

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: Christ's White Lie

*“God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent.
Has He said, and will He not do it?
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”*

These are the words of the Lord concerning Himself in Numbers 23:19. He tells us clearly that it is impossible for Him to lie. And yet, there are still many who make the claim, consciously or unconsciously, that God has lied. They make them out to be “little white lies,” and yet lies they are nonetheless. But those of us who believe God, who take Him at His word and think accordingly, cannot believe that our Lord would ever tell a lie, even a “white” one. Thus we come to the account of the supposed “white lie” of Christ in Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:22-43, and Luke 8:41-56.

As we saw in a previous message, “Contradictions in Scripture: Two Miracles,” these verses actually give two different but similar accounts. Since they are similar, however, we can examine both at once here. Let us look at exactly what the supposed “white lie” was.

In both accounts the Lord is called to heal a little girl. In the Matthew story her father tells us she was already dead, and in the Mark and Luke story Jairus fetches the Lord while she is on the point of death and it is not until they are approaching that the servants meet them and tell them she is dead. In both cases Jesus comes to the house and sees those weeping and the professional mourners mourning. This is the point at which the apparent “white lie” is spoken.

Let us examine the Matthew account first. We read in verse 23, *“When Jesus came into the ruler’s house, and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd wailing, He said to them, “Make room, for the girl is not dead, but sleeping.”*

The Mark and Luke accounts are similar. We read in Mark 5:38, *“Then He came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and saw a tumult and those who wept and wailed loudly. When He came in, He said to them, “Why make this commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping.”*

Many have speculated why Christ said these words. Some point out passages like Mark 7:36, where, after healing the deaf and dumb man, we read, *“Then He commanded them that they should tell no one; but the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed it.”* They use this and similar passages to show that Christ many times tried to downplay His miracles, asking those who witnessed them not to tell anyone about them. Then, since in this case, *“He permitted no one to follow Him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James,”* they claim that these words of Christ were meant to similarly cover up this miracle and make it so that people wouldn’t think a resurrection had taken place.

This idea seems to make sense, yet it has several problems. First of all, the Lord never told anyone to lie in cases like Mark 7:36, nor did He lie Himself. Simply not speaking about something is far different from lying about it. There are many things that I would not talk about in certain company. That does not mean that I would lie about them, just that I would not bring them up.

So Christ telling people not to speak of a miracle to cover it up is far different from Him lying to try to cover it up. Secondly, if this was Christ's intent, it does not seem to have worked at all. No one believed that this girl wasn't dead, so no one believed that it wasn't a resurrection once He healed her. If this was Christ's aim it seems that for once His word failed to accomplish the purpose for which He sent it forth. Indeed, this was a weak and totally ineffective way to try to accomplish covering this miracle up if that was indeed the Lord's intent.

Yet if this is not the explanation, then what? Others have pointed out the passage where the Lord speaks to His disciples about Lazarus. He says in John 11:11: "*Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.*" The disciples mistake His meaning, saying, "*Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.*" But the Lord sets them straight, telling them plainly, "*Lazarus is dead.*" Those who hold this view claim that the Lord's words in the case of Lazarus are similar to those He used in the case of the little girl. He was using sleep as a figure of speech for death, and thus wasn't really saying that she wasn't dead but was speaking figuratively.

This view also seems good on the surface, but the fact is that it does not hold up to honest examination of the two passages. In John the Lord uses the Greek word "koimaomai," which is translated "sleep." This word means "to fall asleep (unintentionally)." Thus, it is logical to use this word as a figure of speech for death. However, in the accounts of the little girl, he uses the Greek word "kathudo." This word also means "sleep," but in the sense of "to compose one's self for sleep," and thus is never used as a figure of speech for death. The Lord did use a figure of speech, however, when He said, "The child is not dead, but sleeping." This is the figure of speech called "Pleonasm" or "Redundancy," by which something that is said is immediately repeated in another opposite way for solemn emphasis. The first phrase is often somewhat ambiguous, and so is repeated again in a different way so that its meaning cannot possibly be mistaken. The statement "the child is not dead" is explained absolutely in the following phrase, "but sleeping," and thus there can be no misunderstanding concerning the Lord's meaning. She was not dead; she was sleeping. This is what He said, and this is most certainly what He meant.

Yet how could this be when the girl was reported to be dead? Surely so many people could not be wrong about the girl's condition could they?

But it is at this point that we need to examine our thinking. We as men tend to assume we have knowledge of what is dead and what is not. Yet this is not always so easily discernable. One who appears to be dead can sometimes be revived by various medical means. A doctor is required to proclaim anyone legally dead. This is not just a formality, but because death is not always so easily definable. There are certain conditions that can simulate death.

