

## The Missing Verses

Recently, I noticed on social media a series of posts regarding verses that are “missing” from some English translations of the Bible. These are verses that appear in the King James translation but do not appear in other English translations such as the New Revised Standard translation. The verses in question are:

Matthew 17:21	Mark 9:44	Luke 17:36	Acts 15:34
Matthew 18:11	Mark 9:46	Luke 23:17	Acts 24:7
Matthew 23:14	Mark 11:26	John 5:4	Acts 28:29
Mark 7:16	Mark 15:38	Acts 8:37	Romans 16:24

Over the years, archaeologists have discovered copies and fragments of the Bible dating back over a thousand years. Collections in places like the British Museum and the Vatican Libraries contain artifacts from the sites where the documents are believed to have originated from shortly after they were authored to modern times.

Prior to the introduction of the Gutenberg Bible in about 1454, every copy of the Bible was copied by hand. The hand-copy process, especially with a large document such as the Bible, is slow and tedious. There is a lot of opportunity for errors to creep in. Even the most diligent of scribes make mistakes. Everyone is susceptible to boredom, exhaustion, and distraction. Once a copy that contains an error is released, other copies made off of the erroneous copy repeat the same error.

Over the centuries, English translators have ended up with several ancient copies of scripture that do not exactly match. Often the errors are minor: two words are transposed, a word is misspelled, a word or phrase is repeated. In some cases, it is easy to identify the error and deduce how it occurred. In some cases, it can be determined where the error occurred and trace which subsequent copies contain the error.

Often, the translators are left having to “play the odds”. The more copies that are identical or near identical, the more likely it is the content of those copies are true to the original. But it is difficult to decide the threshold of what constitutes a match. Do the document have to 95% match? 75% match? 55% match? To take a modern example, despite popular belief the line “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore” does not actually appear in the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*.

I looked into the sixteen verses listed above. In the King James Version (published in 1611), these verses appear in the text. In the New Revised Standard Version (published in 1989) the verses are present but, instead of appearing in the text, they appear in footnotes with the annotation “Other ancient authorities...” either add, omit, or substitute the text in question. In other words, the text is still included but it is flagged as problematic. It has not been erased from the Bible. The translator makes the reader aware that it is unclear whether the material is original.

This is the right way to handle the problem. The translator is being honest with the reader. The translator is not making a decision on the reader’s behalf but, in all humility, admitting his uncertainty. The translator is, in effect, partnering with the reader to try to discover the truth. God commands us to talk about His holy word (See Deuteronomy 6:7). The translator is marking these verses as ones we need to talk about.

The Missing Verses are not, as some social media posts suggest, some conspiracy to re-write scripture. They are consequences of imperfections in a fallen world. And thanks be to the individuals who take up the difficult task in translating ancient texts doing their best as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ to accurately convey the truth revealed in God’s Holy Word.

I, myself, am not an expert in Greek nor do I have access to the original documents. Comparing various English translations available online and in the library at First United Methodist Church in Junction, Texas, here are my discoveries and thoughts on The Missing Verses:

Matthew 17:21 “But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting”

This account recorded in Matthew 17:14-20 appears to be the same account recorded in Mark 9:17-29 and Luke 9:37-43. Mark’s account includes the quote, Luke does not. Perhaps a scribe copying Matthew missed the line or, perhaps a scribe already familiar with Mark’s account assumed that the version of Matthew he was assigned to copy was in error and inserted the line in order to repair the text. In any case, between the three Gospels we have the complete story.

Matthew 18:11 “For the Son of man came to save the lost”

Luke is the only Gospel that records the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). The phrase in question is recorded in Luke 19:10. Again, between the two Gospels, the line is preserved.

Matthew 23:14 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you devour widows’ houses and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive the greater condemnation”

Mark 12:40 records this phrase but as a teaching to the disciples, not directly addressed to the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 23 is a litany of woes Jesus pronounced on the Jewish leaders. In a culture that heavily relied on the oral tradition, the concept expressed in Mark would have fit well into the flow of Matthew 23 as a memory device. It is the same theory we use today embedding teachings into hymns. Perhaps an early scribe who had learned this teaching of Christ in litany form embedded this verse in Matthew believing he was repairing an omission. Once again, the Holy Spirit has it covered in a different Gospel.

