

The Third Day

Dr. Steve Schell | John 20:1-18 | Week 12 Essential Doctrines

Have you ever noticed how often it is said in the New Testament that Jesus would rise from the dead on the third day? At times the phrase "according to the Scriptures" is added. Those words mean that it was prophesied in the Old Testament that Jesus would rise on the third day, which may sound straight forward enough until you go looking for the place where that promise is found. I looked for years and could never find it. Oh sure, there's the example of Jonah. The fact that he was three days and nights in the belly of a fish is an event which pictures Jesus going into the grave and coming out again. Jesus says so (Mt 12:39-41), but that's not a prophecy; it's an illustration. Yet Jesus (Mt 16:21; Mk 8:31; Lk 9:22; Jn 2:19-20) and Paul (1Co 15:4) are very specific that the resurrection had to occur on the third day and are very sure it had been prophesied.

Finally after all these years I believe I've found the answer. It was hidden in plain sight. To see it, all I had to do was to understand the events surrounding the Passover. Once I understood that Jesus is our Passover Lamb and then saw the special meaning of the third day after Passover, it all made sense. It showed me that Jesus' resurrection is the "Firstfruits" of a new harvest. It showed me how much God loves us and wants us to be with Him forever. Let me explain.

Christ our Passover

Jesus always thought of Himself as the Passover Lamb. One of the first things He said publicly was in the temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover. He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19).

He was talking about His body, not the stone building. He meant He would rise from the dead on the third day of Passover. A year later He stayed in Galilee for Passover and said this: John 6:51-58.

He was saying that like manna He had come down from heaven, and like the Passover lamb He would sacrifice His body and His life's blood would be violently shed. By calling on His listeners to "eat and drink," He invited them and us to personally receive the gift of His death.

Three Jewish feasts

But to understand why He said He would rise on the third day we have to understand three Jewish feasts which actually overlap one another. They all occur within an eight-day period of time in the spring of each year. Since Israel used a lunar calendar and its days started at sunset rather than sunrise, it can become very confusing for us to understand what we're reading. But let's try, because once we see it an amazing prophecy emerges, one which affects every person who believes in Jesus Christ.

Passover

The first Passover began on the evening when God led Israel out of Egypt. He told the people to pick a lamb without blemish and keep it in a pen near the house for four days. That evening they were to kill it at sunset. Then they were to take a bowl of its blood and dip a branch of a sage-like plant called hyssop into that blood and sprinkle some of it on the doorposts and the lintel of their front door. The entire family was to remain inside that house throughout the night. No one was to go outside for any reason because the angel of death would go through Egypt and strike down the firstborn of every family, and even of their cattle. But if the angel saw the blood, he would "pass over" that house, and the family would be spared. This would be the final plague, and it would force Pharaoh to allow the Hebrew slaves to leave Egypt. Inside the house the family was to be fully dressed, ready to march, with their staff in their hand. They were to roast the lamb whole, without cutting it open or breaking its bones because it was a holy sacrifice, not dinner. Then they were to burn completely everything that was left over after they had eaten. Nothing was to be left until morning. By eating the lamb's flesh every person personally called on God for protection, and by staying inside the house with the blood on its doors they remained safe.

God told Moses that this feast was to be celebrated every year so that people would remember the night He delivered them from slavery. But it was also God's way of preparing the hearts of that nation to receive His Son who, like the Passover lamb, would give His life for them on the cross. The Passover feast looked backward and forward. It remembered and it prophesied. It became a powerful symbol that predicted and explained Jesus' death.

Unleavened bread

The day after Passover another feast began which lasted seven days. During those seven days no bread made with yeast could be eaten. This was meant to remind Israel of the days they fled across the Sinai Peninsula baking only the unleavened dough they carried with them and eating the manna God miraculously provided each morning (Ex 16). In that exodus God both freed His people from bondage and fed them with bread from heaven. And they must never forget those blessings because He wanted to do those same miracles of redemption and provision afresh in every generation. He wanted every generation not only to remember those events but to believe again.