There are many famous examples in history of people being fascinated by the idea that those who appear to be dead might not actually be dead but still be living in some strange, undetectable way. To cite a famous example, Shakespeare wrote in "Romeo and Juliet" of a potion that would simulate death.

"Take thou this vial, being then in bed,
 And this distilled liquor drink thou off:
 When, presently, through all thy veins shall run
 A cold and drowsy humour; for no pulse
 Shall keep his native progress, but surcease:
 No warmth, no breath, shall testify thou livest;
 The roses in thy lips and cheeks shall fade
 To paly ashes; thy eyes' windows fall,
 Like death, when he shuts up the day of life;
 Each part, deprived of supple government,
 Shall, stiff and stark and cold, appear like death
 Thou shalt continue two-and-forty hours,
 And then awake as from a pleasant sleep."
 -Romeo and Juliet IV. I. 93-106

Such a potion would be powerful indeed, and may not have been just the product of Shakespeare's imagination. I was at a Christian music concert once being played by Audio Adrenaline wherein the band members told a story that supposedly happened to the relatives of one of the band members who were missionaries in Africa. The witch doctors there used a poison to simulate the power of necromancy. This powerful poison would be spread by the witch doctor on the ground around the hut where the one who opposed him lived. Then that person would walk over the poison and it would soak through the skin of his bare feet. The poison would stop his visible breathing, cool his body to just above room temperature, and slow his heart to a nearly undetectable rate of approximately one beat per minute! The victim would be declared dead and buried, but the witch doctor, knowing better, would go back at night and dig up the victim. He would then administer the antidote to the victim, who would recover from the poison and return to visible life. The extremely slow heart rate, however, would have caused significant brain damage by then, and the victim would be little more than a mindless zombie, led about by the witch doctor to prove his "supernatural" power. This farce puzzled the Christian missionaries for years until they finally were able to discover through scientific instruments the truth that these supposed "corpses" actually still had a pulse! Whether or not this story is true, it certainly makes us think twice about whether or not this potion Shakespeare wrote about was really just fiction.

But poison is not reported to be the only cause of this condition. Edgar Allen Poe believed that an extreme example of the sleeping condition Narcolepsy could result in an apparent death, and so records in his "The Premature Burial" the grim tale of such apparent deaths. He says, "There are certain themes of which the interest is all-absorbing, but which are too entirely horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction...They are with propriety handled only when the severity and majesty of truth sanctify and sustain them." He says, "To be buried while alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality." He testifies that many premature interments have taken place, saying, "I might refer at once, if necessary, to a hundred well-authenticated instances." He lists several in the course of the story, people who were thought to have died and later discovered to have been buried alive. These instances are questionable, but they are common stories that were repeated in many forms and existed throughout Europe in centuries past.

But is there any scientific evidence that such things are so, or are they just the products of fiction, myth, superstitious imagination, and hearsay? To settle my mind on this, I purchased a book entitled "Buried Alive" by modern author and physician Jan Bondeson, M.D. (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2001.) In his book, Mr. Bondeson speaks of the phenomenon of the fear of premature burial that swept much of Europe and other parts of the world in the past, particularly the 18th century. This fear was mostly based on the fear of death in general, and many of the proofs of it were caused by misunderstandings when bodies were dug up. Bodies that were tipped over when the closed coffin was lowered into the grave were thought to have moved on their own. Rats finding their way into coffins and chewing off extremities was thought to have been the corpse recovering and starting to eat itself in the victim's madness and despair at finding himself in the grave. Twisted limbs and a terrible grimace were thought to be the result of the horror of waking up buried alive, but were in fact merely the result of natural decay in a corpse.

Yet Mr. Bondeson (who holds a Ph.D. in experimental medicine and is a professor at the University of Wales college of medicine) writes that not all stories of premature burials were false. In the chapter "Were People Really Buried Alive," he presents the conclusions of a famous French neurologist G. Gilles de la Tourette, that some reported cases of nineteenth-century death trances were "an uncommon hysterical disorder, which he termed lucid hysterical lethargy." Mr. Bondeson concludes (page 251) that "like other of the more extreme forms of hysterical conversion, the lucid hysterical lethargy become much more rare, if not altogether extinct, in the twentieth century." He points out the fact that "Rather understandably, there are no case reports on record with titles like 'I falsely diagnosed my patient as dead' or 'My patient was buried alive.'" However, he points out documented cases where people revived during their funerals, and this seems to make it undeniable that we cannot always know for certain when death has truly come. In the next chapter, "Are People Still Being Buried Alive?" he reports (page 263) that, "We today know that the

requirement for oxygen decreases with lower body temperature, given that the natural defense mechanisms against hypothermia, like shivering, are nonfunctional, something that can be accomplished by an intoxication with barbiturates or other narcotic substances." In other words, one can appear to be dead when extremely cold and intoxicated. He writes (page 264) that "In such an extreme case, there may be just ten (or even fewer) heartbeats per minute, and just two or three respirations. It is impossible to feel a pulse or to detect any spontaneous respiration. Electrocardiography (ECG)...may be fallible in these extreme cases." So even today we have no guarantee that we can always tell whether a person is for sure living or dead.

