

A Questionable Ending

Mark 16:9-20



We come this morning to our final study in the book of Mark. We have been following the last three and a half years of Jesus' life through this book. We saw Him call His disciples and begin His ministry. We have seen Him confront the religious leaders of Israel, cast out demons, raise the dead, heal the sick, feed the multitudes. We have heard Him teach about the destruction of the Jewish temple and the end of the age. We have seen His trials before Israel's leaders and before Rome, we have seen Him whipped and crucified, and buried. And in our last study we saw His resurrection. As the women come to the tomb they found it empty, Jesus was gone and an angel tells them that He is risen:

And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him. (Mark 16:6 NASB)



It seems to me that any disciple of Jesus should have expected His resurrection. They should have all been at the tomb on the third day awaiting His resurrection. Over and over He had taught them that He was going to be killed but would rise on the third day; in Mark, chapter eight and verse thirty-one, Jesus told His disciples that He would "be killed and after three days rise again." In chapter nine and verse thirty-one, He told them that "after three days He will rise." And in chapter ten and verse thirty-four that He said, "Three days later I will rise." So my question is; why weren't they all camped out at the tomb waiting for His resurrection?

Throughout Mark's Gospel everything that Jesus promises comes to pass. For example, Jesus accurately predicts: that the disciples would find a colt ([11:2](#)), the location for the Passover meal ([14:13-15](#)), his betrayal by Judas ([9:31](#); [10:33](#); [14:18-21](#)), the falling away of the disciples ([14:27](#)), Peter's denial ([14:30](#)), his death ([8:31](#); [9:31](#); [10:34](#); [12:8](#)). They had seen it all come to pass just as Jesus said it would. So why weren't they expecting His resurrection? Their hearts were dull and slow to believe the Scripture tells us. But I think their main problem was their expectations were wrong. They were expecting a political Messiah who would free them from Rome and establish an earthly kingdom. This view had blinded them to the things that Jesus taught them.

It is the same today. I think that the reason that so many believers are futurists is because they, just like the first century believers, are looking for physical fulfillments to Jesus promises. Jesus told them that He would rise—they didn't believe Him. Jesus also said over and over that His return would be "soon" and yet we don't believe Him. We are earthly minded and we look for physical fulfillments when Jesus clearly taught that His promises would be fulfilled spiritually. Oh that we could all learn to take Him at His word no matter how strange it seems to us.

This angel at the tomb gives the women some final instructions:

"But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you.'" ⁸ ***And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:7-8 NASB)***

The End! That's it! This is where Mark ends his gospel. [Jesus has risen](#); He will meet you in Galilee—the end. Mark closes his gospel with the women running off, trembling, bewildered, mute and afraid.

Matthew continues with the women's encounter of the resurrected Christ ([28:9-10](#)) and the giving of the Great Commission in Galilee ([28:16-20](#)). Luke concludes with post-resurrection appearances along the road to Emmaus

([24:13-31](#)), with the disciples ([24:36-49](#)), and in the ascension ([24:50-53](#)). John also ends his gospel with Jesus post-resurrection appearances to the disciples ([20:19-21:25](#)).

But in the Gospel of Mark, just when Jesus' cameo appearance is expected one stumbles into a significant textual problem. Almost all your translations, if you look closely, will have brackets around 9 through 20; they'll put it in italics; they'll have some sort of a footnote that tells you there is some question about whether or not this was originally a part of Mark's Gospel.

The abrupt ending in verse 8 is found in the two oldest Greek manuscripts. These [Alexandrian uncials A & B](#), both 4th century manuscripts, are supported by the [Sinaitic Syriac manuscripts](#), approximately one hundred Armenian texts and two Georgian manuscripts from the 9th and 10th centuries, and several church Fathers including [Clement of Alexandria](#) and [Origen](#). That this reading was more prominent is supported by [Eusebius](#) and [Jerome](#) who claimed that vv 9-20 were absent from almost all known manuscripts.

