

THE TIMING OF THE CROSS

A Biblical Case for a Wednesday or Thursday Crucifixion

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Introduction

The traditional view that Jesus was crucified on Friday and rose on Sunday morning has been the predominant position of the Christian church for centuries. This timing is embedded in our liturgical calendar, our hymns, and our theological language. We speak of "Good Friday" and "Easter Sunday" as though the days of the week are settled facts of biblical history.

However, a careful examination of Scripture raises significant questions about this traditional timeline. When we allow the Bible to speak for itself, particularly Jesus' own prophecy in Matthew 12:40 and the specific details recorded in John's Gospel, a Wednesday or Thursday crucifixion emerges as a more biblically defensible position. This is not a matter of minor chronological curiosity. It concerns our commitment to literal interpretation of Scripture and the precision of Christ's prophetic word.

This article presents the biblical, historical, and theological case for reconsidering the traditional Friday crucifixion timeline. The evidence suggests that Jesus was crucified on either Wednesday or Thursday of Passion Week, died before sundown that day, and rose from the dead on Sunday morning, thus fulfilling His own prophecy of being "*three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*"¹

The Problem with the Traditional View

Jesus' Own Prophecy: Three Days and Three Nights

The most significant challenge to the Friday crucifixion view comes from Jesus Himself. In Matthew 12:38-40, the scribes and Pharisees demand a sign from Jesus. He responds:

³⁸ Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. ³⁹ But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: ⁴⁰ For as Jonas was three

¹ Matthew 12:40 (KJV).

days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Matthew 12:38-40

This is not a casual statement. Jesus is declaring the *only* sign that will be given to that generation—His death, burial, and resurrection. And He specifies the timeframe with remarkable precision: three days and three nights.

The difficulty with the Friday crucifixion view becomes immediately apparent:

- Friday afternoon to Saturday morning = 1 night, 1 day
- Saturday morning to Sunday morning = 1 night, 1 day
- Total: 2 nights, 2 days (at most)

Even with the most generous reckoning, counting any part of a day as a full day, the Friday-to-Sunday timeline provides at most two nights and portions of three days. It does not provide "*three days and three nights*" as Jesus explicitly prophesied.

Defenders of the traditional view argue that "*three days and three nights*" is an idiomatic expression meaning simply "three days," and that any part of a day counts as a whole day in Jewish reckoning.² While it is true that Hebrew idiom sometimes counts partial days as whole days (as seen in Esther 4:16 and 5:1), this does not resolve the problem. Jesus did not say "after three days" or "on the third day" in this passage. He said "*three days and three nights*," (Matthew 12:40) using language that parallels the precise description of Jonah's experience. Jonah was in the fish's belly for a literal period that Scripture describes as "*three days and three nights*" (Jonah 1:17). Jesus is claiming His experience will parallel Jonah's; not approximately, but actually.

If we take Jesus at His word, we must account for three distinct day periods and three distinct night periods. The Friday-to-Sunday timeline does not provide this.

The High Day of John 19:31

A second critical piece of evidence comes from the Gospel of John. After Jesus died on the cross, John records:

The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. John 19:31

² See D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 293-294.

The phrase "*high day*" (Greek: *megalē hēmera*, literally "great day") is significant. This indicates that the Sabbath following the crucifixion was not merely the regular weekly Sabbath (Saturday), but an annual feast day Sabbath; specifically, the First Day of Unleavened Bread.³

According to Leviticus 23:6-7, the First Day of Unleavened Bread (Nisan 15) was a holy convocation, a Sabbath rest, regardless of what day of the week it fell on. This was one of seven annual "high days" in the Jewish calendar, distinct from the weekly Sabbath.⁴

If the day following the crucifixion was a "high day"; the First Day of Unleavened Bread, then the crucifixion occurred on Nisan 14, the day of Passover. But Nisan 15 could fall on any day of the week, not necessarily Friday. In fact, if we allow for a Wednesday or Thursday crucifixion, we can account for *two* Sabbaths between the crucifixion and the resurrection: the high day Sabbath (First Day of Unleavened Bread) and the regular weekly Sabbath (Saturday).

