

Mark 16:9 - 20

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to Mark chapter 16. We're going to be giving thought to the ending of Mark's gospel from verse 9 through to verse 20. And as I kind of hinted at just before the reading, there is a wee story to this sermon. It's not a very exciting story, but there's a wee story.

I think it was three Sundays ago that I preached in verses 1 to 8 where we were focusing on the one described as a young man, an angel, and we kind of said what we had to say revolving around this character and the gospel message really that he proclaimed following the resurrection of Jesus.

Now at that point, I wasn't sure myself if I would go on and preach on this second part of chapter 16. But then I think it was two Sundays ago. Was it two Sundays ago? It might have been last Sunday. I think I did say, well, having finished Mark's gospel, we're going to do something else until we start a new series. But after that, one or two folk actually approached me and said, what about the second half of chapter 16? Very politely, I should say, I wasn't being reproached.

But nonetheless, there was that curiosity, I think. Well, you know, what are you going to do about that second half of the chapter? So, I thought there would be merit in spending some time this evening on this second part of chapter 16. Now, they are much debated verses. And, you know, in the Bible that you have in front of you, you'll see the reason why they are the source of some debate. They're introduced with these words. The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16, verses 9 to 20. Now, before we do think about the passage, I want to think about the passage. I want to think especially about the words of Jesus that we find recorded in this passage. But I think there would be merit in just spending a very little time commenting on this debate, if we can call it that.

What is it all about when we find that note in our Bibles concerning the most reliable early manuscripts? And reading that could be perhaps quite disquieting. We were thinking this morning about how all Scripture is God breathed, and what a marvelous truth that is. But now we open our Bibles and it would seem that some passages are less God breathed than others, or at least that might be the conclusion we come to when we read something like what we find there in the note. If this passage ought not to be in the Bible, if that is indeed the conclusion that we might come to, what about other passages? Where does this leave us?

[3 : 1 1] Does this not pull the carpet from under us and leave us uncertain as to the authority of the very Bible that we speak so highly of and that we were speaking of this morning as being God breathed?

How can we know? Well, let me say a couple of things to try and explain what is going on, and to try and reassure you, if indeed you need reassuring, that this is not really a big problem or issue. But nonetheless, we can just say a little about it before we turn to the passage itself.

The first thing that I think we can say helpfully in relation to this matter is that our doctrine of inspiration, the Scriptures as God breathed, applies to the original manuscripts as written by the original authors. That's something that our confession states very explicitly and very carefully.

In chapter 1 of our confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, which concerns Holy Scripture, in the eighth paragraph, we read, the Old Testament in Hebrew, which was the native language of the people of God of old, and the New Testament in Greek, which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations being immediately inspired by God and by a singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic. And it goes on. The point is that the confession very clearly identifies those original manuscripts as enjoying that characteristic, if you wish, of being God breathed. Well, that's fine.

I think that makes sense. But then we have a problem. And the problem is that none of these manuscripts exist. None of the original manuscripts is in our possession. Everything that we have from which our Bibles are brought together are copies of the originals. That's simply a matter of fact. The original manuscripts in time and in history were copied time and time again to ensure that they remained with us.

[5 : 20] The multiple copies, which is much more of an issue really in the New Testament than the Old, but these multiple copies are what are referred to when people speak of different manuscripts. So, for example, in this note it speaks about the most ancient manuscripts. Well, these are copies, but they're the more ancient copies. And then there are other copies that are less ancient and any number, hundreds and thousands of these manuscripts. Now, this process of copying was subject to error. Again, that isn't a very controversial thing to say. It's simply a matter of fact that in that process of copying errors could creep in.

Often they would have been unconscious, a word that was skipped. You could just imagine somebody spending day after day copying, and you know, you're tired and with the best will in the world. You know, as you're copying, you might just skip a word or you might add in a word. Again, quite unconsciously, of course, it's possible that on some occasion somebody might have added a word or taken out a word deliberately.

That's also possible, though a much more rare occurrence. Now, that might lead to a certain disquiet. Well, if that's the case, what possible confidence can we have that what we have now is reliable? If all these copies and errors were being made, you know, what confidence can we have? It's interesting that the confession also touches on that. It touches on how we believe that God was involved in preserving the original text. We read that.