Sabbath

It wasn't one of the three feasts, but somewhere during that eight-day period of time called Passover there would be at least one sabbath, which is a day in which people are to rest and worship. It's a day on which only the most necessary work is done. One of these "sabbaths" occurred on the day after Jesus was crucified. It began at sundown on Friday and lasted until sundown on Saturday.

Firstfruits

On the day after that sabbath, which was the third day after Passover there was a feast, which was still being observed in Jesus' time, called the "Feast of Firstfruits." Judaism ceased observing it on that day after the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. (William W. Francis,

Celebrate the Feasts of the Lord, the Salvation Army National Publications, 1997, pp43-46). On that day three priests would go a short distance out of the temple, each with a sickle in his hand and a basket under his arm. They would go to a nearby field at sunset (Saturday evening) to cut a sheaf of barley. Large crowds would gather to watch them, and as they walked along, they asked four questions and the crowd would answer "Yes!" to each:

- Has the sun gone down?
- With this sickle?
- Into this basket?
- Shall I reap?

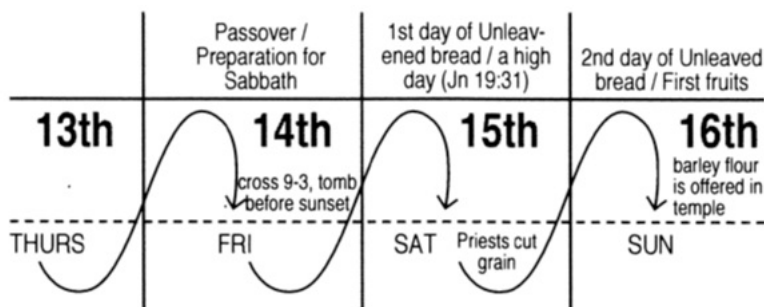
At the appointed site each priest would cut and gather grain into their basket until they had exactly a certain amount. Then they brought it back to the temple where it was carefully prepared. It became about 5 pints of flour which were to be offered to God the next morning in the Feast of Firstfruits.

This ceremony was the beginning of the barley harvest. Up until that moment no grain was harvested anywhere in Israel. The grain cut by the priests was the very first, and it belonged to the Lord. It was holy. It symbolically represented the entire harvest which would now begin. By offering it to the Lord the people said to Film, "It's all from You, and it all belongs to You." That event took place on the third day, which that year happened to be Sunday morning.

Do you see it? On the very morning Jesus rose from the dead, the "Firstfruits" of a new harvest were being presented to God in the temple. On that special day the first human escaped death and was resurrected into a glorious imperishable body. Like that first sheaf of grain which the priests cut He was just the beginning of something greater. An innumerable multitude of thankful people would follow Film out of the grave and become like Him in glorious, imperishable bodies.

Review

Let me review the days:



The point of three days in the grave is not that Jesus was dead for 36 hours so that His body would have plenty of time to decay. The point is He died on Passover (the 14th of Nisan) and rose on Firstfruits (the 16th of Nisan). He is the Passover Lamb who died for us and the

Firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the beginning of a new race of resurrected human beings (Ro 8:19,23,29,30).

Paul saw it

Paul saw these truths. Listen to how he described Jesus:

- 1) Christ, our Passover (Co 5:7): "For Christ, our Passover, has been crucified."
- 2) Christ, the Firstfruits (1Co 15:20-23): "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep... But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming."

Conclusion

I'm not quite sure why I never saw it, but I do now. Now I know what it means that Jesus rose on the third day: it means that all of us who believe in Him will rise too. It means that we are all part of a great harvest that God had planned before the creation of the earth. It means He always wanted us to be with Him. It means we're included in the greatest miracle of all.

Questions

- 1) What would you say if someone asked you why Jesus rose from the dead on the third day? Try to explain it in your own words.
- 2) How is the resurrection different than what happened to Lazarus when Jesus raised him from the dead?
- 3) Do you have family or friends who've died that you long to see again? How do you think they'll look after they are resurrected?