

# Jot & Tittle

*A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God*

April 2000

## **The Day Christ Died**

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Good Friday has long been an established date on the church calendar. This is the day most Christians honor as the day of Jesus' crucifixion. But there has been considerable question about the exact day of the week on which Jesus died. Did the crucifixion take place on a Wednesday, a Thursday, or a Friday? Good Christians disagree about Good Friday.

Most of the debate relates to Jesus' statement in Matthew 12:40. "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Could a Friday crucifixion and a Sunday resurrection really fulfill this prophecy of three days and three nights in the tomb?

### ***Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday?***

Some Bible scholars hold to a Wednesday crucifixion based on Matthew 12:40. They argue that the three days and three nights, taken literally, necessitate a period of seventy-two hours. Only a Wednesday crucifixion could accommodate such a span of time. Banks represents this position saying, "It would appear more likely that Christ died and was buried on Wednesday afternoon, was resurrected on Saturday evening, and therefore remained in the tomb three whole days and nights, approximately seventy-two hours."<sup>(1)</sup>

But this view demands that Jesus rose from the dead late on Saturday evening rather than on Sunday. Since the early church recognized Sunday as the day to worship the risen Christ (Acts 20:7), it seems unlikely that Jesus rose on Saturday evening. Furthermore, the Old Testament typology that presents Christ's resurrection as the "firstfruits" (1 Corinthians 15:23) could have only taken place on the day after the Sabbath, that is, on Sunday (Leviticus 23:10-11). To say that the Jewish day began after sundown only means that Jesus was in the grave more than three days and nights, that is, part of the night that began on Saturday evening.

Others conclude that Jesus died on a Thursday, again largely to make literal sense of Matthew 12:40. A Thursday crucifixion would allow for Christ's body to lie in the grave three nights (Thursday, Friday, and Saturday) and part of three days (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday). According to this view, Jesus did not rise from the dead until early Sunday morning. The Thursday crucifixion view also eliminates a day of silence in the Passion Week, usually designated as Wednesday in the traditional Friday crucifixion view.<sup>(2)</sup> However, a day of silence is not absolutely necessary in a Friday crucifixion view if Jesus' Triumphal Entry took place on Monday rather than Sunday.

The third view regarding the day of Christ's crucifixion is that Jesus died on Friday. This is the traditional view. It is based on a variety of statements in the gospels that describe the crucifixion as taking place before the Sabbath. It also accounts for Matthew 12:40 by indicating that any part of a day was considered to be a day. According to this view, Jesus was buried on Friday, rose on Sunday, and was in the grave three days. This is still the favored view among evangelical writers. But does it fit the biblical data?

### ***Three Days and Three Nights***

Jonah 1:17 states that Jonah was inside the great fish for "three days and three nights" and Jesus declared that He likewise would be in the heart of the earth for "three days and

three nights” (Matthew 12:40). When the Bible refers to day and night in the same phrase, it is simply referring to a time frame that encompasses some part of a day. For example, Queen Esther asked that the people fast for three days, night and day (Esther 4:16). Then, on the third day she approached the king (Esther 5:1). Since she went before the king on the third day, her fast must have only included a portion of the third day. Similar descriptions of time are found in Genesis 42:17-18 and 1 Kings 20:29. “Thus, the Old Testament gives the picture that the expressions ‘three days,’ ‘the third day,’ and ‘three days and three nights’ are used to signify the same period of time.”(3)

Even non-biblical Jewish teaching referred to a day and a night as any part of one day. “In rabbinical thought a day and a night make an *onah*, and a part of an *onah* is as the whole.”(4)

When Jesus predicted that His body would rest in the grave for three days and three nights, He referred to any portion of three distinct days. A Friday crucifixion and a Sunday resurrection would thereby meet this qualification.

### ***The Preparation Day***

According to John 19:14, Pilate tried and crucified Jesus on the “day of Preparation.” Mark 15:42 indicates that the day of Preparation was the day before the Sabbath (compare Luke 23:54). Since the Jewish Sabbath is on Saturday, the day of Preparation would be on Friday. Those who hold to a Thursday crucifixion say that Friday was the day of Passover and was therefore considered a special Sabbath. However, there is no indication that Preparation Day ever referred to any day other than Friday. The First Century historian Josephus also refers to Preparation Day as the day before the Sabbath.(5) “There is strong evidence to suggest that *paraskeue* (‘Preparation [Day]’) had already become a technical name for Friday, since Friday was normally the day on which one prepared for the Sabbath (Saturday); and we have no evidence that the term was used

in the evangelist’s time to refer to the eve of any festal day other than the Sabbath.”(6) So a Friday crucifixion seems preferable. It fits the details of the gospel accounts that refer to the Preparation Day, the Sabbath Day, and the prediction by Jesus in Matthew 12:40.

### ***The Importance of Christ’s Crucifixion***

While it is interesting to piece together the chronology of the crucifixion, it is even more important to understand the meaning of the crucifixion. Good Christians may differ about the Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday views regarding the day Christ died. But the common ground lies in the truth of the cross and its application to lives. Jesus died on the cross for our sins, a substitutionary sacrifice for all our violations of God’s holy standard. He Himself said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Those who recognize Jesus’ death on the cross as a sacrifice for their sins and who place their faith in that finished sacrificial work receive forgiveness and eternal life. The day Christ died was a day of victory. The day you receive Christ is a day of great personal victory for you.

- 1 Banks, William L. *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p.52.
- 2 Rusk, Roger. “The Day he Died.” *Christianity Today*, March 29, 1974, pp.4-6.
- 3 Hoehner, Harold W. *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p.73.
- 4 Carson, D. A. “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, vol.8, p.296. Compare Adam Clarke, *A Commentary and Critical Notes*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d., vol.5, p.140.
- 5 Josephus. *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 16.6.2 (163).
- 6 Carson, p.531.

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*Jot & Tittle* is a quarterly publication of Pittsford Community Church / 421 Marsh Road / Pittsford, New York 14534  
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