

# When Did Jesus Die?

## Was it on Good Friday?

### Three Days in the Tomb vs. The Law and Gospel Accounts

By Karl Duff and Kevin Lea – April 15, 2009

Revised on April 10, 2015 to address the triumphal entry

**Note – An earlier version of this handout was used during a Wednesday night service at Calvary Church of Port Orchard on April 8, 2009. You can listen to the teaching by going to [www.calvarypo.org](http://www.calvarypo.org), then clicking on the Sermon Archives link and scrolling down to the title; or you can click on this hyperlink: [When Did Jesus Die?](#)**

For several centuries Christians have celebrated Good Friday as the day that Jesus died on the cross. But is it the truth? If not, when did Jesus die and how could so many have been so wrong for so long? Does it really matter what day of the week Jesus died?

I believe it is very important for Christians to know the answer to these questions and this handout is written as an attempt to provide a Biblical answer.

#### Is it true that Jesus died on Friday?

If Jesus died on Friday, then it is not true that Jesus was three days and three nights in the grave, as he predicted He would be:

*But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.**”* Matthew 12:39-40 (NKJ)

Those who believe in a Friday crucifixion have gone to great lengths to try and squeeze three days and three nights between Friday and Sunday morning. But no matter how hard one tries, it cannot be done, and the scoffers of the Bible are more than glad to point it out to those who are trying to stick with a Friday tradition. Therefore, Matthew was in error about what Jesus said, Jesus was in error about how long He would be in the grave, or Jesus did not die on Friday. I am thankful that the last option has very strong Biblical support.

But doesn't the Bible say that Jesus died on Friday? No, it does not. What it does say is that Jesus died on the day before a Sabbath day:

*Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the **day before the Sabbath**, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time.* Mark 15:42-44 (NKJ)

*This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before. That day was the Preparation, and **the Sabbath drew near.*** Luke 23:52-54 (NKJ)

*So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit. Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies **should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath** (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that*

*their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. John 19:30-33(NKJ)*

Those who look at these verses without an understanding of the Jewish feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread assume the word Sabbath in these verses means a Saturday Sabbath, but it does not. A careful study of the Jewish Torah (first five books of the Old Testament – referred to as The Law) reveals that there were other “Sabbath” days the Jews were required to observe that were independent of the normal Saturday Sabbath. Many false understandings have crept into the church as a result of gentile believers failing to understand our Jewish roots and the false understanding of when Jesus died is probably the most significant.

The solution to this centuries-long misunderstanding is not an “easy fix.” In order to find the truth, great care must be taken to understand the Jewish feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread and First Fruits as they were established in Exodus and Leviticus. Then additional care must be taken to understand how the Jews changed or mixed their terminology about (and observance of) these feasts in the years leading up to Jesus’ generation. Then further additional care must be taken by comparing all that was said by all of the gospel writers pertaining to the day of Jesus’ death and of His resurrection. One must also keep in mind that the Jews mark the end of one day (and start of the next) at sunset rather than the current western practice of doing so at midnight.

The following bullet items are intended to lay the foundation for the concluding thoughts, and when carefully compared to scripture appear to me to fully reconcile the alleged conflict in the four gospel accounts of Christ’s death and resurrection. It is postulated:

- (1) That Jesus held His “Last Supper” on the **night** of the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the Jewish month of Nisan (In Jewish reckoning, the night of Nisan 14 *precedes* the daylight hours of Nisan 14). The night of Nisan 14 coincides with the night that death “passed over” the Jews but killed the firstborn of Egypt (See Exodus 12). In Moses’ day, Nisan 14 was referred to as “The Passover Day” (Exodus 12:5-6).
- (2) The events of the Last Supper and crucifixion took place on Wednesday *rather* than on the traditional Friday (or as alternately proposed by some, Thursday.)
- (3) The next day (starting at sunset on Wednesday), was Nisan 15, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasts for seven days. The first and seventh days of this Feast are “special” Sabbath days (Leviticus 23:7-8). In Moses’ day, this week of Nisan 15-22 was referred to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6). In Jesus’ day Nisan 14 became known as the “Preparation Day” for the Passover week (formally – Feast of Unleavened Bread). This practice continues to this day in Israel (as can be seen on any Jewish calendar).

With these three postulations as a basis the following understanding flows from the Biblical texts:

All four gospel accounts agree that Jesus died on “preparation day”, that is, the day before the start of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (also referred to as Passover week) which commences on Nisan 15. (See Matthew 27:62, Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54, and John 19:31.)

Nisan 15 is a High Day (John 19:31) or Holy Convocation (Exodus 12:16 and Leviticus 23:7-8), which was a “special” Sabbath, allowing no work. It is distinct from a Saturday Sabbath and falls on a different day of the week each year, just like one’s birthday.

