

Apparent Contradictions in the Bible

Lecture notes by **Charlie Campbell**

Director of The Always Be Ready Apologetics Ministry

Twitter: **@CharlieABReady**

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In a **previous article** I built a case for the trustworthiness of the Bible by bringing to the witness stand a variety of different evidences, or witnesses, all of which testified to its trustworthiness. Some of the different evidences we considered were...

- 1. Fulfilled Prophecy**
- 2. Archaeological Evidence**
- 3. The Bible's Internal Consistency**
- 4. Extrabiblical Writings**
- 5. The Bible's Scientific Accuracy and Foresight**
- 6. Manuscript Evidence**
- 7. The Bible's Forthrightness about its Author's and Hero's Failures**
- 8. The Persecution the Disciples Were Willing to Endure**
- 9. The Bible's Transforming Power for Good**
- 10. The Testimony of Jesus, the Son of God**

All of those taken together build a strong cumulative case for the trustworthiness of the Bible. In our time together now I'd like to return to this topic by tackling head on the number one challenge that critics of the Bible make against the trustworthiness of the Scripture. What challenge am I talking about? Oh you've heard it before. You'll tell a person that you're a Christian and that you believe the Bible is God's word, and very often the response is: "But everybody knows the Bible is full of—what?

Contradictions.

Ahhh see! You know. You've heard the challenge yourself. Now, many times when I've heard pastors touch on the idea that there are supposed contradictions in the Bible, they've said: "Just tell the skeptic to show you one—and then hand them your Bible!"

That's not bad advice. Most of the people who will ever tell you that the Bible is "full of contradictions" can not show you even a single example. They are just parroting off something they've heard. But, my friends, there *are* apparent contradictions in the Bible. And there is coming a time for many of you when you will discover one yourself, or perhaps somebody will actually point one of them out to you.

Years ago when I was a College and Career Pastor at Calvary Chapel in Vista, California, I used to teach a Bible study out at a local college. One afternoon a young man by the name of Nema came over to our group as everybody was heading back to class. He informed me and a few of the guys standing around that he was a Muslim and that he had some problems with the Bible, even saying that the Bible was full of contradictions!

Having heard the suggestion of what to say in response to that kind of claim, I handed him my Bible and said, "Can you show me one?" –and you know what he said?

"Sure. Where would you like for me to start?"

I gulped for a breath of air, and said to myself: "This is not how it's supposed to happen!" I handed him my Bible, and he began to flip around in my Bible for the next twenty minutes and point out what appeared to be legitimate contradictions in the Bible. We did our best to explain to him some of the possible solutions to the difficulties. Boy did that inspire me to do some research and investigation!

I bring this scenario up, because that may very well happen to you!! So in this article I want to do more than just tell you "Hand them your Bible and ask them to show you one!" I want to:

- Look at some popular examples of apparent contradictions
- Show you how they are resolved
- Show you how the *critics* have erred—*not the authors of the Bible*

The first apparent contradiction I want us to look at is found in Matthew 28. This one has to do with...

1. The Number of Angels at Jesus' Tomb

This is a popular apparent contradiction cited by critics of the Bible, so we'll start here. Let's take a look:

Matthew 28:2-7 says: "And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. 3 His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. 4 And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. 5 But the angel [singular] answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 "He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. 7 "And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you."

It appears from what Matthew says that there was only one angel at the tomb at the time of Christ's resurrection. Now turn over to John, chapter 20. This account seems to say something entirely different, and the critics have been quick to jump on it.

John 20:11-12 says: "But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping [v. 10 makes it clear that this was *later in the morning* after the disciples had gone to their homes], and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain."

John makes it clear that Mary saw two angels.

So, the critic says, "Ha! Look at that! Matthew says there was one angel on the scene and yet John says that there were two! That is a contradiction!"

Is this really a contradiction as the critics suppose? Not at all. The possible solutions are so simple, it's hard to believe that this is so often cited as a contradiction.

Let's suppose you email a friend later today and say: "I saw a pastor [notice the singular phrasing] by the name of Charlie at church this morning."

