

“Contradictions in the Bible?”

PART 2

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Two weeks ago at our Vacation Bible School, we studied the inspiration of the Bible and how we got the Bible. We studied 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. We learned that 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. And 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 as Christians have a serious problem.

So, in our lesson two weeks ago, we started looking at the question: Are there contradictions in the Bible? Critics, of course, are looking for the Bible to disagree with itself. They would love to prove that the Bible is full of mistakes. So, two weeks ago we started with four very basic ideas to consider when we think we might have found a contradiction in the Bible:

1. First of all, we thought about the possibility of scribal errors or translation issues. For thousands of years, the Bible was copied by hand, and in a very small handful of passages, we have some very slight differences between accounts. The originals were perfect, but every hand-written copy of the Bible is not necessarily perfect. The same goes for translations. The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. We don't speak those languages, so most of us have to rely on the work of mere human beings to translate God's word into our language. In that process, there can be some challenges. Those challenges, though, should not shake our faith in God's word. As we learned two weeks ago, insofar as it has been correctly preserved and translated, we have the actual word of God today, and that is an amazing blessing.

2. Secondly, when it comes to sorting out some of the alleged contradictions in the Bible, we looked at the question of whether the two passages are actually referring to the same person or thing. We discussed the guy who was concerned about a small handful of men being able to carry the ark across the Jordan River when the ark was obviously large enough to hold hundreds if not thousands of animals. To him, that was a contradiction; however, he failed to realize that Noah's ark and the Ark of the Covenant are two completely different things.
3. We then looked at the question of whether we are talking about the same time-frame. As an example, we learned that Abraham bought a field, and then Jacob bought it a hundred or so years later. To some, that is a contradiction, and yet we learned that if my great-grandfather owned some land in Tennessee, and if I wanted it today, I would probably also need to buy it. Those two purchases were separated by many years, and there is no contradiction.
4. And then finally, we learned that there can be a difference in the sense of a potential contradiction. I can be rich and poor at the same time – physically poor but spiritually rich. And that is how we deal with issues like John the Baptist denying that he was Elijah and Jesus saying that John was Elijah. He was not physically and literally Elijah, but he was like Elijah – he spoke with the spirit of Elijah.

This morning I would like for us to consider three more ideas to keep in mind on this issue. When somebody comes to us and claims to have found a contradiction, what else do we need to consider?

- I. **First of all, especially when it comes to some of the parallel passages in the gospel accounts, we need to remember that we might be dealing with SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL.**

In other words, one account might say one thing that is true, and another account might say something else that is also true, but because the two accounts do not say the same thing does not necessarily mean that there is a contradiction. Let's say I go shopping. When I get home, I might tell my wife that I got brats for the grill tonight. A little later, I might tell my kids that I went to the store and got ice cream. Technically, my two accounts are different, but they are not necessarily a contradiction. If I told my wife that I ONLY got brats, that might be a problem, or if I tried to mislead her into thinking that I did NOT get ice cream, that might be a problem, but the fact that I told one audience one thing and another audience something else does not necessarily mean that I was wrong or that I was trying to trick somebody. It is possible that certain people in my family might have a different interest in what I got when I went out to the store. She might be looking for brats, and the kids might be looking for the ice cream.

In the Bible, one example of this would be the controversy over what was written over the cross. Some have used the differences in the four gospel accounts to prove that somebody was wrong and that the Bible is not inspired. You might remember that the Jews were demanding that Jesus be crucified, Pilate (the Roman governor) reluctantly agreed, and when he gave the order for Jesus to be crucified, the Bible says that Pilate also ordered that a sign be posted on the cross. This was common in that time. Crucifixion was a horrible way to die, and the Romans were good at it. They made it as horrific and as public as possible to serve as a deterrent. In other words: This guy is a thief, or a murderer, or whatever, and if you don't want this to happen to you, then you had better straighten up! Well, Pilate pretty much hated the Jews, he loved messing with them, so in Matthew's account, Matthew tells us that the sign over the cross said, ***"This is Jesus the King of the Jews"*** (Matthew 27:37). Mark's account has the sign reading, ***"The King of the Jews"*** (Mark 15:26). Luke's

account says, ***“This is the King of the Jews”*** (Luke 23:38), and John’s account says, ***“Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews”*** (John 19:19).

