

Three Days in the Tomb: The Chronology of the Cross and Resurrection

On what day did Jesus eat the Passover with His disciples and institute the Lord's Supper? At what time? When was He arrested, tried and crucified? Most importantly, how do we account for Jesus being in the tomb for *three days*? A lot of these questions involve how one reads the Gospel accounts and *how one accounts for time in the Gospels*. This article seeks to answer those questions and show how all four Gospels are congruent, even with *the timing of events*. It also will show how we are to confess and articulate the best accounting of Jesus's three days in the tomb before His glorious resurrection.

Part I. Evening, Morning and the Twelve Hours Day

We start with the length of a day and when it begins. Our basic accounting is determined all the way back in Genesis. "God called the light Day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and morning the first day." We see a division between "day" and "night" and that the beginning of a 24 hour day is the evening. The people of Israel followed this pattern. They reckoned the beginning of a "day" to begin at sundown (=6pm). This is confusing for us! We start our "day clock" at midnight, but they began in what we call evening of the same day. Understanding this will bear fruit later as we consider how many days Jesus rests in the tomb.

We also observe in John 11:9¹ Jesus say, "There are twelve hours in the day, aren't there?" Our collective day is 24 hours, but the Jewish reckoning of *daytime* is 12. Jesus speaks of the general length of time when the sun is up. The point, then, is that night is when the sun is down, and not based on a clock. As well, all activity for the "day" would cease at sundown. There was generally little commerce, worship. There are exceptions. Some fishing, for instance. This is what makes the trials of Jesus after being arrested in the garden highly unusual.

Part II. The Markers of Time in the Gospels/A Discussion of Time

We also have several time markers throughout the Gospels. Let's look at a few. Knowing how they are defined and used will give us a better handle of when things took place.

Mark 4:35 And He says to them on that day, when *evening* occurred...

Here the word does not mean "evening" in the way we would use it (as in 9pm), but the "late part of the day" or the "time between day and night." We might call this *dusk*. So, this time period is not nighttime, *but still part of the day*. It all would depend on when the sun went down.

John 21:3-4 ...and during that *night*, they caught nothing. And *very early in the morning*, already happening...

Here we have the apostles fishing during the night. As stated, night is the time when the sun is down. This is darkness. We don't want to confuse "night" with "evening." This is likely the last

¹ Translations are my own from the Greek New Testament.

part of the night, just before the dawn. So, night could be what we call morning (like 3am!). Verse four indicates that the daylight “began to break.” Again, the total 24 hour day is reckoned *from sundown to sundown*.

Mark 1:35 And *very early*, still in the night...

Here we see very unusual activity. Jesus gets up before the sun, maybe even in the dead of night!

Mark 6:47 And when it became evening, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and He was alone on the land. And He saw that they were torturously making headway, for a wind was opposing them, about the *fourth watch of the night*...

Night time was divided into four watches—first watch was 6-9, second 9-12am, third 12-3, and fourth 3-6. This division was used primarily for the military or anyone keeping guard. Here, though, Mark uses it to convey that the disciples are on the sea after 3am and before sunup. Also important to note, the Jewish reckoning of day and night were different than Roman civil reckoning. The Romans began their day at midnight.² The Jewish tracking of the hours of the “day” started at sunrise, around 6am. So, for the Romans, the sixth hour is 6am, but to the Jew, 6am is the first. This difference is important to note in the movements during the trials of Jesus, as we shall see (especially in John’s Gospel). This may all seem overly technical, but the payout is when we begin to consider the timing of events of Jesus’ arrest and trials.

Another technical distinction. Jews and Romans operated with different calendars. The Jews used a *lunar calendar* (12 months of 29/30 days for 354 total then adding an extra month every three years) and the Romans used a *solar* (12 months totaling 52 weeks). There is even evidence of two *different* Jewish calendars (both lunar) but showing slightly different ways of tracking weeks, months, etc. It is possible that some of the differences in time sequences we see in the Gospels are due to the usage of different calendars.

