

THE THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS

DR. H. A. CAMERON

A question that crops up perennially, and especially occurring to young Christians, is, How can the term "Three days and three nights" be applied to the time between the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, if, as is taught, He died on Friday afternoon and rose again from the dead early on the first day of the week? Three days and three nights are seventy-two hours in duration, whereas part of Friday, the whole of Saturday, and part of the Lord's Day would extend over a period of only half that time. How, then, can we explain this difficulty?

It has been the common belief, throughout the Church's history, that our Lord was crucified on Friday and rose again early on Sunday morning. Now, to get the seventy-two hours that seem demanded by the expression "three days and three nights," some have asserted that the crucifixion took place on Wednesday and not on Friday, and the defenders of this view have many ingenious answers to the several objections that arise, but unfortunately for their position the time is too long, no matter what method of reckoning (Eastern or Western) is adopted, seeing that period occupies three days and four nights, and extends over at least eighty-two hours. For if the Lord died at three o'clock on Wednesday, there would be nine hours of Wednesday still to run, twenty-four hours each of Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and say at least one hour of Sunday. Those who hold this view have, therefore, an insuperable obstacle to face in the fact that the Lord (according to their reckoning) would be raised on the fourth day.

Others have assumed that the crucifixion took place on Thursday, but here, if seventy-two hours are to be obtained, the time is too short by at least fourteen hours, for by this method of reckoning we get only two days and three nights, and a period of at most fifty-eight hours: namely, nine hours on Thursday, forty-eight during Friday and Saturday, and say one for Sunday.

Now we should first of all satisfy ourselves of the correctness of the Church's traditional and universal belief that the death of our Lord took place on Friday (which is the only point to be settled, for all are agreed that He rose again early on the first day of the week), and this search resolves itself into the question, "What saith the Scripture?"

It is evident that our Lord observed the Passover on the proper day, and did not, as some claim, partake of it a day ahead of the Jews, an "anticipatory Passover," as they call it, which was legally impossible. For Matthew, Mark and Luke are agreed that on the first day of unleavened bread, when the Passover must be killed, He sat down at the appointed time with the twelve Apostles "to eat this Passover." At the same hour throughout Jerusalem all the families of the Jews were similarly engaged, including the members of the Sanhedrim who would in a few hours and within the confines of that very Paschal feast day, have a hand in the death of "Christ our Passover." The paschal lamb was killed before sunset on the evening of the 14th Nisan (our Thursday evening), and after the body had been "roast with fire" the paschal feast was partaken of during Thursday night: and thus the Passover was eaten, the Lord's supper was instituted, and the crucifixion and burial of our Lord took place, within a period of one day, made up of what we would call the night of the 14th and the day of the 15th.

But John 18:28 is brought to our attention to prove that on the day of the crucifixion the Jews had not yet observed the Passover, for there we read that early on that day "they themselves went not into the Judgment Hall, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover." Now we have already seen that our Lord and His disciples ate the Passover lamb, not twenty-four hours ahead of the time, but at the appointed hour, and these Jews were just as religious in their observance, and we are positive that when the hour had come they also had partaken of the paschal lamb. In other words, the paschal meal was neither anticipated in the one case, nor deferred in the other. What, then, must we say in view of this statement: "lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover"? Simply this, that the expression "the Passover" covered the seven days of the feast of unleavened bread, and during that day the peace offerings of that feast were eaten, and lest they should be defiled by Gentile contact and thus be prevented (being ceremonially unclean) from eating these peace offerings connected with the Passover, they kept outside the Praetorium, Pilate's residence.

