

Weekly Bible Study Series, Vol. 11, No. 21: 4 July 2010

© Imonitie Christopher Imoisili, E-mail : imoisilic@hotmail.com

For past issues and more, visit our Web Site: www.bibleresourcecentre.com

SIGNS FOLLOW DOERS NOT WISHERS!

Today's Text: Mark 16: 14-18

Extracts:

Later, [Jesus] appeared to the eleven [apostles] 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. 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*" [Mk 16: 14-18]

I still remember quite vividly the story of two young teachers during my primary school days. Both of them were trained and certified teachers, which was quite rare in those colonial days in rural Nigeria. She was pretty and he was handsome. Even in our impressionable age, we their pupils knew that they were in love. We wanted them to get married! But after one long vacation, we did not see her again and the man looked miserable. We overheard him complaining to his colleagues that the lady had jilted him to marry someone else! We sympathized with him and wished her dead! Many years later, I met the lady and pointedly accused her of disappointing us for refusing to marry that man. Her answer shocked me. She said, "I honestly loved Mr. --- and still miss him. But he never told me that he was looking for a wife! All we ever discussed was our work."

That man missed the woman of his dream because he did not at any time act on his feelings. It could have been due to timidity or fear or whatever. The bottom line is that he missed a unique opportunity because he did not act when it was necessary for him to do so. Do you know how many things you have denied yourself because you have not acted on your faith? Do you know how many of your prayers have not been answered because you have remained on your knees when you should be on your feet moving?

*In this week's study, Jesus has given examples of the signs that should **follow** believers. If you call yourself a believer and you have hardly seen those signs happening with or around you, then something is wrong somewhere. This week's study should help you to deal with the matter for your own good.*

1. Background: Signs ought to follow believers; not believers pursuing signs!

Jesus spent forty extra days, appearing from time to time to His disciples to demonstrate to them the reality of His resurrection. It was going to take some time for them to accept that the Christ appearing to them was real, not a ghost! That was why He took pains to show them His nail wounds and to eat with them [Lk 24: 36-42]. So, just before His ascension (as recorded by the Gospel of Mark), He sat with the eleven apostles at the table and revealed certain conditions and principles that will enable true believers then and now to do exploits.

We can summarize them under two broad categories: the profession of faith and the practice of faith. Let us expatiate on both:

a) *The profession of faith*

Jesus said, “He who believes and is *baptized* will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” [Mk 16:16]. This affirms that baptism is a necessary condition for demonstrating your faith in Jesus, that you have accepted Him as your Lord and Saviour, the Son of God who died on the cross for your sins [Rom. 10: 9-10]. This baptism is both by water and the Holy Spirit [Acts 1: 5; Acts 10: 46-48]. That is what makes you born again [Jn 3: 3, 5]. It is a covenant between you and Jesus and the word of God says that a vow cannot be broken [Num. 30:2]. That is why you need to confess each time you sin so as to keep the covenant relationship alive [1 Jn 1: 9].

b) *The practice of faith*

Until you put your faith to work, you cannot demonstrate to others that you are now a believer. God is not interested in how long ago you received your water baptism. Rather, His word clearly states that faith without works is dead [Jam. 2:26]; that if you do not use your faith, you do not have one! So, Jesus gave *examples* to His disciples of the signs and wonders that “will follow those who believe” [Mk 16: 17-18]. In the name of Jesus, believers *can* do the following:

- They will cast out demons

Demons are evil spirits that dwell in human beings and cause them physical, emotional and spiritual problems. Unless they are cast out, they can create unbearable hardship to those who are demon-possessed. Jesus promised His disciples that true believers who call on His name will be able to cast out such demons. Believers in the early church demonstrated it in abundance. For example, Philip who was one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles [Acts 6: 5] fled to the city of Samaria to escape the persecution of the

church by Saul (who later became Paul). We are told “The multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip [about Jesus], hearing and seeing the miracles which he did, *for unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed*” [Acts 8: 5-7].

- They will speak with new tongues

Another sign to follow believers is speaking in tongues and such tongues can be of men or of angels [1 Cor. 13: 1]. For example, on Pentecost Sunday, the disciples “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, *as the Spirit gave them utterance*” [Acts 2: 4]. Interestingly, on that very day, visitors, “Jews, devout men” had come to Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven” and “every one heard them speak in his own language” [vv. 5-6]. That sign and wonder arrested the people’s attention to listen to Peter’s sermon. In the end, “those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them” [v. 41]. That suggests that *the sign(s) manifested on each occasion depends on God’s purpose or plan*. Pentecost Sunday was a unique opportunity to take the gospel of Jesus to the whole world and God made the disciples speak in the tongues of all the nations represented in the Jerusalem crowd.

- They will take up serpents and drink anything deadly and will not be hurt [Mk 16: 18]

True believers are assured that nothing deadly (snake bite or poisoned food) can hurt them. Paul demonstrated this sign soon after the ship wreck on his way to Rome. The survivors had just landed on the island of Malta and it was raining and cold. As Paul was gathering a bundle of sticks to put on the fire, a viper came out and “fastened on his hand.” He simply “shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm” [Acts 28: 1-5]. *That suggests that, as believers pass through rough terrain or persecution while spreading the gospel, God will protect them from harm.*

- They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover [Mk 16: 18]

True believers have Christ’s authority to lay hands on the sick and they will get well. Let us continue with the example of Paul’s ministry on the island of Malta. Seeing that Paul had recovered from a poisonous snake bite without any medical treatment, the people paid him special attention. For three days, Paul and his fellow travellers were entertained by Publius, the leading citizen of

the island. It turned out that Publius' father lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul prayed and "laid his hands on him and healed him ... [and] the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed" [Acts 28: 7-8]. That event opened Malta to receive the gospel of Christ.

