

What Does the Bible Say About . . .?

February 26, 2007

Why 3 Days in the Tomb? Receive Whatever You Ask?

- I. Introduction
 - A. Announcements
 - 1. Open with prayer
 - 2. Any new people? If so, summarize need to bring paper, pen, and Bible (various versions OK for comparison, but NRSV will be main one for reading, NASB for studying).
 - 3. Get list of names and how to contact (email preferred)
 - 4. 90 minutes on 4th Mondays at 7 p.m.
 - 5. Need volunteers to read passages (listed in bold.)
 - B. Does anyone have any questions/topics for us to consider for next time?
 - 1. .
 - 2. .
 - C. The last two times we met we talked about a central issue of our Christian faith: salvation.
 - 1. There was a lot of information, including some that we didn't have time to really discuss.
 - 2. So now that everyone's had some time to read over the notes and to think about it all, are there any lingering questions we need to deal with?
 - D. Today we are going to discuss two much shorter topics.
 - 1. First: why was Jesus in the grave for three days? Why not one day? Why not a thousand years?
 - 2. And Second, why does the Bible say that whatever we ask of Jesus we will receive? That doesn't seem to fit with our real life experiences.
- II. Let's begin with looking at whether there is some special reason or significance attached to the amount of time that Jesus was in the tomb. Why was he raised on the *third* day?
 - A. Like many other questions we have, this is one for which there is no particular verse or passage that give us the answer.
 - 1. We have to look carefully for clues and add them together to see if we can come to a satisfactory conclusion.
 - 2. And since we are not first-century Jews, we will also look to see what Judaism may have taught in its writings.
 - B. **1st Corinthians 15:3-5** **What do you notice what it says about Christ being raised on the third day?** (According to the scriptures.) The question is, what scriptures? We aren't told, so we have to look for them. To our eyes there is not a lot of clarity about this in the O.T., but there are some intriguing hints.

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- C. There are dozens of references to things of importance happening “after three days” or “on the third day.” (Show printout of Bible Gateway search for “three days.” <http://www.biblegateway.com>)
1. It is possible to get overly fascinated by the meaning of different numbers in the Bible. Some people on the Internet, for example, make numbers too important or even seem to believe them to have an inherent mystical power.
 2. That’s going too far, but it is true that certain numbers are often used as a sort of shorthand to convey a general meaning, especially for things of some importance.
 3. The most often used numbers for symbolic meaning are 3, 7, 10, and 12. We won’t do a study of numbers tonight, but it is a clue for us that each of these numbers are used to indicate some sense of completeness. It can be a completeness of events, objects, or as we are interested in today, of time.
 4. In part, then, Jesus’ resurrection after three days showed a completeness of time for an important event.
- D. Let’s read a few of these three-day events, that I think may be helpful for our question.
1. **Genesis 40 (12-13; 18-19)** Joseph in prison interprets dream of three baskets and three grape branches as being three days. At end of that time baker would die, butler would be freed.
 2. **2 Samuel 24:13** Three days of plague as punishment.
 3. **Esther 4:15-16** Three days of fasting.
 4. **Can you see how these could relate to the death and resurrection of Jesus?**
 - a. Gen. 40 (prediction of a death and a restoration [resurrection of sorts] in three days.)
 - b. 2 Sam. 24:13 (Plague/death ends in 3 days)
 - c. Esther 4:15-16 (She could be killed for approaching the king without being summoned. Fasting for 3 days—a type of mourning—was to save her life.)
 5. These are possibly prophetic hints, but there is one more passage that is stronger and clearer to our way of thinking. **Hosea 6:1-2**. Here 3 days is clearly shown to be a time of restoration and renewed life.
 6. These O.T. hints don’t fully answer the question for us, but they start us on the way to believing that there is something special about the resurrection coming at the time it did.
- E. A stronger reason is simply that Jesus said over and over that he would be raised “on the third day” or “after three days.” In the Jewish way of counting time, these were equivalent statements. And remember that any part of a day would be counted as a day, even if it were only a few hours or minutes of that day. (Three days as measured in the Jewish reckoning meant any part of one day followed by a complete 24-hour day and then any part of a third day.)