Contrary to the Jewish Law (Torah) of the Exodus/Leviticus texts, both Matthew (26:17) and Mark (14:12) provide a statement that the “first day of Unleavened Bread” is on the day that the lamb is sacrificed.

*Now on the first [day] of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?" And He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, "My time is at hand; I [am to] keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.' " "* Matthew 26:17-18 (NAS)

*And when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. So he sought how he might conveniently betray Him. Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover lamb, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?" "* Mark 14:11-12 (NKJ)

The Torah makes it very clear that the lamb was to be slain on Nisan 14, which Moses referred to as Passover (Exodus 12:6, Leviticus 23:5), but the Gospel writers refer to as the Preparation Day. The lamb was not to be killed on Unleavened Bread as Matthew and Mark record. This can only be reconciled in one of two ways. Either the Gospel writers were using the Roman scheme for "days" (where the start of the Sabbath Feast could occur in the same midnight-to-midnight, 24-hour period rather than the Hebrew sunset-to-sunset 24-hour day) *OR* some inter-variation of terms was involved. We will see that the latter is the case.

It is likely that Matthew and Mark used the general term "Unleavened Bread" (omitting inclusion of the specific words "Feast of") to refer to the combined Exodus feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. These feasts (when combined) occurred on Nisan 14 and Nisan 15-22 respectively – eight days total. It is also likely that the term "Preparation Day" meant the preparation day for the seven-day week of Unleavened Bread (Moses) Passover (Jesus' day and current).

Compare Mark 14:1 with Mark 14:12. In 14:1, Mark uses the Moses/Exodus terminology, but in 14:12 he uses the terms of Jesus' day:

*Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread was two days off; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth, and kill [Him]* Mark 14:1 (NAS)

*And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover [lamb] was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?" "* Mark 14:12 (NAS)

The conclusion is that vernacular expressions of these observances varied with usage (Passover and Unleavened Bread, Preparation Day and Passover (week), Unleavened Bread (meaning all eight days) – all being used to describe the same eight days associated with these two feasts) . Modern Jews, including Israeli Jews, confirm this.

This enables the use of the general term "Unleavened Bread" to include the Passover sacrifice. Hence Jesus' disciples were assigned to set up His "Last Supper" Passover meal to be eaten on preparation day (Nisan 14), which started after sundown on Nisan 13. Both the set up and supper could have been after sunset on a Roman calendar Tuesday, but the beginning of Jewish Wednesday (although the set-up itself could have taken place prior to sunset). With that assumption, Jesus' betrayal in the garden, Jewish and Roman trial, crucifixion, and death would also all have taken place on Wednesday.

Following Jesus' betrayal and death, the approaching High Sabbath (John 19:31) of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread required the bodies to be quickly removed from the crosses and be buried before sunset Wednesday evening, prior to the commencement of Nisan 15.

As stated, this day is also defined as a "Holy Convocation", just as is the regular seventh day, Saturday, Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3-8). This was also important to the Pharisees, who wanted to be ritually "clean" and able to take the traditional Passover supper celebration at their *customary* commencement of Passover on Nisan 15.

It can here again be noted that Jesus celebrated it a day earlier with His disciples, corresponding to the actual playing out of events in Egypt as the original Passover occurred (that is, the slaying of the Passover lamb, the supper, and the Passing over of the “death angel” all occurring on the night of Nisan 14, which comes before the daylight hours of Nisan 14 – Exodus 12).

Jesus was then buried just prior to sunset on Wednesday evening (i.e., prior to commencement of Thursday on the Jewish calendar).

Thursday continued the High Sabbath associated with the first Day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Nisan 15) through that evening. Friday was a regular work day. It was during this time that some of the women went to purchase spices to properly anoint the body of Jesus when Sunday morning came.

*Now when the Sabbath [Nisan 15 - Thursday] was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him [after the Saturday Sabbath and after those guarding the tomb for three days and nights would no longer prevent them from entering the tomb]. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week [Sunday], they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. Mark 16:1-2 (NKJ)*

Notice that Mark says, “Now when the Sabbath was past.” This cannot possibly mean the Saturday Sabbath, for that would mean the women went out to purchase spices on Sunday (Resurrection Day). “Now when the Sabbath was past” must mean when the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread (Thursday) was past (that is, on Friday) they purchased the spices, then rested on the normal Saturday Sabbath, then went to the tomb on Sunday to anoint the body of Jesus. This sequence also fits nicely with Luke’s record:

*Luke 23:55 And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. 56 Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils [after the Thursday Sabbath but before the Saturday Sabbath – i.e., Friday]. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment [meaning the Saturday Sabbath]. (NKJ)*

Saturday was the regular weekly seventh-day-of-the-week Sabbath, so that both the first and third days in the tomb were Sabbaths, at the end of which Jesus had spent three days and nights in the tomb. This sequence and chronology is illustrated in the figure on page 9.

