

What did Jesus mean that He would spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth? Was He crucified on Thursday instead of Friday?

First, the passage:

(Matthew 12:38–41)³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.”³⁹ But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”⁴⁰ For 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.⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah *is* here.

There are several things we can note from this passage:

1. The Pharisees wanted to “see” a miraculous sign.

There was another time when the Pharisees asked for a sign:

(Matthew 16:1–4)¹ Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven.² He answered and said to them, “When it is evening you say, ‘*It will be fair weather, for the sky is red*’;³ and in the morning, ‘*It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening*.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times.⁴ A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” And He left them and departed.

This time they wanted a sign “from heaven.” The connection between a sign from heaven and validation that one is a true prophet is a thing in those days. It still is today. Not that the sign would actually convince them that Jesus was sent by God.

It’s interesting to note that Revelation speaks of fire “from heaven” to validate that the image set up by the land beast was sent by God.

(Revelation 13:13) He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men.

This takes our mind to another story that occurred on Mount Carmel when fire came down from heaven and devoured Elijah’s offering and altar. Notice the response of the people:

(1 Kings 18:38–40)³⁸ Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that *was* in the trench.³⁹ Now when all the people saw *it*, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The Lord, He *is* God! The Lord, He *is* God!”⁴⁰ And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!” So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there.

The same will happen in the last days, but reverse. Satan will perform signs that cause the people to think that they are following the true God, but instead they will cry out to seize the true followers of Jesus to take their lives.

2. Jesus called them “an evil and adulterous generation.”

Jesus points to their wickedness as the reason they ask for a sign. We need to be careful that our spiritual beliefs and practices are not driven by signs and miracles. Just looking for such is an indication that we are on the wrong track.

We need to seek Christ and the truths of His word:

(Jeremiah 29:11–13) ¹¹ For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

(Matthew 7:7–8) ⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

(Hebrews 11:6) But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

3. This brings us to the sign of Jonah. What is it?

The sign of Jonah is not a sign that Jonah will bring. It was Jonah’s appearance that was the sign to the people of Nineveh that his message was from the God. He had a testimony of being supernaturally rescued from death.

(Jonah 3:1–5) ¹ Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey *in extent*. ⁴ And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

Similarly, Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was the sign of authenticity that His message was sent by God. The religious leaders had already seen Jesus perform miracles (Matt 12:13–14, 24), which confirmed His identity as the Messiah. He would not fall into their trap of giving them more signs so they could accuse.

But also, John’s call of repentance to the Pharisees was a sign that salvation had come through the Messiah. When Jesus called them “an evil and adulterous generation,” it was meant to shake them from their self-deception and accept the message of salvation from sin.

4. What Jesus meant by “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” only makes sense if the term “heart of the earth” is correctly understood.

The phrase “in the earth” appears 66 times in the Bible (KJV), but none refers to the grave. The phrase “in the heart of the earth” is better translated as “in the depths of the world,” or in the grasp of the people that stood against him.

Note this phrase from the night Jesus was taken captive:

(Matthew 26:45) Then He came to His disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners.”

Furthermore, in Hebrew law the sins of the people were placed upon the Passover lamb before it was slain. It was the night before His crucifixion that Jesus, like Jonah, began to experience a total, hopeless

darkness that surrounded Him—a darkness caused by the sins of the world being placed upon Him. The experience was so overwhelming that He almost died (Matt 26:38). The hour Jesus began bearing the penalty for our sins, Jesus was in the heart of the earth.

5. What night was it that Jesus was in the heart of the earth?

We know from the chronology of the story that it was the night before the crucifixion that Jesus was taken captive and brought before Caiaphas the high priest.

Luke provides us with a sequence of events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion:

(Luke 23:54–24:2) ⁵⁴ That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near. ⁵⁵ And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment. ¹ Now on the first *day* of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain *other women* with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. ² But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb.

- Friday: Jesus was crucified on Preparation Day, the day before the weekly Sabbath.
- Sabbath: Jesus rested in the grave.
- Sunday: Jesus was raised from the dead, leaving the tomb empty.

NOTE: Some people argue that Friday was a ceremonial sabbath and that Preparation Day was Thursday. But this doesn't work:

- With inclusive reckoning, Jesus would then have been raised on the fourth day.
- The Sabbath here is “according to the commandment”; the fourth.
- The Sabbath is clearly described in the passage as the day before the “first day of the week.”