

## **Mark 16:12-20**

### **Verse 12**

Together, verses 12 and 13 seem to be a parallel account of Luke 24:13-35. In that passage, we read about the way in which Jesus appeared to two disciples who were traveling to reach “a village called Emmaus” (Luke 24:13). One of the disciples was named Cleopas (Luke 24:18). When Jesus appeared to the men, they were both “prevented from recognizing” Him (Luke 24:16). As Mark says it, Jesus “appeared in a different form” (Mark 16:12). Consequently, the two men had no idea who their traveling companion was. On their journey through “the country” (Mark 16:12), Jesus taught them Messianic lessons from the Old Testament (Luke 24:25-27). When the trio arrived at their destination, the two invited their guest to stay with them (Luke 24:29). They all shared a meal together (Luke 24:30), and it was at that moment that the Lord opened the men’s eyes to see the true identity of their guest (Luke 24:31). It was Jesus! The men would then recount that it was as if their hearts were “burning” within them as the Lord taught them (Luke 24:32).

### **Verse 13**

Verse 13 describes the aftermath of the interaction on the road to Emmaus: “And they went and reported it to the rest, who did not believe them either” (Mark 16:13). A portion of the backstory for this verse is also found in the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke. In Luke 24:33 we read of how the men, after having seen Jesus, immediately returned to Jerusalem in order to tell the other disciples what had happened. When they arrived, they found the Eleven, as well as a group of other Christ-followers (Luke 24:33). Interestingly, Luke’s account does not tell of the doubt of which Mark speaks. Our current text says the rest “did not believe them” (Mark 16:13). Luke’s Gospel seems to give the impression that the Emmaus disciples were met with a hearty, faith-filled reception. Luke 24:34 says the other disciples greeted them by saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” How can we reconcile these two accounts? It seems we can assume the doubt of the Jerusalem disciples occurred before the pronouncement of Luke 24:34. Maybe the Emmaus disciples arrived and made their pronouncement. Initially the Eleven and the others expressed doubt, but they ended up expressing faith after hearing a more detailed account. It could have been that Peter returned and reported his experiences (Luke 24:12 and John 20:3-10) in between the arrival of the Emmaus disciples (Mark 16:13 and Luke 24:33) and the faith pronouncement of the Jerusalem disciples (Luke 24:34). There is not an error in Scripture, nor is there a contradiction between Mark and Luke’s account.

### **Verse 14**

Verse 14 gives an account of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance to His disciples. It says, “Later he appeared to the Eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table. He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who saw him after he had risen” (Mark 16:14). The “Eleven” are obviously the original Twelve (Mark 3:14; 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; and 14:10, 17, 20, and 43) minus Judas (Mark 14:43). Luke seems to give an account of this same appearance in Luke 24:36-49. Perhaps John speaks of the same event in John 20:24-29. Matthew doesn’t mention it.

The three gospel writers who do give an account of it all make mention of Jesus rebuking the disciples’ dull spiritual perception (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:38; and John 20:27). Such correction was necessary when one considers the forgetfulness of the Eleven. Jesus had predicted His pending crucifixion on three occasions (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; and 10:32-34). Despite His repeated reminders, the disciples were still ignorant of the truth. They were so fixated on the possible prominence and prestige of a physical kingdom (Mark 8:32-38; 9:33-37; and 10:35-35), they missed the realities associated with Christ’s spiritual kingdom.

“Unbelief” has been mentioned on other occasions in Mark’s gospel. In Mark 6:6, Jesus stood amazed at the lack of faith amongst the residents of His hometown. Mark 9

contains a miracle episode in which Jesus expressed frustration over an “unbelieving generation” (Mark 9:19) and a desperate father cried “I do believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). The Gospel writer has spoken openly about the sin of unbelief. Now he depicts it as being present in the post-resurrection disciples. The doubt of the disciples is highlighted three times in Mark’s post-resurrection history (Mark 16:11, 13, and 14). Knowing that faith is the victory that conquers the world (1 John 5:4), and knowing that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6), Mark aims to impress upon his readers the importance of faith in the resurrected Christ.

The word translated “hardness” in our current text is a compound word in the Greek. It contains the typical Greek word for heart and another word from which we get our term “sclerosis.” It is only used two other times in our New Testament. On both of the other occasions, Jesus applied the term to the Pharisees. Because of their hard hearts, they misunderstood the Lord’s teaching on marriage (Matthew 19:8 and Mark 10:5). The verb form of the word for sclerosis is used elsewhere in the New Testament to warn disciples (Hebrews 3:8, 13, and 15; and 4:7). Disciples must always be on guard against letting their hearts become dull to the things of God. They must work to not become too casual concerning the realities of redemption. Without faith in the resurrection, our entire system of belief is meaningless (1 Corinthians 15:14).

