

On the Third Day: What Jesus and the Apostles Saw When They Read the Old Testament

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by Bruce Forsee

"He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures"

– 1 Corinthians 15:4 –

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At Easter we think about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the central event in our redemption. It's what all of history has pointed to, and it was foretold immediately after the first sin (Genesis 3:16). Jesus knew that he had come to die, and he taught his disciples not only that he would die and rise again, but specifically that he would rise on the third day. "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and *on the third day be raised*" (Matthew 16:21).

The apostle Paul indicates that the third-day resurrection was even indicated in the Old Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15:4 he claims Jesus "was buried, that he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the Scriptures*." In OBC's recent sermon series on Jonah, we've been reminded that Jesus Himself pointed to the experience of the prophet Jonah as a sign that he would die and rise in three days (Matthew 12:40). If Jonah's "resurrection" on the third day pointed to Christ's resurrection, this prompts the question: Are there other "third day" references in the Old Testament that signified Jesus's greater resurrection?

The answer is a resounding "Yes." See the list at the end of this post to begin to consider all the "third days" in Scripture.

The Third Day in the Old Testament

One of the most detailed "signs" that comes to mind is Abraham's attempt to offer Isaac, his son, as a sacrifice. The parallels to Jesus' death and resurrection are remarkable—the father sacrifices his only son, but since this is on the human level, God provides a substitutionary sacrifice instead. The author of Hebrews shows that this event points to the resurrection: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (11:17–19). It sometimes slips our notice that this "resurrection" of Isaac occurred on the "third day," yet there it is in Genesis 22:4: "On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar."

So many other events happen specifically on the third day that it's clear God has set apart this day as different. The plague of darkness in Egypt was lifted on the third day (Exodus 10:22), God visited His people on Sinai on the third day (Exodus 19:11), and a sacrifice was complete on the third day. On the third day, the sacrifice was ended, finished, in the past (Leviticus 19:6-8). God's people possessed the land on the third day (Joshua 1:11), manna ceased on the third day, and the people ate of the fruit of the promised land (Joshua 5:10-12). David was promised relief from pestilence on the third day (2 Samuel 24:13), the temple was finished and ready for worship on the third day (Ezra 6:15), and Esther was received by the King on the third day, sparing not only her life but the lives of all of God's people as well (Esther 5:1-2). It seems that the third day was so well known as special that it came to be understood as the day for forgiveness, new life, and acceptance by God (Hosea 6:1-2).

In other equally significant passages, the phrases "third day" or "three days" doesn't occur, but if you're paying attention, you'll see the third day is clearly indicated. For instance, in Numbers 16 a descendant of Levi named Korah gathered a group to challenge the very existence of the priesthood, claiming that all Israelites should be able to offer sacrifice, not just the priests. Would the God-designated priesthood survive such an assault? We see that it did! On day one, God judged the rebels by causing the earth to "open its mouth and swallow them up ... and they [went] down alive into Sheol." On the next day, the people grumbled because of these deaths and voiced their discontent (Numbers 16:41ff). So God instructed them to take twelve staffs, one for each of the heads of the tribes, and place them in the tabernacle. On the following day (the third day), Aaron's rod, a dead piece of wood, sprouted buds: "On the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds." (Numbers 17:8) Surely, this is a "sign" pointing to Jesus as much as the "sign" of Jonah the prophet. On that third day in the desert, by bringing life out of death, God selected his High Priest, as He would do on that third day centuries later when Christ came out of the tomb. Over a period of three days, both in the ancient desert and later when Christ died and rose again, there was judgment on sin, bewilderment of God's people, and new life that ushered in a new priesthood that was able to cover the sins of God's people.

These are just samples of "third day" references in the Old Testament that seem to be signs pointing to the resurrection of Jesus. Others can be seen below, and more "third days" occur in the New Testament too. For example, Jesus's first sign where he turned water into wine and manifested his glory occurred on the third day (John 2:1). Likewise, Saul received his sight on the third day after being blinded on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:8-9). Certainly, the sheer volume of "third day" passages reflects something more than a mere coincidence.

Summing Up the Third Day

Where does this leave us? And why should we be interested in such signs, many of which seem to be very enigmatic? I can think of at least three reasons.

First, God wants us to know that the death and resurrection of his Son was planned from all eternity. His suffering unto glory was no accident; no "Plan B." God gave us "signs" from the beginning that pointed not only to Jesus's redemption in general ways, but also to many of the details, such as the resurrection on the third day.

Second, when we start to see things like these signs woven into the fabric of the message of Scripture, we become overwhelmed with the literary beauty of God's Word. Biblical doctrine isn't simply cold, compressed truth presented in a dull framework. Just the opposite: God delights to reveal his character and his plans in a beautiful and complex work of literature that has no equal.

Third, this beauty and complexity teaches us God, not men, wrote the Bible. The unfolding unity of this book, written over a period of about 1,500 years, by 40 authors, many from different cultures, is nothing less than supernatural. When we see the consistency of the message, even in these often overlooked details, our faith is bolstered. In addition, you see God's power at work. When we tell a story, we use flannel graphs (or some of us older people did) or power point. Yet, far better than our word pictures, God has inspired in Scripture living and literary "pictures" to illustrate his redemptive purposes.

All in all, the study of signs in the Old Testament broadens and deepens our understanding and appreciation for the truths that are developed in the New Testament. In other words, if we pay attention to what God says in the Old Testament, we are better able to see the glory of Christ (John 12:41). For that reason, take time to consider what "raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" means, and keep an eye out for those third day references too. You might find more than you first expected, just like disciples did on the morning of the third day.

The Third Day in the Old Testament

A Sampling of Passages

Genesis 1:12-13	God creates seed-bearing plants.
Genesis 22:4	Abraham receives Isaac back alive.
Genesis 31:22	Jacob makes a safe escape from Laban.
Genesis 34:25	Simeon & Levi avenge the sin against their sister.
Genesis 40:20	Joseph's dream, one dies; one lives.
Genesis 42:18	Joseph releases his brothers from prison in Egypt.
Exodus 10:22	Darkness plague in Egypt lifted on third day.
Exodus 19:11	The Lord met with His people on Sinai.
Leviticus 19:6-7, 7:17-18	Sacrifice completed on third day.
Numbers 17:8	Aaron's staff sprouts buds, blossoms, & almonds.
Numbers 19:19; 31:19	Part of the process for purification.
Joshua 1:11; 3:2	God's people possess the Land.
Joshua 2:22	The spies escape from enemies in Jericho.
Joshua 9:16	Treaty with the Gibeonites confirmed.
Judges 20:30	Israel cleanses sin in its midst. (cf. Sodom)
Ruth 2:11	"Before" (ESV) is literally "three days ago" in Hebrew.
	On the third day, Ruth met her "redeemer."
1 Samuel 20:19	David escapes Saul's death plans.
1 Samuel 30:1, 11	David saves the life of the Amalekite slave.
2 Samuel 24:13	Relief from judgment of pestilence.
2 Kings 20:5-6	Extension of life for Hezekiah.
2 Chronicles 10:12	Bad news for those who serve an evil king.
Ezra 6:15	Temple was finished.
Esther 5:1	Esther, Israel's advocate, is received by the King.
Hosea 6:2	Generally understood as time for forgiveness.

Jonah 1:17
John 2:1

Escape from death and life for prophet Jonah.
Wedding at Cana – Water turned to wine.