

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: The Money Changers in the Temple

In considering various supposed “contradictions in Scripture,” it is not only important to note that various gospels record similar but different events, but also that they choose to record one event over another based on the structure and purpose of each gospel. Sometimes this is harder to see than others, but in some cases it may be obvious. The most obvious example of a different purpose causing different events to be recorded is the book of John.

Anyone reading through the gospels in order will come to the end of Luke with the distinct feeling that he has read three books that are very much the same. Certainly Matthew, Mark, and Luke are different, but at the same time they share many of the same or similar stories, and so can seem very repetitive. That is why these gospels are often called the “synoptic” gospels. It is because of their similarity to each other, and the fact that they seem to share so many accounts. Then, however, as we read on from Luke, we come upon the book of John. And John is so different that we are almost taken aback at first, since we have become so used to the repetition in the other three gospels. There are actually only nine events recorded in John that are recorded in one or more of the other books, and all the rest are different. As I said in my first message, “Contradictions Intro,” this has led some to claim that John was written at a much different time period than the other gospels. What those who claim this do not understand is that John was not written at a different time, but rather was written for a very different purpose than the other gospels.

To understand the crucial differences between the book of John and the other three gospels, we need to understand why the Holy Spirit inspired four gospels in the first place. Why not just write one, comprehensive gospel that covered all the stories more thoroughly? Some scholars have attempted to create just that, combining the gospels in exactly this way, producing what they call a “harmony” gospel. Of course, there will always be differences of opinion about how such a “harmony” gospel should be created, and how the various gospel accounts should be combined. If you have read through my series on “contradictions” so far, you have seen that I would take a far different view of the relationship between similar stories than many would. Yet ultimately, though such a gospel could have been written, the fact is that the Lord did not write the record of Jesus Christ that way, and He did not do so for a very definite purpose.

First of all, we need to remember God’s own principle in the Old Testament, that “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.” (Deuteronomy 19:15) So, if the Lord had only written one book regarding the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, His enemies might have claimed that this was only one witness regarding Him, and that it therefore could not be established. Yet, with not just two or three, but rather four witnesses to the truth of His life on earth, such an argument could never be made. Four is more than an adequate number of witnesses regarding Who He was and what He did.

Secondly, the gospels are all written from a different perspective. Each of them presents the Lord Jesus Christ in a different light. Indeed, since He is the expression of the infinite God Himself, we can easily understand why many different perspectives might be needed to present a clear picture of Him. This might be illustrated by the following structure of the four gospels:

- A. Matthew presents the Lord Jesus as King.
 - B. Mark presents the Lord Jesus as God's Servant.
- A. Luke presents the Lord Jesus as a perfect Man.
 - B. John presents the Lord Jesus as God Himself.

From this structure, we can see clearly why each gospel is slightly different, and also why John is so different from the first three. For, while presenting the Lord as a King, as a Servant, and as a perfect Man might all give us somewhat similar pictures, presenting Him as God will quite naturally give us a very different picture indeed. So, the reason for John's uniqueness becomes clear when we look at the gospels this way. We can also see how this helps us understand our Lord better. He is so complex, that looked at only one way, we might miss much of His glory and majesty. With four books presenting four different aspects of Who and What He is, we achieve a far better understanding of Him and appreciation for what He is. We can truly thank God for the fact that there are four gospels, rather than just one!

The four gospels also differ in whom they were written to, and the point of view they were written from. This too can be set forth as a structure, as follows:

- A. Matthew was written to the Jews. It was written from God's viewpoint of the Lord as King.
 - B. Mark was written to proselytes or temple servants. It was written from man's viewpoint of Christ as a Servant.
 - B. Luke was written to a Gentile. It was written from man's viewpoint of Christ as a Man.
- A. John was written to all who read. It was written from God's viewpoint of the Lord as God Himself.

So, again we see that the books differ, and yet work together to provide a broader picture of our Lord. Yet, finally, we need to see that the books also carry unique purposes all their own, which come about due to their particular viewpoint, presentation, and audience. For example, Matthew is concerned with proving to Israelites that the Lord Jesus is indeed their King. Mark seeks to inspire servants with the example of the Lord's selfless service to others, even in the face of rejection and misunderstanding. Luke gives us the evidence that the Lord was not just God in the appearance of man, but that He became a man in truth, so that He truly could be our representative to God. And John urges all who read to believe the great premise of his book, that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," and seeks that "believing you may have life through His name." These different motivations for writing also affect how these individual books are written.