More technical material. Please note the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week, starts for them at sundown, *our* Friday evening. Working back then, Jesus eats the Passover meal on *their* Friday evening (sixth day of the week), what we call Thursday night! The point—the time between when Jesus ate the Passover to when He would die on the cross is around 21 hours—less than a total day. But all of it occurred on the same day—their Friday...though for us, we reckon it the last part of Thursday and most of Friday.

Our reckoning of days, hours, minutes, seconds is very precise. We have a multiplicity of time-keeping pieces. The ancients were limited in this kind of precision. They had sundials and water clocks, but their basic way of keeping time was based on the position of the sun. The rhythm of the 24 hour day (predicated by the full rotation of the earth) is evening and morning, or night then day. The basic pattern we see in Genesis, and a pattern humanity used for centuries. Sun down and the sun up. The day was when things would happen. The night was when activity

² We follow a “Roman” time reckoning with respect to our calendar, clock, and week.

would cease. We have electricity, which muddles this pattern for us! For we can work when it's dark and have leisure when it's light. Their lives would have been much different, and the way they express time would be much more general, and tethered to a natural pattern.

Part III. The Predictions of Jesus of His Own Death and Resurrection

We are heading towards the payoff—the way we understand Jesus being in the tomb three days. But first, we look at Jesus's own predictions of what would occur to Him, using Mark's Gospel:

8:31 And He began to teach them that it was necessary that the Son of Man suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed...and after three days, to rise.

9:31 For He was teaching His disciples and kept saying to them, "The Son of Man is gonna be handed over into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, and when they have killed (Him), after three days, He will rise.

10:33 Look! We are walking up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and they will hand Him over to the Gentiles and they will mock Him and spit on Him and beat Him and kill Him, and after three days, He will rise.

In each prediction, Jesus says the same thing with respect to His rising—it will happen "after three days." The preposition "after" means...after. So, three days will occur before He will rise. We hear this though, and think three days as equaling 72 hours. But that would be imposing our own time reckoning on the Scriptures. More on this below.

Part IV. The Timing/Chronology of the Death, Burial of Jesus

We now walk through the chronology of Jesus's arrest, trials, crucifixion, death, and burial. This is not exhaustive but serves our purpose. We use all four Gospels. Please note that John's expression of timing will seem different, but by using what we have discussed above, it will all fit nicely together. The Passover meal happened *after sundown*. This is confirmed by several things, one of which is John 13:30, which tells us that while they were eating, after Jesus calls out Judas as being the one to hand Him over, Judas went out and "it was night." This is the word for "night" and not "evening". In other words, this was their Friday night (remember—evening then morning!) but our Thursday.

After supper, they go out to Gethsemane. Jesus predicts (Matt 26:31) that they will all fall away because of Me "this night." So, before the day. Judas comes to the garden. Being that it's dark, Judas identifies Jesus by kissing Him. They seize and lead Him away first to Annas, then to Caiaphas. Peter follows and enters into the courtyard of the High Priest. He warms himself by a charcoal fire because it was cold (so, still night). After Peter's denials, as Jesus predicted, the

rooster crowed (twice). What time? *Sometime before dawn*, but as early as 3am. Peter denies Jesus sometime before sunrise.

When did the trials commence? Mark 15:1 says, “And immediately, early in the morning...” and Luke 22:66, “And as it became day...” This tells us the council gathered *formally* at or around dawn, maybe just before. However, we get the picture from John that Jesus was being *informally* questioned *during the night*. Matt 26:59 though says that “the whole Sanhedrin was seeking false testimonies...” The Sanhedrin was the Jewish Council of 71 comprised of Sadducees, elders and scribes.³ Note that Matthew says the Sanhedrin was seeking false witnesses. The formal charge comes as “early morning occurred” (Matt 27:1). In other words, right before dawn. John 18:28 says that they led Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters at “early morning”. Again (see above) *this would be at or around dawn*. The point—this trial of Jesus by the Jews happened early and was not according to their customary practices. Their purpose was two-fold—find enough evidence that they themselves could deem Jesus worthy of death to come up with a reason for Pilate to agree to execute Him. Jesus was questioned through the night but formally charged and brought to Pilate right before dawn.

