TIME LINE OF CHRIST’S DEATH

Today being Easter Sunday, I thought that it was appropriate to set aside Second Corinthians for a week, and to bring an Easter lesson. Do you realize how hard it is to come up with something new on such a well explored subject? We all know the story of Christ’s passion. He met with his disciples for Passover dinner. Then he went with them to the garden, where he prayed fervently, but the disciples slept. Then Judas came with his mob, and arrested Jesus, hauling him off to appear before the high priest and the council of the Jews. They tried him during the night, and when morning was come, they took him to Pilate. Pilate interrogated him, but found no wrong in him. He sent him over to Herod, who did the same thing, and sent him back. Pilate interrogated him again, and was inclined to set him free. The priests whipped up the crowd to cry for crucifixion. Pilate offered them the choice between Jesus and Barabbas. Christ was then scourged, and taken to be crucified. He uttered his seven statements. The soldiers gambled for his clothes. The sky was darkened. Christ finally died, and the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom. He as taken down by Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemus, and buried in Joseph’s tomb. Days later, Mary went to the tomb with spices to anoint the body, and found him gone. That isn’t all of the story, but there is precious little that I could teach you about these events.

What I want to cover today is the timing of all of these events: when they occurred and what is the significance of that timing. This doesn’t promise to be a very spiritual lesson, but I hope that you can get something out of it.

The first thing we need to do is to decide the starting point for our time line. We obviously don’t want to start at his birth, as that is not very germane to the time. Nor do we want to include his ministry times. The point that I think we should start at, a very biblical point in my mind, is at the Passover dinner just before his crucifixion. Passover is held the fourteenth day of Nisan. Nisan is the first month of the year on the Jewish calendar. We have no idea when that is these days, but the Jews still celebrate Passover. They celebrate on the first full moon after the Spring equinox. They can use this date because the Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar, not a solar calendar, like the Julian calendar that we use. That is why it seems to jump around.

The Jewish day begins at sundown and goes until sundown the next day. You can see that in the first chapter of Genesis, where he says, “And the evening and the morning were the first day,” and “the evening and morning were the second day,” and so on. So Passover begins on the evening before the day of the fourteenth. Passover is really a seven day affair, with a holy day at the start and a holy day at the end. These days are called sabbaths, because the Jews were to do no work in them, just as on the Sabbath day. So, during the week of Passover, there are two or three sabbaths, two when Saturday falls on the first or last day of Passover, and three when it doesn’t.

Also, the Jewish day is considered to be twelve hours long. We can see that in John 11:9, where Christ asks, “Are there not twelve hours in the day?” The day is split evenly by noon time, so the daytime is considered to begin at six a.m. and go until six p.m. Time during the day was then reckoned from six a.m. The third hour is nine o’clock. The sixth hour is twelve o’clock. All of this background will come into play as
we study this time line.

Starting, as I said, with Christ’s Passover meal, when did it occur? He ate the meal, as was the tradition, on the evening before what we would call the first day of Passover. Remember that the day began at sundown the previous day. During this meal, he told the disciples that one of them would betray him. Actually, Judas had already betrayed him, in that he had already arranged with the Jewish leaders to point him out for thirty pieces of silver. It was at the end of this meal that he washed the disciples feet, and that he instituted the Lord’s Supper, what is often called Communion. We find the story of the washing of the feet in John 13, and the Lord’s Supper is found in Matthew 26.

After they had eaten, they then went out to the mount of Olives, to the garden of Gethsemane. We don’t know what time they left for the mount, but it had to be late evening. The meal didn’t begin until after 6:00 o’clock. Passover is after the spring equinox, so the days were longer than the nights by a few minutes. They didn’t have time zones, or daylight saving time. Noon was when the sun was at its highest point in the sky. So sunset would have been a few minutes after six. The meal would have taken a while to eat, accompanied as it was by so many rituals. Then there was the washing of the feet. That would have taken some time. Finally, Christ then instituted the Lord’s Supper. They would have walked to Gethsemane. We don’t know where he ate his supper, but Gethsemane is to the northeast of Jerusalem. The northeast quadrant of the city is the temple complex, and occupied nearly a quarter of the city. Gethsemane is well outside of the walls, so he would have had a long walk. As he walked to the garden, he taught his disciples. Three chapters of the book of John were given during that walk, so it would have been quite a long while. When Christ got there, he then prayed for three different periods. These were not casual prayers, in that he prayed until his sweat dropped down like great drops of blood. In my mind, each of these prayers lasted about an hour. After each prayer, he came back to the disciples and found them asleep, so they weren’t short prayers. It being the middle of the night, and the prayers being long, they were unable to stay awake, as Christ had desired. Can’t you identify with the disciples? Christ wants us to do works for him, but our flesh just keeps getting in the way. Our own infirmities and weaknesses keep coming up, and thwarting even our desires to serve him.