This explains several otherwise puzzling details in the Gospel accounts, including why the women waited to prepare spices and why they came to the tomb "*very early in the morning*" on Sunday.⁵

The Proposed Timeline: Wednesday or Thursday Crucifixion

A Wednesday Crucifixion Timeline

If Jesus was crucified on Wednesday, Nisan 14, the timeline would unfold as follows:

- Wednesday (Nisan 14): Passover. Jesus crucified in the afternoon, dies at the ninth hour (3:00 PM), buried before sundown
- Thursday (Nisan 15): First Day of Unleavened Bread; HIGH DAY Sabbath (no work allowed)
- Friday (Nisan 16): Regular day; women purchase and prepare spices (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56)
- Saturday (Nisan 17): Weekly Sabbath (no work allowed)
- Sunday (Nisan 18): Resurrection morning; women come to the tomb at dawn

Time in the tomb:

- Wednesday night, Thursday day (1 day, 1 night)
- Thursday night, Friday day (2 days, 2 nights)
- Friday night, Saturday day (3 days, 3 nights)

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 546-547.

⁴ The seven annual high days were: (1) First Day of Unleavened Bread (Nisan 15), (2) Seventh Day of Unleavened Bread (Nisan 21), (3) Pentecost (Sivan 6), (4) Feast of Trumpets (Tishri 1), (5) Day of Atonement (Tishri 10), (6) First Day of Tabernacles (Tishri 15), and (7) Eighth Day of Tabernacles (Tishri 22). See Leviticus 23.

⁵ Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1.

- Resurrection occurs sometime between Saturday sundown and Sunday dawn

This timeline accounts for Jesus' prophecy of "three days and three nights" and explains the presence of two Sabbaths, allowing the women time to purchase spices after the first Sabbath (the high day) but before the second Sabbath (the weekly Sabbath).⁶

A Thursday Crucifixion Timeline (Alternative)

Some scholars prefer a Thursday crucifixion, which would work as follows:

- Thursday (Nisan 14): Passover. Jesus crucified in the afternoon, dies at the ninth hour (3:00 PM), buried before sundown
- Friday (Nisan 15): First Day of Unleavened Bread—HIGH DAY Sabbath
- Saturday (Nisan 16): Weekly Sabbath
- Sunday (Nisan 17): Resurrection morning

Time in the tomb:

- Thursday night, Friday day (1 day, 1 night)
- Friday night, Saturday day (2 days, 2 nights)
- Saturday night, Sunday morning (3 days, 3 nights)

The Thursday view is less common but still accounts for the biblical data better than the traditional Friday crucifixion.⁷

Both the Wednesday and Thursday views resolve the chronological difficulties that plague the Friday crucifixion timeline.

Supporting Evidence from the Gospel Accounts

The Women and the Spices

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. Mark 16:1

And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment. Luke 23:56

⁶ Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 65-74.

⁷ Robert H. Stein, "The Sabbath in the Passion Narratives," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 4 (1994): 133-139.

At first glance, these accounts seem contradictory. Mark says they bought spices *after* the Sabbath. Luke says they prepared spices and then rested on the Sabbath. How can both be true?

The answer: there were *two* Sabbaths. After the high day Sabbath (First Day of Unleavened Bread) ended on Thursday evening, the women purchased spices on Friday. Then they prepared the spices before the weekly Sabbath began on Friday evening. They rested on the weekly Sabbath (Saturday), and came to the tomb early Sunday morning.⁸

This harmonizes the accounts perfectly and provides additional support for the Wednesday crucifixion timeline.

The Resurrection Appearances

All four Gospels agree that Jesus appeared to His disciples on "*the first day of the week*," Sunday.⁹ The question is not *when* He appeared, but *when* He rose.

Matthew 28:1 says: "*In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.*"

The Greek phrase translated "*in the end of the sabbath*" (*opse de sabbatōn*) can also mean "late on the Sabbath" or "after the Sabbath."¹⁰ This suggests the resurrection may have occurred late Saturday evening, as the new day (Sunday) was beginning according to Jewish reckoning (sundown to sundown).

