

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

MARK 15:16-16:20

There are different types of roads... *dirt roads, paved roads, country roads, toll roads, two-lane roads, super highways, back alleys, even cobblestone streets...*

There are also famous roads... *Pennsylvania Avenue, Peachtree Street, Sunset Boulevard, Park Place and Boardwalk, even the Yellow Brick Road...*

There're even famous roads in the Bible... *The road to Damascus, the Emmaus Road, the Road to Gaza.*

But of all roads the most famous in history is the **Via Dolorosa**. This is the path Jesus took - *from Pilate's Judgment Hall, to a hill called Calvary, to the tomb of a rich man named Joseph...* The term "**Via Dolorosa**" is Latin for "**the way of sorrows**" - ***and indeed it was...***

In Mark 15:15 Jesus was scourged with a flagellum, or whip. Thirty-nine lashes reduced His torso to ground chuck. He was cut down from the post, and His body fell into a pool of His own blood. Some victims died from the beating. Jesus' ordeal was just the beginning.

Verse 16, "**Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium...**" This was the Roman military headquarters, sometimes called The Fortress Of Antonio, on the northeast corner of the Temple Mount.

"And they called together the whole garrison."

Realize, **these soldiers just don't care.** They're on assignment from Italy. Their families are across the ocean. They hate Jerusalem, and despise the Jews.

Every day stationed in Jerusalem these men have had to watch their backs. They're a target for terrorism. The locals see them as oppressors, and try to make their lives difficult. To them Jesus is just a criminal.

He's a Jewish punching bag on which they can take out some frustrations. They respond to Jesus' claims to be King, **"We'll give this king the royal treatment!"**

Jesus becomes the brunt of they're pain. Before the day is done, He'll become the brunt of the world's pain!

Verse 17 tells us, **"And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, and began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"**

This was actually part of a mocking game - **the King's Game** - that soldiers played with their prisoners during their idle moments. Today, in Jerusalem you find this game drawn into the stones, at the pavement on which Jesus was scourged. They did this to Jesus.

They adorned Him with a royal robe and a crown of thorns... Sadly the only crown Jesus ever wore on earth was the mock crown fashioned for Him here.

The Greek word translated **"thorns"** mean **"briars."**

They were thick and sharp, and penetrated Jesus' brow like little daggers. Blood now streams down the Lord's forehead. It's in His eyes and on His cheeks.

Verse 19, “Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him...” Imagine, spitting in face of God. *We long to gaze into His face, not spit on Him.*

This is at least the third time Jesus was struck after being arrested.... First, was at Caiaphas’ house. They slapped Him in the face with the palms of their hands.

Second, was in the fortress, before Pilate turned Him over to the executioners, he had Jesus scourged...

Now the overseers of His crucifixion place a crown of thorns on his head and hammer it in with a stick.

And then, “bowing the knee, they worshiped Him.” Of course, it was mock worship. It was Roman ridicule.

By the time Jesus gets to the cross His face looks like a heavyweight boxer who’s just gone 15 rounds, or the bloody victim of an airplane crash. Our Lord’s torso and face are a whelp - a mass of bleeding tissue.

There is a prophecy, Isaiah 50:6, that quotes Jesus in advance, “I gave My back to the those who struck Me, and My cheeks to the those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting.”

This is a part of our Lord’s suffering that none of the Gospel writers record, *yet Isaiah predicted.* Jesus’ beard would be plucked out. It may’ve happened here.

When my two oldest kids were just tots I sported a beard. And I remember they would stick their tiny fingers in my beard and exercise their clutching reflex.

They'd grab a handful of beard and yank. Of course, they never came close to jerking it out of my face, but it still hurt. Imagine though, what they did to Jesus...

The soldiers pulled out Jesus' facial hair by the root.

They disfigured His face. Trust me, if a funeral had been held for Jesus, the family would've requested a *closed casket*. When His body was finally taken from the cross, it was so maimed, and mutilated, and distorted, He looked more like a monster than a man.

Isaiah 52:14, "His visage was marred more than any man." Literally, "He no longer resembled a human."

John 19:5 tells us, at this point, Pilate presented Jesus to the Jews, and cried in Latin, "Ecce Homo," or "Behold the Man." I think Pilate was hoping the frightful sight of Jesus' suffering would pacify the bloodthirsty Jews, instead they called again for Him to be crucified.

