

## The Ending of the Gospel of Mark

### Mark 16:9-20

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This morning we finish up our study of the Gospel of Mark. Before we can do so we need to address some questions about the end of Mark. If you have a newer translation of Mark, you will see a note either in the text or in the footnotes that says something to the effect that “the most reliable early manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end at verse 8”. Some list several different endings. This has led some people to conclude that newer translators are trying to edit Scripture and new translations should be abandoned.

In his commentary on Mark, Dr. R.C. Sproul wrote,

The late Dr. Roger Nicole was one of the great theologians of the twentieth century. He was a dedicated defender of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. On one occasion, in the midst of a controversy over the reliability of the books of the Bible, he asked a searching question: If the building that houses the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Washington, D.C., were to burn down and the standard yardstick, the official measurement of a yard, were to be destroyed, would our understanding of the yard as a measurement of distance be lost? His answer was “no,” for we would be able to use the myriad copies of the official yardstick that we have to reconstruct the official yard to within a tiny fraction of an inch of accuracy.

This is what these new translations are trying to do. The church has always declared that the Bible is inspired, without error, and infallible in the *original* writings of the Bible. The problem is, that the original documents do not exist. Over the years, the Bible has been copied and translated thousands of times. No one has ever argued that all the copies are without error. Sometimes errors happen as the monks and scribes copied the manuscripts. Most of the time, these were misspellings and transposing letters, and occasionally, it appears, some marginal comments were added to the text.

There is a discipline in Christianity that is called textual criticism. These scholars are not trying to criticize the Bible, they examine our current Bibles against the oldest copies of the Bible. As time goes on, archaeology discovers even older manuscripts. When there are things in our current translations outside of these oldest copies, the concern is that the words might have been added later. The goal is to get as close to the original text of the Bible as possible. The translators are not trying to change scripture. In this respect, some of the newer translations may be much more reliable than the earliest English translations.

These textual critics (or examiners) saw that the oldest manuscripts do not include these verses from the Gospel of Mark. They have not removed the words, they have just warned us about them. As this last section is compared to the previous 15 chapters and eight verses of chapter

16, 1/3 of the words are unique to this section. That is unusual. An author is usually consistent in their vocabulary. This would indicate the words were written by someone else.

So, how did the words get here? A popular belief is that the original ending of Mark was lost which is why it seems to end so abruptly at verse 8. Mark seems to report the resurrection as almost a footnote. The suggestion is that the church sought to give Mark a better ending by summarizing some of the Easter stories found in the other gospels. Almost everything in this last section is recorded in the other gospels.

The only real controversial passage is verse 18

<sup>18</sup> They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won't hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick, and they will be healed."

The snake account may come from the book of Acts where a viper bit Paul, but he did not die. It is also possible early Christians were forced to drink poison but survived. The problem is that some today contend (from this text) that a true believer will be able to snake-handle or drink poison without fear IF they have a genuine faith. Some have been very seriously injured and I suspect died because they were trying to prove their faith was genuine.

This is like saying Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into a fiery furnace by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. These men came out of the fire without being burned, therefore . . . Christians who have genuine faith can walk through fire and escape harm. That is a crazy conclusion to draw. The same is true of snake-handling.

The principle is simple: God does not protect people from "stupid." Here's a caution, anytime you are told you can perform some extraordinary (and maybe questionable) act if you have "enough faith" you should be very cautious.

The bottom line is this: we can trust our Bibles because faithful men and woman are examining the Word of God to make sure that we have as close to the original words as possible. As for the ending to the gospel of Mark, most of what is here is verified in other gospels. So, let's learn what we can from these last verses.

<sup>9</sup> After Jesus rose from the dead early on Sunday morning, the first person who saw him was Mary Magdalene, the woman from whom he had cast out seven demons. <sup>10</sup> She went to the disciples, who were grieving and weeping, and told them what had happened. <sup>11</sup> But when she told them that Jesus was alive and she had seen him, they didn't believe her.

<sup>12</sup> Afterward he appeared in a different form to two of his followers who were walking from Jerusalem into the country. <sup>13</sup> They rushed back to tell the others, but no one believed them.

<sup>14</sup> Still later he appeared to the eleven disciples as they were eating together. He rebuked them for their stubborn unbelief because they refused to believe those who had seen him after he had been raised from the dead.