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1. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus makes his prediction 3 times in quick succession. (Side note: After each time the disciples immediately do or say something foolish. They just don't get it.)
 - a. The first time is right after Peter says, "You are the Christ." **Mark 8:31-32**
 - b. Six days later came the transfiguration and healing of the demon-afflicted boy. He then continued teaching his disciples: **Mk 9:30-31**
 - c. Mark moves quickly to the rich young man who can't give up his money. Then Jesus teaches them again: **Mk 10:32-34.**
 - d. (Similar passages in the other gospels: Mt 16:21, 17:23, 20:19; Lk 9:18-22, Lk 18:31-33)
 2. Jesus uses parables and symbolic language to illustrate his resurrection too.
 - a. When he cleared the Temple: **John 2:13-21**
 - b. When some Pharisees demanded a sign: **Matt. 12:38-40.** (Jonah 1:17) Jesus applied this well known event from the O.T. to himself. We know later he taught the disciples on the road to Emmaus how all the scripture testified about him. (Luke 24:45-47) So we are justified in thinking the O.T. passages we considered earlier could well apply too.
 3. We now have two indications of the importance of the three-day wait for Jesus' resurrection: the precedents in the O.T. and Jesus' own predictions. But there is more.
- F. We are going to have to look outside the Bible to help us understand, but there is one more tiny hint in Luke 24 on the road to Emmaus: **Luke 24:18-21.**
1. The disciples thought there was something important about it being three days. **Any ideas why?** (Jesus' predictions?, O.T. meaning of number 3?)
 2. Those are possibilities, but if they expected his resurrection on day 3, what were they doing out on that road? And there has been nothing in the gospels to indicate any special fascination with numbers. No, there is another reason.
- G. Jewish religious leaders taught that the soul stayed near the body for three days before it left. (Source: <http://home.freeuk.net/jesusmyth/thrday.htm#11> confirmed by many others.)
1. The writings called the Midrash Rabbah, (connected to the Mishnah)
 - a. "Bar Kappara taught: Until three days [after death] the soul keeps on returning to the grave, thinking that it will go back [into the body]; but when it sees that the facial features have become disfigured, it departs and abandons it [the body]." (Genesis [C:7 (994)])
 - b. Their law also said, "You cannot testify to [the identity of a corpse] save by the facial features together with the nose, even if there are marks of identification in his body and garments: again, you can testify only within three days [of death]." This was because the body would be too badly decomposed after that to be properly identified.

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- c. Another writing called the Semahot says: “One may go out to the cemetery for three days to inspect the dead for a sign of life, without fear that this smacks of heathen practice.” (8.1)
 2. This belief that three days in the grave made everything final shows up in the Bible in the passage about the death of Lazarus. **John 11:38-43 (39)**
 3. This must be what the disciples were thinking too. It was already the third day since Jesus’ death, so there was no chance he would live. His soul would now have departed.
- H. There is one more reason for us to explore. The timing would not allow anything earlier than on the third day. It was the earliest time possible.
 1. **Deut. 21:22–23** Those executed were to be buried on the same day they died, so the land would not be defiled.
 2. Because of this, traditional Jewish practice is to try to bury dead on same day. This is even true for those who were executed.
 - a. Jewish 1st century historian Josephus wrote, “Let him who blasphemes God be stoned to death and hung during the day, and let him be buried dishonorably and out of sight...[and]...when he has continued there for one whole day, that all the people may see him, let him be buried in the night. And thus it is that we bury all whom the laws condemn to die, upon any account whatsoever. Let our enemies that fall in battle be also buried; nor let any one dead body lie above the ground, or suffer a punishment beyond what justice requires.” (The Jewish War; 4.202)
 - b. Burial on the same day (or as soon as possible) is still the standard Jewish practice today.
 3. But Jesus died on Friday afternoon and the timing is important for answering our question. **Luke 23:50-54** **What does this tell us about the timing?** (It was nearing sunset which would bring the Sabbath. See Mark 15:42ff)
 4. **Luke 23:55-56** tells us that the women, after seeing Christ's body being laid in the tomb just before sundown, "returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils" for the final preparation of the body.
 - a. Here again there is something important about the timing. **What is it?** (Not possible to do so properly with Jesus because of the Sabbath, so put in a temporary tomb.)
 - b. **Luke 24:1-8** Jews do not embalm their dead in deference to Genesis 3:19 “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken *for dust you are and to dust you will return.*” The body was supposed to be allowed to decay.
 - c. So they wrapped fragrant spices in the shroud with the body instead. This hadn’t been done yet for Jesus because of the Sabbath. The first opportunity to properly prepare the body for burial was the first thing Sunday morning.