That, by the term "the Passover," the Jews meant the Feast of unleavened bread connected therewith, is evident from Luke 22:1: "Now the feast of unleavened bread drew nigh, which is called the Passover." Dr. Saalschutz, one of the most learned of Jewish writers, says that "the whole feast of unleavened bread and all its festive meals were designated as the Passover," a view which is supported by a passage in the Talmud, where, to the question, "What is the meaning of the term Passover?" the answer is, "The peace offerings of the Passover." These holy offerings (the Chagigah) of the feast day, were brought and eaten **before evening** upon the 15th Nisan (the day of the crucifixion), in accordance with the law of Moses: "Thou shalt sacrifice the Passover unto the Lord thy God of the flock (the paschal lambs) and the herd (the peace offerings) . . . seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread therewith" (Deut. 16:23). Compare 2 Chron. 35:7, 8, where the paschal lambs are distinguished from the bullocks and oxen of the feast of unleavened bread. The lamb was slain on the evening of the 14th, the paschal meal was eaten a few hours later, and the peace offerings on the 15th. These Jews had already eaten the Passover lamb, they desired now unhindered to eat the Chagigah (the Passover peace offerings). This is still more evident when we consider that had it been the paschal meal they intended to eat they did not need to fear defilement, for ceremonially they would be clean as soon as the evening came ("unclean until the evening" the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice), and thus they would be fit to eat the paschal lamb which was partaken of **during the night**; but anticipating now (not the paschal meal which they had already eaten, but) the peace offerings which would be eaten **during that day**, and which demanded Levitical purity, they carefully abstained from "going in unto the Gentiles." And we know what followed. For, although these His enemies were very careful about their ceremonial fitness to keep the feast of unleavened bread, they hesitated not to kill the Prince of Life and crucify the Lord of Glory, and while they were eating their peace offerings He, the Prince of Peace, "made peace by the blood of His cross."

Instead, therefore, of John contradicting the other evangelists, as some of the blundering critics of the Scriptures have ignorantly asserted, he emphatically confirms their statements. Indeed, as Lange says, "If the expressions of John be pondered in their full significance, he will be found to have declared more accurately than the rest of the evangelists, that the Lord Jesus was crucified on a Friday, and that it was on the first day of the Feast of the Passover (viz., on the 15th Nisan)." Thus within the limits of the paschal feast day Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us, and this event took place upon Black Friday. Every Friday was a preparation for the Sabbath and John expressly tells us (Ch. 19:14) that our Lord was crucified on the preparation of the Passover (that is the preparation day for the Passover Sabbath). Luke confirms this by saying: "That day was the preparation and the Sabbath was approaching," and Mark also, who definitely informs us that "the preparation was the day before the Sabbath," (Mark 15:42.) The day of the crucifixion thus immediately preceded the Jewish Sabbath (our Saturday), and in accordance with Deut. 21:22 the burial took place at sunset, "that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the Sabbath day." Now those women who witnessed the entombment and saw the great stone rolled to the door of the sepulchre, returned and rested the Sabbath day according to the commandment, but coming again to the sepulchre early in the morning on the first day of the week they found the stone rolled away, the body of the Lord gone, and moreover they saw a vision of angels which said, "He is not here but is risen." Thus the answer to our question, "What saith the Scripture?" is that our Lord was crucified on Friday, bowing his head in death at three o'clock, and that He rose again early on the Lord's Day, thus being in the heart of the earth, according to modern speech, one full day and part of two other days.

The order of events for that part of the month Nisan or Abib, the seventh month of the civil year (Gen. 8:4), but later designated the first month of the sacred year (Exod. 12:2), would therefore be—

14th. Passover Lamb sacrificed between 3 and 6 p. m. (our Thursday).

15th (which began at sundown on the 14th). Passover Feast eaten, the Lord's Supper instituted, the agony in the garden, the betrayal and arrest, all during the night.

Our Lord brought before Annas and Calaphas and the Sanhedrim, early in the morning.

Delivered to Pilate and condemned to death between 6 and 9 a. m.

Crucified at 9 a. m. Died at 3 p. m. Buried before 6 p. m.

This was the day of the Preparation for the Passover Sabbath, and the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (our Friday).

16th. The Passover Sabbath—the 7th day of the week (our Saturday).

17th. The Lord's Day—the 1st day of the week (our Sunday). The Resurrection morning. The anniversary of the resting of the ark on Mount Ararat (Gen. 8:4). The day for presenting the Omer, the "sheaf" of first fruits "on the morrow after the Sabbath."

