

THOSE SIGNS FOLLOWING

by Ray C. Stedman

I suppose one of the most controversial movements in the church today is that called the charismatic movement. I do not like to use the word "charismatic" for a movement that stresses just one or two gifts of the Spirit, for all the gifts of the Spirit are charismatic. In First Corinthians 12 the apostle clearly says that every Christian has one or more charismatic gifts. I would prefer to call this group we are observing in the church now the Pentecostal movement, or, perhaps even more accurately, the glossolalia movement. The term glossolalia comes from the Greek (glossa, the tongue, and lalia, to speak) and is the more accurate term for this group because it stresses speaking in tongues. This movement relies heavily upon the closing verses of Mark's gospel for biblical support of its views. These verses refer to the signs that accompany those who believe: casting out demons, speaking in new tongues, healing the sick, picking up serpents, drinking poison, etc. We want to examine this passage very carefully.

First, however, I want to remind you that last Easter I preached on the resurrection passage from Mark 16:1-8, so that passage has already been taught. We are picking up at Mark 16:9-20, which concludes the chapter.

In some versions, particularly the RSV, you find these verses in a footnote at the bottom of the page. That is because many scholars are in doubt as to whether these verses actually belong to the gospel of Mark. It is true that the best of the Greek manuscripts do not contain these twelve verses, but it is also true that the overwhelming majority of the Greek manuscripts that we have today do contain these verses. And it is also true that two of the earliest church fathers, writing from the beginning of the second century, quote from this passage. So it is clear that, from the very beginning, the church has accepted these twelve verses as accurate, even though they may not have come from the hand of Mark.

In this passage you will note one immediate change from the rest of the gospel: it is not in narrative form. Up to this point, Mark has been narrating in sequence the events as they happened to Jesus, bringing us right up to these stirring events of the crucifixion and resurrection. This last section, however, does not narrate events. It summarizes in brief order the events that occurred over a period of about forty days, and that change to summary form does indicate that perhaps it was written by a person other than Mark.

The key to this passage is the word "believe." That emphasis is in line with the thrust of Mark's gospel because this gospel does not present Christianity as just a nice story, a fascinating account of events that took place in the first century. It stresses the fact that the death and resurrection of Christ is something to be believed, and it is intended to change lives. As we act on our belief, it changes us. The emphasis here is on the belief of these apostles whom Jesus was to send out into all the world with this great story.

If you want a simple division of the passage,

- The first verses, 9-14, deal with the basis of apostolic belief;
- Verses 15 and 16 deal with the apostolic preaching; and
- The rest of the passage, Verses 16-20, deal with the confirmation of the apostolic witness.

Let's turn to Verses 9-14 and examine the basis of apostolic belief:

Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. {Mark 16:9-11 RSV}

Immediately, the writer underscores the fact that these disciples, when they heard of Mary's experience with Jesus, did not believe it. You remember how the women had come to the tomb early in the morning, at the first

light of dawn, and found the stone rolled away and saw the angel. The angel told them what had happened. "He is risen, as he said." But they did not see Jesus then. Mary Magdalene, according to John's account, was ahead of the others and, seeing the empty tomb, she ran to tell Peter and John immediately. Evidently she did not hear the angel's explanation. Peter and John both ran to the tomb. Peter went inside and saw the grave clothes lying there still wrapped as though they were around a body, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head was folded and placed aside. This convinced Peter and John that indeed Jesus was risen, but they still had not seen him. Mary Magdalene returned more slowly to the tomb and, John tells us, as she stood weeping in the garden and saw what she thought was the gardener, she asked him where they had laid the body of Jesus. He spoke her name and she knew it was Jesus; holding him by the feet, she worshipped him. This was the first appearance of the risen Lord to a disciple. He came first, as Mark tells us, to Mary Magdalene. She ran and told the other disciples. But Mark tells us that when Mary told them that Jesus was alive and that she had actually seen him, they would not believe it.

In Verse 12, Jesus appears to two disciples.

After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. {Mark 16:12-13 RSV}

Here we have the account Luke gives of the two disciples who were walking some eleven miles to the little village of Emmaus. Jesus appeared in "another form," Mark explains, and they did not know him. This was an extended conversation. As they walked along he began with Moses and the prophets and showed them all the things that referred to Messiah. But as they sat at table with him and saw his hands as he broke bread, they recognized their crucified Lord. Then he disappeared.