Verse 20, "And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him. Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross."

Crucifixion victims were forced to carry their own cross. The "patibulum," or crossbeam, was strapped to the victim's shoulders. It usually tipped the scales at around 100 pounds.

The victim was accompanied by four soldiers - two in front, two behind. He was paraded through the streets.

And the soldiers always took the long way around to the crucifixion site. They wanted as many folks as possible to see the consequences of Roman justice.

By this point Jesus was exhausted. He was coming off a sleepless night. He was hungry and dehydrated. He had lost a tremendous amount of blood. That's why His body buckles, and collapses under the weight.

Today, when you walk the Via Dolorosa the street is always congested. Pedestrians, shop owners, street vendors *hurry and scurry* - the way it was in Jesus' day.

Here the Lamb of God is turning the bend. Heaven is on the edge of its seat. Angels shutter in horror. Demons squeal with glee.... And it seems this Simon is headed to a coffee shop for a bagel and an espresso.

It just proves the most important moments in our lives are not always the one's we see coming - that we plan for in advance. **Sometimes we don't choose. We get chosen.** This is what happened to Simon...

He was from Cyrene in North Africa - an original Libyan - probably a Jew on a Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This Simon was a robust man - with a large build, a strong frame. That's why he was picked.

He's walking down the narrow street, minding his own business, when he sees four soldiers surrounding a frail, bloody figure trying to balance a wooden beam.

Suddenly, Simon feels the sharp end of a spear poking into his shoulder. A soldier pulls him from the crowd, pushes over, and plops the beam on his back.

Simon was out for a bagel. All he was thinking was *grape jam* or *apple jam*... now He's *bearing the cross* for God's Son, Who is *bearing this cross* for the sins of the whole world! *You never know what a day will bring!*

And notice in verse 21 Mark refers to Simon as the father of "*Alexander and Rufus.*" Since Mark wrote this Gospel to the church at Rome, the Romans must've known these men. In fact, in Romans 16:13, a man named Rufus and his mother are noted as members.

It's assumed Simon's encounter with Jesus led to his conversion. He returned to Cyrene, shared His faith, and led His family to Jesus. The family later migrated to Rome... The vibrant church that sprang up in North Africa probably originated with Simon's testimony.

Again, like Simon, you and I never know when we'll encounter Jesus in a special way. *God's plans for us often interrupt our own plans.* Here, Simon stumbles onto something far bigger than himself. When he least expects it, His life rubs up against eternity...

When God interrupts your plans to involve you in His, I hope you're smart enough to trust and obey.

Verse 22 identifies the site of the crucifixion. "*And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull...*" It happened just north of the city. Today, by the Damascus Gate there's a stone outcropping that resembles a skull. Golgotha was along the road that ran from Jerusalem to Damascus.

Roman crucifixions were intended to strike fear in the locals. The site was usually alongside a congested thoroughfare, so as many people as possible could see. Today, Golgotha is just behind a bus station.

Imagine, your morning commute down Stone Mountain Freeway, and you see the street lined with crucified criminals. The Romans were after shock effect. Our Lord Jesus was crucified either at the bottom of Golgotha, next to the busy road - or on top of the hill, so people could see Him from a distance.

The first step in a crucifixion was to offer the victim a pain-killer. Verse 23, “Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it.” This was a narcotic, intended to knock the edge off the pain.

But Jesus refused. We’ll come back to this point in a moment, but for now realize, there was no *valium* for the Savior. Verse 24, “And when they crucified Him...”

The cross was the most hideous, torturous form of execution ever devised. Josephus, the first century historian, who saw firsthand his share of crucifixions, called the cross, “the most wretched of deaths.”

The Roman historian, Cicero, wrote, “And what shall I call crucifixion? So abominable a deed, can find no word adequate enough to describe it.” Every aspect of the cross was designed to mock and maim... *then* kill.

If you were standing before a live crucifixion you'd shiver in horror - you'd *turn your head* - it would *turn your stomach* - for weeks you'd have nightmares.

In 1968 the ancient bones of a 26 year old victim of crucifixion were discovered at a Jewish settlement north of Jerusalem. This rare archeological find shed light on how crucifixions were performed, and it confirmed the details we read about in the Bible...