The majority of New Testament scholars believe that verses 9-20 are not original. I am not a textual scholar but I don't think these last twelve verses belong in Mark. I think that if we look at the internal evidence we can see that these verses aren't original. The first thing we see is that there is an **awkward transition** between verse 8 and 9. Then, in verse 9 Mary Magdalene is introduced as though she were a new character even though her presence has already been established in the immediate context ([15:47](#); [16:1](#)) while Mary the mother of James and Salome disappear from the entire narrative. This awkward transition coupled with numerous words and phrases that are foreign to Mark, suggest the inauthentic nature of this ending.

We also see that verses 9 through 20 seem to have a different style. They seem to have different vocabulary. It does not seem like the same person wrote 9 through 20 that wrote the rest of the Gospel.

Let me give you a few examples; In [16:9](#) we find the only occurrence of the verb *phaino*, [fie-no] in the New Testament with respect to the resurrection (though the same verb is used in Luke 9:8 to describe Elijah's re-appearance). In verse 10, the verb *poreuomai*, [por-yoo'-o-my] which is found 29 times in Matthew and 51 times in Luke is not found in Mark 1:1-16:8, but three times in the longer ending (vv 10, 12, 15).

The internal evidence raises significant problems with Mark 16:9-20. The awkward transition between verses 8 and 9 and the non-Markan vocabulary has led the vast majority of New Testament scholars to conclude that the longer ending is inauthentic.

We don't have any of the original manuscripts – the [autographa](#)—but we know with certainty over 99 percent of what the prophets and apostles initially wrote. When men discovered the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#) over half a century ago there they found a scroll of Isaiah the prophet which is a thousand years older than any other copy of Isaiah extant. What did that ancient scroll reveal? How carefully the ancient scribes had copied the Scriptures. What the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah displayed was the same text of Isaiah that we already had.

We know what the prophets and apostles wrote, and when there are variants in a verse the decision as to what is the correct choice is usually very clear. Though occasionally there is some uncertainty about words and accents the general sense of the passage is not in doubt, and never is any fundamental or doctrinal teaching of Scripture challenged by any variant readings.

[Sinclair Ferguson](#) writes, *“It is not difficult to see how, for example, some verses might be added to Mark's Gospel. If someone had copied out the text, and realized that it had (as Mark's Gospel does) a rather sudden ending, they might well add an appendix, summarizing some of the relevant teaching of the other Gospels, or the different traditions of the church. It seems likely that this happened in the case of Mark, since the two most reliable early manuscripts of the end of Mark's Gospel conclude at verse 8 with the words, ‘because they were afraid’. They do not include verses 9-20.”* (Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Mark*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1999, p.274).

This textual criticism shouldn't shake our faith; if we remove these twelve verses from the cannon it doesn't change

anything, because the same basic information is recorded in the other Gospels. Even if you want to dismiss this, just about everything in there still could be supported from the other Gospels. I say “just about” because verse 17 is a problem verse. We’ll talk about that in a minute. With that said let’s look at these twelve verses and see how that line up with Scripture:

Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons. (Mark 16:9 NASB)

Mary Magdalene was Lazarus’, the beloved disciples’ sister. Lazarus and Mary were very close to Jesus and it is interesting that He first appears to her. The appearance first to Mary Magdalene agrees with [John 20:11-18](#). Mary Magdalene, according to John’s account, was ahead of the others and, seeing the empty tomb, she ran to tell Peter and Lazarus immediately. 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 worshiped him.

She went and reported to those who had been with Him, while they were mourning and weeping.¹¹ And when they heard that He was alive, and had been seen by her, they refused to believe it. (Mark 16:10-11 NASB)

Here Mary goes and tells the other disciples that Jesus is alive and ***“they refused to believe it.”*** Remember what we said earlier about the fact that Jesus had taught them that He would rise from the dead, and now Mary says He did, and they still don’t believe.