Everything that Jesus had promised His followers came to pass for "through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people ... [and] *believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women* [Acts 5: 12, 14-16]. In sum, the signs were granted to enable believers to win more souls for Christ. *Therefore, everything you do (by your words and deeds) is a sign by which people around you can be drawn to or away from Christ* [Phil. 4:9].

2. From wishing to doing!

What we have said so far looks like fairy tale to most of today's believers. Why are we not showing those signs and wonders promised by Jesus and demonstrated by His early disciples? Why does it seem that it is believers who are following signs and wonders instead of the other way round? Here are some of the reasons:

a) *We are crippled by fear!*

Many of us are scared to try for fear that it may not work! Deep down in your heart, you hear such words as, "Are you the only one here? What if you lay your hands on that lame (or blind) person and nothing happens? Are you sure that Jesus has actually told you to do this? Don't you know this is a public place and not your church?" In the end, you are frozen in your place and do nothing for the sick and the demon-possessed at home, in your school, office or church. The word of God says that fear is a tormenting spirit [1 Jn 4:18].

The danger of fear is that it puts your faith at risk. For example, because of the evil report by ten of the twelve men that Moses had sent to spy out the Promised Land, the children of Israel feared to go forward and, instead, preferred to return to slavery in Egypt [Num. 14: 1-4]. For their unbelief, a journey of a few days turned into a forty-year sojourn in the wilderness [v. 34].

If you find yourself in that situation, *pray for spiritual boldness* for God has not given you the spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind [2 Tim. 1: 7]. For example, as the early disciples faced persecution from the Jewish leaders for the signs and wonders that followed them, they prayed, saying, "Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants *that with all boldness, they may speak your word; by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders*

may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.” As they prayed, the place where they were assembled shook and “they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness” [Acts 4: 29-31].

b) *Or we are too skeptical!*

We may have faith and are not afraid. But we want to be sure that all the “facts are in” before we move forward, especially if it involves some hardship! Even when we have a prophetic word on a matter, we still want to prove it “beyond reasonable doubt.” You want to be sure that it was the Holy Spirit and not the devil or a lying spirit that has spoken! You begin to analyze the spiritual profile of the messenger instead of focusing on the message.

Thomas (also called the Twin), one of the twelve apostles, was absent when the risen Christ first appeared to them. When his colleagues told him about it, he said, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, *I will not believe.*” A week later, after Jesus had challenged his skepticism, he fell on his knees and acknowledged Jesus as his Lord and God. Jesus made a statement for all future believers, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. *Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed*” [Jn 20: 24-29].

If you are waiting for a dramatic experience from heaven before you act on your professed faith, you may wait forever because you may never get one. If you think that facts are superior to faith, you cannot survive a single day!¹ If you do not move forward, everything about you will also stand still. For example, as Egyptian troops pressed in on the children of Israel by the Red Sea, God said to Moses, “*Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward. But lift up your rod and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it.*” Moses did so and the Red Sea parted into two to give Israel a dry passage [Ex. 14: 15-16]. He had the answer all along! Therefore, you need to be transformed by the renewing of your mind “that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect *will of God*” [Rom. 12: 2].

c) *Or we are on the path of deception*

Under the mistaken impression that signs and wonders are a measure of their spiritual power, some people are ready to do anything to acquire and show them. For example, you may have come across some people in your place of worship who force people to speak in tongues

¹ “If you think faith is so hard, try expertise!” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2 No. 8: 18 March 2001; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Ifyouthinkfaithishardtryexpertise.pdf

after laying hands on them just to validate their self-acclaimed calling. During worship and prayer, some people reel off in tongues just to impress those around them that they are up there in spirit! Some people perform rituals in the likeness of a magician's 'abracadabra' as if the Holy Spirit can be invoked!

A good illustration is what some itinerant Jewish exorcists and the sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, did in the Ephesian church during Paul's missionary journey there. They saw how God worked unusual miracles through Paul, so much so that even handkerchiefs or aprons from Paul's body were sent to the sick and diseases and evil spirits left them. So, the exorcists "took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, 'We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.'" Of course, you know the rest of the story! After the man in whom the evil spirit dwelt had overpowered the seven sons of Sceva, they fled that house naked and wounded "and the name of the Lord was magnified" [Acts 19: 11-19].

To deal with seducing spirits, masquerading as men/women of God, you need to have the Spirit of discernment so that you can differentiate between the spirit of *inspiration* (from the Holy Spirit) and the spirit of *divination* [Acts 16: 16] from the devil.

3. Conclusion: Get off your knees and keep moving!

From the foregoing, we can draw the following conclusions:

- ✓ **Signs and wonders are to enable you to do God's work, not for your self-aggrandizement; therefore, only God can determine what signs are necessary *in every circumstance*;**
- ✓ **Signs and wonders are to follow you; if you go after them, you are a sorcerer, not a believer!**

Jesus has said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" [Rev. 3: 20]. You may have heard His voice (the call) but if you do not open the door (by acting on your professed faith), He WILL NOT COME IN (with signs and wonders)! Do you want to pray or wait in vain and for nothing? God forbid!

Signs follow doers, not wishers.