These two disciples came back to Jerusalem immediately and told the eleven what they had seen, but, in Verse 14, Mark says the eleven did not believe them.

Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they sat at table; and he upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. {Mark 16:14 RSV}

It is evident that Mark wants us to understand what a climate of persistent and stubborn unbelief prevailed among these disciples after the resurrection. They found it difficult to accept this amazing fact, that the one they had seen crucified was now risen and living among them again. The significant thing here is that Jesus himself expected the eleven to believe before they saw him. He wanted and expected them to believe the reports of the eyewitnesses who had seen him. They were trustworthy persons and were reporting what they themselves had actually experienced, and that should have been enough to convince these disciples that Jesus was risen from the dead. So concerned is he about this that he rebukes them. Even as he did in the days of his flesh, so now, he, as their living, risen Lord, rebukes them for their unbelief. He takes them to task because they refused to believe those who had seen him. You can see the importance he attributes to this matter of believing eyewitnesses. John's gospel tells us that a week later Jesus appeared to them when Thomas, who had not been with them when he appeared the first time, was present. Jesus invited Thomas to examine him, to put his hand on his side and touch the nail prints in his hands and feet. Thomas did so and fell down at his feet, crying, "My Lord and my God!" {John 20:28b RSV}. Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe," {John 20:29 RSV}. Years later, when Peter is writing his letters to the Christians he says to them (1 Peter 1:8), "Without having seen him you love him; though you do, not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy."

One thing is very clear from this account in Mark. When we have adequate, trustworthy witnesses who report to us what they have seen, we are expected to respond with belief. These men saw the risen Lord. They were granted a privilege that we are not granted; but nevertheless, our faith can rest upon solid foundation. Even though we have not seen him, we believe because of the eyewitness accounts here. Now remember the disciples' struggle to believe in the resurrection because that is the climate in which the rest of this passage dealing with the "signs following" is given.

After rebuking the disciples for their unbelief, Jesus gives them a command in Verse 15:

And he said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." {Mark 16:15-16 RSV}

Amazingly, the translators of this passage have always handled it as though Jesus were emphasizing the word "go." That is not the central command he gave to these disciples. In both Matthew and Mark, where we have the great commission, what we should emphasize is "preach," for this is the command. It should read like this: "As you go into all the world (that is taken for granted), preach the good news to the whole creation." Our Lord takes it for granted that, as the church grows and develops, the good news will spread throughout all the world. It is right that we should think about how to reach out to the world. I am not diminishing the emphasis on missions at all. But I want to point out that the instruction our Lord gives is that while we are going, we are to preach, to tell the good news.

Now the good news, clearly, is the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. Nothing can be clearer than that. The good news is not that Jesus came to earth; the good news is that he died and rose again. The implications of those events and what they mean to us -- that is the good news! For, in the death of Jesus you have the solution of the terrible problem of human evil, the force that grips us and destroys all our good intentions. That force is finally destroyed, vitiated, by the death of Jesus. The implication of the resurrection is that Jesus himself, the same Jesus that lived and talked and manifested his life and power on the hills of Judea and Galilee, that same Jesus now lives within us and is available to us. He will live again that same life, in terms of our circumstances, right where we are.

Now that is the incredible good news of the gospel. There is no mention of the fact that when you die you will go to heaven. That is part of the good news. I do not want to have a misunderstanding here. But, almost invariably, heaven is what people think you are talking about when you mention the good news. They think it is some way to get past death. Heaven is not the good news; it is but a result of the good news. The good news is that the power of evil in your life and mine can be broken! It no longer grips us and ruins everything we try to do. It is broken by the power of the resurrection of Jesus. The living Lord himself lives within us and imparts to us power to act.

This is the good news, and this is what we ought to be telling abroad.

Last week at the Family Congress in St. Louis, Missouri, most of the speakers talked about the release and deliverance that comes as a family begins to experience the power of a risen Lord. But some speakers were very unclear on this and garbled it terribly. One woman, addressing the congress, said that, as the early Christians gathered around Jesus, he taught them how to love one another. Then, she said, the disciples began to teach others how to love, and thus the Christian cause spread throughout the world, teaching people how to be a loving community. There was no mention whatsoever of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now that is pure hogwash. Christianity without the death and resurrection of Jesus is pabulum that is handed out to people as a kind of moral teaching which is impossible for them to follow. Therefore, it is useless.

