

## Living Saviour, Living Message

*9 Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. 11 And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. 12 After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country. 13 And they went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either. 14 Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.*

*15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. 16 "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. 17 "And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; 18 "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."*

*19 So then, after the Lord 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, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen. (Mar 16:9-20)*

Nothing is more pesky or irritating to the secular world than Christians who witness, Christians who evangelise. They regard this as the highest offence: telling others what they should believe. Telling others that they could be wrong, telling others that Jesus alone is the God-Man, and the mediator between God and man.

Why do Christians evangelise, when it is so disliked, so unpopular, so anti-social? The ending of Mark, and in fact the ending of all four Gospels tells us why.

Mark has written this Gospel to show us that Jesus is the Son of God. He wrote to show us that once this was understood by the apostles, the Great Commission, to declare Him to the whole world was given. And the same pattern exists today. Once we believe He is who He said He was, we become commissioned ones. We are told to take that same message to others.

In this last section, Mark shows us what the obstacles to the Great Commission were, the object of the Great Commission, and the Overcomer of the Great Commission.

### I. The Obstacle to the Commission

*9 Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. 11 And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. 12 After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country. 13 And they went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either. 14 Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.*

The eleven apostles were not witnessing to Jesus after He died. On Friday, Saturday and the first part of Sunday, they are anything but evangelistic. Why? Nothing is quite so striking as the unbelief of the apostles in the Resurrection of Jesus. You remember that Jesus had predicted it well over 9 recorded times in the Gospels. Even the enemies of Jesus remembered His prediction of rising on the third day and asked for a guard to be placed around the tomb around that time. But the apostles did not expect it. Not only did they have no intention of stealing the body and faking the Resurrection, they had no expectation of the Resurrection.

Here, we see their unbelief, stubbornly resisting one testimony after another. The first appearance of the risen Christ is to Mary Magdalene, recorded by John in chapter 20 of his Gospel. Mary

returns to tell the eleven that she has seen Jesus, but they do not believe her. They continue in their gloom, their despair, their mourning.

Then, two disciples on the road to Emmaus meet the risen Christ. Luke's Gospel tells us about this incident, and of the conversation that took place. Those two disciples, one of whom was named Cleopas, return to tell the eleven that they have seen Christ. They do not believe them. After rejecting all the eyewitnesses, Jesus Himself appears to them, and rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart.

Throughout Mark, we see the disciples coming to an understanding only by degrees, and often enough, Jesus rebukes them for being slow to understand, faithless, hard of heart. Here again, Jesus shows that the problem was not mental capacity, but spiritual receptivity. They were hardened by selfishness, by stubbornness; by old Jewish ideas which they refused to let go of; by personal ambitions which they did not die to; by hearing what they wanted to hear, and not what Jesus was actually teaching.

The disciples needed their ideas of Jesus going straight to the Messianic throne, with them as His right-hand men, shattered. They needed their personal ambitions of greatness shattered. They needed their ideas of a crown without a cross broken. And only now, with Christ in front of them, do they see the depth of their hardness, their stubbornness, their old ideas.

The Gospel of Mark uses the dullness of the disciples to warn us against believing in Jesus after our own desires. A.W. Tozer warned about believing in a utilitarian Christ, a Christ who is a kind of Aladdin's lamp that we rub whenever we want him to grant us our wishes. Until we get the living Christ squared away in our hearts, we will not be very evangelistic. If anything, we will be chronically self-centred.

You have to wonder what was going on in their hearts. But one lesson they must have learnt: to be compassionate on those who were slow to believe. Here they refused to believe the eyewitnesses. Soon they would become the eyewitnesses telling others, and others would not believe them.

Next time you are tempted to be impatient or angry with those who do not believe, and you shake your head at their hardness and dullness, remember how you rejected the testimony and witness of others. Remember how you thought those Christians were crazy, and how you came up with explanations for their behaviour, but refused to believe what you couldn't see for yourself. Well, at some point you did, and now you are in the position of telling others, and they are in the position you were in: sceptical listener.