When the women arrived at the tomb Sunday morning, Jesus had already risen. The angel declared, "*He is not here: for he is risen*" (Matthew 28:6). The resurrection had already taken place by the time they arrived.

⁸ This two-Sabbath explanation is detailed in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 194-195.

⁹ Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 740n1.

Historical and Theological Considerations

Church Tradition and the Council of Nicaea

The traditional Friday crucifixion view became dominant in the early church and was reinforced by the ecclesiastical calendar established at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.¹¹ However, church tradition, while valuable, is not infallible. Scripture alone is our final authority.

Some early church fathers, including Victorinus of Pettau (3rd century), held to a Wednesday or Thursday crucifixion.¹² The Friday view gained prominence not necessarily because of superior biblical evidence, but because of liturgical convenience and the development of "Holy Week" observances.

The Importance of Literal Interpretation

At stake in this discussion is the question of how we interpret Scripture. Do we take Jesus' words literally when He says "three days and three nights"? Or do we assume He was speaking loosely and meant something less precise?

Conservative dispensational theology has historically championed literal interpretation of Scripture wherever possible. We do not allegorize the creation account, the flood narrative, or the prophecies of Christ's return. We take God's Word at face value unless the text itself indicates otherwise.

If we apply the same hermeneutic to Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 12:40, we should expect a literal fulfillment: three days *and* three nights. The Wednesday (or Thursday) crucifixion provides this. The Friday crucifixion does not.¹³

Does It Matter?

Some may ask: Does the day of the week really matter? After all, the resurrection is a fact regardless of whether it was Friday or Wednesday.

The answer is yes, it matters; for several reasons:

- Christ's Prophetic Accuracy: Jesus staked His messianic credentials on the sign of Jonah. If He did not fulfill His own prophecy precisely, we have a problem.

¹¹ Paul L. Maier, "The Date of the Nativity and Chronology of Jesus," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 113-129.

¹² Victorinus of Pettau, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (c. 270 AD), cited in Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 72.

¹³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 71-73, discusses the importance of literal interpretation as a foundational hermeneutical principle.

- Biblical Inerrancy: If Scripture records Jesus' words inaccurately, or if His prophecy was not literally fulfilled, the doctrine of inerrancy is compromised.
- Literal Hermeneutics: If we do not take Jesus' words literally here, where else might we compromise on literal interpretation?
- Honoring God's Word: We demonstrate our commitment to Scripture by wrestling with difficult passages rather than accommodating them to tradition.

The day of the crucifixion matters because the precision of God's Word matters.

Conclusion

The traditional Friday crucifixion view, while deeply embedded in Christian tradition, faces significant biblical challenges. Jesus' own prophecy of "three days and three nights," the reference to a "high day" in John 19:31, and the details about the women purchasing spices all point toward a Wednesday or Thursday crucifixion.

A Wednesday crucifixion (with Thursday as a possible alternative) accounts for:

- A literal fulfillment of Matthew 12:40
- The presence of two Sabbaths between crucifixion and resurrection
- The timeline of the women's activities regarding the spices
- The emphasis in John's Gospel on the "high day"

This is not a matter of chronological curiosity. It is a matter of taking Scripture seriously, honoring Jesus' prophetic word, and maintaining a consistent literal hermeneutic.

The resurrection is a fact of history. Christ is risen. The tomb is empty. Death is defeated. These truths remain unchanged regardless of the day of the week. But if we claim to believe in the inerrancy and precision of Scripture, we must be willing to reexamine even long-held traditions when the biblical evidence points in a different direction.

As we meditate on the passion of Christ, let us do so with minds submitted to the authority of God's Word and hearts grateful for the Lamb of God who was slain for our sins—whether on Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday; and who rose victorious on the third day.

Bibliography

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For Further Study:

This article presents the biblical case for reconsidering the traditional crucifixion timeline. For additional resources on hermeneutics, dispensational theology, and the passion week, visit **73twentyministries.com**.

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