And after that, He appeared in a different form to two of them, while they were walking along on their way to the country.¹³ And they went away and reported it to the others, but they did not believe them either. (Mark 16:12-13 NASB)

Where in Scripture do we find this account? Luke gives us the account of the two disciples who were walking to the little village of Emmaus. This incident is described in full in Luke 24:

And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem.¹⁴ And they were conversing with each other about all these things which had taken place.¹⁵ And it came about that while they were conversing and discussing, Jesus Himself approached, and began traveling with them.¹⁶ But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. (Luke 24:13-16 NASB)

The Lord appeared to these two men as a man. From His appearance one would have thought of Jesus as only a man. These men, or this man and woman, were disciples, who were intimately acquainted with and associated with the eleven. Luke referred to them as ***“two of them”*** (verse 13), the “them” obviously referring back to the eleven apostles. They were disciples of our Lord.

These disciples were, however, very discouraged. They had, for all intents and purposes, given up all hope:

And He said to them, "What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?" And they stood still, looking sad. (Luke 24:17 NASB)

Their faces were sad and downcast.

¹⁸ And one of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?"¹⁹ And He said to them, "What things?" And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people,²⁰ and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him.²¹ "But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things

happened. ²² **"But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³ and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels, who said that He was alive. ²⁴ "And some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see." Luke 24:18-24**

They had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah (verse 21), but due to His death they had concluded that He was only a prophet—a true prophet of God, a powerful prophet, but only a prophet, who died like many of the other prophets of old.

It was, they said, the “third day” since He had died. This must be a reference to Jesus’ words that He would rise again on the third day. What was more, some of the women, they told Jesus, had gone out to the tomb and found it empty. The very things which seemed to point to the resurrection of Jesus had no impact on these two at all.

Notice that they were headed toward Emmaus, but they should have been going to Galilee. Both Matthew ([28:7,10](#)) and Mark ([16:7](#)) specifically state that the angels and Jesus himself told the disciples that He would meet them in Galilee.

They have absolutely no hope. Had Jesus not sought them out, one wonders what would have become of them. And these two, I believe, are typical of all the rest, especially of the eleven.

These disciples expected Jesus to be **"the one who was going to redeem Israel"** ([Luke 24:21](#)). The promised Davidic Messiah is widely anticipated to redeem Israel from her enemies and to set up the Kingdom of God afresh. Cleopas and his friend are thinking of a military redemption, setting Israel free from Roman occupation. And this kind of redemption is impossible since Jesus is now dead. This is why they are so downcast.

And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. (Luke 24:25-27 NASB)

Jesus calls them "foolish," using the Greek adjective *anoetos*, "unintelligent, foolish, dull-witted." It is a compound word, formed from two words meaning "without, not" and "understanding, perception".

Jesus’ words to these two were not flattering. They were a rebuke for their spiritual dullness and for their failure to believe all that the prophets had spoken. The word “all” is an important one. It indicates that the belief of the disciples was selective. They believed part of the prophets’ revelation, but not all. Which part did they believe, and which part did they not believe? Our Lord’s words in verse 26 give us the answer. The message of the prophets concerning the coming Messiah was a blending of suffering and glory. The prophets spoke in what appeared to be a contradiction in terms. They spoke of Messiah’s rejection and suffering, as we see in [Isaiah 52](#) and [53](#), yet they also spoke of His triumph and glory (cf. [Daniel 7:13-14](#); [Zechariah 9,14](#)).

Most of the Israelites chose to reject the suffering side and only to focus on the glory dimension. They did this not only with respect to the Messiah, but also with respect to themselves. The false prophets were those who gave warm, reassuring, promises of peace and prosperity, while the true prophets spoke of suffering and of tribulation. Thus, the people were inclined to listen to the false prophets and to persecute those who spoke for God ([Jeremiah 23,26,28,32,38](#)). Not much has changed! People today still flock to those who promise peace and prosperity.

The disciples of our Lord did not wish to hear of Jesus’ sufferings, but only of His triumph. Thus, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him for speaking of His coming rejection and death. These disciples had concluded that Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah because He had suffered and died.

Jesus first rebuked these two for their spiritual dullness, and then He went on to show them from the Scripture, beginning with Moses and culminating in the prophets, that the Messiah was prophesied to suffer and to be glorified.

