

## April 3, AD 33: Why We Believe We Can Know the Exact Date Jesus Died

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In our book, [\*The Final Days of Jesus: The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived\*](#), Justin Taylor and I assume but do not argue for a precise date of Jesus's crucifixion.

Virtually all scholars believe, for various reasons, that Jesus was crucified in the spring of either AD 30 or AD 33, with the majority opting for the former. ([The evidence from astronomy](#) narrows the possibilities to AD 27, 30, 33, or 34). However, we want to set forth our case for the date of Friday, April 3, AD 33 as the exact day that Christ died for our sins.

To be clear, the Bible does not explicitly specify the precise date of Jesus's crucifixion and it is not an essential salvation truth. But that does not make it unknowable or unimportant. Because Christianity is a historical religion and the events of Christ's life did take place in human history alongside other known events, it is helpful to locate Jesus's death—as precisely as the available evidence allows—within the larger context of human history.

Among the Gospel writers, no one makes this point more strongly than Luke, the Gentile physician turned historian and inspired chronicler of early Christianity.

### The Year John the Baptist's Ministry Began

Luke implies that John the Baptist began his public ministry shortly before Jesus did, and he gives us a historical reference point for when the Baptist's ministry began: "In *the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar . . .*" (Luke 3:1).

We know from Roman historians that Tiberius succeeded Augustus as emperor and was confirmed by the Roman Senate on August 19, AD 14. He ruled until AD 37. "The fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" sounds like a straightforward date, but there are some ambiguities, beginning with when one starts the calculation. Most likely, Tiberius's reign was counted either from the day he took office in AD 14 or from January 1 of the following year, AD 15. The earliest possible date at which Tiberius's "fifteenth year" began is August 19, AD 28, and the latest possible date at which his "fifteenth year" ended is December 31, AD 29. So *John the Baptist's ministry began anywhere from mid-AD 28 until sometime in AD 29.*

### The Year Jesus's Ministry Began

If Jesus, as the Gospels seem to indicate, began his ministry not long after John, then based on the calculations above, the earliest date for Jesus's baptism would be in late AD 28 at the very earliest. However, it is more probable to place it sometime in the first half of the year AD 29, because a few months probably elapsed between the beginning of John's ministry and that of Jesus (and the year AD 30 is the latest possible date). So *Jesus's ministry must have begun between the end of AD 28 at the earliest and AD 30 at the latest.*

This coheres with Luke's mention that "Jesus, when he began his ministry, was *about thirty years of age*" (Luke 3:23). If he was born in 6 or 5 BC, as is most likely, Jesus would have been *approximately thirty-*

*two to thirty-four years old* in late AD 28 until AD 30, which falls well within the range of him being “about thirty years of age.”

## The Length of Jesus’s Ministry

Now we need to know how long Jesus’s public ministry lasted, because if it went on for two or more years, this would seem to rule out spring of AD 30 as a possible date for the crucifixion.

John’s Gospel mentions that Jesus attended at least three Passovers (possibly four), which took place once a year in the spring:

- There was a Passover in Jerusalem at the start of his public ministry (John 2:13, 23).
- There was a Passover in Galilee midway through his public ministry (John 6:4).
- There was a final Passover in Jerusalem at the end of his public ministry, that is, the time of his crucifixion (John 11:55; 12:1).
- And Jesus may have attended one more Passover not recorded in John but perhaps in one or several of the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

Even if there were only three Passovers, this would still make a date of a.d. 30 all but impossible for the date of the crucifixion. As noted above, the earliest likely date for the beginning of Jesus’s ministry from Luke 3:1 is late a.d. 28. So the first of these Passovers (at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry; John 2:13) would fall on Nisan 15 in a.d. 29 (because Nisan is in March/April, near the beginning of a year). The second would fall in a.d. 30 at the earliest, and the third would fall in 31 at the earliest. This means that if Jesus’s ministry coincided with at least three Passovers, and if the first Passover was in AD 29, he could not have been crucified in a.d. 30.

