

## Aim of lesson

To help the young people appreciate how to approach scriptural passages which at first reading appear to contradict each other.

## Bible background

Malachi 3:6; Psalm 18:30-31, 119:86,89,144; 2 Timothy 3:16

## Preparation required

Read through the notes and questions, and decide how much detail you want to go into. If your class has no problems about apparent contradictions in the Bible, we don't want to give them any, so you may decide to omit this topic and deal with another.

Wrested Scriptures, by brother Ron Abel, is helpful in dealing with several apparent contradictions and taking us logically through them. If you can get hold of a copy, read the section entitled "Alleged Contradictions & Inaccuracies", the first part of which is included in the students' notes.

## Suggested outline of lesson

### Introduction

The lesson begins by establishing the point that God does not change. His purpose, and the way in which he deals with people, are unchanging; so we would expect his book to be consistent and without contradictions. Emphasise the incredible accuracy of the scriptural texts, as witnessed by the Dead Sea scrolls (these were discussed in Part 2, so don't go to town).

Discuss Psalm 18:30-31; Psalm 119:86,89,144 and Malachi 3:6. What are the qualities of a rock?

Read 2 Timothy 3:16 and emphasise that all scripture is inspired, not just some parts of it. Try to work towards the conclusion that the word of God, like God himself, is consistent and its principles unchanging.

### You cannot see my face

Passages such as Exodus 33:11: 'The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend' seem difficult to reconcile with others, like Exodus 33:20: 'You cannot see my face, for no-one may see me and live.'

However, we already know from Exodus 23:21 that the Israelites were instructed to obey his angel, 'since my name is in him'. The principle of God-manifestation in angels is elaborated in Stephen's commentary in Acts 7. Note the shift from 'an angel' (verse 30), to 'the Lord's voice' (verse 31) and 'then the Lord said to him' (verse 33). Could this be a conundrum designed to force us to search the scriptures?

### **Did Samuel come to see Saul?**

Another example is the apparent difficulty with 1 Samuel 15:35: 'Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again,' and 1 Samuel 19:24: '(Saul) ... prophesied in Samuel's presence ...'. Note that one passage (at least, in most translations including the AV, NIV and NKJV), says that Samuel came no more to see Saul. This is not the same as saying that Samuel never saw Saul again.

### **Missing generations**

Another conundrum is the omission of three generations from the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1:8. Joram was not the father of Uzziah. Is this a mistake or are there very good reasons why three kings (Ahaziah, Jehoash and Amaziah) are omitted from the record? Look at 2 Chronicles 22:2-9, 2 Chronicles 24:22 and 2 Chronicles 25:14-16 to see what particular sins they had been guilty of. They all died violent deaths, determined by God.

Most significantly, the genealogy in Matthew is tracing the ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ by the kings of Judah. These three were all descended from Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab king of Israel. Is the main reason for their omission to be found in Exodus 20:5?

### **Two unique kings?**

A careful reading of the text often resolves an apparent difficulty. For example, it is written of Hezekiah that 'There was no-one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him,' (2 Kings 18:5), and of Josiah: 'Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him,' (2 Kings 23:25). Look more carefully and you will note that Hezekiah is commended because he trusted, and Josiah because he turned to the Lord. The two kings are commended for different attributes, so the two statements are not contradictory.

### **The inscription on the cross**

Divinely inspired historians are selective in the information they record, and they do not all select the same information. Take the gospel records of the inscription on the cross - they are all slightly different, but not contradictory. The inscription was written in three languages (Greek, Latin and Aramaic). Get the young people to discuss whether the quotations are really contradictory or not. They are different,

but they do not actually contradict each other. Put all the accounts together and you get the complete picture. There are many other examples like this in the Gospels.

One possibility is that three of the Gospel writers may have quoted the inscription as it appeared in the language of the people they were writing for, whilst perhaps John combined them all.

John also adds another detail - 'of Nazareth', which has added significance in the light of Nathanael's comment in John 1:46.

### **Where different biblical texts disagree**

If you have time you may like to look at these examples. Although they are not contradictions, they illustrate some similar difficulties in understanding the scriptures.

### **What have you learned about how to approach difficult passages?**

Get the young people to think about the ways in which the passages above have been resolved.

The elements they identify should include the following points:

1. Read the passage, or passages, carefully, looking at each word.
2. Compare other passages of scripture that may throw light on the difficulty.
3. Compare different translations. The problem may arise from the fact that translators are not entirely clear about the meaning of a word.
4. If you still don't know the answer, don't worry. There is an explanation somewhere: it's just that we don't know what it is.

### **Relevance to our lives**

Does it really worry us that different writers record slightly differing accounts at times? Rather than raising doubts in our minds it should confirm to us that what we have are real accounts of real events. If everything were completely neat and tidy it would indeed give grounds for suspicion that these accounts were fabricated.

There are many Bible passages which are difficult to understand and to reconcile with each other. Sometimes man himself has put some stumbling blocks in our path. Sometimes we are just not reading the passage correctly. Sometimes God forces us to think hard by using parables and paradoxes. If, after much research, we really cannot arrive at the solution to our problem, we should have the patience and the humility to accept that 'now I know in part, then I shall know, even as I am fully known'. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord God, teach us to treat your word with honour and respect, and to recognise that your ways and thoughts are higher than ours. When we find it hard to understand, give us the humility to trust it still, and the patience to search out the truth that it contains. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

## **Other suggestions for activities**

1. Ask the young people to write down two of the main points from this lesson, without comparing notes. They will inevitably write down different things. Consider whether or not they are contradictory.
2. Ask the young people what is the difference between an undesigned coincidence and an apparent contradiction? They both come about from comparing different records of related events, both may happen because different people are writing. In one case we understand the connection between the two accounts; in the other we do not, at least not immediately. But they both help us in our understanding.