We read about how by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages and are therefore authentic. So, there is this recognition that God didn't step back from His Word once He had breathed out His Word, but He maintained a concern and an interest in preserving His Word. And for that reason, we are confident that what we have has indeed enjoyed the care and protection of God.

There remains the reality that all of these texts that we have have some divergences between the manuscripts, but it is important to stress that these divergences are minimal in number. And not only are they minimal in number, but on no occasion does a divergence impact on any core doctrine, be that a text where words have been removed or are absent or where they have, it would seem, being added.

[8 : 06] In either occasion, and on any of the occasions where this happened, does it have a material impact on a core doctrine? And that's important to be aware of. And in terms of the scale of this, the ending of Mark, which is why often the attention is focused here, is by far the largest chunk of Scripture where there is a debate. In the other places where there is some debate, it will impact on a word or two words, or at most a verse or two. But on this occasion, it is quite a significant chunk, which is, as I say, the reason why there is more of a focus on it. Now, there is, I think, no doubt that the scholarly consensus, and that includes very conservative scholars, is that the longer ending to Mark, the verses 9 to 20 that we've read and are going to be thinking about, did not form part of Mark's original gospel. That certainly seems to be the consensus. You know, one of the main criteria for determining these things is antiquity. So, the older the manuscript, the more reliable. And that makes sense, because with the passage of time, there is more possibility of error being introduced. It's not the only criteria that would determine choosing between manuscripts, but it's a very significant one and one that weighs heavily in the matter of Mark's ending. And the view that is held, and it may be true, it may be correct, is that the longer ending was added by a copyist who felt that the original ending was very abrupt. Now, the original ending, if indeed it is the original ending, is indeed abrupt.

Verse 8, trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. It does seem quite an abrupt ending to a gospel. And so, you can understand somebody saying, well, that won't do. Let's, you know, let's add something to make for a more satisfactory ending to the gospel. It may be that that is what happened, an ending that records post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. But notwithstanding all of what I've said, the reality is that this longer ending has formed part of our Bibles for centuries, and though it may be unlikely, it may be original.

And there's certainly no harm in considering its content and drawing instruction and challenge for our lives, even if we do so with a measure of caution. I remember hearing a story of an old worthy, a minister of the free church who was asked about these verses in Mark's gospel and what his opinion on it was.

And the minister in question will remain nameless, but his response to the question was that he was persuaded that all of Mark chapter 16 was part of Mark's original gospel. And the reason he gave was that he had preached on the subject on one occasion and had enjoyed great liberty. Now, for those of you who aren't familiar with the kind of West Coast Free Church terminology, to enjoy liberty is to preach with particular freedom and anointing. And given that he had enjoyed liberty, then that was a done deal. That was confirmed that it must be kosher. It must be okay. Well, I'm not sure if that's a particularly convincing argument, but it's one that certainly made me smile. But to the passage. Three weeks ago, we were thinking about the angel's testimony that Jesus had risen. This evening, we're going to focus on the words of the risen Jesus, words that we're going to think about under these headings because they correspond to these headings, the words of Jesus. Words of rebuke, words of commission, words of promise, words of warning, and words of assurance. Let's just think about these as found in our passage. First of all, we find on the lips of the risen Jesus words of rebuke.

Verse 14, Mark 16 verse 14, Later Jesus appeared to the eleven as they were eating. He rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

[12 : 39] He rebuked them. Why did Jesus rebuke his disciples? The first word of verse 14 gives us a clue. We probably don't need a clue, but it gives us a clue in terms of perhaps explaining the, the, I wouldn't say the harshness of the rebuke, but the strong nature of the rebuke. Then in verse 14, we read, Later Jesus appeared to the eleven. Another way of translating that very first word, later, could be, lastly or finally, Jesus appeared to the eleven as they were eating, and he rebuked them.

And if that is how we understand that word, it's possible that the author is highlighting what has gone before, and the logic being that the disciples should have believed because of what had gone before, namely the witnesses who had testified to the resurrection of Jesus. Because in this passage you have a description of these different witnesses who had testified, indeed had testified to the disciples concerning the resurrection. You have, first of all, the testimony of Mary Magdalene.

