



"They defend their errors as if they were defending their inheritance."

—Edmund Burke

23-Mar-07

In the Heart of the Earth

As hard as it is to believe, it has been twelve years since Church of the Great [God](#) published [After Three Days](#), a booklet I wrote explaining the timing of the death, burial, and resurrection of [Jesus Christ](#). I am still asked regularly to defend my assertions and dogmatisms in the face of the overwhelming belief in the Good Friday-[Easter](#) Sunday of mainstream [Christians](#). Frankly, many of those who challenge the booklet's argument react spasmodically rather than reasonably, having never considered that the Bible may present a scenario contrary to traditional preaching. Perhaps these people are subconsciously aware that if *After Three Days* is correct, a large chunk of mainstream Christian theology—[Sunday-worship](#) in particular—crumbles to dust.

Since the annual memorial of Christ's death has arrived once again, perhaps an addendum to the booklet's subject is in order. Obviously, as a booklet, *After Three Days* could not include an exhaustive study of every pertinent word and phrase, yet most of the rebuttals to it hinge on the meaning of such small elements in the Gospels' texts. Probably the most common argument

holds that "three days and three nights" ([Matthew 12:40](#)) does not mean exactly that but "parts of" three days, allowing the one day and two nights between Friday sunset and Sunday at dawn to fulfill Jesus' prophecy.

Another frequent protest centers on [John 20:1](#) and the phrase, "Now on the first day of the week. . . ." Supporters of this argument claim that this time-marker points to when Jesus was resurrected, but the text itself refers only to Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb at that time. The stone must have been rolled away at some earlier time. Besides, the verse even says that she came to the tomb "while it was still dark," and Jesus was already gone! Yet, every burgh in Christendom features a sunrise service on Easter morning.

Perhaps the most difficult textual problem to explain is the disciples' assertion, as they walked with Jesus to Emmaus on that same first day of the week, that "today is the third day since these things happened" ([Luke 24:21](#)). To most, counting as we do, this would place [the crucifixion](#) on the previous Thursday, not Wednesday as the modern church of God has taught for about eighty years. However, this simple mathematical explanation is a bit superficial. Those who look at the counting of days from an inclusive point of view say that the disciples' phrasing points to the previous Friday, since the Jews would have counted the current day, Sunday, along with Saturday and Friday to arrive at their three days. This would seem to support the traditional Good Friday-Easter Sunday scenario.

Yet, Jesus said, "The Scripture cannot be broken" ([John 10:35](#)). Everywhere else, the Gospels support a 72-hour burial from Wednesday at sunset to the weekly [Sabbath](#) at sunset. Can this verse in Luke 24 be a contradiction? There are two ways of resolving this apparent inconsistency. The first considers that the disciples are not referring just to the three days of Jesus' burial. Then what are they talking about? They actually say, "Today is the third day since *these things* happened." To assume that they refer only to the crucifixion is to ignore the context of the passage. In verse 18, Cleopas exclaims, "Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?" From the summary of what they told Him, we can conclude that the disciples recounted the whole string of events that occurred in what we now call Crucifixion Week—and those events did not end with Jesus' death and burial.

[Matthew 27:62-66](#) informs us that on the day after Christ's crucifixion—Thursday, as we understand it—the Jews went to Pilate to ask that a guard be set on the tomb, and he told them to do it themselves. They may have done it immediately, but they may have waited until sunset, since the day was a High Day, a holy day Sabbath, the first day of Unleavened Bread. So, on either Thursday or early Friday, a guard was set, making it the last activity surrounding the "big news" that the disciples told the resurrected Jesus about. They could then say that it had been three days since the last of "these things" had occurred.

The second, and perhaps best way, to understand this comment, is to take it in its most natural sense. The immediately preceding thought is that the disciples "were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel." The sign that Jesus had given to them was of being "three days and three nights [in the heart of the earth](#)" ([Matthew 12:40](#)). The sense of the ensuing comment, however, is that their hopes were dashed because the three days and nights of the sign had already passed! The idiomatic phrase reads literally, "One is passing this day as the third," implying "the third day has passed." In essence, they were not saying that it was the third day of Jesus' sign but, unfortunately, that the third day was already up!

Finally, some try to say that the phrase "in the heart of the earth" in [Matthew 12:40](#) does not mean buried in a grave or tomb. Those who support this theory say that *heart* implies "middle of" or "midst of," and *earth* should really be translated as "country" or "world." Thus, the argument runs, Jesus is actually saying that He would be three days and nights in Jerusalem, since it was the center of the nations according to [Ezekiel 5:5](#): "This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the midst of the nations and the countries all around her." Supporters do not say how Jesus' being in Jerusalem for this amount of time can act as a sign of His Messiahship.

However, this argument holds no water. First, the Greek is literally translated here, as it is from a Hebrew idiom found in [Jonah 2:2-3](#), the place to which Jesus referred in giving His sign. In that place, "heart of the sea" parallels "into the deep," which Jonah in the previous verse calls "the belly of Sheol," which is the pit where the dead are laid or the grave. So, *heart of the earth*

means "underground," just as *heart of the seas* means "underwater." "In the heart of the earth," then, was a Hebrew metaphor signifying being dead and buried.

Second, the similar sign Jesus gave in [John 2:19](#), "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," is explained plainly in verse 21: "But He was speaking of the temple of His body." Though they use different metaphors, the two signs are the same: Being in the heart of the earth is the result of having the temple of His body destroyed. Ergo, Jesus was not talking of His travel plans in Jerusalem but of His death, burial, and resurrection.

Indeed, the Scripture cannot be broken, as much as men try to cram their traditional beliefs into it. Would that they read the Bible for what it says rather than what they want it to say!

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Awesome Cost of Salvation](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The world's religions are in abject bondage to falsehood because they do not observe the Passover. Freedom comes to God's called out ones incrementally from continuing on the way- the relationship between God and us. It is this relationship which is the most important thing Christ has died for. We need to be sobered at the awesomeness of the cost to set us free from sin- how far Christ was willing to be pushed. Immense have been the preparations for our ransom- involving billions of years (Hebrews 11:3, I Corinthians 10:11) and the death of our Savior. Because we have been purchased, we have an obligation to our Purchaser.

From the Archives: Featured Article

Jesus' Final Human Thoughts (Part One)

by Staff

"While [Jesus] was being tortured, hated, and crucified, was He 'thinking' of all the dirty sins for which He was dying?" asked a correspondent. The Bible shows that Jesus' thoughts were elsewhere—and more constructively—engaged.

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