

## Prayer

Release us, Lord Jesus, from the worldly bonds that hold us tight, and liberate us into the light of Your Kingdom. Open our eyes to see that even in this world, something of Your majesty may be seen, may be heard, may be touched, may be felt, and may be known. Then, empowered by Your salvation, may we live as people liberated! Thanks be to God, AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Select and read a psalm, and let it guide your thoughts about the day that lies ahead of you*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray this week about agriculture. Pray for the farming communities nearest to you; that their produce purchased at a fair price*
- *Give thanks to God for His many promises and gifts given to you*
- *Pray for South Africa and its political institutions and governance*

## Meditation

Lord Jesus Christ, I can hardly believe that you are  
Never not there with me;  
Never not part of what I am doing;  
Never not interested in the details of my life.  
Never not helping me to do what is right.

And what is more staggering, throughout the whole of creation,  
you are equally involved with every other person who has lived!

Lord Jesus Christ, help me understand that you are  
So much further beyond my understanding!  
So much higher than my grasp!  
So much deeper than my heart!  
So much broader than my compassion!

In Your infinite majesty, You hold all that exists things together!  
You are the great 'I AM' and You are with me always: Hallelujah!

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## Bible Study - Mark 16:15-20

<sup>15</sup> He said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to all creation. <sup>16</sup> Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be condemned. <sup>17</sup> These signs will accompany those who believe: they will cast out demons in my name; they will speak in new tongues; <sup>18</sup> they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink anything deadly, it will not harm them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.'

<sup>19</sup> After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. <sup>20</sup> They went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed their message by the signs that accompanied it.

## Review

Yesterday, we read about the resurrection and the response of the disciples. They really did not know what to make of it! We might expect people to be happy and delighted that Jesus was alive, but the Gospels all record that the disciples were rather uncertain about what to make of it all! It is obvious to us now, and we know that Jesus Himself had told them all about the resurrection, but they did not know how to respond to it when it happened and they were confused about what to do!

Now speaking in resurrection power, Jesus' words (16:15-18) sound rather different from the humble Jesus we have come to know in the rest of Mark's Gospel. However, although it is rather uncertain how these

words came to be in Mark's Gospel (see above), surely we should expect the risen Lord to speak and act with a power and authority which He did not have whilst alive in an earthly sense. It seems right, therefore, that when Jesus called on the disciples to preach and baptise (16:15,16), He spoke to them very strongly and with great authority. He told them about the consequences of accepting or rejecting the offer of salvation, and indicated stridently and absolutely that those who rejected salvation would be 'condemned' (16:16). We should be careful to remember, however, that Jesus does not condemn those who have not even heard the Gospel in the first place; his point is that those who refuse to accept God's way of salvation effectively choose their own damnation (16:16)!

Jesus then promised that the proclamation of the Gospel would be accompanied by 'signs' (16:17), and what He said next has proved very contentious. The first and last 'signs' are those of casting out demons and healing. These are relatively obvious because Jesus did these, and so by doing them, the disciples would simply be continuing Jesus' work. The second 'sign' mentioned is new and more significant; 'they will speak in new tongues' (16:17). This links together with the description in Luke's book of Acts of the coming of the Holy Spirit, enabling the Apostles to preach 'in tongues' to a large number of people on the day of Pentecost. The next sign mentioned by Mark is far more difficult for us to understand; 'they will pick up snakes ... and if they drink anything deadly, it will not harm them.' (16:18). We are entitled to ask whether this is a formula for the general protection of Christians; but many people regard this as highly implausible, and others regard the 'snakes' as symbolic (see Matthew's report of Jesus calling the Pharisees 'snakes' – Matt 23:33).

Now, instead of questioning the plausibility of these gifts, or being overzealous about expecting all of them to be demonstrated literally, I suggest that we think of the signs Jesus mentioned as examples of the work of God in His Kingdom. In general, everything Jesus mentioned can be seen happening all around us in the life of the church even now, if not literally, then certainly metaphorically. Demons are indeed cast out and people healed, people do speak in tongues, and incredible events do occur by which people are saved from near death experiences (such as the snakes and poison Jesus spoke about). In addition, whatever symbolism we read into 'snakes', such as the unbelieving Pharisees (see above), then we can find parallels within the life of the church as well. We only have to ask for open testimony in church and remove the brake of clerical control from church services, and stories of such things come flooding out of people. We should rejoice at such testimonies and see them as evidence of the Kingdom rather than trying to suggest that special events such as surviving the bites of snakes or drinking poison are some kind of sign to the church. They may be signs for unbelievers, but God's people, warned by scripture as in this text, should know how to interpret them. Jesus made many promises in scripture, and these should be placed alongside them, with a cautionary word that picking up snakes to try and prove to others that you have faith is hardly what Jesus had in mind.

Mark's Gospel concludes with a brief comment, agreeing in general with Acts 1, that Jesus 'was taken into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God' (16:19). This is Mark's version of the 'Ascension', and it is followed by a concluding comment that the disciples were by now convinced of Jesus' resurrection and His authority, and they went and did what He told them! (16:20) the work of salvation begun by God with the announcement of the coming of the Messiah (Mark 1:1,2,3) was completed by the ascension of Jesus as Christ the Lord, and the proclamation of the Gospel by the disciples with confidence and joy, accompanied by miracles (16:20).

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does the church today do what Jesus commanded His disciples to do? And if not, why not?
2. How can the church begin to live up to its calling today? How many of signs mentioned by Jesus cause difficulty to people today, and why?
3. What does this conclusion of the Gospel tell us about the whole Gospel of Mark, and what will you remember most about the Gospel?

## Discipleship

### Discipleship issue in this text

- *Obedience to the Gospel command of Christ*
- *Miracles, healing and signs of the Kingdom*
- *The authority of the risen Christ*

### Personal comment:

*I know very well that most scholars regard the end of Mark's Gospel as contentious. For me, even if it was written by someone other than Mark and added later (as many suppose), the words were nevertheless accepted as God's Word by the early church and are contained within scripture. They deserve our attention as such, and I regret the way in which people have avoided the passage simply because of the controversy that surrounds it. It has so much to say to us about the Gospel.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Take time to read carefully through what Jesus commands His disciples to do. How many of these things do you feel comfortable with, and how many of them are problems for you. Pray about this.*
- *Try to find an opportunity to speak to another Christian about what they think this ending of Mark means, and also how they react to the idea that the end of Mark is contentious.*

## **Final Prayer**

Direct us, Lord Jesus, in that simple faith which is content with You and with Your presence; leading us as You will, and guiding us into all truth. May we never wander far from You through forgetfulness, wilfulness, or selfishness, and bring us back to Your paths of peace. Through Jesus Christ we pray AMEN

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