But if John the Baptist began his ministry in AD 29, then Jesus probably began his ministry in late AD 29 or early a.d. 30. Then the Passovers in John would occur on the following dates:

|       |    |  |
|-------|----|--|
| Nisan | AD | John 2:13  |
| 15    | 30 |  |
| Nisan | AD | Either the unnamed feast in John 5:1 or else a Passover that John does not |
| 15    | 31 | mention (but that may be implied in the Synoptics)                         |
| Nisan | AD | John 6:4   |
| 15    | 32 |  |
| Nisan | AD | John 11:55, the Passover at which Jesus was crucified                      |
| 15    | 33 |  |

## Jesus Was Crucified on the Day of Preparation for the Passover

John also mentions that Jesus was crucified on “the day of Preparation” (John 19:31), that is, the Friday before the Sabbath of Passover week (Mark 15:42). The night before, on Thursday evening, Jesus ate a Passover meal with the Twelve (Mark 14:12), his “Last Supper.”

In the Pharisaic-rabbinic calendar commonly used in Jesus's day, Passover always falls on the fifteenth day of Nisan (Exodus 12:6), which begins Thursday after sundown and ends Friday at sundown. In the year a.d. 33, the most likely year of Jesus's crucifixion, Nisan 15 fell on April 3, yielding April 3, a.d. 33, as the most likely date for the crucifixion. In *The Final Days of Jesus*, we therefore constructed the following chart to show the dates for Jesus's final week in a.d. 33:

|         |           |  |   |              |
|---------|-----------|--|---|--------------|
| April 2 | Nissan 14 | Thursday (Wednesday nightfall to Thursday nightfall) | Day of Passover preparation                 | Last Supper  |
| April 3 | Nissan 15 | Friday (Thursday nightfall to Friday nightfall)      | Passover; Feast of Unleavened Bread, begins | Crucifixion  |
| April 4 | Nissan 16 | Saturday (Friday nightfall to Saturday nightfall)    | Sabbath                                     |              |
| April 5 | Nissan 17 | Sunday (Saturday nightfall to Sunday nightfall)      | First day of the week                       | Resurrection |

## Conclusion

The above calculations may appear complicated, but in a nutshell the argument runs like this:

| <b>HISTORICAL INFORMATION</b>  | <b>YEAR</b>     |
|--|-----------------|
| Beginning of Tiberius's reign  | AD 14           |
| <i>Fifteenth year of Tiberius's reign:</i> Beginning of John the Baptist's ministry            | AD 28           |
| <i>A few months later:</i> Beginning of Jesus's ministry                                       | AD 29           |
| <i>Minimum three-year duration of Jesus' ministry:</i> Most likely date of Jesus's crucifixion | AD 33 (April 3) |

While this is in our judgment the most likely scenario, it should be acknowledged that many believe Jesus was crucified in the year AD 30, not 33. However, if the beginning of Tiberius's reign is placed in the year AD 14, it is virtually impossible to accommodate fifteen years of Tiberius's reign and three years of Jesus' ministry between AD 14 and 30. For this reason, some have postulated a co-regency (joint rule) of Tiberius and Augustus during the last few years of Augustus's reign. However, there is no reliable ancient historical evidence for such co-regency.

We conclude that Jesus was most likely crucified on April 3, AD 33. While other dates are possible, believers can take great assurance from the fact that the most important historical events in Jesus's life, such as the crucifixion, are firmly anchored in human history. As we celebrate Easter, and as we walk with Jesus every day of the year, we can therefore be confident that our faith is based not only on subjective personal assurance but on reliable historical data, which makes ours an eminently reasonable faith.

*This article first appeared at [First Things](#) on April 3, 2014. Justin Taylor is executive vice president and publisher for books at Crossway. He and Andreas Köstenberger have co-authored [The Final Days of Jesus: The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived](#) (Crossway, 2014).*

## Paschal controversies

**Paschal controversies**, in the Christian Church, [disputes](#) concerning the correct date for observing [Easter](#) (Greek *Pascha*). The earliest controversy was over the question of whether Easter should always be celebrated on a Sunday or on the actual day of the Jewish lunar month (14th of Nisan) on which the [Paschal lamb](#) was slaughtered. The latter practice, followed by the church in the Roman province of Asia, was generally condemned at the end of the 2nd century because it meant celebrating Easter when the Jews were keeping [Passover](#).

