

Handling Snakes & Drinking Poison

by Bill Crews

Most people have a decided aversion to snakes — whether small or large, non-poisonous or poisonous. But in most nations of the earth there are some whose vocation or avocation involves the regular handling of snakes. Many handle poisonous snakes of one kind or another and know how to do so without being bitten. (Some have even spent several days and nights in small compartments with a variety of vipers.) But accidents can occur or people can become careless. Many have survived venomous bites. Occasionally a handler of snakes dies after a toxic bite. Religion has nothing to do with what I have just mentioned.

In August of 1995 a woman died in Kentucky after being bitten by a rattlesnake. In October of 1998, her husband also died after being bitten by a rattlesnake. She was 28; he was probably in his early 30's; they leave behind five children, ages 4 to 12. He was a preacher who sincerely believed that the Lord wanted them to handle poisonous snakes, promising that if they had enough faith, no harm would come to them (after all he said that he had been bitten 22 times in the past and survived each occasion). Both of them died from bites received at church services. There are many of these churches at whose services venomous snakes (rattlesnakes, copperheads, cotton-mouth water moccasins) are deliberately handled. All of them point to Mark 16:17-18 as their reason for doing so.

One of the appearances of the risen Christ to His disciples is recorded in Mark 16:14-18. In this instance Jesus appeared unto *"the eleven"* (apostles). He rebuked them for their unbelief and their failure to believe the testimony of other disciples to whom He had previously appeared. He then gave them what men have called *"the great commission."* They were commanded to go into all the world and to preach the gospel to all. Anyone who, upon hearing the gospel, would believe it and be baptized was promised salvation. Condemnation would be the fate of anyone who would not believe. And then Jesus made this announcement:

"And these signs (miracles) shall accompany (follow) them that believe: in my name shall they cast out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall in no wise hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mk. 16:17-18).

After this Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down on the right hand of God (v. 19). The last verse of Mark (v. 20) then tells us that the very signs that Jesus had promised did accompany or follow those that believed. It also clearly states the divine purpose of or reason for those signs. It reads: *"And they went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and **confirming the word by the signs that followed.** Amen."* (EMPHASIS MINE)

Jesus was not teaching that every single believer would be able to perform or be directly involved in every single one of these signs. Nor was He teaching that such signs would continue on down through the ages to the end of time. Nor was He saying that anyone of His disciples, from that time on, who had enough faith, would be able to do any of these signs. The brief statement in Mark 16:20 is a condensed version of the book of Acts where we read about the gospel of Christ being preached, first at Jerusalem, then in Judaea and Samaria, and then in other nations of the earth. So that the lost might believe the saving message, many confirming signs or miracles were performed among the people — the very signs that Jesus promised in Mark 16:17-18.

In the book of Acts we can read of occasions when signs in general were performed by the apostles and other disciples: Acts 2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6, 13; 14:3; 28:8-9. And in the book of Acts we can read of nearly every one of the signs promised in Mark 16:17-18 being performed:

"In my name shall they cast out demons." And they did in Acts 5: 16; 16:16-17 and 19:12.

"They shall speak with new tongues." And they did in Acts 2:1-11; 10:46 and 19:6.

"They shall take up serpents." Paul did not deliberately handle a venomous snake, but when he was bitten by one (it fastened on his hand, and he shook it loose into a fire), no harm came to him, and what an effect it had on the natives of the place (Acts 28:3-6).

And if they drink any deadly thing, it shall in no wise hurt them." We have no record in Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament of such an instance. But it certainly may have occurred in the first century when the new covenant was being revealed and confirmed by these signs. Hebrews 2:3-4 says: *"How shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation? which having at the first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed unto us by them that heard; God also bearing with them, both by signs and ...*

continued on page 292704

292703