



Born to Win

Three Days and Three Nights

by Ronald L. Dart

I love a good mystery and puzzle-solving is a favorite pastime of mine. So perhaps I can be forgiven for saying (as I did in a recent program) that God also loves a mystery.

Sometimes, of course, he speaks plainly. (The Ten Commandments are plain enough.) But other times the truth is far more subtle. I might offer reasons for God's subtlety (and they are there) but I hardly need to prove that. Anyone who pays attention to God's actions in the world will be well-aware that God prefers to be subtle, even when you're confident that something that has happened has been his intervention.

But the Bible is a little more than mere subtlety. It is a collection of the testimony of witnesses. And while I certainly believe in the inspiration of the Bible, I also believe that God doesn't engage in witness tampering. The Holy Spirit sees to it that the witnesses are in court and that they tell the truth. After that, we the jury have to evaluate their testimony and try to figure out the larger picture.

Now if you have ever watched a bunch of *Perry Mason* mysteries, or this type of thing — courtroom dramas, you can often find your way to the truth of what happened. We know this even though no individual witness knows the whole story. You get a little bit from this fellow, you get a little bit from that fellow and you get something from a third lady and between those three things, the picture comes together.

Well something like that exists in the Bible. There is enough corroboration of the gospel accounts to support the key elements of their stories. They all saw the resurrected Christ, for example, and they are all unified. Yeah, there may be little details, but those aren't important. The differences that you find in the accounts show us that the witnesses were not in collusion. In other words, this is important to establish the fact that there were *four* witnesses, not four witnesses telling *one* witness's story, if you follow me. There are some first-class mysteries in the New Testament. Many of them have kept scholars scratching their heads for years and provided material for countless doctoral dissertations.

Consider as a case in point the mystery of how you get three days and three nights between Friday night and Sunday morning? You know, Friday night: that's one night. Saturday: that's a day. Saturday night: that's one night. So you've got two nights and one day. Now you probably know what I'm driving at, even if you're not a Christian. You've heard all this because of the holidays we have. Christian tradition has Jesus crucified on Good Friday and raised from the dead on Sunday morning having been buried just at the end of Good Friday. And nearly everyone knows that Jesus said:

Matthew 12

NKJV

⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

There's some marvelously creative theories to account for all this. Some just prefer to declare, "Well, it's just a Greek idiom and it's fulfilled if any part of three separate days are involved."

Well, I've dug out all the relevant texts and I can't make that work. It might work on a stretch if Jesus had merely said "three days", but he didn't. He used an emphatic "three days and three nights". The thing is, there is some non-grammatical evidence that needs to be considered and usually has not been. Now you can talk about Greek idioms all you want, but let's put the language on the shelf, and let's come back to the real world.

Let me start with a point of clarification. Everyone knows that the day following Jesus' crucifixion was a Sabbath day, right? What every one doesn't seem to know is that the Jewish holy days, the Jewish holidays, all except one, were *Sabbath days*. Note, I didn't say they fell on a Saturday Sabbath, I said, they are Sabbath days. And that is so even if the calendar date for one of them falls on a Thursday. In that case, Thursday is a Sabbath, and the day before it is a preparation day.

Now let me advance a theory for your consideration. Suppose that Jesus was not crucified on a Friday, but on Wednesday. He was then put in the tomb in haste, just as the sun was going down. Jewish days begin at sunset. Now let's count out three days and three nights. You've got Wednesday night, Thursday, Thursday night, Friday, Friday night, Saturday, and there we are — three days and three nights. It works, but is that what happened?

Well, let me put some witnesses on the stand and let's consider their testimony and see what one of them might know that the other did not.

Luke 23

NAS

⁵⁰ And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man

⁵¹ (he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God;

⁵² this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

⁵³ And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain.

⁵⁴ It was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

Now there wasn't much of the day left when Jesus was laid in that tomb and the stone rolled across the entrance, and we have firmly established that the day following the crucifixion was a Sabbath day. But which kind of a Sabbath day was it? Was it the *weekly* Sabbath or was it one of the *annual* Sabbath days that fell on a calendar date — a holiday?

Let's back up just a little bit in time to consider the testimony of John. Let's call John to the stand. Here's what he had to say:

John 19

NAS

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfill the Scripture, said, "I am thirsty."

²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop and brought it up to His mouth.

³⁰ Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

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 the Sabbath on the next day was a “high day” It was the first day of the Feast of Passover and it need not have been on a Saturday. It could’ve been on Thursday, it could’ve been on a Tuesday. It moved through the week from year to year.

Now here is our problem: how can we tell whether it was a weekly Sabbath or an annual Sabbath?

John 20

NAS

³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body.

³⁹ Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.

⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

⁴¹ Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.

⁴² Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

The clear implication there is that if they had had more time before sunset, they might well have taken Jesus to another location, but they felt it was important to get Jesus in the ground quickly. That is in complete accord with Jewish burial customs. They don’t like to delay burial at all. Preferably a person should be put in the grave the same day he dies. What was important about this is that the burial had to be done hastily, in order to be complete before the sun went down beginning the Sabbath. There is no day left of the preparation day to count.