There in verse 11, when they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, that is Mary Magdalene, they did not believe it. The disciples didn't believe it. So, they were told it's true, he's alive, but they did not believe it. You also had the testimony of the disciples in the road to Emmaus, that is referred to in verses 12 and 13. These reported or returned and reported it to the rest, but they did not believe them either. You also have, though not recorded in the passage, the testimony of Jesus recorded in this very gospel, where on a number of occasions, he had predicted, prophesied, had indicated that he would die, but that he would rise again. We won't go through the references. They're too numerous to take up our time. We could also note, again, not something that we find in the passage, the rather sad irony that even the enemies of Jesus had understood his claim that he would rise again on the third day, or at least that he had made the claim, whether they believed it or not. But they understood that in some sense, he had made that claim.

Hence the concern to have guards placed at the tomb. You know the story. And so, there's a sad irony in that it would seem that the enemies of Jesus had a greater grasp of this possibility than the very disciples. And so, there were multiple witnesses. And yet, the disciples did not believe. The problem, it was a lack of faith. They did not believe. But the rebuke of Jesus goes beyond simply highlighting lack of faith. They're rebuked for their stubborn refusal to believe. Notice there in verse 14. It's not simply that they lacked faith, but you know, the author goes further and speaks of the disciples' stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. And the words speak of a closed and culpable unbelief. It's curious how sometimes Christians are accused of blind faith, of believing despite the evidence against faith. Well, here Jesus rebukes the disciples for blind unbelief, for not believing despite the evidence for faith. And that's something for us to ponder of and be very wary of. What about us? What about you? Do you believe the witnesses concerning the resurrection of

Jesus? We have the witnesses recorded for us here in the pages of Scripture, but not only on the pages of Scripture, but not only on the pages of Scripture. Those of us who, by the grace of God, have been brought to know Jesus as our Savior, we too serve as witnesses. We witness to you that these things are true, that Jesus is alive, that He is all that He claimed to be, that He is the one who died for our sins and rose again from the grave. We witness to that fact. We haven't seen Jesus in the flesh, but we testify to His resurrection. Notice also that the rebuke of Jesus does identify a certain hierarchy in the gravity and culpability of unbelief. So, the more you know, the greater your guilt. That seems to be the logic of this passage. Why does He rebuke them? Why does the author speak of their stubborn refusal to believe?

[17 : 34] Because they had so much evidence. They had so much opportunity to have come to a conviction that these things were true. And because they had so much opportunity, so much privilege, so many witnesses, then their unbelief became more culpable. And that's a sobering thought for those of us who are here. Because the very fact that you're here places greater responsibility on you. The very fact that you're here shows that you have had way more opportunity to consider these things than most of the good citizens of Aberdeen. The more we know, the more is required of us. The more testimony that we are presented with, the greater the onus on us to believe and to act coherently on the basis of what we have been told and what we have had been demonstrated to us. Now, nobody enjoys being rebuked, but the rebuke of Jesus is delivered with the most gracious of purposes that they might believe. This is His desire. He rebukes them with a view to them believing. And so, if you are in any sense conscious of being rebuked, then be thankful for that. The very fact that God rebukes you is evidence of His care for you. The worst thing you could hope for would be indifference. But the Lord is not indifferent. And the very fact that He rebukes is evidence of His concern for your spiritual welfare. So, words of rebuke. But in this passage, you also have words of commission. Verse 15, He said to them, speaking to the same people, the same gathered group of disciples, He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Before we look at the content of the commission, very familiar, just a simple but I think touching point. The words of commission are delivered to the same disciples to whom had been directed the words of rebuke. Jesus doesn't dismiss them for their unbelief. He doesn't dismiss them despite the fact that they were guilty of stubbornly refusing to believe. He doesn't say, well, these are people I can't work with. I'm going to have to look for others to commission. I can't possibly commission these men because they're so incapable, it would seem, of belief. All the evidence, all the opportunity, yet they stubbornly refuse to believe. Well, they're a lost cause. We can't possibly work with them. No. The very men that He had rebuked, the very disciples He had rebuked, He also commissions.

He still, if you wish, believes in them or is persuaded that they will overcome their unbelief and be useful in His service. And that can be a word of encouragement perhaps for somebody here this evening. Perhaps you have been guilty in your life of not believing Jesus. Not necessarily the facts concerning His resurrection, maybe promises that He makes to you. And you're conscious of that. And you wonder, could I ever be useful given my stubbornness over the years? Well, here we have an encouragement.