Mark Twain used to say, "It isn't the parts of the Bible I can't understand that bother me; it's the parts I do understand." Men do not need to be told what to do. What they need is to be changed, to be altered at the very depths of their being so that they can do what they already know is right.

That is what Scripture calls *salvation*. That is why Jesus said, "He who believes (this good news) and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

Now there are some who quibble over the word "baptism." There are groups today that take this word, press it to an unwarranted extreme, and say it is necessary not only to believe but also to be baptized. They say that if you believe and are not baptized, you will never be saved. Such an extreme is, of course, totally unsupported by the rest of Scripture. What Jesus means is that belief ought to be real, and the reality of that inward belief is demonstrated by the outward action of baptism. Only that belief that changes us and makes us act is real belief,

and the way that we can demonstrate it is by being baptized. But that does not add to what the belief itself has already accomplished; it only demonstrates it. If you cannot be baptized, that does not affect salvation at all. God knows and reads the heart. But ordinarily, belief is to be translated into action by this ritual which is designed to express faith in Jesus Christ, and says, in very eloquent terms, that you have been put down into death and risen again to walk with him in newness of life.

Now I have found people who dislike this word "saved" because it makes them feel uncomfortable. Well, I understand that. There have been times when I have felt uncomfortable when people used this term. To have somebody rush up to you, grab you by the lapels, and say, "Brother, are you saved?" always turns me off. It is not so much the term as the way it is used that turns people off. But I think it is clear that those who struggle with this word have never really understood the hopelessness of humanity. Once you begin to see how absolutely helpless you are to change your pattern of life, to be acceptable to God apart from the work of Jesus Christ, you will understand what "saved" means. And when it happens to you, you will know that this is the only possible word that could have been used -- that mankind indeed is like a drowning man, hopeless and helpless, unless somebody rescues him. As someone has well put it,

Your best resolutions must wholly be waived,
Your highest ambitions be crossed;
You need never think that you'll ever be saved,
Until you've learned that you're lost.

When you come to the place of learning how helpless you are, then this word of release comes in with mighty, thrilling, hope-giving power: "Believe and be saved."

Now just because salvation reduces man to having nothing to offer God, we struggle with it. We do not like that. Therefore it is frequently resisted and attacked and ridiculed. This will be especially true of the resurrection of Jesus, upon which our faith rests. No part of Christianity ever has been subjected to more severe ridicule, more clever attack, than the resurrection. In every generation it is under attack because, as Paul put it, "If Jesus Christ be not risen from the dead, then our faith is in vain," {cf, 1 Cor 15:7}. And so, as the keystone of Christianity, the resurrection is under severe attack. In every generation attempts are made to try and explain it in natural terms.

Knowing the pressure that would be brought against these apostles to get them to deny this supernatural event, our Lord now goes on to give them certain signs which will accompany and encourage them in preaching the gospel. This climate of unbelief is the setting in which Jesus promises these signs in Verse 17,

"And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; If they pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." {Mark 16:17-18 RSV}

It is easy to read this as though Jesus means these signs will accompany everyone who believes and preaches the gospel. Unfortunately, the text makes it appear this way, and this is how this passage has been understood by many. As you go about preaching the gospel, these signs will immediately confirm that the faith of those who believe is genuine. But the amazing fact is that for twenty centuries millions of people have been converted and have believed the gospel, and none of these signs have appeared.

There have been claims that these signs have been manifested in certain instances, but if this is what these words meant, then these signs would be everywhere. Every time a person became a Christian, some of these signs would be manifested. Therefore, they ought to be the most frequent occurrence in all Christendom. But the truth is, they are very rarely, if ever, seen.

Now what does this mean? Well, it means, of course, that we have misunderstood this passage if we read it that way. It does not square with what God actually does.

I think there is a rather simple solution to the problem. If we put the passage back in its context, in terms of the

climate of unbelief which prevailed among these disciples as the word about the resurrection was brought to them, then we see that Jesus is addressing these words not to those who believe the gospel, but to these disciples who believed or disbelieved in his resurrection. When he says to them, "These signs will accompany those who believe," he is speaking about the disciples. I think we can even insert these words, "those among you who believe," without doing violence to the text. Jesus is saying to these disciples, "Now go and preach in all creation. And to encourage you, in the face of the hostility you will encounter, certain signs that only God could do will accompany you." They would be given power to deliver from demons, power to set free from demonic influence. They would be given power to praise God in a new language.

