

# ***“Contradictions in the Bible?”***

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Yesterday, at our Vacation Bible School, many of us spent the day thinking about the fact that the Bible is the inspired word of God. We studied the question of how we got the Bible. We studied a little bit about the Bible and science. We studied prophecy. We thought about the fact that the Bible tells us how to live. We studied what inspiration actually means. We learned that the Bible is an amazing book.

The Bible, in fact, is actually a library of books, a library containing 66 books written by 40 men over a period of roughly 1500 years. The authors lived in different nations, in various cultures, they wrote in at least three different languages and did their writing from the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. And yet with this tremendous diversity, we are amazed that the 66 books of the Bible fit together almost like pieces of a puzzle – diverse, and yet perfectly unified around a common theme: God loves the world and sent His Son to die for our sins.

Many people, though, do not believe the Bible, and many will try to tell us that the Bible is full of contradictions, that the Bible is full of errors, that the Bible says one thing over here and something else completely different over here. Of course, if there are contradictions in the Bible, that would be a huge problem. The Bible claims to be perfect, the Bible claims to be from God, and so if there are mistakes, if there are contradictions, if there are errors in the Bible then we face some serious questions: Did God try to give us a perfect book and fail, or is God lying to us? Or, is the Bible from God at all? And if the Bible is not from God, then is there a God? These are some serious questions.

So, this morning, I would like for us to spend some time looking into this: Are there contradictions in the Bible? As we get started, it might help to outline what a contradiction really is. Literally, the word “contradiction” means, “to speak against,” and the word (as we will be using this morning) refers to two or more statements in the Bible that appear to be “against” each other. Critics, of course, are looking for the Bible to speak against itself. Like prosecuting attorneys grilling a suspect, they are looking for inconsistencies that will prove that the suspect is lying. We might say that they are cross-examining the Bible to try to get the Bible to testify against itself. They are trying to trap God in some kind of inconsistency. And I would point out: The accusations are all around us. Most of us probably have friends, who, when asked why they don’t believe in the Bible, will tell us, “Oh, the Bible is full of mistakes. The Bible is full of contradictions.” Of course, when we ask them, “Like

what?” many of them will say, “Oh, well, I don’t know – but everybody knows that the Bible is full of contradictions.”

The Bible is the most scrutinized book in world history. As we study, then, I want us to look at some of this scrutiny, we will look at some of these accusations, we will look at some of the alleged contradictions, and as we study, I would like to structure our lesson around several key concepts, several responses to the critics who claim that they have found contradictions in the Bible. I would like for us to think about the first four ideas this morning, and then (if the Lord wills) I would like for us to consider the final three ideas two weeks from this morning, after we get back from our week of Bible camp.

**I. Probably the first concern we need to address when thinking about potential contradictions is the possibility that there is some kind of a TRANSLATION OR SCRIBAL ISSUE.**

Most of us understand that when we read the Bible today, we are dealing with a copy of a copy that has been translated into our own language. So, right here at the beginning as we talk about the Bible being perfect, we are talking about the original documents, those pieces of paper that would have had Paul’s handwriting. When Paul, and Matthew, and Mark and the other authors wrote their letters and books, those original documents were completely without error in every way. However, almost immediately, people started making copies. The church in Colossae, for example, once they read Paul’s words, they made a copy and they then passed that copy on to a neighboring congregation in the city of Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). In the same way, they were to read the letter that Paul had written to the Laodiceans. From the beginning, God’s people have copied scripture, and for the first 1400 years or so, those copies were made by hand. Several months ago, I showed you the first typo that I have ever found in any Bible I have ever owned. It was incredibly minor (as I remember it, it involved the misspelling of the word “the”), but it was technically an error. And as you can imagine, we would have a number of these minor issues when dealing with handwritten copies. Thankfully, though, our copies of copies of copies are incredibly accurate. It has been estimated, in fact, that if all of the passages with issues were to be put together in one spot, they would fill up less than one half of one page in the New Testament. And for a book that has been copied by hand for thousands of years, that is absolutely amazing. And on top of that, we are talking about relatively minor issues – some numbers in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, a time or two where we read about *“the Lord Jesus Christ”* versus *“the Lord Jesus.”* All in all, these are some incredibly minor issues and certainly nothing that would affect my salvation. And yet, as you can imagine, some skeptics have used several of these issues as proof that the Bible contradicts itself. For example, 2 Samuel 10:18 says that David killed 700 charioteers in the battle with the Ammonites, but a parallel account in 1 Chronicles 19:18 says that he killed 7,000. Some would see that as a contradiction that proves that the Bible is full of errors. And yet, whether King David killed 700 or 7000 men on a certain occasion is not something that is going to keep me up at night. It is obviously a side effect of the Bible being copied by hand, and it in no way matters in terms of my eternal salvation. I would suggest that in the original document, those two numbers were the same. However, we no longer have the original documents. Instead, we are dealing with copies of copies of copies. So, I would say that a small example like that is not evidence that the Bible is a fraud, but it is evidence that the Bible was copied by hand for thousands of years. So, that is an example of a scribal issue.