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5. Jesus had to be seen as in the grave long enough to be truly dead, and he rose at just the right time to meet the first witness—Mary Magdalene (John 20:10-18).
- I. Why was Jesus raised on the third day? He was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, according to tradition, according to Jesus' own prediction, and according to the perfect timing of God.
- III. What did Jesus mean when he said "Whatever you ask for (in my name), you will receive?"
 - A. There are two extreme responses to this, and a lot of examples of both can be found.
 1. On the Internet there are many Christian sites that go to great lengths to "prove" that the only reason prayers aren't answered is because they aren't sufficiently "in Jesus' name."
 2. They make the valid point that "in his name" means more than just saying the words. It means being committed, faithful, dedicated to Jesus.
 3. Unfortunately, when they leave it at that, it opens many people up to self doubts about their own faith even to the point of despair.
 4. On the other extreme are those who point to this statement by Jesus as a proof that the Bible is just plain wrong.
 5. I found one website that was quite boldly titled "Jesus Lied." The reasoning was actually similar to the Christian sites, but with a different conclusion. Rather than deciding our faith was faulty, they said the Bible and Jesus himself were at fault.
 - B. The Gospel of John records Jesus telling the disciples they will receive "whatever they ask" in prayer, not once, but three separate times. And there is a fourth time the phrase is used when it is spoken at Lazarus' grave side by his sister Martha.
 1. **John 11:17-22** ("the Father will give you (Jesus) whatever you ask.)
 - a. It is hard to draw too many conclusions from the statement here since it is by Martha and not Jesus.
 - b. **But from the context up to that point, what might she have had in mind?** (e.g., healing before he died, restoring his life)
 - c. **And more importantly, who did she think could receive whatever was asked of God?** (Clearly, Jesus and no one else.) In the other three times this is said in John's gospel, it is no longer just Jesus who can ask.
 2. **John 14:8-14** ("If you know me you know my Father also.) This chapter starts a long section—all the way through chapter 17—where Jesus is preparing the disciples for his death and resurrection. A lot is about to change dramatically and Jesus wants them to understand.
 - a. **Looking especially at vv. 13-14, we find a major change. Now who can ask for something?** (Disciples) **And who accomplishes what they ask God?** (Jesus does. Two times "I will do it.")
 - b. It is no longer only God the Father who responds to the prayer, but Jesus. **Why? What has changed?** Look at the context. (vv. 1-3) **What is Jesus**

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- telling them is going to happen? (Jesus is “going to the Father;” i.e. dying and rising)
- c. One of the things Jesus is saying in our key phrase is *I* will be the one who answers your prayers. When I leave, you will not be abandoned, in fact it will be *better*, because you know me and *I* will answer you.
 - d. There is something else going on in this passage too. Look at vv. 10-11. **What is Jesus saying about himself and God the Father?** (They are one, united; praying to Jesus *is* praying to God!)
 - e. So in this passage, when we let the context tell us the meaning, “If in my name you ask me for anything I will do it,” no longer means Jesus will grant our every wish. That’s not the emphasis; that’s not what is new; it’s not at all the point Jesus is making.
 - f. He is saying we will have a new relationship with God. Our prayers will not be to a distant, barely understood God, but to Jesus, the God whom we have seen and touched and known. We will know and speak to God through Jesus.
3. **John 15:1-8 (7), 12-17 (16)** (Vine and the branches. Abide in me and you will bear fruit.) Here the Scripture picks up some of the same themes in chapter 14 and develops them in a new way. Besides repeating the phrase about “whatever you ask,” there is another key thing that Jesus repeats.
- a. **14:13 Why will Jesus answer prayer?** (To glorify the Father.) **And in 15:8?** (The Father will be glorified). In fact, the glory of God is a major theme we find in John, especially in these 4 chapters of Jesus speaking.
 - b. **In chapter 14, God was glorified by whom?** (The Son.) **What about in chapter 15:8?** (By the disciples!)
 - c. There is a shift here. Now instead of Jesus talking about *his* connection to the Father, **what is the connection he wants us to understand?** (vv. 9-12: Our connection to Jesus)
 - d. Jesus reminds us of his unity with the Father, and then says our unity with Jesus is just as strong—if we remain “in him.”
 - e. Before we try to understand what it means in this passage to have Jesus give us “whatever we ask,” we must be careful to notice the “condition” of the promise in v. 7: “If you abide in me and my words abide in you.” You see what it is saying? *His words are to be in our prayers.* (It’s like when Mr. Spock in Star Trek has a mind meld with someone: “My thoughts to your thoughts . . .”) Jesus answers prayers that are like his own prayers. It is a promise for when we think his thoughts and speak his words, not just whatever we might imagine or want. It is about being unified with Christ.
 - f. **So what does Jesus have in mind? What is his focus in prayer?** We saw a good indication already in John 14:13 and 15:8. But there are some other