Aren’t we often like the disciples? Don’t doubts sometimes fill our hearts and minds. We can take comfort from the example of Thomas, Peter, and their cohorts. Even when we are “faithless, He remains faithful” (2 Timothy 2:13). Our lack of trust doesn’t negate our salvation, nor does it quench the love of the Father. Indeed, we are fallen creatures. A degree of skepticism will often plague us until the Lord makes all things new. When we are tempted to doubt, we should lean on Jesus. A look to Him will quell our doubts. He has a heart to help, and He will assure us in our times of darkness.

### **Verse 15**

Verse 15 contains Mark’s account of the Great Commission. It says, “Then He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation’” (Mark 16:15). The word translated “preach” should not be thought of in the modern sense of the word. Our Lord’s intent was not necessarily for the Eleven to don formal clothing, stand behind a pulpit, and pontificate to the masses. The word “preach” comes from a Greek word that simply means “to proclaim.”<sup>1</sup> It was used of a town herald who was tasked with making important announcements to residents. Used in regard to the mission of the Church, it shows that Jesus desires for the Church to announce the message of salvation.

Local congregations are to be committed to proclaiming the good news of Jesus. Scripture teaches that our Lord has made salvation available for all (1 John 2:1-2). As a result, we should be willing to preach to all. Didn’t Jesus say, “God so loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16)? From our human perspective, everyone should be regarded as a potential candidate for grace. Though names are already written in the Lamb’s book of life, we don’t know what names are included. As a result, we should be ready to follow Jesus’ command — to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). As the Church is faithful to Jesus’ call, she has the assurance that there will one day be “a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language...standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9). If we limit the scope of our gospel proclamation, we transgress our Lord’s command. Ryle has said, “We are not justified in making any exception in the proclamation. We have no warrant for limiting the offer to the elect. We come short of

---

<sup>1</sup> Rogers Jr., Cleon L. and Cleon L. Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 104.

the fulness of Christ's words, and take away from the breadth of his sayings, if we shrink from telling any one."<sup>2</sup>

Matthew's famous account of this same commissioning is found in Matthew 28:18-20. Luke speaks of it in Luke 24:48-49 and Acts 1:8. John recounts it in John 20:21-23. Luke is careful to couple the event with the ascension (Luke 24:50-52 and Acts 1:9). Each gospel writer is strategic in mentioning the promise of the Holy Spirit along with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:20; Mark 16:17; Luke 24:49; John 20:22; and Acts 1:8). Explicit references to the ascension and the third person of the Trinity are reminders that the Heavenly Father is the Lord of the harvest (Matthew 9:38), and that He has promised to empower His disciples in the task of world evangelism.

Modern Christians shouldn't give up on missions. They have no need to be worried or weary in gospel proclamation. Jesus has promised to be with them. There is nowhere they can go that He won't be with them (Psalm 139:7-12). His presence brings comfort and cheer, but it also brings energy. When the Church proclaims Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, she can be confident that the Lord will draw men and women unto Himself (John 12:32).

### **Verse 16**

In verse 16, Jesus gives a sort of explanatory footnote on the Great Commission. He says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). This additional caveat-like statement is not found in other accounts of Jesus' commissioning of His disciples. Nonetheless, it is of great importance for us. There is good reason the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to pen it. Jesus' words were meant to emphasize four realities.

First, verse 16 was intended to underscore the role of faith in salvation. Christians are delivered from sin and death because of a trust in Jesus' work on their behalf. Their pardon is built on nothing more and nothing less. Abraham became righteous by faith, and so do we (Romans 4:3). Scripture says, "He saved us — not by works of righteousness" (Titus 3:5). It also says, "You are saved by grace through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). If we want to stay true to Jesus' form of evangelism and missions, we must simply call men, women, boys, and girls to believe in Him. Such is the methodology that He Himself used (Mark 1:15).

Second, the words of verse 16 were also meant to emphasize the importance of baptism. Our Lord held the rite up as an integral part of one's conversion. Though baptism does not earn salvation, it should surely be expected of all who profess Christ. Didn't Jesus humble Himself to take part in this act of obedience (Mark 1:9-11)? Baptism is critical to Christian profession, because it provides a powerful object lesson of gospel truths. Paul said, "We were buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). In and of themselves, the waters of baptism do nothing to cleanse of sin. The physical act is not what brings salvation. Grace and faith do. However, baptism is a sort of spiritual fruit that gives evidence of true salvation (Matthew 7:16-20). If one is unwilling to follow one of Jesus' most basic commands, there could be just cause to doubt whether or not that individual is a true Christian (James 2:17).