But once that veil is taken off the heart, you cannot go back. These men could not and did not go back. Their old ideas of Messiah were shattered. They were no longer devoted to the dead. They knew a living Christ. They knew His presence. They knew His promises of answered prayers were true. They expected Him to change their lives. They expected Him to save souls. You see a living Messiah leads to a living Message.

## **II. The Object of the Commission**

*15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. 16 "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. 17 "And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; 18 "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."*

Just as in the Great Commission recorded in Matthew, there is a main verb here. There is a main action word which was the main responsibility given to them. It is the word *preach*.

This word in the original language was the word for a herald, a king's messenger, who would declare news. A herald is not primarily a debater. A herald is not primarily a conversationalist. A herald is someone with an existing message which is supposed to be announced, declared, made known.

This was the task. And Jesus supplies the who, what, where, and how.

What were they to preach? Where were they to preach it? To whom were they to preach it?

First, Jesus tells them what they were to preach, the content of their message. He tells them to preach the Gospel – the Good News. And then verse 16 summarises that Good News, which is actually Good News and Bad News. The Good News is that he who believes and is baptised will be saved, and he who does not believe will be condemned.

The Christian faith is a message that begins with people hearing truth, and changing their minds about who God is, about who Jesus is, about who they are, about what sin is, and about what they should do about it. But that change in mind is not enough. The demons believe and know the truth about those things. True belief involves a transfer of trust. You transfer your trust for your life, for your future, for your forgiveness of sins from yourself and your own works to Jesus Christ. You abandon trusting in your own good works. You turn away not only from sin, but from self-righteousness, and you turn to Jesus Christ to forgive you of your sins, and to clothe you with His righteousness. The promise is that if you do that, you will be saved.

A word here about baptism. Some groups have tried to take verse 16 as proof that baptism is necessary for salvation. But notice, the verse is not exactly parallel. It does not say, he who believes and is baptised will be saved, and he who does not believe and is not baptised will be condemned. The condition for condemnation is rejection, unbelief. On the other hand, Jesus assumes that those who believe will be baptised.

Perhaps we can illustrate with a custom in our culture. In our culture, married women almost universally wear wedding rings on their left ring finger. It serves as a sign that the lady is spoken for, someone's wife and bride. To the pure in heart, it is a sign that she is not to be coveted by any other man. Now if she takes off that ring, does she remain married? Yes, the ring does not make or break the covenant she made before God. But it is a sign and symbol of her state.

In our culture, if a married woman chooses to not wear a wedding ring, it doesn't make her less married. But it does make her less *identifiable* as married. It does make her indistinct from those who are single. A man cannot be as easily blamed if he takes an interest in her at first, for there is no outward sign of what is true of her.

Baptism serves the same purpose. It says to everyone else, I have died to my old life, and I belong to Jesus Christ. He has washed me, buried me, and now lives within me. And all non-Christian religions regard Christian baptism as the decisive moment when a person has truly identified with Christ. They're putting on that ring, outwardly symbolising what has happened internally.

He who believes and is baptised will be saved. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and you will be saved. On the other hand, if you reject that, you will be condemned.

*17 "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. 18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (Joh 3:17-18)*

Are we really supposed to tell people that if they do not believe in this specific piece of information, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and died of their sins, that they will die and be condemned? Yes. And Jesus explains exactly why that makes sense.

*19 "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 "For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. (Joh 3:19-20)*

People are not condemned simply because they got it wrong about Jesus. People are condemned because from their earliest years, they know that God has revealed Himself. He has shone the knowledge of Himself in the beauty and intricacy and wisdom of creation. He has shone the knowledge of Himself through their moral awareness, their knowledge of good and evil. And regardless of how religious they are, they hate that light. They hate approaching that light which reveals their sin and declares them guilty. A thousand times over, a man will choose not just atheism, but rigorous religious rituals, painful religious service, lifelong-commitment to extreme forms of religious devotion, so long as it prevents him from having to face that light. So long as it serves as his mediator, and salves his conscience, and blocks out a personal encounter with the light.