Based on what we know of Roman work practices, it is likely Pilate is up and already at his desk. Most Roman administrators (trained in the army) began their day in the earliest of morning hours (remember they used a different “clock”). Seneca says Roman trials began at daybreak. So, Pilate is likely not roused from bed, but was well into his workday, especially during the Feast. Here's where it gets even more interesting. John says the Jews would not enter the Governor’s headquarters, *so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover*.⁴ But didn’t the Passover meal already occur? Let’s assume that John does not conflict with the other Gospels(!), but there does seem to be a contradiction. Or is there? If we reckon the day as the Jews did (evening then morning), then the Passover would begin on their Friday night at 6pm and continue until Friday at 6pm. The Jews involved in trying Jesus had (likely) not yet eaten the feast, but still hoped to. Therefore, they did not want to become ritually unclean by entering the home of a Gentile. It would take them time to cleanse themselves, thereby keeping them from eating the Passover *on that day*.

Some have suggested John is operating with a different calendar. Maybe. It has been asserted that in John’s Gospel, the Passover *didn’t start* until after Jesus was in the tomb. The thematic motif suggested by some twentieth century scholars was that Jesus died on the cross as the Passover lambs were being sacrificed at the Temple. But. I think there is a different explanation. What John is likely operating with is a different way of accounting *for the hours of the day*. Allow me to explain.

³ Sources indicate that there might have been a “greater” Sanhedrin of 71 and a “lesser” one of 33 members. This could explain the distinction between what takes place in the middle of the night and what occurs just before dawn.

⁴ According to Numbers 9:6-12, if an Israelite became defiled, they could postpone eating the feast one month. If it was a matter of entering the house of a Gentile, then a ritual washing at sundown would suffice. Either way, by entering Pilate’s abode, it would preclude them eating the Passover THAT DAY.

After several “back and forths” by Pilate in the Gospel of John between Jesus and the Jews, we are told in 19:14, “Now it was the day of the preparation of the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. Sometime after this (several hours), Pilate gives the order to crucify Jesus.” This has confused commentators, for in Mark 15:25 we are told: now it was the third hour and they crucified Him. If both were following the same reckoning of the hours of the day, there would be a contradiction. But it is likely Mark (and Matthew and Luke) are following a Jewish reckoning of the hours of the day (see above) and John is following a Roman reckoning. The third hour in *Jewish time* is 9am. The sixth hour in *Roman time* is 6am. This lines things up much more smoothly. In other words, the main trial of Jesus before Pilate would occur sometime between the hours of 6 and 9am. The various locations in the city are extremely close together. This would even allow time for Jesus to be shipped over to Herod (Luke 23:6-12). Jesus was sentenced and then “crucified” around 9am, as Mark tells us. John is then congruent with this.

But what about the “preparation of the Passover” mentioned in John? The Synoptics⁵ use the term to refer to the preparation for the Sabbath (Matt 27:62, Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54), but John makes it seem that it was referring to the Passover feast...as if the Passover had not yet happened. This takes some unpacking. The word for “preparation” in the Jewish usage was the day before the Sabbath (or a feast), so *Friday*. So, John 19:14 could be glossed this way: *the Friday of preparation of the Passover*, meaning that the Friday occurred *during* the Passover festival and before the Sabbath. The Feast of the Unleavened Bread was a week-long celebration kicked off by the Passover meal. Friday was the day everything was to be done *before the Sabbath*, which began at sundown (Friday evening/Saturday night). Confused? We see this term again in 19:42, and also 19:31, that this Sabbath was a “high day.” This likely means it was a Sabbath *during* the Passover feast...not the Passover itself.