Jesus was resurrected sometime during that Saturday night (Sunday night by Jewish reckoning where any particular day’s night precedes its day), prior to sunrise on Sunday, the “first day of the week.” Since Jesus was not in the tomb the entire night on Saturday (John 20:1), this night is not counted as a night in the grave – only Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday were full nights, fulfilling Jesus’ prophecy:

*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.” Matthew 12:40 (NKJ)*

John 20:1 records:

*On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was **still dark**, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. (NKJ)*

Mark says the women who arrived later than this first pre-sunrise visit by Mary Magdalene, recorded only by John, wondered who would move the stone:

*And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away-- for it was very large. Mark 16:3, 4 (NKJ)*

We must remember that the Jews asked Pilate to post a guard at the tomb.

*On the next day [Thursday], which followed the Day of Preparation [Wednesday – Nisan 14], the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’ “Therefore command that the tomb be made secure **until the third day**, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard. Matthew 27:62-66 (NKJ)*

If current tradition about the day Jesus was crucified is correct (Friday), then it was on Saturday that the Pharisees asked Pilate to seal the tomb for three days. This sealing and guarding of the tomb would have been well known to the disciples of Jesus. They would have also known that the guards would be posted for at least three days and nights. If this were the case, why would women plan to come very early the very next morning thinking they could get through the guards and the sealed tomb to anoint the body of Jesus? Also, why were they wondering how they would move the stone?

If, however, these women knew that Jesus died on Wednesday, and that the tomb was ordered sealed and guarded for three days starting on Thursday, then they would have known that the guard's duty would end on Sunday morning and they would be free to have the tomb opened and then enter. In fact it appears they were concerned that the guards may have already left and would not be available to help them roll away the stone.

*And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away-- for it was very large. Mark 16:3-4 (NKJ)*

When the first women arrived, the guards were still there to witness the miraculous earthquake, the moving of the stone and the angelic visitation (at or after the resurrection event – remember, the stone was not moved away to let Jesus out, but to let the people in to see that Jesus was no longer there. Jesus could have resurrected hours before this event which was shortly before sunrise).

*Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week **began to dawn**, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And **the guards shook for fear of him**, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. “He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. Matthew 28:1-6 (NKJ)*

It can be conjectured that shortly after this earthquake, the guards fled the tomb and went to the religious leaders to tell them what happened, and the two Marys (who were first to get to the tomb) left the tomb to go tell the disciples. Shortly after their departure, the second group of women is arriving at the tomb area. Before they get to within eye contact of the tomb's entrance, the women notice that the guards are gone and won't be able to help move the stone. When they get a little closer to the tomb, they then notice that the stone is already (inexplicably) rolled away. It makes no sense that the women would go to the tomb without a plan for moving the stone. They must have been counting on the guards to do so, and they could not have counted on them unless three full days and nights had transpired.

*“Therefore command that the tomb be made secure **until the third day**, lest His disciples come by night and -----. Matthew 27:64 (NKJ)*

This conjecture flows naturally with Mark's text when one considers that the need to move the stone could not have been an oversight.

*And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away-- for it was very large. Mark 16:3-4 (NKJ)*

When the guards reported the events to the religious leaders, they were bribed into spreading the lie that the disciples had taken the body in the night. This lie has lived in the minds of some till this day.

*Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. Matthew 28:11-15 (NKJ)*

In summary, let’s now consider the questions that started this inquiry:

**Did Jesus die on Friday?** – No, and nothing in the Bible says that He did. It is a misunderstanding which is based on the traditions of man who ignore the details of the biblical texts of the Old and New Testaments pertaining to the Jewish Passover. Jesus died on Wednesday and rose from the dead three full days later, probably very shortly after sunset on Saturday but definitely before sunrise on Sunday morning.

**How could so many have been so wrong for so long?** - Because the Catholic Church, which is the source of the deception, is not interested in our Jewish roots nor in the true gospel of Jesus Christ. As a result of their influence in trying to keep people from obtaining a deep understanding of the Scriptures, and because much of the Protestant church has also ignored the teachings of the Old Testament, most are still in the dark.