Mark 7:16 “If any man has ears to hear, let him hear”

This phrase appears in Matthew 13:9, Mark 4:9, Mark 4:23, Luke 8:8, and Luke 14:35 though the exact phraseology varies slightly. Other variations of this expression appear in Deuteronomy 9:24, Psalm 115:6, Psalm 135:17, Isaiah 42:20, Jeremiah 25:4, and Romans 11:8. It appears to be a common idiom which an inattentive scribe could either insert or omit.

Mark 9:44 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

Mark 9:46 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

This phrase is repeated a third time in Mark 9:48.

Mark 11:26 “But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your trespasses”

This phrase appears in Matthew 6:15 following the Lord’s Prayer recorded in Matthew 6:9-13. A scribe who had memorized the Lord’s Prayer may have assumed this was an omission and inserted the phrase as a correction.

Mark 15:38 And the scripture was fulfilled which says, “He was reckoned with the transgressors”

Luke attributes this to Jesus as part of his final words to the disciples before heading to Gethsemane (Luke 22:37). Mark places this in at the Crucifixion after mentioning Jesus is being crucified between two thieves. The Easter account is the most important story in Christianity and, early in the Christian movement, it is likely several versions circulated in the oral tradition. A scribe most likely inserted this to reconcile what he was reading with the oral account with which he was familiar.

Luke 17:36 “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left”

A scribe may have inserted this in order to match Luke’s account of Jesus’ warning about the end times to reconcile it with the account found in Matthew. The phrase appears in Matthew 24:40

Luke 23:17 Now he was obliged to release one man to them at the festival

Matthew 27:15, Mark 15:6, and John 18:39 explain that Pilate normally release a prisoner at Passover. Luke says that Pilate offered the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbas but does not explain why. A scribe probably included this line for clarification.

John 5:4 ...waiting for the moving of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and troubled the water: whoever stepped in first after the troubling of the water was healed of whatever disease he had.

John 5:2-9 is an account of Jesus healing a man at the pool of Bethesda. John 5:7 explains that the man is not healed because he has never been able to get to the pool first when the water is troubled. John 5:4 appears to be an insert by a scribe who was attempting to clarify the passage for readers who were not familiar with Jerusalem.

Acts 8:37 "And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Acts 15:34 "But it seemed good to Silas to remain there"

Acts 24:7 "...and we would have judged him according to our law. 7 But the chief captain Lysias came and with great violence took him out of our hands, 8 commanding his accusers to come before you."

Acts 28:29 "And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, holding much dispute among themselves"

In Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1, Luke explains that he is assembling his accounts from eyewitnesses and other sources. This means Luke was an editor (not an original author) of at least some material selecting the information from existing sources. Luke's compilation of Acts did not mean the pre-existing sources disappeared nor were all those pre-existing sources identical. It is highly possible that the four insertions into Acts are from these pre-existing sources with which some scribes may have already been familiar. In this case, the insertions may well be attempts by those scribes to correct Luke's compilation.

Romans 16:24 "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."

Romans 16:22 states that the letter to the Romans was written by Tertius. Tertius was the scribe to whom Paul dictated the letter. This is no different than what we see in our modern business world. High level executives will dictate the content of business letters to secretaries and leave it to the secretary to dress the letter up with standard greetings and closings.

1 Corinthians 16:21, Galatians 6:11, Colossians 4:18, and 2 Thessalonians 3:17 all indicate that these letters were also dictated to scribes. All the letters of Paul end with some form of "grace be with you" except for Romans. Also Tertius is unique in mentioning himself in the letter. All other scribes are anonymous. This suggests Tertius may have been trained to use a different standard style than the other scribes. Some later scribe may have appended this more conventional closing to the end of Romans.

In summary, all the Missing Verses in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are covered by verses in the other Gospels. No substance of the Gospel is missing. The content of John 5:4 is found in John 5:7 so there is no substance missing in John as well. The Holy Spirit has blessed us with the four Gospels to compensate for our human imperfection.

Insertions in Acts are narrative details probably from various versions of the source material used by Luke. These details do not change the substance of the accounts in which they are related. The insertion in the letter to the Romans is stylistic and not substantive.

The English translators have not removed the texts. They are still there. The translators have been honest in presenting the text to us, the readers, by alerting us to the problem they have encountered in assembling their source materials.