

# “Biblical Meaning of ‘the Third Day’”

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The Third Day - Jonathan Speaks with David - 1 Samuel 20:12 - FreeBibleImages.org - Used under license

***"When I have sounded out my father about this time tomorrow, or the third day ..."* (1 Samuel 20:12)**

This study explains the biblical meaning of "the third day" using examples from both the Old and New Testaments. This study explains the timing from Jesus' death to Jesus' resurrection and why the biblical accounting of "three days" is correct according to language usage at that time.

Bible verse quotations in this lesson are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) 1995 version unless noted otherwise (Ref. 1).

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**Consider.** When the scripture (Matthew 17:22-23) says that Jesus would be raised on the third day, how do you count the three days?

### **1. The third day is the day after tomorrow.**

*"Then Jonathan said to David, 'The Lord, the God of Israel, be witness! When I have sounded out my father about this time tomorrow, or the third day, behold, if there is good feeling toward David, shall I not then send to you and make it known to you?'"* (1 Samuel 20:12) For your best understanding of the context, please read 1 Samuel 20:1-40 (the entire chapter).

The simplest explanation of "the third day" in the Bible is that it means the day after tomorrow (1 Samuel 20:12). Jonathan said that he would "sound out" his father (Saul) about this time tomorrow, or the third day.

### **2. The third day is the third day in a sequence of time. A partial day counts as a whole day when counting 1, 2, 3.**

God established the pattern for a natural, biblical day beginning in Genesis 1:5. A natural day began at sundown (sunset) when evening started, and continued through the next daytime until the next sundown (Genesis 1:8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Each "day" included evening (nighttime) as well as daytime. We see that pattern for a "day" repeated in Leviticus 23:32 where the Day of Atonement ran from evening to evening.

In ancient Jewish timekeeping, a partial day was reckoned as a whole day when counting a sequence of days. For example:

#### *a. A male infant was to be circumcised on the eighth day*

*"And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations ..."* (Genesis 17:12)

A newborn male was to be circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12). The day of birth counted as a whole day even if the child was born a short time before sundown.

***b. Esther proclaimed a fast for three days***

*"Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 'Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.'" (Esther 4:15-16)*

*"Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms ..."* (Esther 5:1)

Esther proclaimed that the Jews in Susa [the capital of the Persian empire - Esther 1:2 AMP] fast for "three days" to prepare for her to plead with the king for her people (Esther 4:6-8, 16). The "first day" was the portion of the natural day that Esther proclaimed the three-day fast to begin (Esther 4:16). Esther went to speak with the king on the "third day" and to invite the king and Haman to a banquet that day (Esther 5:1, 3-5). Thus, the total period of fasting was three days including a partial first day and a partial third day according to the way the Jewish people counted partial days as full days at that time (Ref. 2).

***c. Jonah was in the stomach of the great fish three days and three nights***

*"And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:17)*

*"for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40)*

What we call day and night made up a natural day (Genesis 1:5, 31). According to Matthew Poole's Commentary, "three days and three nights" is the same thing as three natural days (Ref. 3). In our modern way of thinking, Jesus' body was in the grave two nights and part of three days. In the Jewish way of thinking at that time, Jesus' body was in the grave three natural days -- a portion of the first day in which he was buried, a full second day, and a portion of the third day when he rose from the dead. Taking into

consideration the Jewish way of including partial days as whole days in a sequence of days, the prophesy in Jonah 1:17 and Jesus' quotation in Matthew 12:40 are consistent with Jesus being raised on the third day (Matthew 17:22-23, Mark 9:31).

### **3. The third day is the day when Jesus rose from the dead**

*"And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.' And they were deeply grieved." (Matthew 17:22-23)*

*"He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." (Luke 24:6-7)*

In Luke 23:50-54, on the afternoon that Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus (Luke 23:52). Joseph wrapped Jesus' body in a linen cloth, and laid Jesus' body in a tomb "cut into the rock" (Luke 23:53). Joseph did this hastily because it still was "preparation day" (Ref. 4), and "the Sabbath was about to begin" (at sundown) (Luke 23:54). This portion of the sixth day of the week when the body of Jesus was entombed counted as the first of the "three days." Women who had come with Jesus out of Galilee saw the tomb and how the body was laid (Luke 23:55).

The "second day" of the "three days" was the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. The Sabbath began at sundown a short time after Jesus had died and his body was entombed. On the "second day," the women rested according to the commandment (Luke 23:56, Exodus 20:10).

On the first day of the week (we now call Sunday), the women came to the tomb bringing spices (Luke 24:1) and were expecting to find the body of the Lord Jesus (Luke 24:2-3). This was the "third day." The men in dazzling appearance who spoke with the women at the tomb (Luke 24:4) told them that He had risen (Luke 24:5-6). They reminded the women that Jesus had said that he would be "delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again" (Luke 24:6-7).

Jesus' death and resurrection perfectly fulfill Jesus' prophecy that on the third day he would rise again (Matthew 17:22-23, Mark 9:31).

*Prayer.* Thank you, Lord Jesus, for redeeming us, your people, through your willing, sacrificial death on a cross. We praise you, Lord Jesus, that you rose from death on the third day as you predicted. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your gift of eternal life so that we may live with you now and forever. Amen.

### References

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