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prayers of Jesus right here in the Gospel of John we can look at too.

John: 11:40-42, John 12:28-30, and John 17:1, 4, 5. Do you see the common theme? (The glory of God.)

- g. What is it then that will glorify God?
- h. Remember how chapter 15 began with a gardening parable. Then right after the “Ask what you will” promise in 15:7, what does Jesus say it is Father’s will that they do? (*bear much fruit* and become Jesus’ disciples.) This section ends with the “ask what you will” statement repeated in v. 16, and what else is repeated there? (again connects asking and bearing fruit.)
- i. OK, so what is this “fruit?” Let’s look at the context. What word jumps out in vv. 9-10? (love—5 times) Look at v. 12. There it is again. And in v. 17—right after the promise to grant what we ask. There it is again. Love one another.
- j. Given what we just read 9 times in these few verses, what is the “fruit” Jesus is speaking of? (Love. For one another, Jesus, God.)
- k. So Jesus is not giving a blanket promise that any kind of thing can be asked for and received. He is talking about prayers and actions that bear fruit; that glorify God and cement the bonds of love.

C. **John 16:16-24 (23)** Jesus makes the statement yet again here in v. 23.

- 1. First a word about two translation issues. First of all, the Greek word for “ask” found in v. 23 is different than the word used in the other places we have looked. Let’s compare the wording in our different versions.
 - a. The NRSV and NLT say “ask for anything.” But the NIV: “no longer ask me anything.” KJV: “ye shall ask me nothing” NASB: “you will not question me about anything.”
 - b. The NRSV & NLT translates it as asking *for* something. It is a different word than in v. 24 and our other passages. This Greek word is actually better translated as simply asking a question. (KJV, NASB, NIV)
 - c. In fact it fits the context better too, because that is what the disciples had been doing—asking questions. Jesus is saying you won’t be asking such things later when you understand what I am telling you.
- 2. The second issue is really a clarification of meaning. When we see the word “whatever,” it can sound like a lot stronger word in English than it is in the NT Greek.
 - a. The Greek word is the little, weak, general word $\alpha\upsilon$ (ahn).
 - b. It is not the word for “all” or “everything,” but is much more nebulous, like our words “stuff” or “things.”
 - c. If the intended meaning were truly “whatever,” “everything,” “all,” then several much stronger words were available to use instead.

