

6. All four of the gospel writers provided accounts of the time between Jesus' death and His resurrection on the first day of the week. John's version is unique in recounting circumstances that transpired while Jesus' body was still hanging on the cross. Again, John's focus was more on Jesus Himself while his three counterparts took a broader approach. John's stated intent was to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed Israel's Messiah (20:30-31) and that involved demonstrating that He and His life circumstances fulfilled the messianic prophecies and promises in the Scriptures. Here he showed this to be the case even in the circumstances that followed upon Jesus' death – matters in which He played no active role (19:31-37).
- a. The incidents John recounted are the intent to break Jesus' legs and the piercing of His side with a spear. These were Roman actions, but provoked by Jewish concern that the bodies be removed from their crosses before the Sabbath began that evening. (In Jewish reckoning, a day begins at sunset and ends the following sunset.) Both John and Mark recorded that Jesus' crucifixion occurred on the "day of preparation" (cf. Mark 15:42), which seems to refer to the preparation for Passover with its highlight in the slaughter of the Passover lambs (the 14th of Nisan; ref. Exodus 12:1-6). This was also the day in which all leaven needed to be removed from Israelite homes in preparation for the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (15th -21st Nisan). Passover initiated this feast and the first of the seven days was a high sabbath ("holy convocation"). So the feast concluded with a second such sabbath (ref. Leviticus 23:1-8). (Jesus' crucifixion on the day of preparation as Yahweh's "Passover lamb" meant that He and His disciples celebrated the Passover meal at the beginning of the day of preparation rather than the following evening at the start of the seven-day feast; cf. 18:28).

Because the feast's initial high sabbath was about to begin at sunset, the Jews were anxious to dispose of the bodies beforehand. God commanded the purging of all leaven (symbolizing uncleanness) from Israel during the week of the feast and the Law specified that dead bodies were unclean (cf. Numbers 19:11-14 with 9:1-11). So also God declared that the corpse of an executed person left above ground overnight would defile the land (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Israel's rulers understood that any sort of defilement would disqualify them (or any Jew) from celebrating the Passover and render them guilty of violating this high sabbath and so also the feast it introduced. They weren't about to let that happen; they'd already risked offending Pilate in order to maintain their ceremonial cleanness (18:28) and they weren't going to now forfeit it by allowing dead bodies to hang above ground just outside Jerusalem. In a most profound irony, these men who were concerned about being defiled by Jesus' dead body had already thoroughly defiled themselves by their guilt in murdering Him, Yahweh's spotless Messiah.

This concern led the rulers to approach Pilate and ask that he have the legs of the crucified men broken to expedite their death. A crucified person has to support himself with his legs in order to breathe. If he becomes too weak and hangs under his own weight, he soon will be unable to draw a breath. Thus breaking the person's legs insures that this death by asphyxiation occurs quickly.

Intimidation was the goal of crucifixion and so the Romans preferred a lingering, agonized death and often left bodies hanging on their cross until nothing was left. But in this instance Pilate yielded to the Jews' request. He sent word to his soldiers to break the men's legs, but when they came to Jesus He appeared to already be dead. But just to make sure, one of the soldiers ran his spear into Jesus' side, resulting in an issue of blood and water (19:31-34). The Romans were master executioners and the flow of blood and water (serum) suggests that the soldier pierced Jesus' heart through His lung. Pilate had ordered an expedited death for these men and this was a sure way to that end; the spear settled any question of Jesus being alive, eliminating the need to break His legs.

Later, though, John came to see in these incidents further points of scriptural fulfillment supporting Jesus' claim to be Israel's Messiah (cf. 19:35-37, 20:30-31). He had celebrated the Passover meal in a way that showed He was fulfilling the Passover and its promise of a new Exodus. Now the intact bones of His body sacrificed with countless designated lambs on the day of preparation told John that He was Israel's Paschal Lamb (Exodus 12:43-46). So also He was Yahweh's returned presence (1:14-18, 14:8-11; cf. also 1:19-28 with Isaiah 40:1-11) rejected and pierced by His own (Matthew 27:17-25), now to be mourned over as an only son (Zechariah 12:8-10; cf. Acts 2:1-40, esp. v. 37).