The point to all of this—John is not operating (likely) with a different calendar but with a different “clock.” The Synoptics use the Jewish way of reckoning hours and John uses the Roman.⁶ Jesus was crucified on Friday around 9am and was on the cross until He died at 3pm (Luke 23:44; Mark 15:33-34; Matt 27:45-46). John only has one mention of time (19:14), and that occurs during the final part of Jesus’ “trial” with Pilate. We cannot preclude that there might have been Passover meals being observed all during the evening and the following day.⁷ But the likelihood of John operating with a different accounting of the hours makes a lot more sense than John using a different calendar and a different timing for the events (day) of the Passover, leading people to say that there is no Passover meal in John!

Finally, we are told Jesus was buried *before the Sabbath* (so before sundown at the end of Friday). This seems very clear from all the Gospels. But what about Mark 16:1, which says, “when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene bought spices and very early on the first day of

⁵ Remember that Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptics, which means “same sight.”

⁶ This may be accounted for by who John was himself. He seems to have familiarity and relationships within Jerusalem and with the Jewish officials.

⁷ A way to think about this are the many traditions we have surrounding when we eat our Thanksgivings. No one family does it the same, but generally we all eat it on Thursday!

the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.” This seems confusing. When did they buy the spices? Sunday morning? Remember, the Sabbath is over at sundown Saturday evening. So, after 6pm (on what we would call Saturday night), they could go and procure spices. But to them, that is the beginning of the first day of the week, or Sunday! So having their spices in the evening, we see that they go to the tomb at first light on Sunday morning.

Part V. The Day of Resurrection After Three Days in the Tomb

We are told in John 20:1: Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene comes early in the morning, while it was still dark, to the tomb. Again, this word for “early in the morning” is a time before the dawn. This comports with Mark’s account, but John focuses singularly on Mary’s interaction with both the apostles and then Jesus. What is in Mark’s account is compressed between 1b and 2 of John.

We focus on the fact of it being “the first day of the week.” So, Sunday. The big question is, “How do we account for three days when Jesus had only been in the tomb roughly 36 hours?” The major principle that serves to answer this seeming tension: for the Jews, a part of a day counts as a day. So, we are not operating with three 24 hour days consecutively, *but parts of three days*. Let’s walk through it. Jesus was buried before sundown late Friday afternoon. Day one. He rested in the tomb on the Sabbath, which was 6pm to 6pm. Day two. The Sabbath ends at sundown, and the first day of the week begins after 6pm. Day three. *Last part of Friday, all of Saturday, part of Sunday*. When (what time) did Jesus rise from the dead? Sometime during the night before the dawn of Sunday morning. He died on Friday, which was the Passover, rested in the tomb on the Sabbath, and rose from the dead on the first day of the week, Sunday. After three days had been accounted for, He rose. “After three days” does not mean after 72 hours! It is after three days had happened, even parts of them.

Part VI. Resurrection Day Appearances and a Final Word

Last thing. Jesus makes several Resurrection Day appearances—to Mary Magdalene and the other women, to Peter at some point (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5), then to those on the Emmaus road and finally to the eleven apostles in the locked upper room. This all took place within the confines of Easter Sunday. John 20:19ff: Then when it was *late in the day on the first day of the week* and the doors were in a locked condition where the disciples were on account of the fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the middle and says to them, “Peace be to you.” Remember—the word that gets translated as “evening” is actually more like “the time between afternoon and sunset.” The first day of the week ends when the sun goes down.

What we can be utterly confident in all of this is the Gospel accounts a) didn’t blow it b) are faithful, reliable and true and c) plausibly fit together. It might take a little work to see how everything fits. Part of that is *reorienting our preconceived notions of reckoning time* (which are more precise and account for every hour of the day) *towards the way they accounted for days, weeks, hours of the day*. When we follow the clues, things fall into place. We are to be versed on

how this all works so that people can't undermine the Biblical account or impose other sequences that contradict the overall Scriptural record. Remember...Scripture interprets Scripture! So, we read each Gospel in its own light, but also know that every account does fit together. God's Word does not lie. The burden is on us to faithfully figure out how it holds together. This is complicated to be sure, but not impossible. And while we can't answer every single question we might have (when exactly did Jesus rise from the dead?), we can faithfully answer most using what God has given us—His authoritative Word.