Is this a problem for us? Do these four passages contradict each other? No! In fact, when we look at the four accounts of what was written on the cross, all four accounts get the main point out there – this man was the ***“King of the Jews.”*** That is the point that Pilate was making with the sign over the cross. He wanted to humiliate the Jews by making it look as if their king was being crucified. The Jews were mad. They wanted him to change the sign. They said, ***“Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews;’ but that He SAID, ‘I am King of the Jews.’”*** Pilate responded, though, and said, ***“What I have written I have written”*** (John 19:22). I would suggest, then, that John wrote the inscription word for word, ***“Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews,”*** while the other authors assumed that we would know the Lord’s name is Jesus, they assumed that we would know that he was from Nazareth, and so they only made sure to include the reference to him being ***“the King of the Jews.”*** Everything else is supplemental material.

There is something else I would point out here as a possibility, and that is: John tells us that the charge against the Lord was written in three languages – in Hebrew, in Greek, and in Latin – in the language of the Jews, in the universal language of commerce, and in the official language of the Roman Empire. There is at least a possibility, then, that the charges could have been written in a slightly different way in those three languages, and that Matthew (writing to a Jewish audience) recorded the charge from the Hebrew, that Mark (writing to a Roman audience) recorded the charge from Latin, and that Luke and John recorded the charge in Greek. This is at least a possibility. The point is, just because we have some variation does not necessarily mean that the Bible contradicts itself on this.

Also, for just a moment, think about what this proves. To me, the fact that we have some slight variation here means that the four gospel writers did not just copy each other. I don’t know about you, but when I sit down with some kids to try to figure out what happened in some incident, if they all tell me the exact same story using the exact same words and phrases, I start to get at least a little bit suspicious! The Bible writers were independent. They did not just copy each other. This also tells us something of how well the scribes did their jobs. If the scribes wanted to do so, they could have corrected and harmonized these four accounts so that they were all identical, but they did not. It was extremely important to them that they give us the exact words written by the four authors. They didn’t dare try to “fix” what they might have perceived to be a problem.

We have another example of supplementary material in the case of the healing of the blind men of Jericho in Matthew 20, Mark 10, and Luke 18. Some people have used these three passages to point out two problems that they claim are a contradiction. First of all, Mark and Luke mention the healing of only one blind man. And secondly, Matthew and Mark indicate that the healing took place as Jesus was leaving Jericho, while Luke suggests that the healing took place as Jesus was on his way into Jericho. So let’s deal with the two vs. one issue. It is entirely possible that Jesus healed two men, but that one of the men was more vocal (or whatever) and that Mark and Luke just happened to mention him. After all, Mark and Luke did not say that the Lord healed ONLY one man. They just focused on one of the healings. This, then, is one of those situations where one or two writers simply gave information that the others did not give – not contradictory information, just more information.

Concerning the question of whether Jesus healed the men on his way “into” Jericho as opposed to on his way “out of” Jericho, we have another possibility. One idea put forward by a number of Bible scholars and archaeologists through the years, is that at the time of Christ there were actually two towns called Jericho – there was the old Jericho from Old Testament times that was still pretty much in ruins, and then there was the

new Jericho, about two miles south of the old Jericho, the new city having been built by Herod the Great. So, as the Lord was traveling toward Jerusalem, he would have passed first through the old Jericho, and then, roughly 2 miles later, he would have passed through the new and improved Jericho. The miracles could have been performed in between those two towns – on the way out of one Jericho and on the way into the next one. Matthew and Mark, then, would have been referring to leaving old Jericho, and Luke might have observed that the Lord was heading towards the new Jericho. Or, there could have been three men – two healed on the way in and one healed on the way out. The point is: The differences between the accounts do not necessarily involve a contradiction.