It was in the early morning hours that Judas showed up with his mob to take Christ into custody. He was hauled off to the Annas’ house. Annas was the father-in-law to Caiaphas, the high priest. The two of them were swapping the office of high priest back and forth. This house was across Jerusalem from the garden, so that trek would have taken quite a while, probably an hour or more. After questioning Christ, Annas sent him to Caiaphas. It was there that Jesus was tried for his “crimes.” Now, I have heard it taught all of my life that the nighttime trial was against the Jewish law, but I could not find that anywhere in the scriptures, nor did any of my commentaries mention it. If someone knows where it is that says that it is contrary to the law, I would appreciate seeing where. Otherwise, I just have to come to the conclusion that this is one of those misconceptions that arise, and get passed on as truth, when there is no truth in them. Anyway, during these early morning hours, just before dawn, Christ was taken before the council. During this “trial”, Christ was accused of many things by the false witnesses, but none of them agreed, so they couldn’t convict him according to the Mosaic law. Finally, the high priest asked him if he was the Christ. When Christ
answered, not explicitly, but closely enough, that he was, then the high priest tore his
clothes. This is something else I have been taught is against the law. Indeed, there is
a verse in Leviticus that says that he isn’t to rend his clothes. But I think when we read
that in context, we might come to a different conclusion.

Lev 21:10-12

10 And he that is the high priest among his brethren, upon whose head the
anointing oil was poured, and that is consecrated to put on the garments,
shall not uncover his head, nor rend his clothes;
11 Neither shall he go in to any dead body, nor defile himself for his father, or for
his mother;
12 Neither shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his
God; for the crown of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the
LORD.

You see that these three verses are all of one sentence. There are a number of things
that are proscribed. It is that first phrase in the twelfth verse that causes me to stop.
The high priest isn’t supposed to go out of the sanctuary? That made no sense, until I
reread the tenth verse. This is referring to the high priest, who has been anointed, and
has been consecrated to put on the garments. That is, he has cleansed himself and
made himself ready to put on the ceremonial garments of his office. Then he is
proscribed from defiling himself with even his mother’s or father’s dead body, from
leaving the sanctuary, from profaning God, or from tearing his clothes. I don’t think that
this prohibition is against him tearing his own street clothes.

During this trial, Peter was in the servants’ hall, warming himself by the fire, trying to
hear what was going on. Three times he was approached by other servants, and
accused of being part of Christ’s band. The different gospels give different accounts of
who actually accused him. I reconcile that, by concluding that when he was accused,
there were several there that accused him at each time. He then denied, even going so
far as to curse. After he made his denial, the cock crew. We know from our own
experience, and from common knowledge, that roosters don’t crow in the night. They
crow when the sun starts to come up. So we actually have a very good timing in that. It
was now right at 6:00 a.m.

As soon as it was light, they took Jesus to Pilate, demanding that he crucify him. I
find it interesting that this man, who supposedly had committed great blasphemy, was
not stoned. Yes, it was against the Roman law, but that didn’t stop them in the case of
Stephen. When they caught Stephen preaching Christ, he preached them a sermon,
and they then stoned him for it. Yet, Stephen hadn’t claimed to be God, just that Jesus
was God. Here, they had the man who said he was God. Why didn’t they stone him
immediately, just like Stephen? It was so that the scriptures would be fulfilled. Stoning
would, by its very nature, assure that bones were broken. Yet, the scriptures said that
not a bone would be broken. They didn’t do it so the prophecy would be fulfilled, but
God directed events, so that it would.