Third, Jesus' addendum to the Great Commission in Mark is intended to give comfort to evangelists. Rejection is often the most difficult part of evangelism.

Fourth, Jesus' instruction in verse 16 places emphasis on the surety of a future judgment. The one who rejects gospel summons "will be condemned." In a twenty-first century culture that disdains anything with an air of judgmental-ism, the concept of eternal retribution has fallen on hard times. Even professing evangelical preachers say little about the topic nowadays. Many claim they can't imagine God performing harsh punitive acts. Such perspectives must be held up against the authority of God's Word. Jesus clearly taught that

---

<sup>2</sup> Ryle, J.C. *Expository Thoughts on Mark*. (Edinburg: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 286-287.

there will be an end-time reckoning. The Lord will one day restore humanity to its original intent (Genesis 3:8 and Revelation 21:1-4), and the great and terrible day of His wrath will be the means by which He makes all things right (Revelation 6:17 and 20:11-15). If there will be no punishment of sinners, there will be no paradise for saints.

Jesus makes mention of this reality in giving the Great Commission, because He knows that the prospect of judgment is a great motivator in world evangelism. Missionaries ought to go to the nations with a burden. Every man, woman, boy, and girl will stand before Christ in judgment. As a result, Christians, like the Apostle Paul, should be gripped by the “fear of the Lord.” The inevitable reality of an end-time judgment should compel them “to persuade people” (2 Corinthians 5:11).

The prospect of judgment is also a grand motivator for hearers. Is it not the threat of hellfire that prompts many to surrender their souls to Christ? So called “hellfire and brimstone preaching” has led many to shun any mention of judgment in preaching; however, it is worth a reminder that Jesus was bold in speaking of the subject (Mark 12:40). The Whitfields and Wesleys of human history have known that announcements concerning the coming judgment are what often startle people from their spiritual sleep. It is for this reason that Jesus gave a caveat concerning this matter in His Great Commission. Millions have been rocked to spiritual sleep by a lullaby of love that makes no mention of the justice of our Holy God. May we be faithful to preach a full gospel.

### **Verse 17-18**

In verses 17-18 Jesus instructs His disciples concerning the sign-gifts that will be given unto them. He says, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes; if they should drink anything deadly, it will not harm them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will get well” (Mark 16:17-18). Ferguson notes well that “Mark 16:17-18 read like a summary of some of the amazing things which took place in the early church.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, nearly all of the miraculous events listed in Jesus’ pronouncement can be found in the book of Acts. In Acts 5:12 we read that “many signs and wonders were being done among the people through the hands of the apostles.” The Twelve are seen driving out demons in Acts 19:11-20, they speak in tongues in Acts 2:4; they are unharmed by snakes in Acts 28:1-6, and they heal the sick in Acts 3:1-10.

The drinking of poison is the only miraculous event from Jesus’ words not found in the history of the early church. Perhaps it occurred on some occasion that we are not aware of. As with the other miracles, it probably has roots in Old Testament prophecy. Remember that Elijah was unharmed by a poisonous stew (2 Kings 4:40-41). His ability to save people from death validated his position as one of the Lord’s prophets.

As for the capability to speak in unknown languages, the Old Testament gives us several clues concerning the purpose of the gift. The speaking of tongues was foretold by the prophets. When the Lord sent the people into captivity the strange babel of foreign invaders was proof that God’s corrective hand had fallen on His covenant people (Isaiah 18:2 and 7; 28:11; 33:19; 66:18 and 23; Jeremiah 5:15; Ezekiel 3:4-6; Daniel 5:19; and Zephaniah 3:9). This token of judgment was in alignment with the Lord’s age-old perspective from Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Under the Mosaic Law, it was made clear that unknown tongues were a sign of God’s judgment (Deuteronomy 28:49 and Numbers 11:25), and the Psalmists knew this was true (Psalm 81:5 and 114:1). Speaking in unknown tongues was an indicator that condemnation was being meted out on the Jews and that the Lord was moving to primarily work amongst the Gentiles. When the apostles spoke in various foreign languages at Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4), it was proof that the Lord was moving to minister among the Gentiles. Paul spoke of the way in which God primarily works among non-Jews during this current dispensation when he talked about “the fulness of the Gentiles” (Romans 11:25-27).

