

It Is Written

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Is Mark 16:15-16 Genuine Scripture?

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According to Mark 16:15-16, the risen Savior Jesus Christ gave his Apostles the Great Commission including these words: *"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."*

This passage is simple in meaning and powerful in giving hope to sinners who seek salvation. All men in every nation must know that the Son of God and Savior of the world has come. He died as the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and arose from the grave to conquer death for us. Any person who believes this good news and submits to Christ by being immersed in water receives the gift of the forgiveness of his sins by the grace of God.

But Is It Genuine?

We are sometimes asked if Mark 16:15-16 is genuine Scripture. There are two prominent reasons. First, footnotes found in some Bibles create doubt. Second, questions arise because of exaggerated claims by false teachers who seek to escape the force of verse 16 requiring baptism as a condition to receive salvation from past sins. How can the average person know whether this passage is genuine or fraudulent, original or fabricated, true or false?

Here are samples of footnotes found in some Bibles which create doubt about the authenticity of Mark 16:15-16. The New American Standard Bible, Reference Edition (1971) says in a marginal note, *"Some of the oldest mss. omit from verse 9 through 20."* "Mss." means manuscripts, referring to ancient copies of the New Testament in Greek. The New International Version, Study Bible, 10th Anniversary Edition (1995) says in an end note, *"Serious doubt exists as to whether these verses belong to the Gospel of Mark. They are absent from important early manuscripts and display certain peculiarities of vocabulary, style and theological content that are unlike the rest of Mark. His Gospel probably ended at 16:8, or its original ending has been lost."*

The Living Scriptures Paraphrased, Messianic Edition of The Living Bible (1982) says in a footnote, *"Vss 9-20 are not found in the most ancient manuscripts, but may be considered an appendix giving additional facts."*

What are we to believe?

Ancient Greek Manuscripts and Versions

The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. The original manuscripts were hand copied and distributed. As they spread to new peoples, they were also translated into other languages and these translations are called versions. As the original copies of the first Greek manuscripts and the first versions were repeatedly used, they were damaged and they wore out. Copies were made from the first copies, then copies from the copies. As the process continued minor mistakes were made on some copies, and leafs or pages were lost later for various reasons. For instance, the last page of a manuscript or of a version might easily be damaged or lost through constant use.

God promised that His Word would never pass away (Isa. 40:7-8; 1 Pet. 1:24-25). His providence has protected His Word so that it has been accurately preserved. There are about 5,000 known copies of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, in part or the whole. Likewise, there are multiple copies of the early translations into various languages. One Greek manuscript copy or translation copy may be missing certain books, chapters, and verses, and the next one is missing others. When Bible scholars gather all of the manuscripts, they compare one to another to identify anything missing or any miscopied word. What is missing or miscopied in one is accurately preserved in another. By God's providence we have the whole Bible.

Among the most complete copies of Greek manuscripts are Codex Vaticanus (dated A.D. 300-350), Codex Sinaiticus (dated about A.D. 350), and Codex Washington (dated A.D. 300's-400's, very good copies of the books Matthew through John). Mark 16:9-20 is missing from the Greek manuscripts Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, but is included in Washington and in other early manuscripts. Codex Vaticanus is also missing Hebrews 9:14 - 13:25, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and all of Revelation. Yet, these passages are not put under a cloud of doubt like Mark

16:9-20. There is no footnote in modern translations raising doubt about these other passages.

Do the false teachers who reject these verses from Mark in an effort to escape from Mark 16:16 ever quote from those other “missing” passages as Scripture? Yes, of course, they do! Some of these men teach the premillennial theory that Jesus will return to reign on a literal throne for 1,000 years, but the only chapter (Rev. 20) which mentions the 1,000 years is missing from Codex Vaticanus, one of the same manuscripts which is missing the last verses of Mark! That same manuscript is missing many early chapters from Genesis. Do the preachers who reject Mark 16:16 believe Genesis 1:1 is true Scripture? If we do not include all of these passages as true Scripture, we violate Revelation 22:19 which forbids subtracting anything from God’s Word. Perhaps preachers who reject Mark 16:16 will also reject Revelation 22:19 because it is missing from Codex Vaticanus!

When the New Testament was written in Greek, it was very soon translated into other languages. The complete ending of Mark is found in the earliest translations or versions such as the Peshito Syriac and the Old Latin, which date to the second century, thus 200 years older than Codex Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Washington. Other early versions include Curetonian Syriac, Coptic, Sahidic, and Tatian’s Diatessaron (the earliest harmony of the four Gospels). All of them include the complete ending of Mark.

Because verses 9-20 were so widely available in early Greek manuscripts and in early versions, verses from this passage are cited and quoted by men who explained and defended Christianity such as Irenaeus (A.D. 115-202), Papias (A.D. 70-153), Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165), and Tatian (A.D. 110-180). They were freely using these verses long before the Sinaiticus and Vaticanus manuscripts were made which omit them.

Nothing New or Doubtful in Mark 16

Mark 16:9-20 confirms the same truth taught in other passages. For instance, let us observe the preaching done under the Great Commission to see if it is the same or different from Mark 16. Mark 16 affirms the resurrection of Christ, the gospel must go to all men, faith in Jesus Christ is essential, baptism is essential, salvation is received upon the conditions of faith and baptism, and the truth of the gospel was to be confirmed by miracles.

Let us observe the first preaching under the Great Commission as recorded in Acts 2. Peter affirms the following things to be true. Christ is raised (Acts 2:22-36). The gospel is for all men (vv. 38-39, “every one of you,” “unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off”). Faith in Jesus Christ is essential (vs. 36). Baptism is essential (vs. 38). Salvation or “remission of sins” is received on the conditions of faith and baptism (vs. 38). The truth of the gospel preached by Peter was confirmed by miracles (vv. 22, 33, 43). The gospel message and the miracles confirming it to be true are recorded in Scripture. We do not need a new message or a new miracle, but we need to preach the gospel in its original purity, simplicity, and power.

There is nothing new or doubtful in Mark 16.

The Risen Savior Proclaimed by Mark!

If Mark 16:9-20 is rejected as fraudulent, Mark’s account of Jesus ends on a note of gloom, doubt, and confusion. In verses 1-8 the women who came to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus were startled by the open door, the empty tomb, and the claim of an angel that Jesus was risen. They then fled from the tomb bewildered and trembling, “neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid” (vs. 8). Those who doubt Mark 16:9-20 leave us with an account of Jesus which ends with an unconfirmed claim he was raised, and the women who followed him bewildered in fear.

The end note in The New International Version says of Mark, “His Gospel probably ended at 16:8, or its original ending has been lost.” Neither conclusion is possible. If the original ending is lost, God’s promise to preserve His Word has failed (1 Pet. 1:24-25). If Mark’s account ended at 16:8, he left the issue of the resurrection hanging in doubt.

To the contrary, Mark proclaimed the risen Savior! In Mark 16:9-20, Mark shows that the questions and doubts of the disciples were resolved by overwhelming evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then, Mark records our Lord giving these believing disciples the Great Commission:

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.

Mark ends by showing the power of the gospel at work in a world darkened by sin, giving the hope of salvation: “And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.”

Under that same Great Commission, we proclaim the same glad message today. The world must know the Savior has come! Yes, Mark 16:15-16 is genuine Scripture, proclaiming the hope of the world!