For an example of a translation issue, I would direct you to Acts 2:27 in the King James Version. In Acts 2:27, the KJV says that when Jesus died he went to hell for three days. Of course, elsewhere the Bible teaches that hell is a place where people go to be punished. Other passages speak of Jesus being perfect. So, some have used this to supposedly prove a contradiction – was Jesus perfect as the Bible claims, or did he deserve to be punished in hell. Most modern translations don’t have this problem, because they properly translate the word

in Acts 2:27 as *“hades.”* Hades is simply the place of the dead. From other passages, we know that there is a canyon separating the two sides of hades – on one side is the waiting place of the lost, and on the other side is Paradise, the waiting place for those who are saved. And with that properly translated, it makes a lot more sense. We understand why Jesus said to the thief on the cross who repented, *“Truly, you will be with me today in paradise.”* So, Jesus never went to “hell,” he went to *“hades.”* The use of “hell” in that verse is not a contradiction; it is just a matter of an improper translation. 400 years ago, the translators of the KJV assumed that hades and hell were the same – they made the mistake, not the actual author of the book of Acts. Years ago, somebody explained it to me like this, “This is the word of God, insofar as it has been properly translated and preserved through the ages.” So, before we get too deep in this discussion, we need to at least be aware of the translation and scribal issues. When somebody makes a mistake translating the Bible or making a copy of the Bible, that does not represent a mistake on God’s part.

**II. Once we have determined that we are dealing with the actual word of God and not a translation or copying problem, if it looks like we have a contradiction, we need to start by making sure the two passages are talking about THE SAME PERSON OR THING.**

Here is a simple example from our VBS material this year: Suppose somebody says, “Leroy Jones is rich,” and then says, “Leroy Jones is poor.” That appears to be a contradiction, but it is possible that there are two different people by the name of “Leroy Jones.” It could be that the Leroy Jones who lives down in Florida is rich, but the Leroy Jones who lives in New York is poor.

Let me give an example from the Old Testament. Some people have said, Noah’s ark in Genesis 6 was a huge barge designed to carry hundreds if not thousands of animals – it would have weighed many tons, but then the priests were said to have carried the ark over the Jordan River in Joshua 3. It would have been impossible for a small handful of men to have lifted such a huge barge; therefore, there is a contradiction, a mistake, in the Bible. I hope you see the problem there! Noah’s Ark and the Ark of the Covenant are two completely different things! One was 450 feet long by 45 feet tall by 75 feet wide, and the other was a little bit smaller than the Lord’s Supper table up here. One could be carried, and the other could not.

In the New Testament, some have looked at the book of Acts, and they have pointed out that James was murdered by King Herod in Acts 12, but then in Acts 15 (some time later) James is listed as being one of the leaders in the early church. At first, it appears to be a contradiction, until we realize that there were at least four men in the New Testament who went by the name of James. The James in Acts 12 is a different James than the one in Acts 15. So, before we allow somebody to say that there is a contradiction, we need to make sure that we are talking about the same person or thing.