Later controversies concerned the different methods of calculating the Paschal moon, until in the 6th century the computations of [Dionysius Exiguus](#) were generally accepted in the West. The [Celtic Church](#), however, did not accept this method until the 7th century (*see* [Whitby, Synod of](#)), and there were some difficulties in Gaul in the 8th century.

In the Eastern [Orthodox Church](#), Easter is often observed on a later Sunday than in the Western Church, partly because it [adheres](#) to the [Julian calendar](#) for the movable year. In the West the subject has ceased to be a matter of dispute, and the [second Vatican Council](#) stated in 1963 that there was no objection in principle to observing Easter on a fixed Sunday (probably early in April).

## The date of Easter and its controversies

Fixing the date on which the Resurrection of Jesus was to be observed and celebrated triggered a major controversy in early [Christianity](#) in which an Eastern and a Western position can be distinguished. The dispute, known as the [Paschal controversies](#), was not definitively resolved until the 8th century. In [Asia Minor](#), Christians observed the day of the Crucifixion on the same day that Jews celebrated the [Passover](#) offering—that is, on the 14th day of the first full moon of spring, 14 Nisan (*see* [Jewish calendar](#)). The Resurrection, then, was observed two days later, on 16 Nisan, regardless of the day of the week. In the West the Resurrection of Jesus was celebrated on the first day of the week, [Sunday](#), when Jesus had risen from the dead. Consequently, Easter was always celebrated on the first Sunday after the 14th day of the month of Nisan. Increasingly, the churches opted for the Sunday celebration, and the Quartodecimans (“14th day” proponents) remained a minority. The [Council of Nicaea](#) in 325 [decreed](#) that Easter should be observed on the first Sunday following the first [full moon](#) after the spring [equinox](#) (March 21). Easter, therefore, can fall on any Sunday between March 22 and April 25.

[Eastern Orthodox](#) churches use a slightly different calculation based on the [Julian](#) rather than the [Gregorian calendar](#) (which is 13 days ahead of the former), with the result that the Orthodox Easter celebration usually occurs later than that celebrated by [Protestants](#) and [Roman Catholics](#). Moreover, the Orthodox tradition prohibits Easter from being celebrated before or at the same time as Passover. (Britannica)

<sup>40</sup> We on our part also retain many ceremonies and traditions (such as the liturgy of the Mass and various canticles, festivals, and the like) which serve to preserve order in the church. <sup>41</sup> At the same time, however, the people are instructed that such outward forms of service do not make us righteous before God and that they are to be observed without burdening consciences, which is to say that it is not a sin to omit them if this is done without causing scandal. <sup>42</sup> The ancient Fathers maintained such liberty with respect to outward ceremonies, <sup>43</sup> for in the East **they kept Easter at a time different from that in Rome.** <sup>6</sup> When some regarded this difference a divisive of the church, they were admonished by others that it was not necessary to maintain uniformity in such customs. <sup>44</sup> Irenaeus said, “Disagreement in fasting does not destroy unity in faith,”<sup>7</sup> and there is a statement in Dist. 12 that such disagreement in human ordinances is not in conflict with the unity of Christendom.<sup>8 45</sup> Moreover, the Tripartite History, Book 9, gathers many examples of dissimilar church usages and adds the profitable Christian observation, “It was not the intention of the apostles to institute holy days but to teach faith and love.”<sup>9 1</sup>

<sup>32</sup> We certainly had weighty reasons for presenting this article, for it is clear that many foolish opinions about traditions have crept into the church. Some have thought that human traditions are devotions necessary for meriting justification. Later they debated how it happened that they had come to worship God in so many ways, as though these observances were really acts of devotion rather than outward rules of discipline, completely unrelated to the righteousness of the heart or the worship of God. For good and valid reasons, these vary according to the circumstances, one way or another. Similarly, some churches have excommunicated others because of such **traditions as the observance of Easter**, the use of icons, and the like.<sup>9</sup> From this the uninitiated have concluded that there can be no righteousness of the heart before God without these observances. On this issue there are many foolish books by the summists and others.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>55</sup> It is proper for the Christian assembly to keep such ordinances for the sake of love and peace, to be obedient to the bishops and parish ministers in such matters, and to observe the regulations in such a way that one does not give offense to another and so that there may be no disorder or unbecoming conduct in the church. <sup>56</sup> However, consciences should not be burdened by contending that such things are necessary for salvation or that it is a sin to omit them, even when no offense is given to others, just as no one would say that a woman commits a sin if without offense to others she goes out with uncovered head.