II. This ties in to a second idea – it actually overlaps this one a little bit – and that is: The idea of HARMONIZATION.

Especially within the four gospel accounts, there is harmony. I looked up “harmony” in the dictionary, and this is the first definition, “The combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce chords and chord progressions with a pleasing effect.” Harmony is not playing the same note – harmony is playing different notes that sound good together. Again, the gospel accounts are not identical, but there is harmony – the differences work together to make something incredibly beautiful. Each gospel account has its purpose and has its own intended audience. Matthew, for example, was a tax collector, and you can tell that Matthew writes like an accountant. He is very concise. There are no wasted words in the book of Matthew. The book of Matthew was written primarily to the Jews to convince the Jewish people that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah. Matthew features extensive quotes from the Old Testament, and when he quotes from the Old Testament, he quotes from the Hebrew text of the Old Testament (not from the Septuagint, the Greek translation that was commonly used by the common people at the time of Christ). Matthew takes it back to the original Hebrew for the Hebrews.

Mark’s account of the life of Christ was written for the Romans. The Romans were the ones who had conquered the land all around the Mediterranean world at that time. They were the traders, and the leaders, and the engineers and the professionals of the ancient world. Mark’s account, then, is full of action. If you were to sprint around the block and come back and read the book of Mark from cover-to-cover, out of breath, as fast as possible, it would totally make sense. Just open up to any passage in the book of Mark and start reading, and you will find that Mark seems to be so excited that he is just rambling, “Jesus went here, and he did this, and immediately somebody was healed, and then Jesus went there, and immediately he did this,” and on and on. Mark is the shortest book, but it reads like one gigantic run-on sentence. “Immediately” is Mark’s favorite word! The book was written for up-and-coming professionals on the move who wanted to know more about Jesus. They wanted action, and they get it in the book of Mark.

Luke was a Gentile (the only non-Jew to write a gospel account), and Luke was not an eyewitness, but he based his report on extensive research and interviews. Luke was a medical doctor. Luke, then, reads like a term paper or a research project, almost like a thesis that someone might write for a PhD program. Luke wrote to his fellow Gentiles. And so for that reason, we find Luke explaining some of those prophecies from the Old Testament. Instead of just tracing the Lord’s genealogy back to Abraham, Luke traces it all the way back to Adam. That would have been important for his fellow Gentiles. Luke loved the common people. You will find more references to women, and the poor, and foreigners in the book of Luke than in any of the other gospel accounts.

John was one of the Lord’s closest friends, and John waited to write his book until much later in life. By the time he wrote, John was an old man, and John’s account is very much different from the other three.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are pretty much parallel, but John's account is written for doubters, for those who need to consider the evidence – the book is structured around some of the Lord's most famous miracles. John was a commercial fisherman. Think of the television program "Deadliest Catch." John was like one of the men on that show, and he writes like it.

There is so much more I could say, but each writer had a different audience and wrote specifically for that audience – not that there are contradictions, but there are differences – beautiful differences – differences that allow us to have a much greater appreciation for the Lord. It is not a perfect parallel, but think about having a huge event happen here in the United States where we need to check the news. Think about the plane crash out in San Francisco. If we go to one source, we might get the facts, but if we check several different sources, all might be accurate, but we get a deeper understanding of what is going on. I think of the bookmarks for news on my computer. I might check CNN, and Fox News, and NBC News, but as you know, some of the earliest reports came in on Facebook and Twitter. Locally, I always check madison.com, and channel3000, and Channel 27. We combine all of these sources, and we get a deeper appreciation of what is happening in the world around us, both locally and nationally. When it comes to yesterday's crash, I might go to Fox News to get the basic facts. We might go to some kind of aviation journal, and we might get the more technical testimony from pilots and from those in the field. We might go to a South Korean newspaper, and we might get some of the personal stories from the families involved. All of the accounts are accurate, but they are written from different perspectives. In a similar way, we have four solid accounts of the life of Christ, and each account lets us learn about the Lord from a very unique point of view.