**III. There is a third idea to consider, and that is: We must also be sure that we are talking about THE SAME TIME PERIOD.**

To illustrate, we could go back to our example concerning Leroy Jones. Leroy Jones is rich, and Leroy Jones is poor. Even if we are talking about the same Leroy Jones, Leroy might have become very wealthy in his early 20’s as an oil tycoon, but after a terrible market crash, Leroy might have lost everything and might have ended up very poor. So, to say that Leroy Jones is rich and that Leroy Jones is poor is not necessarily a contradiction. Those two statements could have been accurately describing his financial situation at the time each statement was made.

With this in mind, consider an accusation of a contradiction. In Acts 7:16, the Bible says that Abraham bought a tomb in Shechem where the patriarchs were buried. However, in Joshua 24:32, the Bible very plainly says that Jacob was the one who bought the plot of ground in Shechem where Joseph was buried. Some have said that this is a contradiction – Who bought the tomb – Abraham (as the Bible says in Acts) or Jacob (as the Bible says in Joshua)? Keeping this concept of time in mind, I would suggest that it is possible that both men could have bought the field. Abraham could have bought the field, sold it back, and Jacob could have bought the field again many years later. Most of you know that many of my relatives live in Tennessee. Let’s say my great-grandfather bought some land along the Cumberland River down in Clarksville back in the late 1800’s. If I go down there, and if I want to take possession of that land, chances are I will need to purchase it. Just because my great-grandfather might have owned it more than a hundred years ago does not necessarily mean that it is automatically mine today. If I want the land, I will need to purchase it. In the same way, there is not necessarily a contradiction to say that Abraham bought something and then Jacob bought it again many years later.

For a New Testament example, we could think about the two thieves who were crucified on each side of the Lord, one on the right and one on the left. In Matthew 27:44, the Bible says that both robbers were insulting Jesus on the cross. In Luke 23:39-43, however, the Bible says that one of the criminals was hurling abuse at the Lord while the second criminal rebuked the first and was promised that he would see the Lord in Paradise later that day. Some would say: That is a contradiction! But what they forget is that Jesus was on the cross for six hours. It is certainly a possibility, then, that both thieves started out hurling insults at the Lord, but as they watched the Lord suffer and die, one of the thieves had a change of heart. We call that “repentance.” We think of the Roman centurion responsible for the crucifixion. His men crucified the Lord, but by the time the day was over, the centurion finally admitted (in Mark 15:39), ***“Truly this man was the Son of God!”*** If the centurion could change, then certainly one of the thieves could have changed as well. So, the difference between Matthew and Luke can be explained. Matthew was a snapshot taken earlier in the day, and Luke was a snapshot taken a little bit later. The two passages are not dealing with the same time period. So, we need to be aware of the timing of the two passages. A difference does not necessarily involve a contradiction.

**IV. There is a fourth idea to consider here, and that is: When someone accuses the Bible of having a contradiction, we need to determine whether the passages refer to something in THE SAME SENSE.**

If we could think about Leroy Jones again, what if I were to say: Leroy is rich and Leroy is poor. That might appear to be a contradiction, but aren’t there several ways to be both rich and poor? What if I meant that Leroy has more money than anybody else in the world; however, he is not following God; therefore, Leroy is spiritually poor? On the other hand, Leroy might have absolutely no money, but he might be rich with spiritual blessings. We think of James 2:5, where James says, ***“Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”*** The people in this verse were physically poor, but they were rich in faith. So, before we label something as a contradiction, we need to make sure that the two passages are addressing an issue with the same sense.

To illustrate this very practically, consider this: What if someone were to ask me if I have ever seen the back of my own head? Have you ever seen the back of your own head? In one sense, I could answer “No,” because I have never seen the back of my own head, and I sincerely hope that I will never see the back of my own head! And yet in another sense, I have seen the back of my own head – not directly, but indirectly. Several days ago, I walked over to Great Clips and got a haircut. Before woman was done with my hair, she pulled out a mirror, I

then looked in the large mirror in front of me, the image was reflected in the smaller mirror she was holding up behind me, and in a sense, I did, in fact, see the back of my own head.

