

Transcript [#460]: 04-13-14
Title: "Have Miracles Ceased?"
(Pt. 2: What Does Mark 16:20 Really Teach?)

Not long ago a professing Christian preacher died as a result of snakebite. It is my understanding that he believed, and taught, and practiced, that the verses we just read imply the idea that he was doing God's will. But is this the will of God? Is this something that we must do? Turn with us to the New Testament book of Mark 16 and we'll have our Scripture reading in just a moment.

[INTRO]

Now, if you have your Bible ready with the New Testament book of Mark 16, let's begin our reading in verse 17:

And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; ¹⁸they^[a] will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." ¹⁹So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with *them* and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen" (**Mark 16:17-20**).

As a matter of mere opinion, what some people may do in religion may seem odd to us. But friends, just like anything else, just because it may sound strange to you or me does not automatically make it odd or wrong. The determining factor is what God says about it. So in our current lesson together we are going to explore this idea. Is this concept of religious snake handling what is actually taught in Mark 16:17-18? And that will also serve as a continuing study on the subject of biblical miracles.

Let's begin by reasoning through this text together, phrase by phrase. Notice first in verse 17, "*And these signs will follow those who believe...*" So right from the start we see that Jesus promised His disciples that miracles would be part of their ministry. The next phrase begins a listing of the kind of things they might expect. Jesus said, "*In my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.*"

So this is a sampling of the kinds of signs, or miracles, that would accompany the ministry of the early disciples of Jesus. Now obviously, Jesus said what He meant, and we can't argue in any way that He said what He said. There are some people who attempt to throw this whole section of the Bible out – going all the way back to verse 9 of this chapter – as uninspired. I am not of that persuasion, so I believe it is the Word of God.

As such, there is no doubt in my mind that many of the early disciples of the Lord experienced every single one of these miraculous signs at one time or another. But I'd like to point out from the start that there is a greater than/less than principle at work in this text. You remember doing greater than/less than problems in math, don't you? You're given two numbers and you put the little sign between them to indicate which one is greater than the other, and so on? This is also a principle or concept that we use in everyday life to compare things other than numbers. For

example, which is greater? Mother, or daughter? Father, or son? Obviously, the mother and the father are greater than the daughter and the son. The daughter and son owe their very existence to mother and father, and so one is obviously “greater than” the other. One cannot exist without the other.

Likewise, we find this principle in Scripture. Look again at the text we are studying, and we will find two major concepts. We’ve read verses 17-18, which talk about various types of miracles, or signs. But now let’s add verses 19-20, which say, “*So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. [especially notice verse 20]*”²⁰ *And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.”*

Okay, we can clearly see at this point that we actually have two things going on in this context: the preaching of the gospel, and signs that accompany the preaching of the gospel. Now I take us back to the greater than/less than concept and ask you, which, if either of these, is greater than the other? I believe if we are honest, we will say that the preaching of the gospel is greater than the miracles because, according to the Word of God, the miracles were designed to be an accompaniment, an aid, to the preaching of the gospel. Is that fair to say? Certainly the preaching of the gospel is of greater prominence and importance than the miracles.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that there is plenty of evidence in the New Testament, that the preaching of the gospel was *not* always accompanied by the miraculous signs Jesus listed. For example, in the 8th chapter of the book of Acts, the preacher named Philip taught the Bible to a man of Ethiopia while they rode together in a chariot, during which time the Ethiopian man came to a knowledge of the truth, repented of his sins, confessed his faith in Jesus, and was baptized right there along the way. There is not a miracle of any kind. No expelling of demons, no snake handling, no raising people from the dead, or healing someone of illness – the kinds of things that were listed above. The only miracle was one of which the potential convert, the Ethiopian man, was not aware. That was when the Holy Spirit came to Philip and gave him instructions to teach the man.

So again, both in this text, and in the evidence provided in the New Testament, we see that the most significant and important element was the preaching of the gospel, and that miracles were, at best, a secondary matter. So it would be accurate, biblical to say, that the purpose of the miracles was to support the preaching of the gospel, and they were not always necessary.