---

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let’s Study Mark*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 275.

The thought of disciples handling of snakes is one that has provoked much controversy. Even to this day, there are those who try to mimic the practice. Modern snake handlers miss the purpose of Jesus' pronouncement in our text. Jesus earlier prophesied that His disciples would be unharmed by snakes (Luke 10:19), and we see fulfillment of His prophesy in Acts 28:1-6. Supernatural protection from snakes harkens back to Moses' days in Egypt. The first sign and wonder performed by a prophet of Israel involved a serpent (Exodus 4:1-3). From that point forward, the Lord often graced His prophets with sign-gifts to validate their ministry.

Considering the purpose of miracles in the Old Testament, it is no wonder that Jesus would give such gifts to those who were tasked with establishing His Church (Ephesians 2:20). Hebrews 2:3-4 tells us that the miracles wrought by the apostles were intended for this purpose: "How will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? This salvation had its beginning when it was spoken of by the Lord, and it was confirmed to us by those who heard him. At the same time, God also testified by signs and wonders, various miracles, and distributions of gifts from the Holy Spirit according to his will." Jesus' distribution of miracle-working abilities in our text was intentional. The mighty works were never meant to be for all believers throughout the entire church age. Instead, they served as special sign-gifts for the twelve apostles. They were meant to validate the original heralds of the New Covenant, just as miracles validated the prophets of the Old Testament. As the disciples went out to preach, they would have proof that their message was truly from God.

### **Verse 19**

Verse 19 contains record of an event we call the ascension. It says, "So the Lord Jesus, after speaking to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). A historical account of the ascension is also given in Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:9. Though it deserves great theological consideration, the event is often overlooked because of a fascination with the crucifixion and resurrection. Those two events are indeed significant, but so is Christ's ascension into heaven.

The prophets foretold of it years in advance. David said, "This is the declaration of the Lord to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'" (Psalm 110:1). Jesus claimed that this verse was of Himself (Luke 20:41-44), and Paul applied it to Jesus (Philippians 2:9). The author of Hebrews makes explicit mention of the event, saying, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of His nature, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). In ascending to be with the Father, Jesus reclaimed and resumed the status He had in Heaven prior to His incarnation (Genesis 1:26 and Philippians 2:6).<sup>4</sup>

The ascension has great meaning for us. It is a pity that many modern Christians are ignorant of the event, and that so few preachers speak of it. When we live with an awareness concerning Jesus' current position, it does a lot for our souls. First, it gives us the right perspective in life. Instead of seeking after the things of this world, we should fix our focus on the Lord. Colossians 3:1-2 says, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." Secondly, the ascension assures us that Jesus is presently preparing a future home for us. Such truth should give us comfort and endurance as we face grief in life. Jesus said, "I am going away to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). Third, this doctrine makes us aware that Jesus is currently interceding on our behalf in the presence of the Father. Such truth should encourage us and solidify our commitment to pray. Romans 8:34 reveals, "Christ Jesus is the one who died, but even more, has been raised; he also is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us." Finally, the ascension teaches us that the Lord is in control of all things. Paul spoke of Jesus' exalted state, saying, "He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens—far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Ryle, 290.

every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:20-21). Jesus now sits with the Father, overseeing and ordaining the course of human history. Even if the foundations are destroyed, we have confidence that our Lord reigns supremely as Sovereign God (Psalm 11:3). The ascension indeed has great meaning for us!

### **Verse 20**

Verse 20 tells of what happened after the ascension. It says, “And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word by the accompanying signs” (Mark 16:20). All in all, the miracles spoken of in our passage (vs. 17-18) were designed to be confirmations of the apostles’ ministry. By driving out demons, by being unfazed by poison, by being unharmed by venomous snakes, through speaking in unknown languages, and in healing the sick, the disciples proved that the Lord’s gospel was true.

Today, the Christian Church has a different means of validating its message. The Lord intends for our spiritual faith and fruit to be a compelling witness to the power of the gospel. Ryle has correctly commented, “Let us never forget that Christ’s believing church in the world is of itself a standing miracle. The conversion and perseverance in grace of every member of that church is a sign and wonder, as great as the raising of Lazarus from the dead.”<sup>5</sup>

Didn’t Jesus teach similarly? In His famous Sermon on the Mount, He proclaimed that our transformed lives are a great sign of validation for an unbelieving world: “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:13-14). In His High Priestly Prayer of John 17, He prayed that our lifestyles would serve as a validating witness for Him: “I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me” (John 17:20-21).

---

<sup>5</sup> Ryle, 289.