So, when we see a difference between the accounts, we need to keep this in mind. A difference is not necessarily a contradiction. For one thing, scholars have done a pretty good job of piecing together the four gospel accounts into one parallel account, and when you add it all up, it appears that the four gospel accounts give us information on events from only about 35-40 days in the life of Christ. Think about that! Jesus preached and served for 3-½ years, but out of those 3-½ years (out of those 1200+ days) we have information on only 35-40 of those days. To me, that is amazing! John tells us, in fact, that if he were to tell us everything Jesus did, the world itself could not contain all of the books that could be written (John 20:30-31).

We combine this with the fact that the Lord surely had to repeat himself on a regular basis. He travelled from place to place, and everywhere he went he spoke – city after city, village after village, individual upon individual. Someone has suggested that he very well might have delivered a variation of the Sermon on the Mount more than a hundred times during those 3-½ years. Think about modern politicians during a campaign. They spend an entire two years basically talking – state fairs, rallies, conventions, crowds upon crowds, and I am sure that much in those speeches is repeated. I think of some of the differences as well as the similarities between the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 11. Are they the same speech? I don't know. They are incredibly similar. If the same, perhaps he spoke on a flat place on the side of a hill. If different, then perhaps it's one of these repeat situations. I'll be speaking at a youth rally in Rice Lake coming up in October, and I can tell you: What I speak up there will not be original! They will be getting a repeat. They will be getting some variation of something that you have already heard down here, and if there is a difference between what I say here and what I say there, that is not necessarily a contradiction.

Besides the issue of Jesus actually repeating something similar in a slightly different way, this concept of harmony should also cause us to back up and give the Bible some slack concerning the order of certain events. Some people make a big deal about the order of certain things being different from one book to another. But again, the four gospel accounts are not necessarily arranged in perfect chronological order.

Some have made a big deal about the tearing of the veil in the temple in Matthew and Mark as opposed to Luke. When did it happen? Matthew says, ***“And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom...”*** (Matthew 27:50-51). Mark says, ***“And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom”*** (Mark 15:37-38). Luke says, ***“It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.’ Having said this, He breathed His last”*** (Luke 23:44-46). Some have said, “Matthew and Mark have Jesus dying and then the veil tearing, Luke has the veil tearing and then the Lord dying; therefore, there is a contradiction here.” And yet when we go back and read those accounts, we don’t really read the words “before” or “then” or “after.” But instead, the events are simply told in a different order. The order was not the point of those three passages!

Two weeks ago, our daughter and a friend went to Noah’s Ark for the day, and I did a little experiment. I told my wife that when our daughter got home, she was to ask her what rides she went on that day and then my wife would write them down. Several hours later, I did the same thing...and then we compared the lists. We got some very interesting results! When casually asked what rides she went on, she told my wife that she went on the Time Warp, the Black Anaconda, the Sting Ray, the Cowabunga, and the Big Kahuna Wave Pool. Well, I waited a few hours and then I asked her, “Hey, what rides did you go on today?” And she told me she went on the Dark Voyage, the Big Kahuna Wave Pool, the Black Anaconda, the Cowabunga, the Stingray, and the Time Warp. Whoa! We have a serious problem here! Do you think I got all serious and accused her of lying to her own parents? Do you think we started questioning whether she went to Noah’s Ark at all? I mean, with this huge discrepancy here, she’s obviously making up the whole story, right? Of course not! Did she accurately tell us what rides she went on? Absolutely! Yes, she remembered one more ride when she talked with me as opposed to my wife. The two lists are in a slightly different order, but both lists are accurate. Now, if she had said, “Mom, I did not ride the Dark Voyage,” then we might have a problem, but she did not say that. In the same way, the four gospel accounts are accurate – they are different, but there is harmony between them. Differences do not necessarily constitute a contradiction.

