturday afternoon because of C.

If He rose Saturday afternoon then counting back 72 hours we see that He died on Wednesday.

How then did the Good Friday myth get started? Let me begin by saying that I think it began because someone didn't understand the Sabbath and it was perpetuated because nobody bothered to check. Sabbath means rest; no work. Because they could do no work on a Sabbath itself, necessary work was done on the previous day called the day of preparation. Now I didn't say that the *someone* didn't understand the word Sabbath but that they didn't understand the Sabbath. You may say that the Sabbath is the seventh day (Saturday) and because God rested on the seventh day after He created everything He commanded man to rest on the seventh day too. You might even say that the fourth commandment relates to the Sabbath. All of that would be correct - as far as it goes.

But it doesn't go far enough. God commanded that certain other days be days of rest as well. These are special Sabbaths for special celebrations and they are called high Sabbaths or high days. Passover is one such extra Sabbath. Now we know that Jesus is The Passover Lamb. Look at this passage about the high day (Passover) which occurred during that special week so that Jesus could be our Passover.

## John 19:31

- 31** Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and *that* they might be taken away.

So now we can see that for this particular year Passover fell on Thursday and the day of preparation was Wednesday. But if we don't know any better and assume the passages which speak of His death on the day preceding the Sabbath are referring to the day preceding Saturday, namely Friday, we wrongly conclude that Jesus died on Friday. Hence a misunderstanding of Sabbath leads to a tradition perpetuated for centuries which is clearly wrong.

**Matthew 27:46-50**

- 46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?” that is, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”
- 47 And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, *began* saying, “This man is calling for Elijah.”
- 48 Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink.
- 49 But the rest *of them* said, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.”
- 50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

**Matthew 28:1, 5-6**

- 1 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.
- 5 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.
- 6 “He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.