The very men that He rebuked are the same men that He now commissions. Well, what is the commission? Well, they have to do something. They have to go. They're not commissioned to listen or to study or to meditate.

They're not commissioned to sit on a pew, but to go. And the church of Jesus Christ is never to be static, never stationary, never passive. We are to be a church that is on the go, on the move, on the advance, on the offensive. Is that true of us? Does that describe us? Are you on the go? Are we on the go? Are we advancing? Or are we passive and sedentary in gospel matters? And we are to go into all the world. The world is our parish, but we begin where we are, here where God has placed us. We are to preach the good news. At the heart of our mission is to preach, to announce, to proclaim good news, that Jesus is alive, that there is hope, that forgiveness that is free and full is available for all who would but believe. This is the message that we are to proclaim, that you are to proclaim.

This commission was given to this gathering of disciples as the church, and there is a sense in which the church corporately has a responsibility to obey. But it's also true that each of us who makes up that body, that family that is the church is to play our part in obeying this commission to preach the good news, and to do so to all creation. All are invited. There is room for all. His grace is sufficient. And notice also in this call, this commission to preach the good news to all creation, there's an implication that is important to stress. And the implication is that only the gospel, only the good news concerning Jesus is the way to peace and friendship with God.

[22 : 53] And because only the gospel can open that door, can draw sinners into friendship with God, is it necessary to preach the gospel to all creation? If it were the case that there were many roads to God, many religions that all end up in the same destination, all end up in heaven, then why the need to go and preach the good news to all creation? We could concern ourselves with those of our own background, those in some way part of our tribe and allow others to show the other ways that there are.

But that is clearly not what Jesus is persuaded of. Rather, it is necessary for all to be told, for the good news to be shared with all, for this is the only way for sinners to be reconciled with God. Now, we live in an age where that is considered a very intolerant message, and perhaps for many a very unwelcome one. But it is the clear testimony of Scripture. So, you have words of rebuke, you have words of commission, also words of promise. In verse 16, whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. A promise of salvation, saved from guilt, saved from condemnation, saved from an empty life.

For whom is this promise? For those who believe and are baptized. What does it mean to believe? To believe what? Well, remember what Paul said to the Philippian jailer, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

To believe in Jesus, where in the context of the New Testament, the word is used to speak not only of an intellectual assent to certain truths concerning Jesus, though that is necessary, but a trusting in Jesus that finds expression in a life lived for Him. Hence believe and be baptized. Jesus is not saying here that without baptism we cannot be saved, that it's indispensable for salvation. What He's saying is that the evidence of genuine belief is identification with Jesus and with His people, and one way in which that identification is demonstrated is demonstrated, the principle way is by baptism. Hence the two are together. This is what it means for biblical faith or saving faith to be demonstrated in an act of public profession and commitment to the church of Jesus Christ. For an adult who comes to believe and who has not been baptized already, then baptism is the way in which that public commitment is demonstrated. For those of us in our tradition, many of us who will have been baptized as infants, that public profession that is important, that public commitment is made when we consciously and deliberately express our desire to be identified fully with God's people as we participate in the Lord's Supper as communicant members of the church. That's the opportunity we have to identify ourselves. It's not the only way we do that. Hopefully, we do that in any number of ways, but it's a formal way in which that is done. These are the words of promise.

Whoever believes and identifies with Jesus is saved. But there's also words of warning. We're going to see words of warning and then finally words of assurance. In verse 16, that same verse, whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. See, this is not a matter simply of intellectual or religious curiosity. The stakes are high for those who refuse to believe, for those who refuse to trust in and confess Christ as their Savior, what awaits is condemnation.

[27 : 05] Condemned on that great and dreadful day. And what is their great sin for which they will be condemned? Unbelief. Unbelief, which is the mother of all sins, if we can use that language to describe it. Words of solemn warning that Jesus would have us communicate as we proclaim the good news. But there are finally, in these words of the risen Jesus, words of assurance, verses 17 and 18. These are also words that, or a couple of verses that within the context of a passage that is perhaps clothed in some controversy, generates even more debate. Let me just read them again, verses 17 and 18.

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 with their hands, and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all. They will place their hands on sick people and they will get well.