We think of the statement in Exodus 33:11, where the Bible says, ***“Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend.”*** And then, just a few verses later, God says (in verse 20), ***“You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!”*** At first, those two verses seem to contradict, until we look at the context, until we look at the surrounding verses. In between these two statements, Moses got pretty excited and said to God (in verse 18), ***“I pray You, show me Your glory!”*** Moses, then, was not content with the way he was interacting with God, he wanted to see God’s full power, and at that point, God had to dial it back a little bit and had to warn Moses that he would not be able to survive seeing God in all of his glory. And then, in the next few verses is where God allows Moses to hide in a crack in the side of the mountain, God would then cover Moses with his hand, he would pass by, and Moses would then be allowed to see just the backside of God as he passed by. In that way, Moses would be able to survive seeing just a part of God’s true glory. As we sometimes sing today, ***“He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, and covers me there with His hand.”*** In a sense, we can see God face-to-face, but in another sense, God is far too holy for us to ever truly comprehend.

We could also consider the situation with John the Baptist and the question concerning whether he was or was not Elijah the prophet. In Matthew 11:14, John is clearly identified by the Lord as being Elijah. However, in John 1:21, the people who heard John speak were asking, ***“Are you Elijah?”*** And he said, ***“I am not.”*** That right there appears to be a contradiction. In fact, we can look at Malachi 4:5-6, the last two verses in the Old Testament. God is about to “go dark” we might say, for the next 400 years – there is going to be a gap between the Old and the New – but right before the Lord starts that period of prophetic darkness, this is what he says in the last two verses of the Old Testament – this is what the people were to be looking for, ***“Behold I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.”*** And that was the last word for 400 years. The people, then, were looking for Elijah. We understand, then, why the people, when they heard John preaching, were asking, ***“Are you Elijah.”*** Why would they ask that? Because he was a lot like Elijah! John was able to answer ***“No,”*** because in a literal sense, he was not Elijah. However, we learn in Luke 1:17, as the angel spoke to John’s father before John was born, that the child to be born (John), would ***“...go as a forerunner before Him (referring to Jesus) in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*** Very interesting, then! John was not literally Elijah, but he was going to be like Elijah. He was going to preach with the same passion and power that Elijah had. So, I hope you understand that there is not a contradiction here. In a sense, John was not Elijah, but in another sense, John was Elijah, in that his preaching would be very similar to that of Elijah.

### **Conclusion:**

In addition to these four, there are three more very important ideas for us to consider here, and to cover those, I would like for us to continue our study in two weeks. Next Lord’s Day morning, my brother-in-law will be our guest speaker. If everything goes well, we will be getting home late next Saturday night, Howard has offered to preach, and then we will be leaving for a week at Bible camp. And then, that following Sunday, I’d like for us to conclude our study on the subject of contradictions or alleged mistakes in the Bible.

I would point out two truths based on what we have learned this morning. First of all, people reject the Bible not because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them. Remember: The word “contradict” means “to speak against.” The Bible says one thing, but many people will disagree with it.

The second truth is this: The Bible is full of mistakes. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve made the mistake of disobeying God, and people have been making mistakes ever since then! The mistakes, though, are on our part, not on God’s part. In a sense, then, the Bible is full of mistakes – not mistakes in terms of contradictions, but mistakes in terms of people turning away from God. So, next time somebody tells us that the Bible is full of mistakes, maybe we could just agree with them and then explain. Yes, people in Bible times did make mistakes. People sinned. And in response to sin, God sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. The Bible, though, is perfect.

We accept God’s sacrifice by turning our lives back toward the right path, by doing a U-turn, by changing our minds about how serious and how offensive sin really is. The Bible then tells us that we are to publicly confess our faith in Jesus as being God’s Son, and then we are to allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. At that point, His blood covers our sins, and we come up out of the water having called on God for a good conscience. If you have any questions, please let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can come to the front as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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