Now, let's suppose someone else comes along after you and emails that same person and says: "I saw two pastors, Charlie and Joe, at church this morning."

Question. Has this person contradicted your previous statement? Not at all. This person is just giving a fuller account of what happened at church today. He's making it clear that there was actually more than one pastor on the scene. It's not that you were wrong when you said you saw a pastor. You were just speaking with a narrower view of the day's events.

The same is true with the accounts of the angels at Jesus' tomb.

Matthew mentioned one angel—the angel who rolled away the stone in Matthew 28. John, talking about a scene later in the morning, tells us that there were two angels on the scene (John 20). The accounts are not *contradictory*. They are *complementary*.

One of the mistakes that critics of the Bible commonly make is this:

They assume that a partial report is a false report.

There are many instances in the Bible, especially in the Gospels, where one author chose to leave out certain details in his account of an event that another author chose to include. The critic comes along and assumes the author has erred or contradicted another writer. But this is an error on the part of the critic.

It is perfectly acceptable—even in today's society—for reporters and biographers who are writing about the same event or person, to include or omit details that others do not.

When we read the news online at two different websites, we *expect* to read some different details about the same story.

If the Gospels had all said exactly the same thing in the same way, they would have been discredited long ago on grounds of collusion. (By collusion, I mean that the authors of the Gospels got together secretly and agreed to harmonize their writings with the intent of deceiving

people.)

All right, with the number of angels at Jesus' tomb cleared up, let's look at a second apparent contradiction. This one has to do with...

2. Jesus' Occupation

Turn over to Mark, chapter 6 with me. How many of you happened to see the two hour long Peter Jennings special a few years back (2000) called "THE SEARCH FOR JESUS"? This apparent contradiction that we're going to look at was one that Peter Jennings mentioned in the program.

Mark 6:3. says, "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? [Notice the question the people were asking about Jesus] And are not His sisters here with us?" And they were offended at Him."

According to this passage, we learn that Jesus was a carpenter. Now turn over to Matthew 13.

Matthew 13:54-55 says, "And when He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? 55 Is this not the carpenter's son?"

Peter Jennings said in his program that the Gospels contradict one another, for one says *Jesus* was a carpenter (Mark 6:3) and another says His *father* was the carpenter (Matt. 13:55).

What's the solution? Was Jesus the carpenter as Mark tells us? or was He the carpenter's Son, as Matthew tells us? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to think this through Peter. I've taught this study to Junior High kids, and they start shouting out the answer as soon as I ask the question. The answer is: Both. Come on Petel! I wanted to throw the remote at the television set.

Jesus, like most men at that time, followed in the footsteps of his father. The crowd of people ("they" Matt. 13:54) knew that, and were asking both things: "Is not this the carpenter?" (Mark 6:3) and "Is this not the carpenter's son?" (Matthew 13:55) So there's no contradiction here at all. A second apparent contradiction is laid to rest with a little careful thought. A third contradiction that critics have pointed out has to do with...

3. Jesus' Location When He Healed A Blind Man

Luke 18:35-38 says, "Then it happened, as He [speaking of Jesus] was coming near Jericho that a certain blind man sat by the road begging. 36 And hearing a multitude passing by, he asked what it meant. 37 So they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. 38 And he cried out, saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And if you know the rest of the story, you know that Jesus went on to open the eyes of this blind man. But notice back there in v. 35 where it took place. Luke says that Jesus healed this blind man as He was "coming near," or as the NAS translation says, as He was "approaching Jericho."

So, get this image in your mind. Jesus is approaching Jericho off there in the distance when the man was healed. Now keep that in mind and turn over to Mark, Chapter 10. Mark seems to say something different.

Mark 10:46-47 says, "Now they came to Jericho. As He [Jesus] went out of Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging.

47 And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Did you catch that? Mark, as the story goes on to say, tells us that Jesus healed this man as He left Jericho. Notice there again v. 46. It says, "As He went out of Jericho..." (Mk. 10:46). So the critics have said, "Surely Luke or Mark made a mistake." And that appears to be the case, doesn't it? What's the solution?

