

Signs that Will Follow Those Who Believe

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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After the Lord rose from the grave on what we now call Easter Sunday, He appeared to various women and men who had followed Him during His ministry, reassuring, comforting and even literally feeding them – in one case with bread in the evening and in another with fish early in the morning. And then, as we read in Mark’s Gospel, He appeared to all 11 of the remaining disciples as they met ‘round a table and “He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.”

And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. *And these signs will follow those who believe:* 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.” – Mark 16:14-18

Our topic today is “these signs” and what they really mean to us today. Are they intended to be *tests* of our faith, or are they the logical consequences of it? And what is the deeper *significance* of these miraculous signs as they are listed in the Word?

Occasionally some churches or pastors in rural communities make the news for their commitment to handling rattle snakes as a testimony of their faith. And when one of them is bitten and dies (as happened a few years ago) the believers are usually not deterred, saying simply that the victim obviously didn’t have enough faith! (Similar things are often said in evangelical churches about the Lord’s promise of prosperity to those who believe – with similar implications: if you don’t prosper it’s because you don’t have enough faith.) But all these things need to be seen in the light of the Lord’s consistent teaching that His kingdom is *not of this world!* Yes, He did say about food and clothing that if we seek first the kingdom of God all these things will be added to us (Matt. 6:33), but He also said that we must not lay up treasures – even food! – on earth, only treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:20), so it is pretty clear that the food He was talking about is the righteousness with which we can be filled, and the clothing the garments of salvation (Matt. 5:6, Isa. 61:10). Indeed, He said, “What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul” (Matt. 16:26). We could go on...

But the point is that the Lord very frequently referred to the blessings of heaven as if they were material or physical things, and yet He clearly spoke metaphorically, that is, symbolically. For example, He said that if we have faith as a mustard seed we can move mountains (Matt. 17:20). Well, think about it: faith is only *compared* to a mustard seed to illustrate how little we need, and so the thing we will *move* with that faith is no more a physical mountain than the mustard seed is faith. It simply refers to *large obstacles* in our spiritual life, typically our own self-love. So, again, when the Lord referred to those who would inherit His kingdom for their good works to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner (Matt. 25:35), He wasn’t just referring to those who have these physical problems, He was talking about the spiritually hungry and thirsty, the spiritual stranger, and those who are spiritually naked, sick or imprisoned, that is, all who long for what is good and true, or are constrained by what is bad and false.

Just so, the signs that will follow those who believe *must be* spiritual and not merely natural or physical, otherwise they wouldn't relate to the kingdom of heaven. So let's look closely at these 5 special signs that were given at the Lord's resurrection and see what they really mean.

1. "In My name they will cast out demons." The Lord had already taught the disciples that the only way to cast out demons – at least the very stubborn ones – was by prayer and fasting (Matt. 17:21). But surely He didn't mean just going through the motions! No, obviously, real prayer is a deep cry from the heart, and likewise fasting is the awareness of our lack and our need for the bread of life, the spiritual good that only the Lord can provide. We must not assume or claim any powers that we can't possibly have, including power over evil spirits or demons (remember, one evil spirit is a channel for many thousands more to affect us!), but if we humble ourselves to learn and do what is good from the Lord, then the demons have no place to stay with us, in fact they can't stand to be with us because they can't stand the sphere of the Lord's love and wisdom.

Names everywhere in the Word represent essential qualities or characteristics. So to cast out demons – or do anything, really – in the Lord's name is to do it in the spirit and power of HIS love and wisdom. Now the only way we can get this with any degree of confidence is from His Word, and of course the doctrine or concepts drawn from the Word. And this naturally involves daily contact with it, and reading, and reflection on it, not to mention applications in life. We can't impose this on anyone else, but we *can* do it for ourselves, and we can *encourage* others, especially by example, so the effect of the teaching is mainly on ourselves.

Still, the promise is that when we do these things the demons we have otherwise welcomed into our lives will be cast out. In fact they will withdraw of their own free will, and seek some other place to present their insulting influence.

2. "They will speak with new tongues." This is one of the most oddly misunderstood teachings in the New Testament. Coupled together with the story in the 2nd chapter of the book of Acts, it has been assumed that this is some new kind of natural language that can only be understood by gifted people who can interpret what is being said for others. Accordingly, many churches encourage people at worship to let go of any rational conception of the truth and open themselves up to an influence that they believe is the Holy Spirit, a spirit that in some way speaks *through* them in words they themselves don't understand. And yet the Lord Himself said that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth, and that spirit surely does involve understanding!