**The Resurrection Happened.** The most important historical event EVER was the resurrection of Jesus. Rick talked about this last week. The Resurrection is the basis of our hope and the foundation of our salvation. Paul calls it the cornerstone and says, “And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins.” (1 Cor 15:7)

We are told Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene (whom we are also told had seven demons cast out of her). In a world where women were kept in the background, this is noteworthy, perhaps this illustrates the transforming power of the Resurrection. We are told the disciples did not believe Mary’s testimony. Their unbelief may not have had anything to do with the fact that she was a woman. Her testimony *was* hard to believe. The disciples had witnessed the death of Jesus. The idea that Mary had seen Him alive again surely sounded preposterous to them and would have been emotionally very difficult to embrace.

Many others, however, validated Mary’s testimony. Two men were on the road to Emmaus (we read about them in Luke 24). They found themselves walking with the risen Jesus but didn’t recognize Him. While they walked Jesus explained to the men that the Scriptures had predicted the death and resurrection of Jesus throughout the Bible. They remarked that their hearts burned with excitement and insight as Jesus spoke to them.

Jesus also appeared to all the disciples in the upper room. He rebuked them for their lack of faith. This sounds harsh but He did need to point out to them that He had told them many times that He would rise from the dead, but they weren’t listening. He needed the disciples to listen more carefully from this time forward. And that is what they did.

**Jesus Gave Us a Job to do.** We need to pay attention to what the disciples were told because our Lord says the same thing to us.

<sup>15</sup> And then he told them, “Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.

<sup>16</sup> Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned. <sup>17</sup> These miraculous signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak in new languages. <sup>18</sup> They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won’t hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick, and they will be healed.”

This is a commission with which I hope we are familiar from the Gospel of Matthew, but we need to read slowly and carefully. We are to “go into all the world.” In our case, this doesn’t necessarily mean we must go to foreign lands. It means that we need to go into all OUR worlds and preach the gospel. That means our family, our place of employment, our social contacts, our neighbors, classmates, teammates, and relatives. Our Lord has commissioned us to share the gospel everywhere we live.

We are to share it as the “good news.” What exactly is this good news? It is the message that the sin that is so much a part of our DNA has been paid for by our Lord when He died in our place and rose so we could also live beyond the grave.

Before we can proclaim the good news, however, we have to be honest about the “bad news.” For the most part, we think about sin as the bad things people do. As a result, most people don’t see themselves as “sinners.” We feel like we don’t do bad things and certainly don’t do many of them. There are a lot worse people than us. But sin is something much deeper. God created us to honor Him and glorify Him. In other words, He wants us to live our lives with respect toward Him. When Jesus answered the question: “What is the most important commandment?” he said, “We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the second command is to love our neighbor as ourselves.”

We often skip over that most important commandment and focus on the second commandment about loving others. It is much the same when we talk about the ten commandments. The first four commandments tell us to have no gods but Him, not to diminish Him by making an image that depicts Him, don’t take His name in vain, and remember to set aside a day a week to worship Him and realign our lives with Him. The sin nature is found in our ignoring these commands related to our relationship with God.

Do we really live our lives for God’s glory (or is it all about us)? Do we obey Him in all things because He is the true and living God and we owe Him our obedience? (Or do we do what we believe is in our best interest?) How many times have we ignored God’s commands because we felt we had something “more important” or “more fun” to do? How often do we put other things before spending time with Him? How often are we doing “good” things to gain a good reputation with others and not to honor God? Each time we do this, we sin.

When a person rebels against the one who is the ruler, it is considered treason. Even today, treason is a capital offense that results in a death sentence. It is seen as the most heinous of sins. We are all guilty of treason toward God MANY TIMES A DAY. Our very best deeds are stained by the fact that these things were not done to honor God but self. A good ruler, and the Lord God is the very best of rulers, must punish treason or be seen as weak and powerless.

What does this mean? It means we deserve to go to Hell! Jesus, by dying on the cross, made it possible for us to be forgiven for our sin. He died in our place. He was our substitute. He took our punishment. That is why it is called “good news.” Do you understand how we often have to explain to people the bad news before we can tell them the good news?