The victim was laid on the ground and 7" iron spikes were driven through his wrists into the crossbeam. The beam was then lifted, and attached to a standing post.

The victim's legs were pushed up so his heels were under his buttocks. A single spike was driven through both heels. Crosses in Palestine were made of olive wood. And since olive trees were never large, the cross' height was just a few inches taller than its victim.

Medical Doctor, Truman Davis, gives a description of the agonizing pain the victim endured once He was nailed to the cross... "As his body slowly sags down with more weight on the nails in the wrists, excruciating, fiery pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms to explode in the brain - the nails in the wrists are putting pressure on the median nerves.

As he pushes himself upward, he places the full weight on the nail through his feet. Again he feels the searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves...

As the arms fatigue, cramps sweep through the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push himself upward to breathe.

Air can be drawn into the lungs, but not exhaled. He fights to raise himself up in order to get even one small breath.

Finally carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside.

Spasmodically he's able to push himself upward to exhale and bring in life-giving oxygen. The victim endures hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain, as tissue is torn from his lacerated back as he moves up and down against the rough timber.

Then another agony begins. He experiences a crushing pain deep within the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart. It is now almost over - the loss of tissue fluids reach a critical level - the compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues - the tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. He can feel the chill of death.. Finally he can allow his body to die."

Often I've asked the question, *why crucifixion?*

It's one thing for God to die, but why did God's Son die the most hideous form of death ever invented?

Why didn't God send His Son at a time when lethal injections were the mode of execution?... Or even the electric chair? A means that's quick... easy... painless?

The answer is that our sin is not quick... or easy... or painless. Our sin grieves the heart of God. Sin not only *breaks God's law* - but far worse, it *breaks His heart*.

In God's eyes, sin deserves the most brutal death imaginable. Jesus died on the cross because our sin demanded such a death. This is why He refused the pain-numbing potion. He took the full brunt of our sin.

The cross teaches us two truths: **the severity of our sin**, and **the sincerity of God's love**. Though our sin demanded a steep price - Jesus paid it in full. Romans 5:8 tells us, “**God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**”

Once, a little boy went to church with his dad. The church had a cross at the front of the sanctuary. The boy asked, “**Dad, what’s the meaning of that cross?**”

The father replied, “*Son, Jesus died when people nailed Him to a cross.*” The little guy’s eyes grew big as saucers as he gazed around at the church members.

He said, “**You mean these people?**” And if the dad had answered, he could’ve said, “**Yes, these people!**”

Who crucified Jesus? The Jews? They played a part. The Romans? They also played a role. But who really crucified Jesus? The answer is you and me. Our sin drove the nails into His hands and feet. It’s been said, “Every man is born with a fist full of nails, and he dies with his hands empty.” In other words, we’re all guilty!

Verse 24 tells us the Roman soldiers who supervised Jesus’ crucifixion, “**divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take.**”

Imagine, the holy Lamb of God suffers for the sin of all mankind, while calloused Roman soldiers laugh, and mock, and gamble - they shoot *craps* for his *cloak*.

“Now it was the third hour (or 9:00 AM), and they crucified Him. And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

The Romans always hung a wooden plaque, called a “*titulus*,” over the victim’s head. It listed his crimes.

John tells us that what was written on the plaque over Jesus’ head infuriated the Jewish leaders. They appealed to Pilate to change it, but he refused. In the end the Jews couldn’t silence Jesus true identity.

“With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left.” One robber mocked Jesus. The other pleaded for mercy and was forgiven!

Verse 28, “So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And He was numbered with the transgressors.”

Isaiah 53:12 predicted that the King of the universe would die a criminal’s death among common thieves.

“And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!” Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.”

These mockers wanted a *Christ*, but not a *crucified Christ*. Jesus proved He was Messiah by going to the cross. But to them, being King meant coming off the cross. Jews at the time wanted *miracles not sacrifice*.

And the same is true today. People want heroes, not Saviors. A hero champions the human spirit. He spotlights human potential and makes us feel good about ourselves. He's a poster boy for the good in man. But a crucified Christ means we have a problem.

It means all is not right with the human race. The crucifixion isn't an example of *human potential*, but *human depravity*. People today, just like the Jews of old, want a *Christ* without a *cross*. Only humble, repentant people - who realize their sin and need for forgiveness - want a *Christ that's hanging on a cross*.