A German archaeologist by the name Ernst Sellin, working on an excavation in Israel between 1907 and 1909 discovered that there were actually what have been called "the twin-cities" of Jericho in Jesus' time. There was the old city of Jericho (from the Old Testament story of Joshua) and the new Roman city of Jericho separated by about a mile. [Joseph Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, 1992, p. 251] There were two cities called "Jericho," separated from one another by about a mile. Luke referred to one of the cities and Mark referred to the other. Luke referred to the city that Jesus was approaching. Mark referred to the one that Jesus had left. The incident occurred as Jesus traveled between the two.

The authors of the Bible did not err. The critic, who assumes that this is a contradiction, errs because he or she is unfamiliar with ancient Roman and Jewish geography.

Critics of the Bible would be wise to consult **a good Bible commentary** (or **two** or **three**) before passing judgment on the Bible. These kinds of solutions are easily accessible for the person willing to do a little homework.

Let's look at another example. Turn with me to Matthew, chapter 26. This fourth apparent contradiction has to do with...

4. The Timing of the Passover Meal

Matthew seems to say that it was the night before Jesus' crucifixion, but John seems to say that it was the following night (the day of Jesus' crucifixion). This is an alleged contradiction that Bible critic Bart Ehrman brings up in his book, *Misquoting Jesus* (p. 10). Let's take a look.

Matthew 26:18-20 says, "And He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, "My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.'" 19 So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. 20 When evening had come, He sat down with the twelve."

You know the rest of the story. Jesus' disciples enjoyed their final meal, the Passover meal, with their friend and Lord before His crucifixion. If you were to read the rest of the story we learn that this meal took place the night before Christ was crucified. Ahh, but John seems to contradict that by saying that the Passover meal was actually eaten the next day, on the day of Jesus' crucifixion (24 hours later). Turn over to John's gospel, Chapter 18.

John 18:28 says, "Then they [speaking of the people who arrested Jesus] led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium ["Praetorium" is a Latin word that means palace. It was Pontius Pilate's residence], and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, [They had developed a tradition that said they would become ceremonially unclean entering a Gentile residence. Why would that be a big deal?] but that they might eat the Passover." [When? Later that day, the evening after Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover]

John here seems to place the Passover meal 24 hours later than the other three Gospels. And so, critics of the Bible ask, "Did the Jews eat the Passover meal the night before Jesus was crucified as Matthew tells us? Or was it eaten the following day as John tells us?"

Here's the answer. In Jesus' day, the Passover meal was eaten on two different days. How do we know that? Two different extra-Biblical sources.

1. Josephus
2. *The Mishna*

Josephus, of course, is that Jewish historian for the Roman Empire who lived in the first century A.D. *The Mishna* is a compilation of the writings of well-known Jewish scholars that was completed in the third century A.D.

These two sources reveal to us that the Pharisees and the Sadducees (the two popular religious parties in Jesus' day) disagreed about the day of the week on which to celebrate the Passover. The reason why is this: There was a disagreement over when a day began.

When God rescued His people from Egypt, He instructed them in Exodus 12:18 to celebrate the Passover on "the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight." The Jews knew that. But when did a day begin?

The Jews who lived in northern Israel by the Sea of Galilee and the Pharisees believed that a day began with the sunrise.

The Jews who lived in southern Israel—which would have included Jerusalem—and the Sadducees—calculated days from sunset to sunset.

This difference in opinion, as to when a day started, is what led Jesus and His disciples from northern Israel to celebrate the Passover a day before those who lived in the south did. [Sources: John MacArthur, "The Last Passover, pt. 1" and Michael J. Wilkins in Clinton E. Arnold, gen. ed, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, Vol. 1, p. 162]

So once again, with a little research, an alleged contradiction is cleared up. The Passover meal was eaten on two different days. Let's look at a fifth apparent contradiction that critics have pointed out. It's found over in Mark 15 and it has to do with...