Now Luke from a slightly different perspective notes:

Luke 23

KJV

⁵⁵ And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid.

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

Did you catch that problem? They had to rush to get this body buried. They buried him right next to the place of the crucifixion because they had no time to go anywhere else. How could these women have watched the burial and the completion of the burial and had time to go home and prepare spices before the Sabbath day came? There isn’t any way! If you think that’s difficult, I’ll call in another witness who saw something else that happened.

So here’s the picture. They had to bury Jesus almost in the same place, just in a little garden right there below the place where he was crucified. Why? Well, because they had no time to carry the body to another place. They had to get the body in the ground before the Sabbath day began. But we are told these women stood there, watched how the body was laid, watched this all take place, *then* they returned and prepared spices and ointments and *then* rested the Sabbath day, according to the

Commandment. Now that doesn't look like it would work. But it becomes a little clearer. Now you have to wait for this because Mark's testimony is a little different.

Mark 16:1 is not a major point, it's almost a throw away line. He says:

Mark 16

NIV

¹ When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.

Oops, they didn't buy their spices till *after* the Sabbath, but we've just been told that they had prepared the spices *before* the Sabbath. What happened? How can we understand this? Here's what took place. They bought their spices when the Sabbath was over, prepared their ointments and spices and then rested on the weekly Sabbath day. It's really easy to miss, since the details of the sequence of events are spread over four gospels.

But the women saw Jesus buried in the last minutes before sundown beginning the Sabbath. Then, when the Sabbath was over, they bought spices, prepared them and rested the *second* Sabbath day according to the Commandment. This second Sabbath day was indeed Saturday. But when I said this *second Sabbath*, I drew an inference from the facts and the testimony before us. The inference is that there were two Sabbaths that week with a day in between.

So my theory of a Wednesday crucifixion is not entirely out of court.

But there's another important question here that bears on this. Why three days and three nights, anyhow? What is the big deal about that? Why not just — Jesus is dead. They bury him, they put him in the tomb, they roll the stone across it, and when they turn around there stands Jesus saying, "Aha, fooled you didn't I?" In other words, why not an hour in the tomb? Why not overnight? Why *three days and three nights*?

It turns out that there really is a reason for that. If we ask the question of how those days and nights got into the picture, we can start by looking at another distinct example of a resurrection in the New Testament.

There was a family in Bethany that was very special to Jesus. He loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha and no doubt he had spent a lot of time with them. So when they sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick and dying, they plainly expected him to come to them right away and heal him. But when the word came to Jesus, he delayed for two more days, which is really kind of odd considering the closeness of that family. You can find this story in the 11th chapter of John's Gospel. He told his disciples:

John 11

KJV

⁴ [...] This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.

Now after delaying these extra days, waiting deliberately for Lazarus to die, Jesus said to his disciples:

John 11

KJV

¹¹ Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.

The disciples didn't catch the drift at first, so Jesus spoke more plainly:

John 11*KJV*

¹⁴ [...] Lazarus is dead.

¹⁵ And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.

Now this is really an important section here. Jesus tells his disciples “I waited until he was dead, because it was important that you would understand, and believe what’s going on here.” Now, it’s clear enough that Jesus intended to raise Lazarus from the dead right from the beginning, but this was terribly hard on Mary and Martha.

John 11*KJV*

²⁰ Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house.

²¹ Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

²² But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.

The pain of this moment is palpable and that last phrase of Martha’s seems to imply that she thought Jesus might indeed raise Lazarus from the dead and Jesus replied. “Your brother will rise again.” This is the answer that we hear at a funeral of people that we love, “Your loved one will rise again and you will be reunited in the day of the resurrection.”

John 11*KJV*

²⁴ Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

And apparently she’s implying that’s not what she was asking for here. Jesus answered this plaintive cry...which is the hope that all of us carry:

John 11*KJV*

²⁵ Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

²⁶ And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?

Martha did believe, and she returned to the house and quietly told Mary that Jesus had come at last.

John 11*NAS*

³² Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”

That had to hurt, even though Jesus knew what he was going to do. Knowing what Mary and Martha had to suffer, this passage in John 11:33 tells us that:

John 11*KJV*

³³ [H]e groaned in the spirit, and was troubled.

Here was Mary crying like her heart would break and there was a collection of mourners who had followed her to the house and in verse 34 Jesus said:

John 11

KJV

³⁴ [...] Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

This shortest verse in the Bible speaks volumes about Jesus' humanity. Even though he knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, he hurt inside for the pain others were feeling. And there is something inside all of us that, no matter how well prepared we think we are for the death of a loved one, weeping follows in the face of death.

John 11

KJV

³⁸ Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

³⁹ Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

And this begins to answer the question of Jesus' delay. It had to be established that Lazarus was truly dead before Jesus raised him, otherwise somebody would have been saying, "Well he wasn't really dead, he just swooned. He was just in a coma and he recovered." No, he was dead to the point that his body would have begun to decay.

Jesus called out "Lazarus come forth!" and the man who had been dead staggered out of the tomb still wrapped in his shroud.