"New tongues" is speaking in a language that hasn't been learned. The disciples would be given this ability as a means of praising God. Paul himself tells us in First Corinthians 12, that he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to man. I do not know why it is so hard for us to accept that fact. Everywhere people consider tongues as a means of speaking to men, of preaching the gospel, or of conveying messages or prophesying events. And yet Paul says he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God. He goes on to make clear that speaking in tongues is an act of praise and thanksgiving unto God for his magnificent works among men, as a sign to unbelievers. You remember these two things are underscored very strongly in Paul's great treatment of this in First Corinthians 14. "New tongues" is not spoken to men; it is spoken to God. And it is not for believers; it is a sign for unbelievers. Thus these disciples were sent out with this sign. I do not think this sign was limited to the apostles; others received the gift as well.

Further, the disciples would have power to survive physical attacks upon their lives. Bitten by a poisonous serpent, they would not die. If they accidentally drank poison, they would not die. They would have power to survive, that the gospel might go out. This would be one of the authenticating signs given to them.

Now you can see this has nothing to do with the practices of certain Kentucky mountain people who handle rattlesnakes and drink strychnine as evidence of their faith. Actually, if you investigate those practices, you will find that this really is affirming a lack of faith on their part, for periodically, one or more of them die as a result of having been bitten by a rattlesnake, or by drinking poison. This is not what the gospel is talking about.

The fourth sign is power to heal, to lay hands upon the sick, and they will recover. This was to be the invariable rule; there was to be no percentage on this. The disciples would lay hands on the sick and 100% of those who had hands laid on them would recover. Again, you can see what a far cry this is from what we are seeing today in "healing services" that claim to fulfill this.

Now the Apostle Paul did all these things. He cast our demons in the name of the Lord Jesus. He spoke in new tongues more than them all, he said, as praise and thanksgiving to God. I think he did it in the synagogue; it was not a private practice of his at home. When he was accidentally bitten by a poisonous snake, as recorded in the last chapter of Acts, he shook it off into the fire, unharmed, to the amazement of those who watched. He had power to lay hands on the sick, and they were healed; and he did it again and again. This is what he means when he writes in Second Corinthians 12:12: "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works."

These, then, are the signs of an apostle. They were authenticating signs to accompany those who first went out with the gospel into an unbelieving and hostile world. We have this confirmed, I think, by the final paragraph.

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them [the disciples] and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. {Mark 16:19-20 RSV}

Thus the authentication was given to their ministry, and encouragement to their faith. We have another reference to this in the letter to the Hebrews where, in Chapter 2, the writer reminds us,

... how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness

by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will. {Heb 2:3-4 RSV}

So Mark closes this gospel of his with the Lord in heaven -- not far off in space somewhere, but in the invisible dimensions of life right here among us, living as Lord in the midst of his church, directing its events, planning its strategy, carrying it unto the farthest reaches of the world. And the apostles, scattered throughout the known world of that day, preached this good news, their witness being confirmed by these great signs. They thus laid the foundation of the great building that Paul calls the church, the body of Christ, that has grown through all the centuries since. Remember how, in Ephesians 2, Paul says that the foundation was laid by the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, upon which the whole building grows (and has grown now for these twenty centuries) into a habitation of God through the Spirit. That foundation was laid by these apostles, who speak to us the truth about Jesus.

When you hear all these claims about Jesus today, are you ever tempted to say, as I am, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?" He does in these Scriptures. The real Jesus is the apostolic Jesus, the one the apostles witnessed. And that witness is underscored and confirmed by these signs which accompanied them in their ministry, so that we would know that what they say is the truth.

May God grant that our work will rest upon this great foundation that has already been laid, and which no man can re-lay. May we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, alive, vital, ready to live within men and women and set us free, change our lives, lead us into liberty and freedom, for that is what the gospel is all about.

Prayer:

Thank you, our heavenly Father, for the good, good news that Jesus Christ is not dead but alive, and that he lives within our hearts and has the power to break the chains of sin, the bondage of evil, in our lives. Thank you, Father, for the changes that come as a result, the differences that he makes as he comes into human hearts. And thank you for these apostles, these mighty men who faithfully preached this great truth against much persecution and ridicule, and who clearly and accurately conveyed to us the facts upon which our faith rests. We pray that we may be faithful like them, and rest our faith upon this unchanging witness. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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