<sup>57</sup> Of like character is **the observance of Sunday, Easter**, Pentecost, and similar holy days and usages. <sup>58</sup> Those who consider the appointment of Sunday in place of the Sabbath as a necessary institution are very much mistaken, <sup>59</sup> for the Holy Scriptures have abrogated the Sabbath and teach that after the revelation of the Gospel all ceremonies of the old law may be omitted. <sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, because it was necessary to appoint a certain day so that the people might know when they ought to assemble, the Christian church appointed Sunday for this purpose, and it was the more inclined and pleased to do this in order that the people might <sup>(tr-93)</sup> have an example of Christian liberty and might know that the keeping neither of the Sabbath nor of any other day is necessary. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In Asia Minor Easter was observed on the Jewish Passover while in the West, as in Palestine and Egypt, it was observed on the Sunday following.

<sup>7</sup> In Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V. 24, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Gratian, *Decretum*, Part I, dist. 12, chap. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Cassiodorus, *Tripartite Ecclesiastical History*, IX, 38, quoting from Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, 22.

<sup>1</sup>Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

**9 In the Paschal Controversy at the end of the second century Roman Christians excommunicated Christians in Asia Minor. In the Iconoclastic Controversy in the eighth century the Lateran Synod condemned the Synod of Constantinople. In 1054 the pope excommunicated the Eastern Orthodox.**

<sup>1</sup> Since the thirteenth century many casuistical handbooks of penance (e.g., Raimund of Pennaforte, *Summa de casibus conscientiae*) had been prepared.

<sup>2</sup>Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

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# THE PASSOVER WEEK

## ROMAN AND JEWISH CALENDARS

The Jewish day commenced at 6pm and counted two lots of 12 hours so noon was the 6th hour.

The Roman day began at midnight and counted two lots of 12 hours so noon was the 12th hour. The day ended at midnight. John's Gospel written about AD90, after the Jewish nation was scattered in AD70, uses Roman time.

**Christ Buried before 6pm**  
**Christ Risen before Daybreak**

## CHRIST DIED ON THURSDAY

Christ died on Thursday 14th of Nisan Lev.23:5. He arrived in Bethany on the Friday, 6 days BEFORE the Passover (counting inclusively) Jo.12:1. On the Tuesday He said, "AFTER two days is the feast of Passover" (Matt.26:2) i.e. Tues/Wed.

3 Days & 3 Nights  
 (The Jews reckoned a part day as one day)

**Palm Sunday**  
 Messiah the Prince  
 Dan.9:25

**The Last Supper, arrest and trial of Jesus**

**Special Sabbath a "high day"**  
 Jo.19:31

## 7 DAYS FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD

**Weekly Sabbath**  
 7

**Feast of Firstfruits**  
 Lev.23:11

**Special Sabbath**

Jesus comes to Bethany  
 6 6pm

Weekly Sabbath  
 7 6pm

1 6pm

2 6pm

3 6pm

4 6pm

5 6pm

6 6pm

7 6pm

Preparation  
 The lambs slain

Frid Sat Sun Mon Tues Wed Thurs Frid Sat  
 8th Nisan 9th Nisan 10th Nisan 14th Nisan 15th Nisan

69 "Weeks" = 483 yrs  
 173,880 days exact

**Palm Sunday**  
 "Messiah the Prince"  
 Luke 19:42  
 Zech. 9:9

## THE PASSOVER LAMB

The Sadducees held the High Priesthood and observed Passover on 15 Nisan which began at 6pm on Thursday. Since they controlled the Temple, lambs were slain after 3pm on 14 Nisan.

The Pharisees kept Passover on 14 Nisan (Wednesday night that year) without a lamb. Thus Jesus kept the Passover on Wednesday night and died as the Passover lambs were slain on Thursday afternoon.

"Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Cor 5:7)

From the 20th year of Artaxerxes - 445 B.C.