5. The Timing of Christ's Crucifixion

What time was Jesus crucified? Approximately 9AM. Why do we believe that? Mark 15.

Mark 15:24-26 says, "And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take. 25 Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. 26 And the inscription of His accusation was written above: "THE KING OF THE JEWS."

Mark here tells us here that Jesus was nailed to the cross during "the third hour." When did a day begin? Papias (A.D. 60-130) and Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215) tell us that the source of information for Mark's Gospel came from the apostle Peter who related the events to Mark. Where was Peter from? Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:21, 29). Ahh, where's that? Northern Israel. When did the Jews in northern Israel believe that a day began? At approximately 6AM, with the rising of the sun. So, to say "the third hour" (Mark 15:25)

would be the equivalent of approximately 9AM. Well, that poses an apparent problem. Turn over to John 19.

John 19:14-16 says, "Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he [Pilate] said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" 15 But they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!" 16 Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away."

Notice back there in v. 14, that this whole scene with Pilate, this whole trial which took place before Jesus was crucified, took place at "about the sixth hour" (John 19:14).

About "the sixth hour"!?

Mark just told us in Mark 15 that Jesus was crucified at "the third hour" (9 AM, Mark 15:25). John tells us that Jesus is still standing before Pilate on trial at "about the sixth hour" (John 19:14). Three hours later?

Do you see the problem here? Critics do. Is there a solution? Of course.

As I pointed out a minute ago, Mark (Mark 15:25) was referencing a Jewish time system, which for him began at sunrise. John, on the other hand, when he makes mention of Jesus standing before Pontius Pilate at the "sixth hour" (Jn. 19:14), was referencing the Roman time system whose day began at midnight (like ours).

Referring to the Roman time system is something John does throughout his Gospel. [See Norman Geisler, *When Critics Ask*, p. 376]

For example, see John 20:19 where the evening of the resurrection is still called the first day of the week (Sunday) not the second day of the week.

So this scene here with Pilate, that John talks about, took place **"early [in the] morning"** (John 18:28, around 6 AM), three hours before Jesus was crucified. This fits perfectly with the sequence of events. But why would John use the Roman time system? Matthew, Mark and Luke all used the Jewish time system; Why would John, who was also a Jew, do differently? Well, where was John when he wrote his Gospel almost thirty years after the other Gospels were written? Was he in Israel still living with the Jews when he wrote the Gospel of John? No. Where was he? Eusebius and other first and second century writers tell us he was living in Ephesus.

What was Ephesus? Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. John lived under the Roman time system! Using Jewish time references with readers in the Roman Empire would have been confusing to them. And so to avoid confusing them, John converts the references to times they would understand.

So, knowing a little background about when and where John wrote his Gospel solves the apparent problem. Jesus was standing before Pilate at "the sixth hour" (according to the Roman time system – John 19:14), which would have been about 6:00 AM. And Jesus was being crucified about the "third hour" (according to the Jewish time system – Mark 15:25), which would have been about 9:00 AM our time.

This next apparent contradiction has to do with...

6. What Happened to Judas's Body

Let's look at Matthew, chapter 27:5. "Then he [speaking of Judas] threw down the pieces of silver in the temple [Judas felt guilty for betraying the Lord] and departed, and went and hanged himself."

Well, that's pretty clear. How did Judas die? He hung himself. But there seems to be a contradiction found over in Acts, chapter 1. And critics are quick to point it out.

Acts 1:18 18, "Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; [most scholars believe that this purchase was made after Judas died by the chief priests, who bought it in his name with the 30 pieces of silver he gave back to them (Matt. 27:3)] and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out."

This verse tells us that Judas fell and his body burst open.

The critic says, "So which was it? Did Judas hang or did he fall?"

Answer? Both. He hung himself and then one of three things likely happened.

1. The rope snapped or came untied
2. The branch broke
3. Or someone came along and, not wanting to touch the dead body, cut the rope

And what happened? Judas fell to the ground, his body broke open and out gushed his entrails. Again, neither of these accounts are *contradictory*. They are *complementary*. When you take both accounts together they provide a fuller picture of what happened to Judas.

