

How long was Jesus in his Tomb?

Introduction

One of the concepts that most Christians are aware of is the fact that after Jesus was crucified, he was dead – and in his tomb – for a **period of time**, before God resurrected him.

Most mainstream Christian churches assert that Jesus was in the tomb for parts of **three days**. The general tenets of that doctrine are as follows:

- Jesus died – and was placed in his tomb- shortly before **sundown** on a Friday;
- He was dead, and in the tomb, **all day** on a Saturday;
- Jesus came back to life – and emerged from his tomb – shortly after **sunrise** on a Sunday.

So, with the above doctrine, Jesus was dead in the tomb for a **small fraction** of the day on Friday, **all day** on Saturday, and a **small fraction** of the day on Sunday.

Of course, it is always necessary to determine if any given doctrine is *consistent* with Scripture. As a result, let's examine Scripture, to determine if the above doctrine is supported by Scripture or not.

Facts from Scripture

To begin with, consider the following facts about Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, from passages in Scripture:

- Jesus died shortly before a Sabbath day began:

John 19:31-33 (ESV):

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would 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. ³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

- Jesus was dead, and in his tomb, for three days and three nights:

Matthew 12:38-40 (ESV):

³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” ³⁹ But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For just 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.

- Jesus was already **alive** – and **out** of his tomb – before sunrise on Sunday:

John 20:1-2 (ESV):

¹ Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Is the Mainstream Doctrine Supported by Scripture?

Now, let us compare the mainstream doctrine about Jesus’ death and burial with facts from Scripture – to determine if the mainstream doctrine is consistent with Scripture or not. As listed above, there are three basic “tenets” of the mainstream doctrine; so each tenet will be examined in turn.

First, the mainstream doctrine states that Jesus died and was buried shortly before sundown on a Friday. In order to investigate that assertion, it is necessary to understand a few things about the Biblical calendar.

In the Bible, new days begin when the **sun sets** – not at midnight. In other words, whenever the sun **sets** in a given day, a new calendar day begins.

For example, the first day of the Biblical week is **Sunday**. As mentioned above, though, new days begin when the sun sets. So, the first day of the Biblical week begins at **sundown** on Saturday, and lasts until **sundown** on Sunday.

In addition, note that the weekly Sabbath day begins when the sun sets on **Friday** – and it ends when the sun sets on **Saturday**.

The mainstream doctrine asserts that Jesus died on a Friday afternoon – and that he was placed in his tomb shortly before the sun set on that Friday. As mentioned, the weekly Sabbath day begins when the sun sets on Friday – and Scripture does state that people “rushed” to get Jesus in the tomb before the sun set – because a *Sabbath day* was going to begin at sundown.

So, at “first glance”, it *appears* that this specific tenet of the mainstream doctrine is consistent with Scripture.

Second, the mainstream doctrine asserts that Jesus was dead and in his tomb for parts of three days – part of the day Friday, all day Saturday, and part of the day Sunday. The justification for the “parts” of Friday and Sunday has to do with the principle of “inclusive counting”. Basically, in the Jewish culture, fractions of days are sometimes counted as full days. This is especially true for days at the **beginning** and **end** of a given time period. So, “inclusive counting” **seems** to provide a justification for Jesus being dead for fractions of three days.

There is another issue to consider about the length of Jesus’ time in the tomb, however. As listed above, Jesus himself *explicitly* stated that he would be dead in his tomb for three days **and** three nights. In other words, there would be three “daytime” periods – **and** three “nighttime” periods – in which Jesus would be dead in the tomb.

The reason why this is important is because the mainstream doctrine asserts that Jesus died on a Friday afternoon, and was raised on a Sunday morning. That assertion means that Jesus was in the tomb during the following periods:

- Part of the daytime on Friday;
- All of the nighttime on Friday;
- All of the daytime on Saturday;
- All of the nighttime on Saturday;
- Part of the daytime on Sunday.

As shown above, the mainstream doctrine has **three** daytime periods when Jesus was in his tomb – but only **two** nighttime periods when he was in the tomb. Of course, this **directly contradicts** Scripture – because Scripture states that Jesus was in the tomb for **three** nighttime periods.

As a result, the mainstream doctrine of “death on Friday and resurrection on Sunday” is not supported by Scripture **at all** – on the contrary, Scripture contradicts that doctrine.

Third, the mainstream doctrine asserts that Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday morning – shortly after the sun rose on that Sunday. However, as shown above, Scripture states that Mary went to Jesus’ tomb on the first day of the week (Sunday), while it was **still dark**. When Mary looked in the tomb at that time, Jesus was **not there** – because he had already been resurrected.

Of course, the fact that it was “still dark” when Mary went to the tomb indicates that the sun had **not** yet risen. In other words, it indicates that Mary arrived at the tomb before the sun rose on Sunday. That, in turn, indicates that Jesus was resurrected **before** the sun rose that Sunday – because Jesus was already alive when Mary arrived at the tomb.

As mentioned, the mainstream doctrine asserts that Jesus was resurrected after the sun rose on Sunday – but Scripture indicates that Jesus was resurrected before the sun rose on Sunday. As a result, this tenet of the mainstream doctrine is **not** supported by Scripture, either.

Overall, there are three basic tenets of the mainstream doctrine. As shown above, it *appears* that the first of those three tenets is supported by Scripture. However, the other two tenets definitely are not supported – instead, Scripture directly **contradicts** them. So, overall, the mainstream doctrine is not consistent with Scripture.

An Alternate Doctrine

As noted above, at least two of the three tenets of the mainstream doctrine are *contradicted* by Scripture. So, let’s examine the evidence further, to determine if there is an alternate doctrine which is supported by Scripture.