One story that Mr. Bondeson gives that seems particularly relevant to our discussion is that of a young girl who was almost buried alive. I will repeat the story here in its entirety.

"An instructive case of death trance was reported by the Austrian physician C. Pfendler. In 1820, he had occasion to observe in Vienna a fifteen-year-old girl who had suffered from what was interpreted as intermittent epileptic seizures for not less than three weeks. The seizures were lengthy and severe, and Johann Peter Frank, who was consulted by Dr. Pfendler and his colleague Dr. Schafer, feared for the worst. The following evening, the patient collapsed. The three doctors tried to revive her for several hours, by means of strong smelling salts and ammonia. They pinched her mercilessly and plunged needles into her feet, but the patient remained senseless and still. They next resorted to galvanism, but the patient showed no reaction. Even Frank was then prepared to admit defeat, but being well aware of Hufeland's teachings about the Scheintod," (the death-sleep, a common theme in Mr. Bondeson's book,) "he advised that she be kept in a warm bed until putrefaction was apparent. After twenty-eight hours, the girl's relatives thought they could smell putrefaction from her corpse, and they wanted to prepare her for her funeral. The funeral bell was rung, the girl's lifeless body was dressed in a white gown, and her friends put a wreath of flowers in her hair. Dr. Pfendler was yet another disciple of Hufeland, however, and he came barging into the room, saying that he wanted to undress the corpse once more, to obtain definite proof that putrefaction had taken place. Such behavior from a medical attendant would today have been thought eccentric and rude, but the German people had become used to the excessive safeguards against premature burial, and the girl's relatives meekly walked out and let the doctor tear her clothes off. But Dr. Pfendler found no signs of corruption; instead, he thought he could see a weak respiratory movement of the chest. After having applied liberal amounts of a strong itching powder, Dr. Pfendler managed to induce the girl to open her eyes. With a smile, she said, 'I am too young to die!' She later recovered totally and told her physician that although she had been completely unable to speak, move, or even open her eyes, she had heard and understood everything her doctors said. Dr. Pfendler did not believe her, but she convinced him by repeating some Latin words used by Frank during the consultation. The most horrific part was when she heard and understood that she was made ready for burial, without being able to make it known that she was still alive." (*Buried Alive*, pages 248-250)

Dr. Bondeson quotes this documented medical case as being, among others, reliable evidence that apparent death does exist. And I can't help but notice the similarity to the story we have in the Word of God! Only there, of course, the Lord was able to heal her with a word, not with drastic and sometimes silly methods of resuscitation. Christ's words were indeed clear. He, the author of all life, was diagnosing this girl's condition. She was not dead! She was indeed sleeping! Her malady was not death but rather the hysterical condition of apparent death. Yet, the men of that time, smug in their supposed knowledge of who was dead and who was not, laughed at the truth proclaimed by the Healer and rejected His clear testimony of the girl's condition. No wonder He, in disgust, "*put them all outside.*" (Luke 8:54)

But this is not the saddest thing about this record. Rather, the saddest thing is that men today still refuse to believe His words! How many Bibles have I used to turn to this passage and read, bold as brass, the heading, "A Dead Girl and a Sick Woman"? (NIV) How many Sunday school curriculums have I seen that make this story to be "Jesus raises a girl from the dead"? How many times has this passage been proclaimed and preached as a resurrection? We, in our self-deluded knowledge, still believe the diagnosis of ignorant men more than the declaration of the living God! We are so secure in our own human knowledge that we still cannot grasp that God does indeed

know things that we cannot fathom. Even with the modern discovery and understanding of hysterical disease that can simulate death, we still prefer to think that the creature knows better the truth of life and death than the Creator! How sad this is, and yet how typical. We prefer to believe that Christ told a "white lie" than to imagine that we might not know all we think we know. Alas, we have a long way to go in our faith.

So this is not a "contradiction in Scripture." This is rather a misunderstanding and lack of faith on the part of those setting Scripture forth. God's claim that He does not lie stands true, and Christ's words in these passages are merely an example of a truth that many have failed to have faith in. Yet let us grow in faith and accept Christ's words as the TRUTH that only such as the Living Word could speak. He is the one we can trust more than our own knowledge, and His truth is the answer to all such "contradictions in Scripture."

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