III. There is a third and final idea to consider here, and that is: The Bible writers often used the language of the people, including figures of speech along with words and phrases that we might find in CASUAL CONVERSATION.

To begin with here, I would point out the alleged contradiction between the healing of the centurion’s servant in Matthew 8 and Luke 7. Matthew seems to indicate that the centurion came directly to the Lord himself, but Luke’s account seems to indicate that the centurion didn’t come personally but sent some of the Jewish elders to talk to the Lord on his behalf. We can reconcile this account when we realize that the centurion DID come to Jesus, but he did so by using his messengers, the Jewish elders. There is no problem there. We talk like this all the time. As I was doing the research for this morning’s lesson, I ran across an article where one author was watching a show on the History Channel when the narrator cut in and said, “On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland.” Really? Did Hitler invade Poland? Did Hitler invade Poland by himself? No. Hitler invaded Poland not personally, but by using a huge and powerful army. And I would suggest that no one who watched that program had any doubt about what was meant when the narrator said that Hitler invaded Poland. We might say the same thing about President Obama sending arms to Syrian rebels. Mr. Obama did not go over to some huge warehouse to pack up some missile launchers. He is not delivering those items in person, but he has authorized his people to do it. And that is the case with the centurion. He asked Jesus to heal his servant, but in the absence of a cell phone, the Roman centurion used messengers to make the actual request. There is no contradiction.

Along similar lines, others have made a big deal about passages like Psalm 50:1 where the Bible refers to the *“rising of the sun.”* Some have actually said, “But wait a minute! The sun does not actually rise! Doesn’t God know that the earth actually rotates? Therefore, the Bible is not scientifically accurate, and the Bible must not be true!” I would respond by saying, “Somebody needs to explain this to Gary Cannalte and Bob Lindmeier!” Every night on the news, our highly educated meteorologists also refer to the sun rising and setting, even though they know that the sun does not literally rise and set. In the same way, the Bible often uses language the way we use language, and we have to be reasonable about it.

Conclusion:

So, we have spent two weeks now looking at the accusation that the Bible is full of mistakes. As far as I am concerned, we have looked at some of the worst and some of the most disturbing examples, but I believe we have considered some valid explanations for these issues.

If you would like to look into this more extensively on your own, I would suggest three resources:

- *A Harmony of the Gospels* (NASB), by Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry – This is a book that takes all four gospel accounts and puts them in four columns side by side in chronological order. This is an amazing book and really helps in figuring some of this stuff out. This one is available on Amazon for about \$22.
- *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, by Gleason L. Archer – As the title suggests, this book tackles all of these difficulties and gives a good, valid explanation for each and every one. Amazon now has an updated and revised edition from the copy that I have, and it is also right around \$20. If you get this book, I would ask that you let me borrow it. I would love to see the updates that he’s made over the past few years.
- *Answers to Tough Questions Skeptics Ask about the Christian Faith*, by Josh McDowell and Don Stewart – This book has a great section in it dealing exclusively with apparent contradictions. I checked a few weeks ago, and a new copy is available on Amazon for less than \$10.

As we conclude our study on mistakes and contradictions, I would emphasize that the word of God is perfect. The word of God is accurate. And because it is accurate, we can know that it comes from God. There is no other way that a book with 40 authors on three continents written over a period of more than 1500 years could possibly be perfect, as the Bible is, without it being from God. And because it is perfect and without contradiction, we can know that everything in it is true, including God’s plan for our salvation.

The Bible teaches that we accept the love of God by turning our lives away from sin, by confessing Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, please let us know. If you have any questions, pull one of us aside after the service this morning. 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...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com