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Tower of Strength

**“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”**

—Proverbs 18:10

Ambiguity in Scripture

Contradiction in Scripture is a serious charge. We are convinced that the Bible is inspired by God from start to finish, from word to word. If one could find true contradictions in Scripture, it would suggest that the Bible was not inspired by an omniscient God, but was rather the product of man, who is rarely smart enough to keep straight every detail of such a large enterprise.

I have read several lists of alleged contradictions, some no more than unlearned rantings on the internet, some scholarly works by highly intelligent college professors. But, often, when people find two passages that they accuse of being contradictory, it is really nothing more than ambiguity.

Now, what I mean by ambiguous is not “doubtful, uncertain, wishy-washy.” What I mean is that one concept or situation may be looked at in a couple of different ways.

For example, I was driving to the office the other day listening to the radio, and a deejay was whining and complaining about how life has gotten so terribly complicated. The very next day, on the way to the office, I was listening to the exact same deejay

in the exact same time slot, and he was talking about how life is so simple that it boils down to just a couple of basic principles. I smirked, because I wondered if the deejay had remembered his contradictory comments on the previous day. But then it struck me that these two statements—life is complicated, life is simple—are not at all contradictory. Life is ambiguous. The statements are both correct, depending on the situation. They are both equally valid statements describing life!

Let me give you a few examples among many, of passages that are accused of being contradictions, but are nothing more than ambiguities.

Peace, or no peace?

Many critics love to seize upon the apparent contradiction between Matthew 10:34–35, where Jesus says,

Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household;

and Luke 2:14, where the angels sing “peace on earth” at Jesus’ birth.

Well, did Jesus come to bring peace or not? Which is it? It is both! These two statements are not contradictions; they are equally valid, depending on their individual contexts. Jesus Christ most certainly did come to bring peace—peace between men and God thanks to the forgiveness of sin, and peace among men who conduct themselves according to the principles of the kingdom of Christ. Peace is one of the fruits of the Spirit, and Christians will be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9, Rom. 12:17–18, Gal. 5:22).

But, not everyone will accept the gospel of Christ. And in fact, many will be antagonistic toward the gospel and its converts. Strife will be a reality, and Jesus is trying to make His disciples understand that those who desire to live godly will be persecuted.

Works, or no works?

The tension between grace and works in the New Testament is so obvious, it has caused some to throw up their hands and declare it a contradiction. Skeptics suggest that James and Paul headed up two competing branches of Christianity. Martin Luther went so far as to doubt the status of the book of James as canonical Scripture.

But Ephesians 2:4–10 and James 2:14–26 are not contradictions at all; they are equally valid statements depending on their contexts. Paul, speaking by inspiration, revealed that “by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” This expresses the great truth that all men are sinners, and can do nothing to earn or deserve salvation.

But Paul didn’t mean to suggest that Christians don’t have to obey God. Such a thought never entered Paul’s mind. And in many, many places, Paul declared the actions necessary for one professing a Christian calling (read, for example, the rest of the book of Ephesians). In order to obtain the grace of God, a person does have to faithfully obey. He must believe, he must repent, he must be baptized. He must live a sanctified Christian life.

James, in his inspired passage, points out that “faith without works is dead.” One can claim to have faith, but if his actions do not support that claim, his faith is empty, impotent. James asks the question, “what use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?” James answers that question in the negative no less than eight times in the rest of the chapter.

One says, “Not as a result of works.” One says, “Faith without works is dead.” So which is true? They are both true! Both statements correctly describe man’s salvation. And we miss the truth if we take either statement to the disregard of the other. Shouting out one passage and ignoring the other causes us to take an extreme, unbiblical position. The truth is, man will never deserve heaven; and at the same time, man has a vital part to play in his own salvation.

Fear Jesus, or befriend Jesus?

Preachers love to emphasize the gap between holy God and unrighteous man. In fact, I knew a worship leader who would not sing the song, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, because he felt that being friends of Christ was too informal, too familiar. For example, 1 Tim. 6:15–16 describes Jesus as, “He who is the blessed and only sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see.” Or Heb. 10:30–31 says, “The Lord will judge His people. It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

But what about those passages like Luke 5:20, 7:34, John 15:14, and James 2:23, which say that human beings can become the “friend of God.”

Well, which is it? Again, both sets of passages accurately describe man’s relationship with Jesus Christ. He is most certainly our friend, for He gave us the greatest gift that can be given. He loves us, personally and affectionately. His interactions with Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and his disciples, show that He really did befriend humanity.

At the same time, we would think too little of Jesus if we thought of Him as merely a pal. Jesus is still the Lord! He deserves our respect and fear. If we do not approach Him in spirit and truth, He will reject our friendship and condemn us eternally. In some ways, it depends on one’s reaction to Jesus whether He’s a friend or a judge.

In conclusion, don’t take a simplistic or nitpicky approach to Scripture. Life is a big subject. How silly to think that one sentence could adequately describe everything there is to say about it! Scripture is deep enough to look at all aspects of our relationship to God.

—*John Guzzetta*

Quote of the Week:

“We must sail sometimes against the wind, and sometimes with the wind, but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.”

—*Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.*