Among the texts that Jesus must have referred to would be these: [Deut. 18:15-19](#); [Psalm 2](#); [Psalm 16](#); [Psalm 22](#); [Psalm 118:22](#); Cf. [Exodus 20:11](#); [Ps. 146:6](#); [Daniel 9:24ff](#).

I believe you and I fall into the very same trap into which the disciples fell. We read and study the Scriptures through the grid of our own sin, of our own desires, our own ambitions and preferences. We arrive at our own idea of what God should be like, and what His kingdom should be, and then we rearrange the Scriptures, over-emphasizing some, and ignoring others, so that we have nicely (but wrongly) proof-texted our own thinking.

We are not told until later what impact this teaching had on the disciples, but when we get to verse 32 we overhear them saying to each other,

And they said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32 NASB)

Jesus revealed himself to them and then disappeared. They immediately returned to Jerusalem to report to the rest what they had experienced, only to be told that they already knew Jesus was alive, because He had appeared to Peter in the time of their absence.

Back to Mark:

And afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table; and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen. (Mark 16:14 NASB)

Whoever wrote these last twelve verses constantly stressed the unbelief of the disciples. This leads some to believe there was an Apostolic hand behind these verses.

This disbelief of the apostles is also taught in Luke:

³⁶ And while they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst. ³⁷ But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit. ³⁸ And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ " See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ [And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet.] ⁴¹ And while they still could not believe it for joy and were marveling, He said to them, " Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² And they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; ⁴³ and He took it and ate it before them. Luke 24:36-43 NASB)

Notice verse 41, ***"they still could not believe."*** They disbelieve out of joy and wonder. They are afraid that this is too good to be true. So Jesus offers them yet another sign that his body is real and He has a physically risen. He asks if they have anything edible with which He can demonstrate his corporeal nature.

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:

Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28 NASB)

Jesus said:

Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." (John 20:29 NASB)

Years later, when Peter is writing his letters to the Christians he says to them:

and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, (1 Peter 1:8 NASB)

None of us have seen Christ, but we believe and we greatly rejoice.

Back to Mark:

And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. (Mark 16:15 NASB)

Where else do we find this is Scripture? This is the writer's version of Christ's great commission which is found at the end of Matthew's gospel.

How does this apply to us? All believers have been given a share in this task—to be heralds of the good news and ambassadors for Jesus Christ, the only savior of the world. We are all to be lights in the darkness:

for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8 NASB)

"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16 NASB)

Believers, we are to shine the light of God's kingdom to the world in which we live. We benefit our world only when we live as light, which is a synonym for holiness. If the people of the world fornicate, and we fornicate, what is the difference? If they lie, and we lie, what is the difference? When they have a poor work ethic, and we have a poor work ethic, what is the difference? When they complain and murmur against life's circumstances, and we complain and murmur against life's circumstances, what is the difference? When they don't love their spouses, and we don't love our spouses, what is the difference? When they divorce, and we divorce, what is the difference? When they are lazy, and we are lazy, what is the difference?

We cannot benefit the world when we are like the world. Christians are to reflect the light of Jesus to the world. And what is this light? It is the light of salvation, the light of eternal life, the light of the knowledge of God, the light of the joy of salvation, the light of hope, and the light that shines in darkness. It is the light that opens the eyes of the blind and causes them to see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Those who see our light and believe in Him will be saved:

"He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. (Mark 16:16 NASB)

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.

They were to baptize every new convert, and to warn those who refused to believe of their certain condemnation.

The reason we need to go everywhere and tell the story is because there are only two paths that anyone can take. Either you believe the story and embrace it—you say, "I believe that; I trust it; I believe Jesus did that for me"—or you disbelieve. If you believe, you will be saved. If you disbelieve, you will be condemned.

Now, people in our culture do not like this message. In their minds it is very intolerant. But this is a consistent message from Genesis to Revelation. There are only two choices. Either you believe the story of Jesus and

experience His salvation, or you disbelieve it and experience His condemnation. There is no middle ground.