But now that God has been amongst men, men's excuses are even more flimsy. That light is no longer the voiceless sound of the sun and the stars. It is not the easily corrupted voice of conscience. It is the living, personal voice of the Son of God, who came amongst us, spoke, healed, and then died and rose for us. His Words are the most copied and distributed on Earth, and with good reason.

This is why Jesus gives the scope of this preaching. He says, they are to go into all the world and declare this message to all creation. Every sentient, moral being on earth, every human must hear the message that Jesus is the God-Man, the mediator between God and men. Who must hear this, and where? Everyone, everywhere.

So here the words of Jesus come into conflict with post-modernism and pluralism and relativism. If Jesus said the message is for everyone everywhere, then who is it true for? Relativism will tell you that Christianity is true for some people in some places. But it cannot be true for all people in all places. If Christianity works for you, then great, it is true for you. But don't impose it on anyone else.

But if that were the case, Jesus ought to have said, "Go into the world, and find those for whom Christianity is true". But of course, if it is already true to them, why tell them? Jesus clearly means, my message must have universal declaration because it is universally valid, universally binding. No man comes to the Father except through Him.

Of course, that's a big statement. And Jesus was willing to back up His message with powerful signs. The Lord lists four signs that would accompany the preaching of the Gospel and the reception of the Gospel. He says:

*17 "And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; 18 "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."*

These are all miracles. Nothing here is merely devotional or part of ordinary Christian experience.

He promises miraculous deliverances – His witnesses will cast out demons. He promises miraculous communication – His witnesses will speak in new languages, languages not native or known to them. He promises miraculous protection, should someone attempt to poison them; or should they be bitten by a deadly snake, they will be protected in the course of their proclamation. He promises miraculous healing – they will lay hands on the sick and they will recover.

Now if you read the book of Acts, you see these things exactly fulfilled in the apostles. In Acts 2, they speak in new tongues, and the Jews from other countries hear them miraculously speaking the languages from the regions they are from, and then give heed to Peter's sermon, and 3000 are saved. In Acts 5:16, evil spirits were cast out of those in Jerusalem, and then in Samaria in Acts 8, and then out of Gentiles in Philippi in Acts 16, and in Asia Minor in Acts 19. We see sick people healed by Peter's very shadow, by handkerchiefs touching the body of Paul in Acts 19, the lame man in Acts 3, people in Samaria by Philip. And in Acts 28, we have Paul bitten by a snake while collecting wood on the island of Malta, but the poison did not harm him.

So Jesus' words were certainly fulfilled in the apostles. The question is, did Jesus mean for these signs to follow all His followers of all times? Should everyone who proclaims the Gospel expect these signs?

Well, I would say, that if you say yes, then you cannot pick and choose which of the signs belonged to the apostles, and which belongs to all Christians of all times. That is, if you take the tongues and the healings, then you need to take the snakes too. And there are some groups who hold to this. Every year, there is a new story of a church in the mountains of North Carolina, where a snake-handling pastor was bitten and died. I think that's a sad misunderstanding of these verses, but I have to grant that they're more consistent than some.

My answer to this question is this: which group of people, historically, looked for signs and the miraculous to get them to listen and obey? The answer is, the Jewish people. The Jewish people had two mighty epochs of signs: when God took them out of Egypt and established them as a nation under Moses, and when God rebuked them for idolatry and sought their repentance under Elijah.

So the miracles of Jesus were intended to show that the one greater than Moses was there, to lead them out of sin, and to initiate the New Covenant. They were there to show that the one greater than Elijah had come to call them to repentance and to no longer halt between two opinions. And those who were directly commissioned by Jesus were given the same power, to witness to Israel that this was indeed the true message of the Law and the Prophets.