We tend to forget in this day and age when we can be more certain through science when a person is dead, but even now we're not totally sure. In ages gone by they didn't even have that. Some held to a belief that the soul stayed with the body for three days after death. Here's what one Jewish source says. It is the *Tractate Semahot* which means "mourning". It says:

One may go out to the cemetery for three days to inspect the dead for a sign of life without fear that this smacks of heathen practice for it happened that a man was inspected after three days and he went on to live 25 years. Still another one went on to have five children and died later.

Now when you look at this you would say, "Now wait a minute!" What it is saying is that, often enough, people who would appear to be dead...weren't!

And so it was that they waited, and did not finalize the person's death for three days.

Other Jewish sources believe that they should only use wood coffins and they do not embalm the dead. The reason offered is that as the body decays the soul ascends to heaven, and I presume that's one of the reasons the Jews do not approve of cremation either. The decay was assumed to begin after *three days*.

So if Jesus had been buried at sunset on Friday, and rose while it was still dark Sunday morning, he would've been in the tomb less than 36 hours. The Jews could have argued that he had not been dead, that this was no miracle. He had merely lapsed into a coma and then recovered.

So *three days and three nights* really is important. It is important to establish *real death*. 36 hours doesn't do it. But I realize in saying all this, I have raised still another problem.

Now here is the next problem. If my theory is correct that Jesus was buried at sunset Wednesday and if he was in the tomb for three days and three nights, then Jesus rose from the dead, not on Sunday morning, but Saturday about sunset. The problem is with something that Mark said. It is in Mark 16:9 where it says:

Mark 16

KJV

⁹ Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.

It sounds like he rose early the first day of the week. The question is whether the phrase “early the first day of the week” refers to the time of the resurrection or the time of his appearance. Now the Greek does not have any punctuation, but if you move the comma, this is what you get. “Now when Jesus was risen, (comma) early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene out of whom he cast out seven devils.”

Now there's another important fragment of testimony here. he appeared first to Mary Magdalene. What this tells us is that no one witnessed the time of his resurrection, only the time of Jesus' first appearance. So, my theory of the case seems to hold together through this small difficulty, and the Friday to Sunday period seems unlikely from the evidence.

Now there's a question that someone's going to come up with: what was Jesus doing all night Saturday night? Well there is no witness in the Bible to answer that question.

But there was at this season a little noticed ceremony in the Temple service, that was also about Christ. This was the season of the first ripe barley, but the people were not allowed to eat any of that year's crop until a small portion of it had been offered to God by the priests. It is called the Wave Sheaf Offering in the King James version and the ceremony is described in Leviticus 23. This could not be done on the Sabbath; it was an act of work. They had to harvest the grain. They had to prepare it and they did it during the night. This work was done when the Sabbath ended.

It is described in Alfred Edersheim's well-known book *The Temple — Its Ministry and Services* [Chapter 13: The Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Day of Pentecost]. The ceremony took place right after the Sabbath day, according to the law. It was an act of work to harvest the wave sheaf. So just after sunset, a little group of people wound their way down to a field that had been prepared ahead of time. The crowd found one of the sheaves that was there. Three men, each with a sickle in their hands, shouted a series of questions to the crowd gathered around them. Now I remind you that this is just after sunset. They shouted their answers back at them. They said, “Has the sun gone down?”, and the crowd answered, “Yes.” “This sheaf?” “Yes.” “With this sickle?” “Yes.” “Into this basket?” “Yes.” “Shall I reap?” “Yes.” And with a stroke they cut the sheaf of the firstfruits from the ground and that may have been the moment when Jesus, who is also called the firstfruits in the Bible opened his eyes in the tomb.

Through that night the sheaf was prepared for an offering. The grain was threshed from it, parched in a pan over fire, and early the next morning it was presented to God in the Temple. This sheaf is the very first of the firstfruits from the fields around Jerusalem. This seems to be the imagery that Paul is driving at in the beautiful resurrection chapter of 1 Corinthians 15.

1 Corinthians 15

KJV

²⁰ But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

- ²¹ For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.
²² For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.
²³ But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.

Paul understood all this and it is a clear allusion to the harvest, of that firstfruit of the barley from the ground, as a symbol of Jesus being the first of many that would be resurrected ultimately to stand before God. For some reason this image of the harvest is repeated again and again in Jesus' ministry to try to impress upon people's minds that what we are doing is harvesting people from this life for God's kingdom.

When Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, the first time after his resurrection, she grabbed him by the feet and he said:

John 20

KJV

¹⁷ [...] Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

Later that same day Jesus would allow his disciples to touch and hold him [**John 20:20**] and the plain implication is that between the time that Mary saw him and the time he met with his disciples, he had ascended to the Father and returned. No doubt he was presented before the Father at the same time that the Wave Sheaf was being waved in the Temple. The firstfruits of the dead was Jesus.

Funny thing about this verse, Mark 16:9. It is consistently called "the first day of the week" in all translations, but in the Greek it is "the first day *of the weeks*". It is day one of the seven weeks that count down to the Feast of Pentecost, which is indeed the Feast of the Firstfruits.

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radio program by
Ronald L. Dart.

Christian Educational Ministries

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 (242-5344) ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311
❖ www.borntowin.net ❖

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