

"THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS"

Dowlan Road Church—Max Dawson

Introduction:

1. One of the most perplexing problems in studying the Bible has to do with issues of time. Whether it is hours, days, months or years—each present challenges to us. Issues of time can be hard to understand because the Jews did not reckon time in the same way that we do. The Jews did not count days, months or even years by the same standards that we use.
2. This presents a particular problem for many Bible students when it comes to Matthew 12:38-40.
 - a. The common understanding is that Jesus' time in the tomb was from late Friday afternoon until early Sunday morning—something less than a literal three days and three nights.
 - b. But, it is suggested by some that Jesus' statement demands exactly 72 hours in the tomb. Others would insist that He be in the tomb for at least parts of three days and parts of three nights. That avoids a discrepancy and accommodates our thinking and works well with how we count time.
 - c. But is that our obligation—to make this text fit our thinking and how we reckon time?

The Lesson:

I. Jewish methods of counting time.

- A. It is absolutely critical to understand that the Jews did not count time the same as we do. We will never understand what Jesus meant if we assume the Jews used our counting methods.
- B. The Jewish month was a lunar month; that is, it coincided with the cycle of the moon.
 1. A lunar month is the time between two full moons. This presents a problem because the cycle of the moon isn't exactly 30 days, though it is somewhat close to that. The moon goes through its complete cycle in 29.53 days (29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, 2.7 seconds). The fact that the cycle of the moon isn't exactly 30 days presents some issues.
 2. To address this issue, Jewish calendars had 12 months (7 months had 30 days; 5 had 29 days). In this way, the 12 months closely stayed with the cycle of the moon. If every month had 30 days, it would have been quickly out of step with the moon's cycle. (Our word "month" is from the same word as "moon." A close relation exists between "month" and "moon.")
 3. And so, the Jews (and other ancients) devised a workable system whereby the months would correspond to the cycle of the moon. But, this presented another problem. This system did not correspond well with the year.
- C. The Jewish year was a solar year; that is, it coincided with the cycle of the earth's orbit around the sun. The solar year (which we use today in modern calendars) is 365 days.
 1. Adding up the twelve lunar months of the Jewish calendar, you come up with 355 days—ten days short! This meant that each year (calendar-wise) the seasons would change ten days later than the year before. It would soon be hot in January and snowing in July.
 2. How did the Jews fix this discrepancy? About every third year they added an intercalary month that was 29 days long. It was added after the month Adar, and was called Second

Adar. This is much like the extra day we add to February every four years to make our calendar work—because the solar year is actually 365.24 days (about 365 days, 6 hours).

- D. The Jewish day was also treated differently than we treat our days. Of course it involved the rotation of the earth on its axis—24 hours, a period of darkness and a period of light.
1. The Jews, however, did not begin their counting as we do (and as the Romans did) at midnight. They began the new day at sundown (at approximately 6:00 PM).
 2. Furthermore, they counted any part of a day as a day. This likely came from Genesis 1 where “the evening and the morning were the first day (etc.).” Any part of the evening or morning was counted as a day, however brief that part might have been.
 3. They counted the number of days of an event in an unusual way. An example is in 2 Chronicles 10:5, 12. Rehoboam asked Israel to give him three days to make a decision.
 - a. 2 Chronicles 10:5. Let’s assume this was on a Monday. If so, when would the people come back to him? He said, “Come back to me after three days.” We would expect them to be gone for three days and maybe return on the fourth day (Thursday), right?
 - b. 2 Chronicles 10:12. They returned the third day. If Monday was the first day, then they returned on Wednesday—yet we would think they would return Thursday or maybe even Friday. Someone says, “I think they had it wrong.” Are you sure?
 4. We can’t impose our reckoning of days on ancient peoples. See Exodus 19:10-11, regarding the Israelites purification. We would refer to the third day as “two days later,” but they called it the third day. To illustrate, let’s say this began on Monday—day one; Tuesday is day two; Wednesday is day three, the third day. But we would say “two days later.”
 5. See the case in Acts 10. Note carefully that the counting of days is given in the text.
 - a. Acts 10:3. It was at the ninth hour (3 PM) of the day that Cornelius received a vision. For purposes of our study let’s say this was Monday (Day 1 of our story--Monday).
 - b. Acts 10:9. On the next day Peter received a vision (Day 2—Tuesday).
 - c. Acts 10:23. On the next day Peter departed from Joppa (Day 3—Wednesday).
 - d. Acts 10:24. On the following day they arrived at Caesarea (Day 4—Thursday).
 - e. Acts 10:30. Cornelius says “Four days ago...” We would have said, “Three days ago...” It was exactly 72 hours earlier that the event took place, yet Cornelius called it “four days.” As the ancients counted time, it was indeed parts of four days!
- E. Remember that the Bible was not written using 21st century figures of speech. However time may be reckoned, language is filled with figures of speech about time. Our English language uses many figures of speech about time—figures that we understand very well. Our problem is, we either don’t understand ancient figures of speech or won’t allow others to do as we do!

