

When Did Jesus Die?

There are three possible days that Jesus could have died. Friday is by far most often thought to be the day Jesus died. Thursday also is often thought to be that day and some even think it could have happened on Wednesday. Many volumes have been written defending each hypothesis but obviously only one school of thought is correct. Let's do a quick overview of each theory to see which one has the most merit.

Friday death

Jesus dying on Friday is by far the most popular idea with church tradition propelling this idea well beyond a Thursday or Wednesday death. Adherents claim many clues in Scripture that indicates a Friday death. The first clue is found on Mark 15:42 that states it was the day of preparation, the day before the Sabbath. Sabbath is the seventh day of the week and the Jews would celebrate the Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. As Jesus was hanging from the cross there was concern on the part of the religious leaders that those hanging on the cross would not die soon enough to be buried before the Sabbath (John 19:31—33), another indication that Jesus was crucified on Friday.

To complicate things a bit Matthew 26:19; Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:15 describe Jesus desiring to eat the Passover meal with His Disciples however, we see from John 18:28—29 that the religious leaders had not yet eaten their Passover meal while Jesus was in their custody. This would suggest that Jesus ate the Passover meal (often called the Last Supper) with His Disciples on Thursday (Nisan 14, sundown) while the religious leaders would eat theirs on Friday evening (Nisan 15)—right after Jesus' trial. The religious leaders would have been preparing for Passover during the time He was being crucified, including the killing of the Passover lamb corresponding to Christ's sacrificial death.

Since Jesus was to be in the tomb for three days we need to figure out how Friday night to Sunday morning adds up to three days. By counting Friday as the first day in the tomb, Saturday as the second and Sunday morning as the third day we can see that Jesus was in the grave covering three days, although the total time would be no more than 1.5 days. This is the biggest problem with this theory. As Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights so will the Son of Man (Matthew 12:38—40). At best, only two literal days and two literal nights can be accounted for with a Friday death.

Thursday death

Another fairly popular theory is that Jesus died on Thursday. Jesus would have eaten the Passover with His Disciples on Wednesday evening (Nisan 14) then would have been arrested, tried and condemned on early Thursday and crucified around 9 a.m. Two Sabbaths are required for this view to work. Passover is Nisan 14 followed by the seven-day feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev. 23:4—8), the first and last days being a Sabbath. If Jesus died on Thursday, Friday would be the first day of Unleavened Bread followed by a weekly Sabbath on Saturday. This is confirmed by John 19:31—37 when the soldiers broke the legs of those hanging on the cross to speed up the dying process in order to remove the bodies before the Sabbath.

Having a Thursday crucifixion seems to solve the three days and three nights that Jesus needed to spend in the earth. The three nights happened on Thursday, Friday and Saturday while Friday, Saturday and Sunday give three mornings. However, total time in the grave would be a maximum of 2.5 days.

A problem seems to arise if we follow what Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were doing. According to Luke 23:54—24:2 the women went to the tomb of Jesus to watch Joseph of Arimathea place Jesus into the tomb then went to prepare spices and perfumes. They would have rested the next two days because Friday and Saturday were Sabbaths. Early Sunday morning they went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus but discovered the tomb empty. The main problem is found in Mark 16:1 that states they bought spices. Since the Sabbath was to begin very shortly after they watched Joseph place Jesus in the tomb there would be no time for them to buy spices by early Sunday morning. However, the aorist tense indicates the purchase was made previously (had been purchased) with no indication of when that happened.

Wednesday death

Less popular but still with some merit this proposition has Jesus and His Disciples eating their Passover meal on Tuesday evening (Nisan 14). Later that night they went to the Mount of Olives where Jesus was arrested and tried early the following day. The next day after Passover (Thursday) was the beginning of Unleavened Bread and thus would be a special Sabbath. Saturday would be a weekly Sabbath with Friday a non-Sabbath day. This can solve the problem of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary buying spices and preparing them for Jesus' body after the Sabbath (Mark 16:1). They would have seen Jesus placed in the tomb, rested on Thursday's special Sabbath and purchased and prepared the spices on Friday before the regular weekly Sabbath. They would not have had access to the tomb on Friday because of the guards that were posted to protect Jesus' body from being stolen so their first opportunity to bring the prepared spices to Jesus' body would be Sunday morning.

This view can also account for three days and nights in the grave: Wednesday, Thursday and Friday night and Thursday, Friday and Saturday morning. We know Jesus was resurrected by Sunday morning meaning he could have arisen anytime after Saturday evening. According to Matthew 28:1—6 an earthquake occurred and an angel of the Lord was in the tomb. We are not told exactly when this happened.

One problem with a Wednesday death is that Jesus would need to ride into Jerusalem on the Sabbath and thus would have broken the Mosaic Law. This would not be possible since Jesus was the only human to be able to completely fulfill the Law (Matthew 5:17—18; John 15:10; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22). Another problem arises on the road to Emmaus when the two mention it is now the third day of Jesus' death. This is easy to explain since they said it was the third day the actual time could be closer to four days putting the events as far back as Wednesday.

A note about Passover

Many assume Jesus ate Passover one day earlier. Matthew, Mark and Luke all call this meal Passover (Matt. 26:18; Mark 14:14; Luke 22:8, 11). John calls the day Jesus was arrested the Preparation day of the Passover (John 19:14; 31) and the religious leaders were going to eat the Passover while Jesus was detained (John 18:28). To understand how these fit together it is necessary to understand how Israel celebrated Passover.

Passover was a one-day event followed by seven days of Unleavened Bread. The first and last days of Unleavened Bread were Sabbaths. There were several preparation days including preparing for the Passover and for the Sabbath(s) after the Passover. It is also important to realize Israel interchanged Passover and Unleavened Bread. When they spoke of the Passover they were often referring to the eight days of celebration and vice versa (Luke 22:1; Ezekiel 45:21). When John 19:14 records that it was the day of preparation for the Passover he was saying the next day was a Sabbath, the first day of Unleavened Bread, he was not saying that the next day was the Passover. In order for the Passover lamb to be killed at the same time that Christ was crucified would have Jesus eating the Passover meal one day earlier than it was to be eaten. This is not possible because Jesus called His last supper with the Disciples a Passover and Jesus would have followed the Law to the letter. He could not change the day of the Passover without violating the Mosaic Law which is why Mark 14:12 clearly states that the Passover lamb was being sacrificed at the same time Jesus and His Disciples were planning their Passover meal.

What's really important?

Speculation about when Christ died is an interesting exercise and can actually shed light on the veracity of Scripture if you approach God's word by faith. Each book of the Bible holds together in one cohesive volume. The immeasurable love demonstrated by the Father giving up His Son should have us fall to our knees in thankfulness for His great gift to mankind. Knowing Scripture is absolutely trustworthy should lead us to realize that our eternal future is wrapped up in Christ's resurrection. Remove the resurrection and remove our hope of an eternity with Him.

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