But if in trying to meet the seventy-two hour demand, the theory of the Wednesday crucifixion gives us too much time, and that of the Thursday crucifixion gives us too little, are not the difficulties increased when we insist upon Friday being the day of the Lord's death? They certainly are, if we admit that by "three days and three nights" are to be understood seventy-two hours. This meaning, however we deny, and if asked, What then do they mean? we reply that the expression was a Hebrew idiom which conveyed a definite thought to the minds of those who heard it, an idea in accordance with both Scriptural and colloquial usage. To ascertain what our Lord expressed by these words, and also what His hearers understood therefrom, we must appeal to the Scriptures where they occur and note the interpretation usually put upon them, and this we shall do. But first let us say a few words in regard to idioms and idiomatic phrases. To a foreigner studying our language many expressions, perfectly intelligible to us, must present difficulties that can only be removed by careful explanations, yet once elucidated are quite easily grasped. For instance, one might say, "I worked a fortnight." The word "fortnight" (that is, fourteen nights) is an idiom which actually means fourteen days, and yet no one would think of accusing us of duplicity if, in using that idiom, we meant to say that we did not work at night at all, but only during the day. The idiom says one thing but means another. Similarly we speak of making a train, taking a boat, and boarding a car, all of which idiomatic expressions, though perfectly explicit to us, must sound strange to the ears of one learning our language, for not one of these things do we actually do. When we speak of a day's work, we do not mean the labor of twenty-four hours; indeed we hear of the ten-hour day, the eight-hour day, and even the six-hour day. A week's work does not extend over seven days, but usually means a six-day period, although we are becoming accustomed now to the expression of a five-day week. The word day itself has many significances: there is the sidereal day, and the solar day, the civil day and the legal day, and the true meaning of each is to be understood only by its idiomatic usage.

Now, the Lord Jesus in His speech and the Apostles in speaking and writing, used the everyday language of the people, words easy to be understood, and they accomplished the desired result for the common people heard Him and them gladly. Thus when the Lord said, "The Son of Man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," we believe that He was employing an idiomatic phrase, perfectly understood by those who heard Him, and as easily grasped by us when we learn its usage. To ascertain the meaning, therefore, we must appeal to instances where it occurs in the Scriptures, and attempt to discover what the expression meant to those using it, and how it was understood by those to whom it was spoken.

Let us turn first to Gen. 40:12, 13, 20: "The three branches are three days. Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head and restore thee to thy place."

And it came to pass the third day." Three days would be literally seventy-two hours, but Joseph curtails the interval to within three days, and the full curtailment is seen in the event coming to pass on the third day, that is the day after the morrow. Our western mode of expression would demand for a seventy-two hour period that the restoration would take place on the fourth day, but the idiom calls for a much shorter time, in this case probably less than forty-eight hours. Three days, therefore, imply within three days, and actually the third day, which was then only two days distant.

The same remarks apply to Gen. 42:17, 18, 26. "And Joseph put them all together into ward three days. And Joseph said unto them the third day, This do and live. . . . And they departed thence." They first came during business hours, say on Friday; they were that day sentenced as spies to three days' imprisonment, but on the third day (that is, early on Sunday), they were on their way home. Their three-day imprisonment therefore was one full day and part of two others.

Now, let us read 1 Samuel 20:5, 12, 19, 27. David said: "Let me go that I may hide myself in the field until the third day at even" (until the third evening, according to Newberry's margin). To our western mode of interpretation this would be again seventy-two hours. If the words were spoken Friday evening then Saturday evening would be one day, Sunday evening two days, and Monday evening would be the third day at evening. But Jonathan did not so understand David's words, for he answered, "When I have sounded my father tomorrow any time (let us say Saturday), or the third day" (Sunday), which expression Mr. Newberry translates on his margin "this time day after tomorrow." Read now v. 18. Jonathan said to David, "Tomorrow is the new moon, and thou shalt be missed . . . and when thou hast stayed three days . . . come to the place where thou didst hide thyself." Here again we see that the expression "three days" is equivalent to "day after tomorrow," for on the second day after the conversation Jonathan found David in the place appointed. The arrangement was made probably in the evening of one day (let us again say Friday) and in the morning following the next day Jonathan meets David (that is, on Sunday). "Three days," therefore, were understood by both parties as "day after tomorrow."