Now of course none of us can understand the whole truth, especially the whole truth of the Word, but when you look carefully at the story in the book of Acts you can see right away that this mystical speech is not what the believers who had met in Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost were experiencing. Rather they were all speaking in their own native languages and *the miracle was that they all understood one another!*

What, then, does it mean that believers will speak with *new tongues*? Well, just as "tongue" is a word that refers to speech or language, so a *new tongue* is a new way of speaking, that is, from a new understanding, in this case with special consideration for the Lord and His Word. It is a new way of thinking and talking that arises out of our conviction about what He teaches. So, for example, whereas before we are reformed and regenerated by the Lord we might be inclined to make nasty remarks about others, accuse, condemn or otherwise belittle our neighbors, worship our own ideas, despise the Word and take the Lord's name in vain, *after* we have been reformed

there is no way we can talk or even think like that. Our “new tongues,” that is, our new ways of speaking will reflect our commitment to the Lord’s instruction.

3. “*They will take up serpents.*” The serpent is a universal symbol in just about all cultures of the world for what is sensual in human life. It occurs in ancient civilizations, mythology and literature, modern art, advertising and even fashion, and of course above all in the Word, literally from beginning to end, where the flying dragon of Revelation is also referred to as “that serpent of old” first mentioned in the garden of Eden.

Subtle, silent (for the most part), and creeping as it does on the ground, it represents that part of our lives most closely connected to the earth. It is the sensual principle – the idea that the delight of life rests in the pleasures of the five senses: taste, touch, sight, smell and hearing. So, exotic pleasures, and particularly *erotic* pleasures are often portrayed in a context that includes alluring poses and suggestive-looking serpents.

But here in His resurrection the Lord says that people who believe in Him will “take up serpents.” What this means is that when we honor the Lord first of all He will give us the ability to “handle” our sensual desires in a spiritually healthy way. He will give us the ability to control and subordinate our natural urges so that they do not harm us. In fact, the really good news here is that the Lord is telling us we don’t have to give up the pleasures of the senses at all, *as long as we make use of them in spiritually responsible ways*. In other words, we can have nice things; we can eat well and engage in various recreations, even including games of chance; we can dance, and play, and have a lot of fun; and we can enjoy the pleasures of intimacy in marriage. There is no great virtue in poverty or deprivation for its own sake. Rather what the Lord asks of us is that we keep these things in perspective and subordinate them to the higher principles of the spiritual life.

So, for example, whereas we can spend a fortune if we have it on fine dining and recreation, we really should compare this with what we spend – in time and money – on our spiritual lives. Do our contributions to the church come off the top of our budget or do our natural pleasures come first so that the church only gets what’s left over? Which is more important – to you and your neighbors? It’s pretty difficult to tame and train a serpent. But the Lord says that if we really believe in Him we can do it, and we *will* do it.

4. “*And if they drink anything deadly, it will be no means hurt them.*” In the Word what we drink refers to what we take into our minds and think about, whether truth or falsity. So the Lord blessed “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” saying they will be filled. And when we drink the wine of the holy supper we know that it corresponds to the purified Divine truth that we hope to receive from Him as well. On the other hand, to drink what is false is to believe in a lie. But to suppose that we could drink polluted water, kerosene or muriatic acid and not get sick defies the Lord’s own laws of order.

The beautiful and reassuring thing about this particular sign therefore is that if we learn and believe anything false it will not harm us spiritually as long as we have faith in the Lord. This certainly seems counterintuitive, as we know that falsity and misunderstanding can do a lot of damage in our natural lives. But it’s different spiritually because more than anything else the Lord looks on the heart, that is, on our loves and intentions. We all make mistakes. We all misunderstand. We all have a limited *ability* to understand. But if we love the Lord and love our

neighbors as ourselves the wrong and hurtful things we may believe or experience in this life will be rendered harmless in our spiritual lives.

For example, the Lord explains in the heavenly doctrines that any church preaching salvation by faith, and faith alone, may be deeply involved in a fundamental falsity. But there are people within such churches who are not hurt by that falsity because they know intuitively that the life of faith is charity, and so they do their best to live according to the Word (see AE 764). Again, more personally, we may learn and accept things about ourselves or other people that are quite wrong, and not knowing any better we may organize our lives accordingly. But if we believe in the Lord we can be sure that He will preserve our spiritual lives in spite of that, and open our eyes to the truth when we are ready to see it. The only proviso is that we honor Him by doing the best we can with what we do understand from His Word.