The seventh and final apparent contradiction we'll look at has to do with...

7. Jesus' Teaching On The Treatment of Enemies

Look at Matthew 5:43 and following. Jesus said to His disciples, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

You're probably familiar with those words. Jesus taught that we, His disciples, are to extend love to our enemies. We are to "bless" them, "do good" to them and "pray for" them (v.44). That was what Jesus did, and that's what He commands us, as His followers, to do as well. Well turn over to Luke, chapter 19. Jesus seems to contradict Himself. Look down at v. 27. If you have a Bible that has the words of Jesus in red, you'll notice that v. 27 is in red ink. These are Jesus' words my friends. Jesus says...

Luke 19:27 says, "But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me."

Huunnh? Let's read that again. What? Jesus tells His disciples to bring His "enemies" before Him and "slay them"!?!? That seems to contradict everything that Jesus just said in Matthew's gospel! What's going on? The critic says, "This is as clear of a contradiction as I've ever seen. There's no escaping this one! Jesus plainly contradicts his own teaching!!" Is that what's going on? Not at all.

The solution is this: The words found there in Luke 19:27, although spoken by Jesus, actually appear in a parable and are attributed to a slave-owner. You need to start reading back in v. 11 to get the whole story. Jesus is stating what the slave-owner said in his parable, not commanding His disciples to slay anyone. In fact, look at v. 28 (Lk.19), the verse immediately after the verse in question. Luke writes, "When He had said this, He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem" (Luke 19:28). Jesus left immediately after He finished the parable. This totally rules out any possibility that He intended people to be brought to where he was so they could be slain. The critic assumes the Bible contradicts itself here in Luke because of a:

Failure to understand the context.

That, my friends, is *the* number one mistake that people make when interpreting the Scriptures. Failing to understand the context. As you well know, every word in the Bible is part of a verse. Every verse is part of a paragraph. Every paragraph is part of a book. Every book is part of the whole of Scripture. No verse of Scripture should ever be divorced from the verses around it.

Mormons, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, university professors, and other critics of the Bible, are notorious for taking verses out of their context and making the Bible say things it never intended. That is the cause of most of the apparent contradictions in the Bible.

So, I encourage you to always investigate the context of a passage you read. That will, more times than not, help clear up a difficult passage.

In our time together today, we've seen that there *are* solutions for the apparent contradictions that critics cite in the Bible. What about the other ones we didn't have time to consider? Are there solutions to those as well? **Yes!**

The Bible is absolutely trustworthy and it proves to be so the more you investigate it. If that is the case:

- Are you reading it?
- Are you trusting it?
- Are you obeying it?

It's one thing to know the Bible is trustworthy. It's another thing to treat it that way. I exhort you:

- Read it daily—spend quality time in God's Word!
- Believe God's promises
- Build your life on the Word of God
- "Continue in the faith" (Acts 14:22)

If you've never placed your faith in Jesus Christ—Do it today! There are no good reasons to wait. Two thousand years ago Jesus, (God in the flesh) died on that cruel wooden Roman cross to take the punishment for your sins so that you could be forgiven, saved from eternity in Hell, and come to experience the greatest relationship you'll ever know: Knowing God personally, not only in this life but throughout eternity. Jesus rose from the grave on the third day and today He is offering mankind—including you!—the free gift of salvation and everlasting life to all those who

will turn from their sins and **place their faith in Him**. Do it!



About Charlie Campbell:

Charlie Campbell is the Director of the Always Be Ready Apologetics Ministry and a popular guest speaker at churches and conferences. He is the author of three books:

- *One Minute Answers to Skeptics*
- *Archaeological Evidence for the Bible*
- *Teaching and Preaching God's Word*

His DVDs and books have been endorsed by:

- Norman Geisler
- Charles Colson
- Chuck Smith
- Ed Hindson
- Nancy Leigh DeMoss
- Jeremy Camp

He resides in southern California with his wife and five children.

Scheduling Charlie to Teach:

Email info@AlwaysBeReady.com or [click here](#) for further details.

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