When Jesus got to Pilate, he interrogated him. He found nothing in the charges that
were being brought against him worthy of death. This is, of course, because Jesus was
sinless. He did not deserve to die. All other men, throughout all time, deserved to die,
but this one man stands above us all, in that he had no sentence of death in him. Pilate then found out that Jesus was a Galilean, so he sent him to the king of Galilee, Herod, who was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Herod even had a palace in Jerusalem, in the northwest corner. He was anxious to see Jesus, because he had heard so much about him. Herod had already had John the Baptist beheaded, and he didn't think that there could be two such holy men at the same point in history. He thought that he must be John come back from the dead. I find this somewhat amusing, in that John didn’t come back from the dead, but Jesus did. Herod wasn’t anxious to see him then. Herod interrogated Christ, and he found nothing to charge him with, either, so he sent him back to Pilate. Pilate then offered the crowd the choice between Barabbas and Jesus. After the crowd demanded that Christ be crucified, he had him scourged, and then sent him on to be crucified. All of this took time. By the time that Christ was actually crucified, it was noon. Mark says that he was crucified at the third hour, or 9:00. Much has been said about this discrepancy. There are two basic theories of reconciliation. The first is that there is a scribal error copying the text. The Greek method of specifying numbers is by using letters, alpha for one, beta for two, gamma for three, and sigma for six. Mark probably used this to designate the hour. The letters gamma and sigma are very similar in the lower case, and could have been copied wrong. That error would then have been propagated through the copies of the copy. The other theory is that Mark was referring to the entire events of the crucifixion as starting about 9:00. This would mean that that is when Pilate passed his sentence. The scourging and mocking would have followed, then the march to Calvary, which would have taken a couple of hours. We also have to remember that time was only reckoned by the position of the sun. They didn’t have watches and clocks to go by.

All of the gospel writers agree, though, that at noon, the sixth hour, a darkness fell on Jerusalem. God was turning his back on his son, as he hung there bearing the sin of the world. God can’t look on sin, so he couldn’t watch his son die. The darkness lasted for at least three hours, until the ninth hour. Now the Jews reckoned time only in hours, not in minutes. So it was the ninth hour from three o’clock until it became four o’clock. Shortly after three o’clock, Christ died. The Jews didn’t want the bodies to be hanging on the cross during the Sabbath. Because it was the day of preparation, the day before the Sabbath, and thus Friday, they went to Pilate, and asked that the legs be broken. This was because crucifixion is a particularly cruel execution, slow and painful. People lived on the cross for days, before their strength gave out, and they died. They didn’t want Christ to live on for those several days. But, Christ had already died, so when they came to break his legs, they didn’t need to. It was then that the soldier stuck him with a spear, to make sure that he was dead, and the blood and the water poured out.

It is because of this statement, about it being the preparation, that people have come to believe that Christ died on Friday, and it became known as Good Friday. It has become a high holy day in some churches. But a careful examination of the scriptures shows that this isn’t true.

Mark 15:42-43

42 And now when the even was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath,

43 Joseph of Arimathaea, an honourable counsellor, which also waited for the
kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus.

When even, that is, evening came, then it was the day of preparation. To reconcile this, we have to understand that the Jews went to Pilate to have the legs broken after dark, not during the afternoon.

The next event on the time line is Christ's resurrection. We know from the several gospels that Christ arose on Sunday morning, sometime before dawn. That time is very well established, seeing as how they say that "on the first day of the week," Saturday being the Sabbath, and Sunday being the first day of the week. So, if Christ died on Friday, as is so readily accepted in most of Christendom, then Christ must be a liar.

Matt 12:40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

He said three days and three nights. If he died on Friday, as is assumed, then he was in ground only for two days and two nights. They say that he was in the grave for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday; ergo, the three days. But we have already shown that it was after sundown, so to the Jew, it would have been Saturday that he was buried. And if he died on Friday, there is no way to get three nights. There would have only been Friday night, and Saturday night. No, he had to have died on Thursday, so that he could have spend Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in the grave, and Thursday night, Friday night, and Saturday night in the earth, as he prophesied.

I hope that this study of the time line has been informative, and that you have gotten something spiritual out of it. Maybe the crucifixion is now more of a personal thing, and not some theoretical concept to you. Perhaps now, you understand a little more of the pain and suffering that our savior went through to bring you salvation. Perhaps, you understand more that it was your sin, personally, that nailed him to that cross, and you are ready to live more for Christ, realizing that when he hung there in pain and agony, naked, and bearing the ultimate shame, the sin of the whole world, that he asked the father to forgive you, then and there.