5. “*They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.*” This is the last of the signs given in Mark’s Gospel, and just as the previous one refers to *falsity* this one refers to the *evils* of life. Note however that it doesn’t say the evils won’t harm us; it says we can recover.

The hand in Scripture is a symbol for the power to do good or evil. It is also a means of communicating affection, as when we hold someone’s hand, or put a hand on someone’s shoulder. So, to lay hands on the sick is to offer consolation and help to a person who is affected by evil. It’s important that we not think of the whole person as evil – any more than we would think of a person’s sickness as being the person himself. But still, how can we help somebody in this way without being patronizing? Well, as in medicine the first principle is to do no harm. What this implies is that we address the evils in ourselves first of all, lest they aggravate the evils in others. Only then will we by laying our hands on someone else be able to communicate the good of genuine charity from the Lord. And that good will be communicated not just by physical touch, but even more effectively by the work of our hands as we set a good example for that person.

Finally, you may have noticed that these five signs the Lord listed in His resurrection are similar to the five commands He gave the disciples when He first commissioned them in Matthew, chapter 10. There He told them to “...(1) go and preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ (2) Heal the sick, (3) cleanse the lepers, (4) raise the dead, (and 5) cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.” We could perhaps have a whole sermon comparing the two lists. But for now just consider this: the ultimate purpose of all that the Lord revealed and taught was that we might grow in our faith and use that faith to help others, establishing His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. In the beginning, as in Matthew, it seems to be all about those others: preach to them, heal them, cleanse them, raise them up and cast out *their* demons. But in the end, as in Mark, we must learn that we can only help others when we do our own work first: cast out our own demons, speak with new tongues, take control of our sensual urges, and if (or rather when) we are given poison to drink, ask the Lord in faith to protect us inwardly from its harmful effects. Then, and only then can we lay hands on the sick so that they will recover. *Then* the Lord can bless all of us as we work together in His name. And *then* He can truly establish His church among us for the good of all the world.

Amen.

Lessons: *Mark 16:9-20*
Children’s talk on the 5 signs that follow belief

Apocalypse Explained #706:14 & NJHD #167
Psalm 34:8-22

Concerning the signs promised in Mark 16:16-18:-

These miraculous signs, as that "they should cast out demons," "should speak with new tongues," "should take up serpents," "if they drank any deadly thing it should not hurt them," and "they should become well by the laying on of hands," were in their essence and in their origin spiritual, from which these flowed forth and came forth as effects; for they were correspondences that derived their all from the spiritual world by influx from the Lord. For instance, that "they should cast out demons in the name of the Lord" derived its effect from this, that the name of the Lord understood spiritually means everything of doctrine out of the Word from the Lord, and that "demons" mean falsities of every kind, and these are thus cast out, that is, taken away, by the doctrine out of the Word from the Lord; that "they should speak with new tongues" derives its effect from this, that "new tongues" mean doctrinal concepts for the New Church; "they should take up serpents" was because "serpents" signify the hells in respect to malice, and thus they would be safe from infestation by it; "they would not be hurt if they drank any deadly thing" meant that they would not be contaminated by the malice of the hells; and "the infirm would become well by the laying on of hands" meant to be healed of spiritual diseases, which are called iniquities and sins, by communication and conjunction with heaven, thus with the Lord; the laying on of the hands of the disciples corresponding to communication and conjunction with the Lord, and thus to the removal of iniquities by His Divine power. ~ AE 706:14

The signs that sins have been forgiven, that is, removed are as follows: A delight is perceived in the worship of God for the sake of God; in ministering to the neighbor for the sake of the neighbor, and thus in doing good for the sake of good, and in speaking the truth for the sake of the truth; a disinclination is felt to reap merit by anything belonging to charity and faith; evils are shunned and held in aversion, as for instance, enmities, hatreds, revenues, adulteries, and the very thoughts of these evils together with their intentions.... ~ NJHD #167

A Prayer for this Service

O Lord, Jesus, help us to acknowledge today and every day that You have all power and authority in human life – in heaven and on earth. Help us to set aside any doubts we may have about this and trust that You can lead us through temptations into a heavenly state of mind. Give us grateful, thankful hearts that this is possible, O Lord, and then let the signs that You are with us find full expression in the way we live and work and interact with others wherever we may go.

Amen.