First of all, there is *another* item to note, about the exact length of time that Jesus was in his tomb. In some cases, people can get into *extremely* comatose states – such that they appear to be dead. However, people can sometimes **recover** from those states – on their own – within a few days.

The Jewish community in ancient times was well aware of the above possibility. As a result, the Jewish community would always “watch” the tombs of people who had apparently died, in case they recovered. This was done to ensure that the person was actually dead – **before** burying them in a grave.

The standard policy was that a person’s tomb would be monitored for three **full** days – i.e., **72 hours** – *before* burying the person.

This very issue – of people watching tombs for three full days, before burying a person – presumably explains why Jesus **waited** for two days, **before** going to see Lazarus, in John chapter 11. More information about this issue can be found in the following article, under the “Waiting for Two Days” heading:

Four “Unexplained” Actions of Jesus

So, if Jesus had been placed in his tomb on a Friday afternoon, then people would not be convinced that he had died until **Monday afternoon** – 72 hours later. If Jesus had left his tomb **earlier** than that – such as, on Sunday morning – then people would have assumed that Jesus had recovered **on his own** – that is, they would have dismissed the possibility of him being *resurrected*.

As a result, the “death on Friday and resurrection on Sunday” doctrine does not match the culture of the time (in addition to being *contradicted* by Scripture).

Another item to note is that as shown in John chapter 20, above, Jesus was resurrected on the first day of the week – while it was **still dark**. As mentioned, Biblical days begin when the **sun sets**. This means that the first day of the week begins at sundown on Saturday – and it ends at sundown on Sunday.

Since it was still dark – on the first day of the week – when Jesus was resurrected, that means that he was resurrected at some point after the sun set on Saturday. In other words, it means that he was resurrected on Saturday night.

Also, as shown in Matthew chapter 12, above, Jesus needed to be in the tomb for three full days and three full nights. This was needed in order to fulfill Jesus' **own words** – as well as to convince everyone that he had actually died.

From the above, we know that Jesus was resurrected after the sun set on **Saturday**. As a result, we can “count backwards” from there, in order to determine the three full daytime periods – and the three full nighttime periods – in which Jesus was in the tomb. Here are those days and nights, counting **backwards** from Saturday night:

- All of the daytime on Saturday;
- All of the nighttime on Friday;
- All of the daytime on Friday;
- All of the nighttime on Thursday;
- All of the daytime on Thursday;
- All of the nighttime on Wednesday.

The above information shows us that Jesus died on the cross on a **Wednesday** afternoon – and was placed in the tomb shortly before sundown on that Wednesday. He was then resurrected shortly after sundown on the following **Saturday**. This means that Jesus was in the tomb for three full days and three full nights – just as he himself stated!

There is one other item to address, about this overall issue. As shown in John chapter 19, above, people had to “rush” to get Jesus into the tomb, after he died on the cross – because a Sabbath day was going to begin at sundown. As noted above, the **weekly** Sabbath day starts when the sun sets on Friday. So, that would seem to indicate that Jesus *must* have been placed in the tomb on a Friday afternoon – because the weekly Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday.

However, there is another fact that needs to be brought up, about this overall issue. As mentioned, there is a Sabbath day at the end of every week – from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

In addition to that, though, there are also seven annual Sabbath days. In other words, there are seven *specific* days in the year, which are **also** Sabbath days.

The annual Sabbath days always fall on the **same** days of the month. However, they fall on **different** days of the week each year. (This is similar to New Year's Day – it is always held on January 1; but it can fall on any day of the **week**.)

One of the annual Sabbath days falls on the **15th** day of the Biblical month of **Nisan**. That annual Sabbath is the first day of the feast of “Unleavened Bread”.

As it turns out, the Passover sacrifice takes place on the **14th** day of the month of **Nisan**. The day of the Passover sacrifice is not a Sabbath day; but the day **after** that – i.e., the first day of Unleavened Bread – is an annual Sabbath.

The reason why this is important is because Jesus was crucified on the day of the **Passover** sacrifice. That is, Jesus was crucified on the 14th day of Nisan. As mentioned, the day **after** the Passover sacrifice – the 15th of Nisan – is an **annual** Sabbath day. So, the day **after** Jesus' crucifixion was definitely a Sabbath day – no matter **what** day of the week it fell on.

In addition, note that the **annual** Sabbath days are sometimes called “high days”. As shown in John chapter 19, above, the day after Jesus crucifixion – i.e., the Sabbath day that would start when the sun set – is called a “high day”. So, this definitely indicates that the Sabbath in question was the first day of Unleavened Bread – as opposed to a weekly Sabbath day.

Conclusion

Here is a summary of the above information – about the exact days of the week that Jesus was in his tomb:

1. Jesus was crucified on the day of the Passover sacrifice – Nisan 14. In that year, Nisan 14 fell on a **Wednesday**.
2. Jesus died on **Wednesday afternoon**; and he was “rushed” into his tomb shortly before sundown that day. This was needed because the next day – which **began** at sundown – was an annual Sabbath day (i.e., a “high day”).

3. Jesus remained in his tomb from shortly before sundown on **Wednesday**, until shortly after sundown on **Saturday**. This means that he was in his tomb for three full days **and** three full nights – i.e. **72 hours**.

4. There are two main reasons **why** Jesus needed to be in his tomb for three full days and nights: To fulfill his own prophesy (from Matthew 12), **and** to convince everyone that he had actually died (as opposed to being in a “comatose” state, and then recovering on his own.)

5. Shortly after sundown on **Saturday**, God resurrected Jesus – and Jesus emerged from his tomb!

The above doctrine is supported by Scripture; and it is also consistent with the culture of Israel in the 1st century.

Of course, we should all celebrate the fact that God **resurrected** Jesus – and that Jesus will never die again! Come, Lord Jesus!