The text in Mark goes on to say:

"And these signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; ¹⁸ they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:17-18 NASB)

How many of you have believed? How many of you are will to drink some poison? Why not? It says, ***"If they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them."*** What's interesting to me is that these verses are seldom if ever expounded from the pulpit and almost never appealed to in didactic circumstances. These verses seem to say that these signs will accompany everyone who believes 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.

If what these verses are saying was true, 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.

The Bible never teaches that "all" believers will demonstrate these miraculous signs as these verses seem to say. These verses are to me strong reason to reject these last twelve verses as not original. What these verses teach is taught elsewhere in Scripture but in relation to the Apostles and not all believers.

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. (2 Corinthians 12:12 NASB)

how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴ God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will. (Hebrews 2:3-4 NASB)

The words ***"signs, wonders, various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit"*** are all synonyms. They each refer to the supernatural things the apostles did. The purpose of sign gifts is that of confirmation, authentication and affirmation.

"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know--" (Acts 2:22 NASB)

The primary purpose of the gifts in the first century was not to alleviate distress and suffering, but to prove that the one performing the miracles spoke from God.

The Apostle Paul did all these things. He cast out demons in the name of the Lord Jesus. He spoke in new tongues more than them all. When he was 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.

Are the gifts of the Spirit still functional today? To answer this we must understand just what a spiritual gift is. A spiritual gift is a God-given capacity through which the Holy Spirit **supernaturally** ministers to the church. So, these gifts were a supernatural enablement.

There are several Scriptures that hint at the fact that the gifts were temporary:

how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, (Hebrews 2:3 NASB)

In this verse the main verb is past tense and the participle is relative in time to the main verb, “*was confirmed.*” The signs, wonders, and miracles are referred to as being in the past—at the time of the writing. All this was past at the time Hebrews was written.

The **voice of history** confirms the temporary nature of the gifts. If the miraculous gifts of the New Testament age had continued in the church, one would expect an unbroken line of occurrences from apostolic times to present. The miraculous gifts of the “last days” ceased when the last days ceased.

[Chrysostom](#), a 4th century theologian, testified that the miraculous gifts ceased so long before his time that no one was certain of their characteristics.

Just like the manna ceased when Israel entered the land of promise after forty years of transition, so spiritual gifts ended when the Church entered the fullness of the New Covenant after forty years of transition.

This text in Mark has nothing to do with the practices of certain Kentucky mountain people who handle rattlesnakes and drink strychnine as evidence of their faith.

I believe those signs were limited to the apostolic age to affirm the message and give birth to the Church—everything from being able to speak a foreign language that you do not know, to casting out demons in Jesus’ name, to healing the sick. And this wasn’t having a bunch of people come to a crusade and somebody come up front and maybe they’re healed and maybe they’re not.

No other text in Scripture provides a promise for the handling of snakes and imbibing deadly poison without adverse repercussions.

So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰ And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed. (Mark 16:19-20 NASB)

These truths are taught in Acts and Hebrews. We know that these things did in fact happen. They went out and out and it was not long before there was to be a formidable group of believers in Rome itself, as well as in every major Greek city.

There is also another alternate translation that reads:

<And they promptly reported all these instructions to Peter and his companions. And after that, Jesus Himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.>

Almost all scholars absolutely dismiss the short ending. So that isn’t really even worth our time to discuss.

In closing a question we might ask is, “Why would Mark end his Gospel so abruptly?” It may be that it is a literary device designed to involve the reader to the highest degree. The reader is left to complete the story with his own response to this Gospel.

Jesus disciples’ having forsaken Him ([14:50](#)) and the women’s blunder leave the story unresolved begging for some form of closure. Who then will proclaim the good news? The reader is invited to take up the actions required for closure: becoming that disciple of Jesus who will proclaim the Gospel message. Jesus died, He was buried, He rose the third day. His death was substitutionary—he died for all who will trust Him. The work is done, the price is paid, all that is left to do is to trust in what He has done for you. That is the good news!

It's now our turn to participate. This is our opportunity. What will we do with this story? What will we do with Jesus?

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