Verse 33, "Now when the sixth hour had come (or noon), there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour." It was *midnight at midday*. For three hours - noon til 3:00 PM - darkness blanketed the land.

Remember, when Jesus was born a star, a light, was seen in the heavens. Now when Jesus dies, the sky turns to pitch black. God turned out the lights.

And here's the reason, verse 34, "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, "Look, He is calling for Elijah!" Then someone ran and filled a

sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down."

Jesus spoke in Aramaic, the street language at the time. The aristocratic priests were thinking Hebrew and mistook His words as a cry for Elijah - instead of God.

This cry was an expression of the alienation Jesus experienced with His Father. In John 8:29, Jesus said, "He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him." Since before the beginning of time, Jesus had lived in perfect harmony with the Father in heaven.

Now suddenly, Jesus feels the pain of rejection. He feels what He'd never felt before. The sin of the world is being thrust on His sacrificial shoulders, as He cries out, "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*"

Jesus was the spotless lamb. Morally, his heart was as tender as a baby's soft, sensitive skin. It was a shock for Him to bear a single speck of sin. Imagine the piercing fright, the staggering horror, when He felt the sin of the whole world. The sin of the rapist, the serial killer, the child molester, the secret gossip – *all of man's sin came crashing onto His innocent shoulders.*

2 Corinthians 5:21 explains the plan of God, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Jesus was God. He never ceased being God. He lived with the Father in unbroken fellowship. From before the beginning,

nothing had interrupted the Godhead's *holy harmony*. Yet for a moment *the Son of God* became a *forsaken Child*. God was separated from God, so that through Jesus we could be restored.

Verses 37, “**And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.**” The Temple veil was a partition 60 feet tall, by 30 feet wide, by 10 feet thick.

The curtain required 300 priests to move. It was heavy and impenetrable since it represented mankind's sin... *Access to God was blocked because of our sin.*

But on the cross our debt of sin was paid in full - and as a result, the huge veil was torn from top to bottom. It was as if a knife from heaven had cut the veil in two.

And verse 38 says specifically ***“from top to bottom.”*** For salvation is a *top down proposition* - not *bottom up*. It's initiated by God's grace, not our human efforts.

When the veil was torn God was declaring an *open house!* From then til now - nothing separates us from the presence of God, but the person of Jesus. Today the door is wide open - you can come boldly to God.

Verse 39, ***“So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!”*** Realized what happened that day softened hard, calloused men. Even Jesus' own executioners were transformed into humble, repentant believers.

And He continues to have that effect on men today. The most calloused heart becomes putty in His hands.

And not only are *stubborn men* transformed by Jesus, so are *sinful women*. Verses 40, “There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee; and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.”

We know Mary Magdalene had a shady past. She was a prostitute, possessed by seven demons. Yet she was delivered by Jesus, and remained loyal to the end.

Which brings us to verse 42, “Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus...” Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin, “*a council member.*”

Why didn't he speak up at the trial? We don't know.

Joseph had been a secret disciple. Now he “*takes courage*” and goes public. There comes a time when all secret disciples are challenged to be witnesses.

Victims of crucifixion often lasted days before death.

This is why “Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead

for some time. And when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph.

Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph observed where He was laid.” These ladies will return on Sunday to finish dressing Jesus’ body. Here we’re told they paid special attention to the tomb’s location.

This is an important point, for there are skeptics even today who try to discredit Jesus’ resurrection by saying the tomb was empty - *not because He rose from the dead* - but because the women went to the wrong tomb. Mark though, says that was impossible since the girls made special note of its location ahead of time...

If men had been first to the tomb we might assume they got lost - but women are experts at navigating directions. The only viable explanation for the empty tomb is that Jesus lives, and it was no longer needed.

Chapter 16, “Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him.”

Because of the special Sabbath the women couldn’t properly prepare Jesus’ corpse. They hurriedly laid His body in the tomb. Now they return to finish the job.

“Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen.

And they said among themselves, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?"

Notice, these women are worrying about a dilemma that's already been solved. The tomb is empty! Yet we often do the same. The fact that Jesus is alive means He's able to solve problems before they even arise.