**Does it really matter what day of the week Jesus died?** - Yes, it certainly does if you are interested in the truth. Knowing the truth will also keep you from being tested in your faith when a college professor (or some other Bible critic) who loves mocking ignorant Christians, challenges you to come up with three days and nights between Friday and Sunday morning. Knowing the truth about the timing of Jesus’ death and resurrection gives us assurance about the accuracy of the Biblical record. If we keep in mind the Jewish roots of God’s salvation plan, everything fits into a perfect order that fulfills the great sign that Jesus gave the world:

*But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. “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.** Matthew 12:39-40 (NKJ)*

*Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. “And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” John 11:24-27 (NKJ)*

**But what about the Triumphal Entry?** – There are those who do not accept a Friday crucifixion but advocate Thursday, instead of Wednesday, as the day of Jesus’ crucifixion. They contend that if Jesus was crucified on Wednesday (Nisan 14), then His Triumphal Entry (TE) into Jerusalem four days earlier (Nisan 10) would have been on a Saturday Sabbath. If so (they contend) Jesus’ travel into Jerusalem and the crowd’s cutting of branches both violated the prohibition against doing work on the Sabbath. They maintain that since Jesus would never

violate the Sabbath or allow others to do so on His behalf, the TE could not have occurred on a Saturday.

The Scriptures are clear there were four days between the TE and Jesus' crucifixion. (This further exposes the false teaching of the Catholic Church that TE was on "Palm Sunday" and the crucifixion was on a Friday – five days). Therefore, it is true that a Wednesday crucifixion places TE on Saturday, a Sabbath. But this is not the problem some presume it to be. Here's why.

Jesus left to enter Jerusalem from Bethany at the Mount of Olives (Mark 11:1, Luke 19:29), which was within a Sabbath Day's journey from Jerusalem. While the Law of Moses does not stipulate how far a person could travel on the Sabbath, religious leaders had (over the centuries) developed an elaborate set of rules restricting how far an observant Jew was allowed to travel without violating God's prohibition about doing "work" on the Sabbath. During Jesus' day it was established that this distance was 2,000 cubits (1000 yards). This distance was greater than the distance between Bethany and Jerusalem (see <http://tinyurl.com/nthuhpy>). Therefore, Jesus was *not* violating the law or the religious traditions of His day when He traveled from Bethany to Jerusalem on the Sabbath.

But what about the people cutting down tree branches and laying them down in front of Jesus during Jesus' ride into Jerusalem (Matt 21:8, Mark 11:8, John 12:13)? Wouldn't this be considered "work" that would be prohibited during the Sabbath? Before answering, we must ponder why the people were cutting down branches in the first place.

Hundreds-of-thousands of Jews were flocking to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (John 12:12), the festivities of which start on Nisan 10 (Saturday – TE day). It was on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan that the sacrificial lambs were to be pulled from the flocks and inspected (Exodus 12:3-6). There is nothing in the Law of Moses (or the subsequent history of the Jews) that combines cutting branches with the Feast of Passover. So why did they do so on the Passover associated with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem?

An example of the most common answer can be found in Adam Clark's commentary, where he says, "Carrying palm and other branches was emblematical of victory and success." Clark then cites the apocryphal books (1 Maccabees 13:51; 2 Maccabees 10:7) and the biblical text of Revelation 7:9. These texts do equate waving tree branches with times of victory and joy, but do not solve the problem of doing so on a Sabbath.

Although Clark and others may be right about what motivated the Jews to cut branches down, I would like to posit another possible explanation and then conclude by saying that no matter what the reason, we can know from Scripture that cutting branches is not a violation of the Sabbath.

Because of Zechariah 14:16 and other verses, the Jews have always believed that Messiah will set up His kingdom on earth during the fall Feast of Tabernacles (or Sukkot). The Gospel accounts of Jesus' TE into Jerusalem record that the Jews (who were laying branches in front of Jesus) believed that Jesus was their Messiah, crying out "Hosanna" ("save now"), and quoting other sections of Psalm 118, which is a prophetic Psalm referring to the Messiah.

The Law of Moses gives requirements for the Feast of Tabernacles in Leviticus 23.

*'Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the Lord for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest. And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. Leviticus 23:39-40- NKJV*

Is it possible that those attending Jesus' TE into Jerusalem decided to include the Tabernacle practice of cutting tree branches by putting them in front of Jesus the Messiah on His way into the Holy City? I think so.

But in any case, the Leviticus 23 passage above shows that it was not a violation of the Sabbath for the Jews to cut tree branches during the Sabbath of Tabernacles. The law instructed them to cut the branches on the *first day* of Tabernacles, but it also states that the *first day* is a special Sabbath day. Even if the Jews in Jesus' day were not incorporating Tabernacles into their thinking, they had precedent to believe that cutting branches would not be considered a violation of the Saturday Sabbath since it was clearly not a violation of the high Sabbath of Tabernacles.

In summary, the crucifixion on Wednesday, and only on Wednesday, perfectly harmonizes all scriptural accounts of the events surrounding the last week of Jesus' life, when He took our sins upon Himself on the cross so that we (who believe) can be forever forgiven and have eternal life.

I pray this handout has helped you to grow in your faith in Jesus. A **GOOD WEDNESDAY** to you.



# The Spring Feasts - 2009