Our goal is to lead people to believe and be baptized. Now, we must also be careful here. Baptism is often presented as the “way to get saved.” He does not say before you can be saved you must be baptized!” Baptism it is not a work we do to obtain salvation. Notice that Mark says those who refuse to believe, will not be saved. He says nothing about a lack of baptism disqualifying you from being saved. In other words, in this text, baptism is not a “necessary ingredient” to salvation (you don’t have to be baptized to be saved). Baptism is the public declaration of personal trust in Christ. It identifies your as a follower of Christ. In the early days of the church, and even in some parts of the world today, baptism signifies that you have made an irrevocable decision to follow Christ. And it may cost you your life.

And let's also be clear on the word "believe." Too often, we think "belief" is about saying a particular prayer and asking Jesus into your heart. We certainly do need to ask God to save us, but real belief is more than just that. Others see faith as asserting certain facts to be true. And this, too, is part of belief. Faith IS anchored to objective truth. However, Biblical "faith" is to embrace the truth about Jesus and acknowledge Him as our Savior and Lord. It means to be willing to bet your life on these truths. To merely say that Jesus is Savior and Lord and then live as you have always lived is NOT Biblical faith!

When we proclaim the gospel message, a great deal is at stake. Those who do not embrace Christ as their Savior and follow Him as Lord will not be forgiven and will face eternal condemnation. Some of those people will be religious. Consequently, the stakes are high! We must be clear on what it means to be saved.

The church is not meant to be a club where everyone comes to have a good time. It is instead to be a place where the good news is proclaimed and where God's redeemed (forgiven) people, who are filled with gratitude, worship Him and give quiet attention to the proclamation of His word.

In the early church, miracles often accompanied the gospel's message. It was a sign showing the message was authoritative (or from God). This does not mean God will always do miraculous things to underscore the truthfulness of His message. Miracles still happen, but we should never expect or demand miracles. We now have the Word of God and there were sufficient miracles in the past that make a compelling argument for the gospel.

**Jesus Continues to Work on Our Behalf.** The last words in the gospel point us to the ascension and what is called the session of Christ.

<sup>19</sup> When the Lord Jesus had finished talking with them, he was taken up into heaven and sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand. <sup>20</sup> And the disciples went everywhere and preached, and the Lord worked through them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs.

Acts Chapter 1 tells us about the ascension of Christ. After His resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days meeting with the disciples. Can you imagine how much more intently these men listened to Jesus? I am sure they had many questions the Lord took the time to answer. This was an intense time of concentrated training. After the 40 days, we read,

<sup>6</sup> So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?"

<sup>7</sup> He replied, "The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

<sup>9</sup> After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. <sup>10</sup> As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. <sup>11</sup> "Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here

staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”

I love that last statement from the angels. They said to the disciples, “Stop looking up in the sky . . . get to work! You have a job to do!” Why was it important to see Jesus ascend to Heaven? Perhaps because they needed to know the baton had now been passed to them.

The “*session*” of Jesus describes what Jesus is doing now. Our text says the Lord went to Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God but has not stopped His redemptive work. “Sitting at the right hand of God” means Jesus has re-taken his rightful place as part of the Trinity. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is working as our High Priest,

we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. <sup>15</sup> This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. <sup>16</sup> So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Chapter 7 is even more specific,

<sup>23</sup> The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, <sup>24</sup> but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. <sup>25</sup> Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:22-25)

Our Lord, we are told, continues to pray for us and to work on our behalf in Heaven. It is because of His work and the work of the Holy Spirit in us that we can accomplish anything in this world. Through His intercession, our Lord is restraining evil to allow us room to work. We may not be good at prayer . . . but He is constantly interceding for us. Romans 8:26 says the Holy Spirit is also praying for us with “groanings too deep for words.” No matter how we feel, we are not alone in this world.

This leads to the last verse of the gospel of Mark, “And the disciples went everywhere and preached, and the Lord worked through them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs.” In other words, the disciples went out and did what they were instructed to do. They did not let anything stop them!

The gospel of Mark tells us the story of Jesus and His disciples. It ends with Jesus handing the baton to those disciples, and they do what they were told with the help and power of the Lord and the Holy Spirit. But this is not the end of the story. The baton has now been passed to us. It is our turn to preach everywhere the message of God’s provision for our sin, His desire for us to come to repentance, and to live the life we were meant to live. If we do this, we must do it in His strength and for His glory. And if He tarries, it will be our job to pass the baton on to those who come after us.