So, we see why John is very different from the other three gospels. Yet, this still does not fully explain away all problems. Let us focus on one particular example. Why, when John speaks of the same event as is recorded in the other three gospels, does he speak of it as if it happened at a very different time and in very different circumstances than the other gospels suggest it happened in. The event I am referring to is the cleansing of the temple by Christ and the casting out of the money changers. Let us look at this event as it is recorded in each of the four gospels.

First, we see this event recorded in Matthew 21:12-13. *"Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, 'It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"* Matthew records this event as occurring after the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when, as verses 10b-11 say, *"all the city was moved, saying, 'Who is this?' So the multitudes said, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.'" Immediately after he cast out the moneychangers, Matthew says that, "the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them."*

Mark 11: 15-16 also records this event. *“So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple.”* This occurred *“the next day”* after the triumphal entry (verses 1-11.) It was followed by the Lord teaching in the temple (verse 17.)

In Luke 19: 45-46, we read the third record of this event. *“Then He went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it, saying to them, ‘It is written, ‘My house is a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’”* This happened after the triumphal entry (verses 28-40.) We do not learn specifically what happened after it, only that *“He was teaching daily in the temple.”* (verse 47)

In the book of John, however, we read of this event very early in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 2:14-17, we read of this event. *“And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, ‘Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!’ Then His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.’”* This event takes place at the very beginning of His ministry, just after He worked His first sign in the turning of the water into wine (verses 1-11.) It was followed by the Jews coming to Him, and demanding, *“What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?”* The next major event to occur is Nicodemus coming to Him by night. It is far removed from the triumphal entry in John, which takes place in John 12:12-16. The only similarity between John's timing and that of the other gospels is that the Lord was also coming to Jerusalem for the Passover here (verses 13&23,) just as He was at the end of His ministry in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

So why does John record this event as if it took place at the very beginning of the Lord's ministry, whereas the other gospels reveal that it took place at the end? Was John mistaken? Did his memory fail him, and so he thought the Lord did this cleansing of the temple at the first Passover of His ministry rather than three years later? Why does John record this event at such a different place?

To answer these questions, we first need to realize that John records this event earlier because it fits better with the theme of his book. The reason the Lord drove the money changers and sellers of animals out of the temple was to cleanse it for the upcoming Passover. These money changers were telling the people that they could not offer their money to God if they were using Roman money. Instead, they had to trade their money in for special, temple coin. These moneychangers would give them temple coin, but would charge an unfair exchange rate, keeping the extra for themselves. Similarly, the sellers of animals, oxen, sheep, and doves, were doing so for the people who wanted to make sacrifices in the temple. Animals brought for most sacrifices had to be perfect animals, without blemish. Yet the religious rulers in the temple were taking advantage of this law. They would “inspect” the animals the people brought to sacrifice, and would find some tiny, almost imperceptible “defect” that would cause them to reject the animal. Then, they would tell the worshipper that he must now buy one of their own, pre-approved animals to make his sacrifice instead. These animals were usually no better than the ones the people had brought themselves, yet they charged exorbitant prices for them. Both these practices were dishonest, and insulting to God. Thus, the Lord drove these money changers and sellers out to cleanse the temple of this corruption. It is true that He also did it to fulfill Scripture, as John 2:17 tells us (quoting Psalm 69:9.) So this was a reason too, of course, but the primary reason He needed to do this (and that the prophecy was made) was because the temple was being defiled by dishonest practices.

Now Matthew, Mark, and Luke reveal to us how the Lord cleansed the temple in preparation for the great, Passover sacrifice that He Himself was about to make on the cross. His zeal for the integrity of the Passover sacrifices and offerings was a reflection of His zeal for being the great Passover Lamb Himself, offered for our sins upon the cross. Yet in John, this event is recorded to serve a far

different purpose. John has just started to present the Lord Jesus to us as the “Christ, the Son of God.” By placing this event here in his gospel, he establishes early on the Lord’s authority in the temple. He also starts to set the stage for the Lord’s clash with the religious leaders at Jerusalem. By the time we get to the triumphal entry in John, however, the Lord’s authority has already been well established by many witnesses and by seven great signs, being capped off by His great miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. Establishing His authority in the temple at that time would be like trying to make a preliminary point after the major one has already been made. All that really is left after Lazarus for John to set forth as evidence is His great work of death and resurrection. John is not concerned with the Lord preparing the way for a perfect sacrifice. He is focused on His point, which is proving to us Who and What the Lord is. Thus, the driving out of the sellers and money changers is uniquely suited in John to the beginning of the Lord’s ministry, whereas it does not fit at all at the end.

So, we see why this event needs to be recorded early in His ministry in John. Yet, does this justify placing it at a time when it did not occur, and surrounded by events that did not really surround it? Some argue that this is fine, and that God does not have to give us events in chronological order. This might be true, yet it does not erase the fact that connecting words like “now” (verse 13,) “so” (verse 18,) and “now” (verse 23) all seem to link these verses together, and clearly imply that these events are recorded as if they all took place in sequence. Was God being deceptive in doing this, if this event really took place at the end of the Lord’s ministry? We would have to conclude that this was the case, if indeed that was the only time this thing happened.

Yet, I believe that if we will think a little bit more deeply about this, we will see that the ultimate explanation for the difference in the time of this event as recorded in John versus the other gospels is not that John changed events around to suit his theme, but that this same event occurred more than one time, and John merely chose the occurrence of this event that best suited his book. In other words, the Lord did cleanse the temple during the first Passover of His ministry, and He cleansed it again during the last Passover of His ministry. He cleansed the temple more than once!

When you think about this, it makes perfect sense. The money-changing and animal-selling racket was very successful for the religious leaders, and no doubt brought in a great deal of extra cash flow for them. They had the people who wished to worship God in the temple over a barrel, and they could dictate to them whatever actions they wanted. It seems unlikely that their corrupt market being shut down for one day by the Lord would stop them from reopening the market and resuming their ungodly practice the moment the Lord wasn’t there and they were able to do so. Certainly the merchants themselves who were involved in this business would rather reopen their old businesses once the Lord had moved on than to come up with a more godly way to earn a living. So, we might expect that the Lord would find the same racket running and going strong when He returned to the temple a second time. And, in that case, we would not be surprised either to find that He would respond in the same way, and shut down the fraudulent business just as He had before.

Some will insist that this could not be the case. The Lord must have only done this once, and John just mixed up the events, they claim. Yet when you think about it, there is no reason to believe this. I might give as an example myself telling a story about my trip to California. I might tell two different people that I visited the ocean, stayed with my friends in Atascadero, and was there with my parents and brother. Yet, if these two people compared notes later, one might say that I told him I took this trip in my senior year in high school, that I flew out there in an airplane, and that the trip took place in November. The other might disagree, saying I said I took this trip between my sophomore and junior years of college, that we drove out there in our van, and that we took the trip in the summer. Upon finding that their stories disagree, these two acquaintances of mine might decide that I had lied to one or the other of them, or that I couldn’t remember the details of my own trip. Or, they might decide that I had actually taken two trips to California, which is what was actually the case. I did similar things both times, like visiting the same friends, but they were two different trips.

So ultimately, there is no reason to believe that the same situation would not have arisen for the Lord at two different times during His ministry. Deciding that John either was mistaken or bending the facts is discounting the idea that the Lord could have done this same thing more than once, and discounting that idea for no good or logical reason. He very well could have done this more than once, and that is exactly what I believe He did. There is no reason, other than pure lack of faith, to insist otherwise.

So we see that there really is no good reason for believing that the different time for this event that John gives is a “contradiction in Scripture.” Yet, for those of my readers who have been paying close attention earlier in this message, there is another problem in the story of the money changers that I have not yet cleared up. That is that Matthew and Luke indicate that the casting out of the money changers and sellers later in His ministry took place the same day as His triumphal entry. Yet, in Mark, it is stated that this took place “the next day” (Mark 11:12.) How could this be? Did Mark truly get mixed up, or did Matthew and Luke forget that there was a day in between? What about Matthew’s claim that the Lord rode a colt and a donkey, whereas Mark and Luke just mention a colt? Is this an actual contradiction in Scripture? We will examine these questions more closely in our next study, “Contradictions in Scripture: The Triumphal Entry.”

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