I’d like at this time, then, to give you my conclusions. First, modern snake-handling does not reflect what is taught about snakes in this passage, or anywhere else in Scripture. This passage does not teach what modern snake-handlers practice. Snake handlers believe that they must do this, that this is a test of faith. I do not deny the idea that there are tests of faith in life, but I do deny that this is one of them. The Bible does not teach any such thing. This passage simply does not teach, either by direct statement, or by implication, that gospel preachers should go hunt or buy snakes and then bring them into a worship assembly and preach and sing and dance with them. That is a learned behavior, you will not find it in Scripture. I would defy anyone to find someone who practices this who did not first know of someone else who was practicing it. This is not a Bible command, it is a cultural phenomenon.

Furthermore, I would add that if snake-handling is authorized by God, then it is not optional, and you and I who do not handle snakes are sinning by omission by refusing to do it. If not, why not?

Second, I want to remind you that modern snake-handling does not reflect what is otherwise taught in this passage. I don't mean to sound harsh, but the truth of the matter is that the practice of religious snake-handling is terribly inconsistent. Reason with me. There is only one passage of Scripture in the New Testament that even says anything about snakes being handled, but it says a number of other things as well. It also says that other signs will accompany believers as they bring the gospel around the world. Remember, it said, *"In my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."*

This passage no more authorizes the use of snakes in worship than it authorizes the drinking of bleach in worship. Yet, if the passage teaches one, it surely teaches the other, does it not? Why snakes and not bleach? Why not snakes and bleach? I'll tell you why, because you can get away with handling a snake for a long time – especially if you know what you're doing – but you can't get away with drinking bleach even once!

The fact is, these are things that happened on occasion. There were occasions when demons were cast out of people, but it was only to confirm the testimony of an inspired preacher. There were times that preachers spoke in languages they had no learning in, but it was only to confirm that the word they were preaching was true. There were occasions where they were bit by deadly serpents. This happened to Paul on the island of Malta in Acts 28. Everyone just knew Paul would die. But he didn't just narrowly escape – he had absolutely no ill effects whatsoever. This was something that God granted, on this occasion, to give credence to the message Paul was preaching. The same thing with drinking something deadly, or healing people. These were all done, according to verse twenty, in order to confirm the word of God. But they weren't always done in every instance, as we've already noted, and they weren't done always and forever.

Which brings us to our final point, which is that modern snake-handling – and modern faith-healers and those who propose that biblical miracles are still being effected today – does not accurately reflect what the Bible teaches about the duration of the miraculous age.

In 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, Paul lists 9 miraculous gifts, and then spends a long time talking about the attitudes that should regulate the use of them. But in chapter 13, he says that those things that are done in part – the miracles he spoke of – would be done away when they received that which was complete. So I would take your mind back to the beginning of our lesson where we talked about greater and lesser. Remember the purpose of miracles? It was to confirm something greater: the word of God. But remember, as Paul is writing these words, the whole New Testament had not been written. The whole revelation of God was not complete. Therefore, the miracles were a necessary support to demonstrate the truthfulness of God's word. But when the word of God was fully revealed, that which was lesser – that which was a partial support for the miracles – was done away.

The list of miraculous gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and Mark 16 are those that the Lord use to support the preaching of the gospel, and give it validity. But when the Word of God was fully

revealed in the New Testament, the need for biblical miracles ceased. I would urge you not to handle snakes or drink bleach.

[CONCLUSION]

Scriptures Used/referenced in this lesson:

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Sources Used:
(1978) New King James Bible. Thomas Nelson, Nashville.

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

Hear The Gospel (Rom. 10:17)

Confess Faith in Jesus Christ (Jn. 8:24; Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 8:37)

Repent of Sin (Mt. 10:32-33; Lk. 13:3-5)

Be Baptized (Immersed) For the Forgiveness of Sins (Mk. 16:15-16; Acts 2:38)

Life Faithfully (Rev. 2:10)