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3. The translation clarifications help some, but once again it is the context that really will tell us what Jesus is talking about.
 4. **What was Jesus trying to get the disciples to understand?** (v. 16)
 5. **And what was their response?** (v. 18 They were still confused; worried.) **What were they worried about?** (Losing Jesus. If he is gone, what will they do? How will they continue to be connected to God? They know God because Jesus tells them about God and because Jesus shows them the power of God and because Jesus shows them the love of God. If Jesus is gone, then what?)
 6. **How does Jesus reassure them?** (v. 20, 22. You will grieve, but it will turn to joy.) That is the theme. That is the context. Your grief will turn to joy.
 7. **Our question then is why will our grief turn to joy?** The answer is in v. 23.
 8. You see what he is telling them? “You’ve been relying on me all along and you think you’ll be at a loss with me gone. Now you will ask the Father—in my name—and be answered just like I was.”
 - a. You see, this takes the statement in chapter 15 to the next step.
 - b. There they were told Jesus would hear their prayers. **Now who will hear their prayers?** (God the Father.)
 - c. That’s part of what praying in Jesus’ name means: that our prayers will be received just like Jesus’ prayers were received. Incredible.
 - d. This whole passage then is a reassurance to the disciples and to us that Jesus’ death and resurrection does not sever our connection with God, but makes it much stronger—just like Jesus’ connection with the Father.
 - e. No wonder Jesus said, “Your grief will turn to joy!”
- IV. Let’s turn now to the other gospels and look at two more instances of Jesus saying, “Whatever you ask for you will receive.”
- A. **Mark 11:20-25** (say to this mountain be thrown into the sea) This seems a pretty strong and clear promise, doesn’t it? But if we take it out of context it must mean that we can all start tossing mountains around at will. That can hardly be what Jesus meant.
1. **What happens in vv. 12-14?** (Jesus curses the fig tree because it bears no fruit.)
 2. **What’s next in vv.15-19?** (Jesus cleanses the temple. It should be house of prayer for all nations, but is den of robbers: i.e., it bears no good fruit.)
 3. Next is the other “bookend” to the temple scene. **What happens in vv. 20-21?** (Fig tree has withered.)
 - a. Jesus then says the lesson is that what you ask for in prayer will be given.
 - b. We have looked at this previously and seen that Jesus meant both the mountain and the fig tree to be representative of the temple. (see Jesus’ Way of Teaching and Ministry, pp. 4-5, September 26, 2005).
 - c. <<http://www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa/index.html>>
 4. Verse 25 seems odd here. It states that when praying, we should forgive. The subject and scene changes right after this, so the connection seems to be to what was just said.

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5. The message isn't completely clear at first, but let's ask a few questions. What was the "good fruit" the temple was supposed to produce? (e.g., faith in God, disciples, etc.)
 - a. Let's look a little deeper. **What was the main purpose of Jesus' life and especially his death?** (Forgiveness of sins.) **And the temple sacrifices?**
 - b. If the purpose of the temple was also to reconcile all people to God through forgiveness of sins, doesn't Jesus' comment in v. 25 make more sense now?
 - c. **Why then would he have said that after his comment about getting whatever we ask in prayer? Are we to ask for mountains to be thrown into the sea, fig trees to wither, or something else?** (Forgiveness.)
 - d. It may well be that what Jesus had in mind with his imagery of tossing a mountain into the sea came right out of the O. T. **Micah 7:18-19**
 - e. The "whatever we ask" is not just anything at all, but like temple worship was supposed to promote and Jesus accomplished, we are to ask for "whatever" sins to be forgiven!
- B. Let's look at another passage on this question, this time in **Matthew 18:15-20** (19)
 1. Again the context is critical. **In vv. 5-9, what is the subject?** (Sin).
 - a. It isn't our eyes or our hands and feet that cause us to sin, but our hearts—our very nature.
 - b. But Jesus makes a point here about the seriousness of sin and our critical need to be freed from it.
 2. That leads right into a the parable of the lost sheep in vv. 10-14. **How does that relate to the subject of sin?** (Jesus wants to rescue those lost to sin.)
 - a. **In vv. 15-17 of our passage, what is the subject?** (Forgiveness of sins).
 - b. **So when we get to our key verses 18-19, what does Jesus have in mind when he says "anything you ask" will be given you?** (Forgiveness)
 - c. In fact the whole rest of Matthew 18 stays on this topic of forgiveness. Peter talks about it in vv. 21-22 wanting to know how often he should forgive. **What does Jesus tell him?** (Way more than Peter had thought!) Then Jesus tells another parable about it, emphasizing the wrongness of unforgiveness in vv. 23-35. **Remember what the Lord's Prayer says?**
- C. In Mark and Matthew the message is the same.
 1. Jesus is talking about forgiveness of sin.
 2. **And more than that, who does he say can forgive sin?** (Matthew 18:18-19.)
 3. Jesus' message is the farthest thing in the world from being a promise that we can ask for anything for ourselves and get it.
 4. His promise is this: Anything we ask in his name *to be forgiven*, God the Father will forgive.
- D. Forgiveness; the glory of God; and love of God and neighbor. Those are the things Jesus teaches us to pray for and the kinds of prayers the Father and Son together will answer.

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V. Summary

- A. Have we answered today's questions satisfactorily? Are there still questions on this topic we need to discuss more?
- B. What questions for next time?
- C. Next meeting: Monday, March 26, 2007. 7:00 p.m.
- D. Closing prayer
- E. **Archives of class notes can be found online at: www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa**