

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 Blind Men of Jericho

When approaching supposed “Contradictions,” we must start to develop an idea of the pattern we should follow in defusing such arguments. Often the error is caused by ignorance on the part of the one claiming to have found a contradiction. This ignorance can come in several forms, however. One might be an ignorance of the translation. At times two conflicting statements might become clearer if we knew that they used different words in the original language, for example. Another problem might be ignorance of the overall context of the passage. Sometimes an author who appears to contradict himself in two different passages might merely be speaking of two entirely different situations. A third ignorance might be caused by tradition. Many times earnest students of the Bible come to the pages of Scripture with preconceived ideas of what it teaches. Because they think they already know what it says on a subject, they are blinded to what it actually teaches on that subject. Then, upon someone pointing out a contradiction with what they believe and a certain passage, they are confused and upset. But this is not the Scripture contradicting itself, but rather the Scripture contradicting the false ideas of the reader. Nevertheless the Word of God is often blamed for the problem rather than the error on the part of the reader.

In many of these messages on Contradictions in Scripture, we have focused on discrepancies between the gospels, and we have started to see that there is a pattern of error that causes these to appear. Often the error stems from making two or more different events to be the same event. Perhaps the clearest example of this may be found in the healing of the blind men of Jericho, given in the three synoptic gospels. Let us examine each of these occurrences in turn and see what we can learn from them.

1.) In Matthew 20:29-34, we read of a healing that took place when Jesus was on His way out of Jericho. We read that there were two blind men sitting by the road, who, when they heard that Jesus was coming, cried, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!” The multitude warned them to be quiet, but they only cried out all the more, repeating the exact same phrase. Then, we read that Jesus stood still and called them. They came to Him, and He asked them, “What do you want Me to do for you?” The blind men replied, “Lord, that our eyes may be opened.” At this point, no words of Jesus are recorded. Rather we read that He touched their eyes, and they received sight and followed Him.

2.) In Mark 10:46-52, we read of a healing that took place when Jesus was departing from Jericho. We read that there was one man on the road out of Jericho, blind Bartimaeus, who, when he heard that Jesus was coming, cried, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” We read that many warned him to be quiet, but he cried all the more, using the same phrase minus the first “Jesus.” Then, we read that Jesus commands him to be called, whereupon the crowd (not Jesus) calls Bartimaeus, encouraging him by saying, “Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you.” Bartimaeus throws aside his garments and comes to Jesus, at which point He asks him, “What do you want Me to do for you?” Bartimaeus replies, “Rabboni, that I may receive my sight.” Jesus replies, “Go your way; your faith has made you whole.” Bartimaeus is instantly healed and follows Jesus down the road.

3.) In Luke 18:35, we read of a healing that occurred as Jesus was coming near to Jericho. We read only of one certain, unnamed blind man, who when, upon asking, heard that Jesus was coming, cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" We read that "those who went before" warned the blind man to be quiet, but he cried out all the more, repeating the same phrase minus the first "Jesus." Then, we read that Jesus commands him to be brought to Him. We read of no encouragement on the part of the crowd, but only that the man drew near, at which point Jesus asked, "What do you want Me to do for you?" The blind man replies, "Lord, that I may receive my sight." Jesus again speaks, saying, "Receive your sight; your faith has made you well." We read that he immediately received his sight and followed the Lord, praising God, along with the people, who praised God as well upon seeing this miracle.

But which of these stories is correct? For we can clearly see that, although all three of these accounts are similar, they are not the same. One took place on the way into Jericho, whereas the other two were on the way out. One involved two blind men, whereas the others involved only one. In one case Jesus touched the blind men to heal them whereas in the others He only spoke to them. And the words of the blind men in all three cases are different, although Jesus' words are exactly the same. How can we justify such discrepancies? Were the authors speaking from faulty human memory, and are these errors the result of forgetfulness on their part?

If there were no claim of divine inspiration, of course, we should quickly accept these minor discrepancies as resulting from the bias or the poor memories of the authors. However, since this is the Holy Scriptures, we know that the very fact of inspiration is at stake here. If these verses contain errors, even the smallest of errors, then we must admit that the words are not the perfect words of God and therefore are not entirely trustworthy. But if they are not trustworthy, then what good are they for bringing salvation? How can we trust the word of God in regards to our salvation if we cannot even trust it to get the story straight about one of Jesus' miracles?

But this difficulty will disappear if we will employ the method used in earlier messages to clear away discrepancies in the gospels. If we do this, we will see that not one but three miraculous healings of blind men took place in the vicinity of Jericho that day. Not one or two but four blind men were healed. That there was more than one blind man in a city the size of Jericho is logical and seemingly obvious. That more than one such blind man would be healed during Jesus' journey through the city is not a baseless assumption, but is rather a sensible thing. Jesus did not have a limited amount of power that He could only heal one blind man a day. No doubt there were many healings of blind men very similar to these three that we do not have recorded in Scripture.

But what of the very similar appeals of the blind men? This can easily be explained by the stories of Jesus that went around. If you were a crippled person living in that day and you heard of a man who could heal any illness, you would most certainly have listened very closely. The crippled in that day were often poor, miserable beggars. The economy of Israel was so bad that anyone who was not physically fit was almost doomed to a life of misery. To be blind meant it was impossible to get a job, and beggarhood was the only way out for most afflicted with this infirmity. To hear of a healer who could cure this condition must have shone a ray of hope into the desperate lives of these individuals. No doubt they would have asked eagerly to hear the story of Jesus healing a blind man, and perhaps the most common story involved a blind man who called upon Jesus as the "Son of David" and asked for mercy. This story would have been imprinted on the minds of any blind man in Israel, and no response would have been more immediate on the part of any one of them than to start crying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

But what of the similar words of Jesus? This is even more obvious, for whereas the blind men were different individuals, Jesus remained the same, and nothing seems more likely than that the same words of God would have been called for in very similar situations. However, every individual is different, and with some blind men Jesus might choose to touch them before healing them as in the case of the healing in Matthew, whereas with others He might choose to merely speak to them as in Mark and Luke. This is the sovereign choice of the Lord and His care and concern for each individual and his specific needs.

Lastly we consider the similarities in the actions of the crowd, who, although they were similar in some ways, were very different in others. Why would they offer comfort to Bartimaeus but not the man healed in the book of Luke? We can imagine many reasons. Bartimaeus may have been more popular than the other blind man. Maybe those in the crowd who comforted him were his friends, or friends of his family. The unnamed blind man, however, may not have been as popular or as well known (thus our not having his name recorded for us.) Or he may just not have had any friends in the crowd. In Matthew, of course, we have no actions of the crowd recorded, as Jesus apparently drew near enough to call the blind man Himself without the help of the crowd.

But why do we only read of the crowd praising God in the case of the blind man in Luke? This again is simple. Remember, Jesus was entering Jericho in this instance, whereas in the others He was leaving Jericho. Thus this miracle was the first healing of a blind man the crowd had seen that day. Therefore it would be a new and fantastic experience for them to see this man healed. By the second or third such healing of the day, however, the crowd would be less amazed, as the wonderful began to morph into the commonplace. If Jesus healed one blind man He certainly might heal more, and the sensation would diminish with each successive healing. Thus in the other two occurrences we read of the responses of the healed men as being significant rather than that of the crowd, who were starting to expect the event and be less amazed at it.

So you see that all we have to do is realize that these are three similar yet different events, and then a dozen explanations for each similarity and each difference can readily come to our minds. Any one of our explanations may not be correct, but certainly some such thing was true. Thus we see that inspiration is not threatened by such "contradictions." Only to those who have already decided that the Bible is not inspired do such discrepancies appear insurmountable and without explanation. To those, however, who accept these as the very words of God, the explanations are there and readily attained. The crucial ingredient of the argument is not accuracy but faith. Do we choose to take God at His word and believe accordingly, or do we choose to doubt Him and cast His words aside? This is the real question that confronts us every time we come upon such a passage. And when we come out of our study of it our faith will either have grown or have failed. Thus our opportunity to "grow in faith," as the Scripture admonishes us. Let each of us grow in our faith in our daily studies of His holy Word.

Nathan C. Johnson