Verse 4, "But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away - for it was very large."

On my first trip to Israel I went to the King's Tomb. The site's featured attraction is a tomb where you see a downward channel cut into the opening of the grave.

A stone was placed at the top of the channel, and wedged in place. To close the tomb the wedge was removed and gravity pulled the stone into place.

Here the Greek word translated "*rolled*" means "to roll up a slope or incline." When this stone was rolled away it was not only pushed back - but rolled up a hill.

And realize the stone was not moved to let Jesus out, *but to let the disciples in*. From other verses we know the risen Christ wasn't bound by natural laws. He could've walked right through the stone. But the stone needed to be removed so the world could see inside.

And verse 5 tells us what the women saw, "And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed." This was an angel appearing as a man.

Mark only mentions one angel. Luke says there were two. But I like what one commentator suggests, "(The angels

were) probably only those who elected to be seen. Many more, perhaps thousands more, watched, for as we're told in 1 Peter 1:12, these are *'things which angels desire to look into...'* Angels marvel at God's grace and plan for salvation. There were probably millions of eager angels at the empty tomb.

And listen to the first words out of the mouth of the angel - verse 6, **"But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here."** He's alive!

"See the place where they laid Him." In other words, *"Don't take our word. Come, examine the evidence."*

And this was still the invitation thirty years later when Paul witnessed to Agrippa. He said, **"The king knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner."** From its outset, Christianity wasn't based on philosophical arguments, or metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, but on a historically verifiable event.

There's only one plausible explanation for the empty tomb, and that is its former resident rose from the dead. Even secular historian, Thomas Arnold, once wrote, **"I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort... than the great sign which God hath given that Christ died and rose again from the dead."**

The angels says, “*come and see,*” but then he says, “*Go and tell.*” And this is our calling as Christians. Don’t sit on what you’ve seen. Spread the news He is alive.

He says, “*Go, tell His disciples - and Peter...*” Peter gets special attention. Jesus loved all His disciples, but none had fallen harder and faster, than cocky Peter.

Peter boasted of his loyalty, and then denied the Lord three times. By the time the cock crowed twice, Peter was overcome with guilt, and wept bitterly.

Yet as soon as Jesus is back from the grave, He’s already thinking of His failed disciple. And this is Jesus’ heart toward us. I like one commentator’s rendition of the angel’s words... “*Be sure and tell Peter that he gets to bat again.*” God still had a plan for Peter!

Verse 7, “*But go, tell His disciples - and Peter - that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you.*” So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” When the women first saw the angel they were afraid. Now they’re still afraid, but its a different kind of fear - *a good fear*. It’s now *a purifying fear...*

I love the fact, that the three women who were first to the empty tomb, were also the last to leave the cross. They were the ones who accompanied Jesus’ corpse.

I think there’s a lesson here. Those who share His *burdens* are the most likely to share His *blessings*.

His power is granted to those who understand in *His passion*. Remember what Paul longed for in Philippians 3:10,

“to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings.”

Verse 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.” According to John, Mary was hanging around the tomb by herself when Jesus appeared to her privately. At first she thought Jesus was the gardener until He spoke her name...

When **men** spoke Mary’s name it was to use her... when her **neighbors** spoke her name it was to judge... but when **Jesus** spoke her name He conveyed love.

It was the way Jesus said, “*Mary*” that brought her peace... *Listen, Jesus may be speaking your name...*

After Jesus came to Mary, “She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept.”

You’d think her report would dry their tears - make them jump for joy, but, “when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.”

“After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country.” Luke 24 gives the full account of what occurred on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. At first, they didn’t know it was Jesus walking with them. Their eyes were blinded.

He taught them a Bible study - how the Scriptures spoke of Messiah. Finally, their eyes were open when He handled the bread. That’s when He vanished.

But Luke tells us, their *hearts burned* within them while they were with Jesus. He can still take the cold embers of a discouraged heart and strike a passion.

These men, like Mary, “**went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either.**” *What’s with these hard-hearted disciples? They don’t believe anyone!*

“**Later (Jesus) 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 eyewitness reports were certain and trustworthy - they should’ve believed.

So often it’s not that a person *can’t* believe, it’s that they *won’t* believe. They lack *willingness* not *evidence*.