II. “Three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

- A. When Jesus spoke these words in Matthew 12:40 he was speaking in accord with Jewish reckoning of time. This phrase was just a longer way—a Jewish idiom—of saying “three days.”

- B. We can be sure of this because the men to whom he said it understood it that way. They didn't think it was literally 72 hours or even parts of three days and parts of three nights. See Matthew 27:63. They quoted Jesus. Don't make this four days. It was three, counting the day of His death and the day of His resurrection.
1. Jesus died and was buried on a Friday, the Jewish Preparation Day, Mark 15:42. This was a day to prepare everything (food, clothing, etc.) for the Sabbath. This Sabbath was the Sabbath of Passover week—a high day, John 19:31. The Sabbath was the seventh day of the week; thus this was a Friday. Jesus both died and was buried on Friday.
 2. On the “next day” (the Sabbath—“which followed the day of preparation”), the Pharisees went to Pilate, asking that the tomb be guarded “until the third day,” Matthew 27:62-64. The enemies of the Lord understood that the third day was quickly approaching. Friday was the first day; Saturday (the Sabbath) was the second day; Sunday would be the third day. The enemies of Jesus understood Jewish reckoning of time better than we do. They were worried about Sunday. They weren't trying to figure out some formula that came out to exactly 72 hours in the tomb. They knew what Jesus meant. The time problem is in our minds, not theirs!
 3. Jesus was raised very early in the morning on Sunday, after the Sabbath was past, Mark 16:1-2, 9. This was the third day of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 16:21.
- C. The Bible is clear that Jesus would be (and was) raised “the third day,” not the fourth or fifth day as some have speculated. In addition to Matthew 16:21, see...
1. Matthew 17:22-23. Jesus consistently spoke of being raised the third day.
 2. Matthew 20:17-19. He is in the tomb Friday and Saturday, and raised the third day, Sunday. If he died on Wednesday or Thursday as some say, then he is raised the fourth or fifth day. It won't work. See also Mark 9:31; 10:34; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7.
 3. Luke 13:31-33. Here Jesus sent a cryptic message to Herod about the third day. The word “perfected” meant he would reach His goal and His work would be complete.
 4. Luke 24:46. After the fact, Jesus made it clear that “three days and three nights” is just another way of saying “the third day.”
 5. Acts 10:39-40. The message is consistent, whether spoken by Jesus or Peter.
 6. Luke 24:1, 13, 21. This incident took place on Sunday—the first day of the week—the day of the resurrection, “the third day since these things (Jesus' death and burial) happened.”
- D. The same thing is further illustrated in Esther 4:16; 5:1.

Conclusion:

1. Our Lord's words in Matthew 12:40 are perfectly consistent with how the ancients spoke. No one in the Bible misunderstood this. We misunderstand the Jewish figure of speech and then devise theories to fix it. We wind up making a mess of the whole thing and have Jesus being raised the fourth or fifth day—contradicting a dozen passages that plainly say he was raised “the third day.”
2. Let us resolve to be better Bible students and recognize that there are no contradictions in scripture. Let us also be obedient Bible students and remember what the resurrection means to us!