

Responding to “Contradictions in the Bible”

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“And so we have the prophetic word made firm, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Peter 1:20-21)

“All Scripture is inspired by God [*theopneustos*, literally, “God-breathed”] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

“For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.” (1 Thess. 2:13)

God is eternal, omniscient, infallible. He does not make mistakes. He directs all things to the fulfillment of His purposes. He does not lie. He does not change (Mal. 3:6). God speaks His Words and has them written down to bring life into us by joining us to Him. So the idea that God’s Words are filled with contradictions and errors has been part of the demonic playbook since Satan denied God’s Words to Eve in the Garden.

This is a favorite tactic to use because it can play off the fact that reality is complicated and language is, too. Language has to be understood in context, according to the speaker’s intended meaning. We all know what it is like when someone takes our own words out of context and twists them to mean something we didn’t say or mean to say. Taking things out of context, either in terms of the literary genre, grammar and structure of what is said, or its meaning in the original historical context can make aspects completely harmonious with one another, which often involve complementary aspects, *seem* as if they are contradictory, even though they are not. Those who like to play with words and read things at a superficial level, in ways completely disconnected from the mind of Christ and the Church will point to all sorts of plausible sounding supposed contradictions; so people find that their faith is shipwrecked (1 Tim. 1:19).

As a supposed example of contradiction, the Beatitudes in Matthew and in Luke read differently. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor” (Luke 6:20), but Matthew records, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”

(Matt. 5:3). “See? A contradiction!” No, that is silly. The explicit indicators are that these are two different sayings of Jesus. People who go around speaking to crowds often say similar but slightly different things to different groups at different times. Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount is on a completely different occasion from the Sermon on the Plain recorded by Luke.

But what about when it is clear the Gospels are describing the same event? Matthew prefaces the Transfiguration account, and connects it to Jesus’ first Passion Prediction, saying, “After six days...” But Luke says, “Now it came to pass, about eight days after...” [“*Ἐγένετο δὲ μετὰ τοὺς λόγους τούτους ὥσπερ ἡμέραι ὀκτῶ*”] Sorry, there is again no contradiction. Matthew simply gives a specific number. But notice Luke doesn’t say “eight days later.” He uses a qualifier. The word here means “approximately.” It can also mean “as if” (a use going back to Homer). Luke’s use may strike us as odd. If *we* were going to round off a number to give an approximate number for six, *we* wouldn’t choose eight! We might think Luke would round off to something else. But Luke is making a theological point. He highlights the New Creation number. Remember, too, Matthew was already in circulation, and Luke is fully familiar with it. He is offering a further Spirit-guided commentary on the meaning of the event. “You’ve heard what Matthew told you? Good. Now let me say something profound.” He is careful to qualify his statement with a word that indicates his use of a number is not the exact number of days. The Transfiguration is a precursor to the Resurrection, a pointer to the breaking in of the New Creation, the new time that transcends the seven-day week of the old Creation and enters a new, unending eighth day. It is Luke, too, who alone tells us that Moses and Elijah were speaking with Jesus about: “His Exodus which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (9:31).

The purpose of the Scriptures is to unite us to Jesus, the meaning and fulfillment of them all (Luke 24:25-32, 44-45; John 5:39-47). We can have absolute confidence that every syllable is faithful and true and designed to fulfill God’s purpose. There may be translation errors, or superficial readings of the texts, but there are no contradictions in God’s inspired Word.

Suggested Reading:

- Arndt, William. *Bible Difficulties and Seeming*. Concordia Publishing House, 1987.
- McGrew, Lydia. *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts*. DeWard Publishing, 2017.
- . *Testimonies to the Truth: Why You Can Trust the Gospels*. DeWard Publishing, 2023.
- Torrey, R. A. *Difficulties and Alleged Errors and Contradictions in the Bible*. Crossreach Publications, 2023.