Verse 15, “**And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."**

This is called “**the Great Commission.**” It was Jesus’ final marching orders to His disciples... “**Go into all the world...**” Don’t stay where it’s familiar and comfortable.

“**Go and preach...**” Don’t remain silent. “**And preach the Gospel...**” Not manmade traditions, or human wisdom, or pop psychology. And “**preach to every creature...**” not just to folks like us, but to everyone.

Then Jesus says, “**He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.**” Everyone knows the difference between a *primary article of clothing* and a *wardrobe accessory*.

A hat is a nice accessory, but it's take it or leave it. It's an elective. Nobody is going to be to up in arms if you don't wear a hat. But pants is a definite must.

Notice the same distinction in verse 16. Faith is mandatory. Baptism is an accessory. Baptism is a nice statement - it shines a light on our faith. But baptism isn't essential. It's not the guy who fails to be baptized that gets condemned, it's the guy who won't believe.

The thief on the cross was never baptized. But He was promised Paradise because of his faith.

And speaking of accessories. Jesus lists a few more accessories to faith in verse 17, **“And these signs will follow those who believe...”** Notice what Jesus' says, **“these signs will follow...”** We're not told to follow miraculous signs - it's the signs that follow our faith.

Nobody saw more wonders than the Hebrews who exited Egypt, yet they refused to believe. Some of the Jews who saw Jesus' miracles, ended up screaming, **“Crucify Him.”** **It's not signs and wonders that produce faith, they're the result of faith.** They follow faith. Faith grows as a result of feeding our soul on God's Word.

But signs do follow real faith... Walk by faith, trust God's Spirit, and God will do some miraculous stuff...

Jesus gives us examples, **“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.”** Walk by faith and demons flee. You'll praise God

with Spirit-inspired language. You'll be immune to poisonous snakes, and deadly poison. You'll pray for the sick, and they'll be healed.

And understand the context of these verses. Jesus is giving His disciples their marching orders - *the Great Commission*. Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel... And when we do, God works supernaturally.

These verses speak of protection for missionaries.

Missionaries in pagan lands frequently encounter the occult. Jesus assures them of the power to expel demons... When they run into foreign languages, they can count on the gift of tongues to help... Snakes and contaminated water fester in jungle environments, Jesus promises us supernatural protection... In the outback, where medicinal remedies are unavailable, lay hands on the sick and trust in the power of prayer...

As a matter of fact, survey the book of Acts, and you'll see where all these signs followed the early church... *Demons were cast out... Tongues were spoken... In Acts 28 Paul survived a deadly snake bite... and God healed the sick...* The only one of these sign not seen in Acts is protection from poisons.

Again, these are not phenomena we should follow.

Hillbillies in the Ozarks who read this verse, and toss around rattlesnakes, are tempting God. I don't believe in handling snakes for the sake of handling snakes...

But if I'm on a mission trip - and in the bush - and I happen to get bitten by a snake - trust me, the first thing I'm going to do is remind the Lord of this verse!

This passage is for folks busy sharing the Gospel.

Verse 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." What a moment this was.

Like a NASA lift off, Jesus rose into the clouds.

And Jesus' ascension was not only a spectacle to see, don't underestimate its theological significance.

Jesus' ascension was God's way of saying He had accepted His sacrifice. Jesus conquered all heaven's enemies, and took the exalted place on God's throne.

Once, a little girl came home from Sunday School, and told her mom, "Mommy, God created the world with His left hand, and He parted the Red Sea with His left hand, and He heals the sick with His left hand..."

The mom couldn't understand the fixation with God's left hand. "*Honey, why does God only use His left hand?*" The little girl replied, "*Well, my Sunday School teacher says that Jesus is sitting on God's right hand.*"

If the resurrection was the highpoint for His disciples, the ascension was the climax for Jesus. Imagine, like a victorious soldier returning home from battle, Jesus entering the halls of heaven. What a moment that was!

Verse 20 closes, "And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the

word through the accompanying signs. Amen.” When Jesus ascended to heaven, His disciples descended on this lost world. *And I love verse 20...*

The disciples didn't just work for the Lord, *“the Lord working with them...”* He was *“confirming the word through signs...”* This is Christian ministry. It's not just serving God - it's partnering with Him. Joining forces.

We work together to fulfill the great commission.