When we read from the Old Testament and into the Gospels, we have Israel, rabbis, priests, the Law, the Temple. Then we read the epistles, and now we have all nations, pastors, the High Priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of the believer; the church as the Temple, the New Covenant and grace replacing the Law. How do you go from there to there? How could you convince a people so steeped in their tradition and loyalty to Judaism that this was the true faith, the original religion, the continuation of the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David? You needed signs, signs worked through the hands of the eyewitnesses. These signs authenticated these men as genuine, as the appointed overseers of transitioning from Israel to church.

But at some point, that transition was complete. Once complete, you no longer needed those signs in the same way, otherwise we should expect all four in every church of every age. We should expect it in every believer, or at every conversion. But we don't because the apostles established the church, and got us from old to new, from synagogue to church, from rabbis to pastors.

Now God can do anything He wants to, in any age. He is not bound. There is no doubt about God's power or ability. The question is simply, did God say He intended to give these signs for all believers of every age? I don't think so. But I do think He continues to give signs that accompany belief. They are different in nature, but they also confirm the Word, and point to the truth. And you shouldn't look down upon these, as if they are inferior to the miraculous gifts, because then you would be like those Jews who demanded a sign, or like those Corinthians who cared only for the outward, showy gifts. What did Paul say was more enduring than the showy, sign gifts? Love.

And what did Jesus say would be the sign by which all men would know that we are His disciples? If we have love for one another.

Here is what displays God's glory to a watching world: when a group of people, whose background culture, language, former beliefs, economic state, age gaps and personality differences would never in a million years have thrown them together, now meet together, voluntarily, call one another brother and sister, share their homes, their wealth, their lives with each other, show genuine, sacrificial care for one another. When they seem released from the slavery of selfishness, and exist together as a genuine community, where there is compassion, help, mercy, generosity, honesty, all the things people long for in their families, in their friendships, in their communities. Here they see an outpost of Heaven, an embassy of the King.

Which should tell you something about what you do to your own Gospel witness when you treat the church as a drive-by experience. If you want to see an unbeliever truly consider the claims of Christ, you need to be plugged in enough so that he can accompany you to watch body-life in action.

Changed lives continue to be the miracle that accompanies the Word. New lives, new families, new communities – this is the fruit that tells people the tree is alive. These are the works which show that the faith is real.

Proclaim the Gospel to all people everywhere, that they must believe and be baptised. And then introduce them to a supernatural community, where the miracle of the new birth has occurred again and again. We have a living Messiah, which leads to a living message, which creates a living body.

How do we know this commission that Jesus gave us will be victorious? How do we know He didn't give us an impossible task? The last two verses of Mark tell us.

### **III. The Overcomer of the Commission**

*19 So then, after the Lord 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, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.*

Here we have the assurance that the Saviour not only lives, but is going to continue to work to see this Gospel proclaimed. Why? Because He is the ascended, enthroned Son of God.

Do you remember the very first verse of Mark?

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mar 1:1)*

And what was the climax of Mark's book? It was the word of the centurion at the cross:

*"Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mar 15:39)*

Here Mark tells us this emphatically. Jesus ascended. A few years ago I did an ascension day sermon and asked why it was necessary for Jesus to ascend. Why couldn't He just disappear? Some of the answer seems to be that by ascending, He demonstrated that He was supreme. The whole earth was under His feet. He was truly King, and like the angels said, would return in the same manner.

He sat down at the right hand of the Father. This is a metaphor, a picture. The Father is the Almighty Maker and Ruler of all. So if the Son sits down at His right hand, then the Son is sitting the place of honour and favour. And this language goes back to Psalm 110: “

*The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." (Psa 110:1)*

From this place of exaltation and power, what is He doing? Confirming the Word with accompanying signs. He is commanding, confirming, working. He is now the commander of His armies, working out the victory that He has provided through His death and resurrection.

The task of evangelism is not given to us by one who is unsure of the victory. We are not employees of an enterprise whose future is uncertain. We are not volunteers for an organisation that we are propping up by our own efforts. We are heralds of an enthroned king. His work is completed. His victory is certain. His enemies are defeated. His return is sure. His message is true.

If we believe it, then we declare it. We declare it to all, everywhere.