But I Samuel 30:12, 13, is still more explicit: "He had eaten no bread, nor

drunk any water three days and three nights . . . and he said, "Three days ago I fell sick." By "three days ago" he meant "day before yesterday," and thus the period called "three days and three nights" was only one day and part of two others. The Romans reckoned time in a similar way. "The point of departure was by Roman custom counted in the reckoning, the second day before being called three days before. The Romans counted both ends." (Allen and Greenough's Latin Grammar.)

In II Chron. 10:5 the king is reported as saying, "Come again unto me **after three days**." We would understand this to mean, "on the fourth day." But the king did not so command and the people did not so interpret his expression for (v. 12), "All the people came to Rehoboam **on the third day**, as the king bade, saying, 'Come again to me **on the third day**.'" Here we learn from both king and people that "after three days" is equivalent to saying "on the third day."

Esther 4:16 is still more emphatic. "Fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day. I also and my maidens will fast likewise, and so will I go in unto the king." Now read Ch. 5:1: "Now it came to pass **on the third day** that Esther put on her royal apparel and stood in the inner court of the King's house," and on that day Esther prepared and held the banquet. Thus by "three days, night and day" Esther meant and Mordecai understood, until "the third day," or day after tomorrow.

Now, putting all these expressions together, we learn that "three days and three nights," "three days," "within three days," "after three days," and "the third day" are synonymous, and each means "the day after tomorrow;" and we are now prepared to look at identical expressions in the New Testament and read into them the meaning determined by their current usage. For this purpose we shall quote only from the gospel of Matthew:

Matt. 12:39: "The Son of Man shall be **three days and three nights** in the heart of the earth."

Matt. 17:23: "They shall kill Him, and **the third day** He shall be raised again."

Matt. 29:19: "And **the third day** He shall rise again."

Matt. 26:60: "At the last came two false witnesses and said, 'This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it **within three days**.'" (as in Mark 14:58).

Matt. 27:40: "Thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it in **three days**, save Thyself."

Matt. 27:62: "The Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying: 'Sir, we remember that that deceiver said while He was yet alive, "**After three days** I will rise again." Command, therefore, that the sepulchre be made sure until **the third day**.'"

Thus in **one gospel** we find duplicated all the expressions which we discovered in the Old Testament, and ascertain moreover that they are here as well as there used interchangeably, and all are to be understood as meaning "the day after the morrow," that is, a period of one day and part of two others.

Nor does the expression, "three days and three nights," do violence to language, either Hebrew or English. "According to Jewish law part of the day stands for a whole, for 'if a day be once entered on, even for a few minutes, the whole twenty-four hours were reckoned to the person who had so entered on the day.' If a child is born in the last hour or even in the last few minutes of a day it is counted as a whole day of the period of time within which he must be circumcised. Thus legally, according to Jewish reckoning, the crucifixion and burial of our Lord having taken place before the 16th Nisan actually commenced, He may be said to have been in the grave "three days and three nights," viz., Friday, to which legally belonged the night of what we should call Thursday; Saturday, consisting of the night of Friday, and the day of Saturday; and Sunday to which belonged the night of Saturday, and the very early morn of Sunday." (David Baron, in 'Types, Psalms and Prophecies.') Dr. Lightfoot tells us that it was a Jewish saying, that "A day and a night made an Onah, and a part of an Onah is as a whole," and he adds, "Therefore Christ may truly be said to have been in His grave three Onath . . . the consent of the schools and the dialect of the nation agreeing thereunto." And as to English usage and practice we quote from Sir Robert Anderson, who is well qualified, as a lawyer and judge, to speak in his own province: "Our civil day begins at midnight, and the law reckons any part of a day as a day. Therefore while a sentence of three days means three days of twenty-four hours, equal to seventy-two hours, a prisoner under such a committal is seldom more than forty hours in jail; and I have known cases where the period was in fact only thirty-three hours. And this mode of reckoning and of speaking was as familiar to the Jew as it is to the habitudes of our criminal courts."

Thus not only from authorities outside of the sacred canon, but also by appeal to the Scriptures themselves, we see that the idiom, "three days and three nights," harmonizes perfectly with the facts of the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.