Now, I'm describing these words as words of assurance for believers. For those who are humble and wise enough to receive the rebuke, for those who listen to and respond to the words of commission, these are words that assure them, that assure us, I hope, that the task, though huge, is doable. Jesus will be with us.

And the evidence that Jesus is with us are the signs that will accompany the believers. Now, some of the signs seem very strange to us, but I think the important thing for us is to see behind the particular signs mentioned to the fundamental truth that they reveal. Of the signs mentioned here, behind the peculiarity of the signs, there is the fundamental truth of the protection of God. So, if we think of this sign that we do find rather strange, of picking up snakes and not suffering any harm as a result, we think, well, that's very odd and peculiar. We've maybe seen documentaries about the snake handlers of the Appalachian Mountains, and we think, well, that's really weird and bizarre, and we don't really, we're not into that at all. Well, that's fine. I don't think we would want to be into that. I don't think that really is what has been spoken about at all. Rather, there is this recognition that if in the course of fulfilling the commission, in the course of going out into the world to preach the gospel, we are met with danger, be that snakes or be that anything else, we can be assured of God's protecting promise. Acts of the Apostles gives one very concrete example of an occasion where there was that protection. Those of you who are interested in football will be thinking about Malta tomorrow night and whether Scotland will be able to win another game. Well, remember when Paul was in Malta and where he was faced with the danger of a snake, of a deadly snake, and he enjoyed supernatural, miraculous protection. And so, this rather strange sign, it seems to me, is simply acknowledging that we are promised the protection of God. We're also promised that our obedience will be accompanied with power, very much in the sense of in our confrontation with the forces of evil, evil, the driving out of demons, that confrontation that there is as we proclaim the good news. We can be assured that we will know and enjoy the power of God in that place of confrontation on the battlefield, as it were. But also the signs speak of the supernatural impact of the gospel when faithfully preached.

Now, regardless of the manner in which that supernatural impact finds expression, which may vary from place to place and from time to time, nonetheless, there is this promise that there will be a supernatural impact. And of course, if we have one individual, one man, one woman, one boy, one girl, brought to faith in Jesus, brought to that place of belonging to the family of God, that itself is a supernatural act of God. And Jesus assures His disciples that such supernatural activity will accompany their obedience to the commission. Words of assurance. And these are words that apply to us today. As I say, the peculiarities of the signs, perhaps not, but the truths that they speak of very much still apply to us today. So, here we have words of the risen Jesus, but words that in the manner in which the gospel closes in the final couple of verses, it is clear we're not only for that one occasion, because there in verse 19 we read, after the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was taken up into heaven and He sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere. So, they'd heard the words of commission, they're obedient to the words of commission, and then we read, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed His word by the signs that accompanied it. So, you have Jesus saying, this is what will happen when you obey, the disciples obey, and sure enough, that which He had promised comes true, is fulfilled. Well, the Jesus who is described here as seated at the right hand of God remains, as we speak, seated at the right hand of God. The same Jesus on the same throne who had delivered those promises to

[32 : 57] His disciples and by extension to us also. He remains on the throne. The one who spoke these words rules now. He rules today. And so, we too are left with a challenge to obey as the disciples obeyed. The disciples went out and preached everywhere. And in the measure that we obey, in the measure that we are faithful to the commission, we can reasonably and confidently expect that the words of promise and the words of assurance will be confirmed in our experience also. And so, the challenge then is to listen to the words of the risen Jesus and to respond to them in obedience. Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for His resurrection. We thank you for the manner in which He involves us in His purposes. We thank you for the manner in which even weak and faithless disciples are deemed suitable for gospel work and ministry. These very disciples who had stubbornly refused to believe, and yet they are the ones whom Jesus commissions to go into all the world and to preach the good news to all creation. We thank you that you are a God of second and third and fourth opportunities.

And even if it is true of us that in the past we have lacked faith, in the past we have failed to obey, in the past we have failed to believe, we are granted an opportunity anew to hear you speak to us and to respond. We pray that we would know and experience the thrill and the excitement of the signs that accompany your people as they faithfully go. Protection in the face of danger and threat, power to confront supernatural enemies and to gain supernatural and miraculous victories for the glory of God. We thank you for these promises and these words of assurance that we are given even tonight. Heavenly Father, go with us and we pray. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.