- b. One of the men who observed Jesus' death was Joseph of Arimathea. All four gospel writers mentioned him by name, Mark and Luke identifying him as a prominent member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43a; Luke 23:50) and Matthew and John noting that he was a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 27:57; John 19:38). Mark and Luke also described him as a devout and upright man who was earnestly awaiting the coming of the kingdom (Mark 15:43b; Luke 23:51).

Joseph had apparently come to believe that this hope was being realized in Jesus of Nazareth, making His death all the more despairing; when the man he'd embraced as the Messiah died, so did Joseph's confidence that Yahweh was at last fulfilling His promise to restore David's throne and kingdom (cf. Luke 24:13-21). It must have been a monumental struggle to come to grips with Jesus' crucifixion and it's uncertain whether Joseph knew of His claims regarding His resurrection (ref. Matthew 16:21). In any case, he was committed to honoring Jesus in death and so went to Pilate to ask for His body, even at the risk of his own security and reputation (cf. 19:38 with Mark 15:43). Once Pilate determined that Jesus was dead, he ordered that His body be released into Joseph's care.

Joseph then prepared Jesus' body with burial spices, wrapped it in a linen grave cloth and placed it in his own unused tomb (only Matthew noted that this tomb belonged to Joseph – ref. 27:60). John added that this tomb was located in a garden near Golgotha and that Nicodemus – apparently also a formerly secret disciple – assisted Joseph and provided the immense amount of burial spices (19:39-42). After they'd prepared Jesus' body for burial, they set it in the tomb (likely on a stone shelf cut for that purpose) and sealed it with a large stone.

- c. Matthew also recorded that the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate the next day and asked that he dispatch soldiers to secure Jesus' tomb (27:62-66). They were aware of His resurrection claims and worried that His disciples might steal His body in order to convince the people that He was raised from the dead. The fact that they met with Pilate on the high sabbath which opened the feast shows how concerned they were. Whether or not this meeting directly violated the sabbath, their agitated thoughts and actions certainly violated the spirit of it. But they no doubt rationalized this meeting as pleasing to God because it was necessary for Israel's well-being. Jesus was a deceiver who'd been leading the nation toward destruction; He needed to die and now He needed to remain dead in the people's minds so that this whole unfortunate episode could die. Pilate saw the logic and consented. Ironically, this action devised to prevent deception did just that, but in the opposite way; it helped substantiate the truth of Jesus' resurrection.
- d. One final consideration is highlighted by Luke's statements regarding the women leaving the tomb to prepare spices and perfume to anoint Jesus' body after the Sabbath (23:55-56). The issue is the actual day of Jesus' crucifixion and the length of time He remained in the tomb. The traditional view is that Jesus died on Friday afternoon before the Saturday sabbath and then was raised early Sunday morning. The most significant challenge to this view is Jesus' own insistence that He would spend three days and three nights in the grave in accordance with the "sign of Jonah" to Israel (Matthew 12:38-40; cf. also Matthew 27:40, 63 and Mark 10:32-34). With respect to the traditional view, this is typically explained in terms of *portions* of three days and nights: Jesus died the afternoon of the first day and rose early on the third day (though this leaves only two intervening nights).

The centuries have seen other schemes proposed, but arguably the best one is that Jesus was crucified on *Wednesday* and raised after the Saturday sabbath. This allows for two sabbaths that week – the high sabbath that commenced the Feast of Unleavened Bread (always on the 15th of Nisan) and the weekly seventh-day sabbath. (The traditional view collapses these two sabbaths.) It also suits Luke's statement about the women leaving Jesus' tomb to prepare spices while also resting on the Sabbath. For the gospels record that there was barely enough time for Jesus' body to be prepared and entombed before the Sabbath began at sunset. How, then, was there sufficient time for the women to gather and prepare their spices and perfumes before the Sabbath when they were present at the tomb when Jesus' body was laid there? But if Jesus was crucified on Wednesday, the women could have rested on the high sabbath (15 Nisan) that began that evening and then done their preparation on Friday before the weekly sabbath began that day at sunset. They'd have again rested on that second sabbath and returned to the tomb early Sunday morning to find it empty (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1-4; Luke 24:1-3; John 20:1). If Jesus was raised during the night after the weekly sabbath ended – i.e., "early on the first day of the week" (He was already raised when the women arrived at dawn), then His time in the tomb precisely accorded with the three days and three nights He spoke of. So also this scenario fits with the Jews' statement about Him being raised *after* three days (Matthew 27:63).