

HOPE ON THE ROAD OF DESPAIR

SERIES: JESUS SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

Last Tuesday evening the elections booths were closed, the voting was over, and before we went to bed we knew that we had a new president and vice-president. We also were aware that in the days to come we would see new cabinet members, senators, and representatives. Our president-elect told us that he would be a man who would bring many changes to our society through programs that would promote jobs, enhance education, and open doors for trade. He would appoint new Supreme Court justices, work on pro-choice programs for pregnant woman, and open the door to introduce gays into the military, etc.

The election has caused mixed reactions among the citizens of our country, running the spectrum from great joy to great despair and fear. I also experienced a range of emotions, as did the students gathered that night for my Discovery Seminar; that is, until we were able to remind ourselves of the truth found in Daniel 2:20-21:

"Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever,
For wisdom and power belong to Him.
And it is He who changes the times and the epochs;
He removes kings and establishes kings."

Paul would pick up this truth in writing to the Romans: "For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." (13:1) Yet in spite of these Biblical truths, despair can attack us not only on a political level but also on a personal level, affecting our mental, emotional, and spiritual lives. Despair is a deep feeling which leaves us with a sense of hopelessness, a feeling that there is no hope of change or escape from the difficulties of our current situation. And unless we invite Jesus to become our king and set up his kingdom in our hearts, we will remain in a state of deep despair.

If you ever have gone through, or are now in, a time of despair, a time of hopelessness and fear, then you will appreciate the two disciples we meet in Luke 24:13-35, who were found on a Sunday afternoon long ago walking down the road of despair.

The road of despair

Luke 24:13-24

And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. And they were conversing with each other about all these things which had taken place. And it came about that while they were conversing and discussing, Jesus Himself approached, and began traveling with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. And He said to them, "What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?" And they stood still, looking sad. And one of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?" And He said to them, "What things?" And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, and did not find His body, they came, saying that

they had also seen a vision of angels, who said that He was alive. And some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see."

It was the third day after the death and burial of Jesus. Early that morning, several faithful women, arriving at the tomb with spices to anoint his body, instead found the stone rolled away and the body of Jesus missing. In the midst of their perplexity, "two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling apparel; and ...said to them, 'Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.'" (24:4-7) The women reported these things to the apostles and the other disciples who thought they were nonsense. But Peter, even in his unbelief, ran to the tomb to find it empty just as the women had said.

It was after those events that two of the disciples left Jerusalem and began the seven-mile walk down through the hills of Judea to the village of Emmaus. Perhaps, as they conversed and reviewed the events of the past three days, they found themselves "iffing." If only Jesus had run from the garden when he had the chance, what a different day this would have been. If only we had stood with him during his trial. If only Peter had not denied Jesus. If only Jesus had not admitted to Pilate that he was a king. If only the secret disciples among the Pharisees like Joseph and Nicodemus had spoken out on Jesus' behalf. If, if, if only...

While they were conversing and discussing [and iffing] Jesus Himself approached, and began traveling with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him." I believe Jesus prevented these disciples from seeing him as their risen Lord in order to show them who they were at this moment without him, as well as how much they needed him to continue living out their lives on this earth to the glory of God and their spiritual joy. How often we get caught up in the hopelessness of a situation, blinded to what God is doing beyond that current circumstance. We hear the truth of God, but the eyes of our hearts are prevented from being enlightened because we choose to invite despair to overwhelm us. We often don't understand the immediate events of our lives and allow perplexity and sadness to confuse us to the point where we settle for the physical or historical interpretation of what is going on around or within us. Thus, we become blind to the spiritual realities behind those events.

Jesus wanted the disciples to articulate the cause of their sadness. Cleopas questioned the stranger: "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these last days?" And Jesus said to them, "What things?" Our Lord was going to let them review who he had been before he showed them who he is. For at this moment they were living in the past and he was living in the present (and still is). Imagine these two disciples telling their story of hope and subsequent despair to Jesus along that road to Emmaus. (Note their use of the word "was.")

1. "He was Jesus the Nazarene." There were many men who were named Jesus, but this man from Nazareth was given his name before he was born. An angel appeared in a dream and said to Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20, 21)

2. He was a prophet who was. "[He] was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people. He was a mighty man of God who made the Scripture shine forth so that we understood who God was, who we were, and what God wanted of us. It was always an exciting adventure to be with him. We were hoping that he was the prophet that Moses spoke of in Deuteronomy, but unfortunately, he was a prophet who was."

3. "He was mighty in deeds. He did many signs and miracles among us which can be best summed up in his words to John the Baptist who was sitting in prison wondering if Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus instructed two of John's disciples, 'Go and report to John...: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them.'" (Luke 7:22)

4. "He was mighty in word. When he spoke his words rang with the power and authority of God himself." At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Matthew recorded: "The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." (Matthew 7:28-29)

5. "God loved him and the common people loved him, but the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. They crucified a good man, a great prophet, and a possible messiah, shattering our dreams and hopes. [The disciples viewed the cross as a failure.] He almost made it, but he failed. He got caught on two stupid charges-the religious charge of blaspheming God by admitting he was the Son of God in presence of the high priest [Matthew 26:63-65], and the political charge of declaring himself the King of the Jews in the presence of Pilate, the Roman governor [Matthew 27:11]. As a result they nailed him to a cross."

Writing about the crucifixion, Ralph Earle says:

"True, it was the world's blackest hour, but also the world's brightest hour. It was the blackest hour because human hatred came to its fiercest focus. It was the brightest hour because divine love came to its fullest flower. At Calvary, hatred was seen in all of its heinous horror, but there also love revealed the heart of God. Calvary stands at the crossroads of human history. At the cross, all the sins of the ages were placed on the heart of the sinless Son of God, as he became the representative of all humanity. From the cross salvation flows to every believing soul. This is the gospel, the greatest good news the world had ever heard." And these disciples were missing it.

The disciples spoke of their shattered dreams and hopes. "We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. We thought that this man whom we followed for three years was the promised Messiah who would redeem us from the yoke of the Romans, like God redeemed Israel from Egypt, the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks. We were hoping it was he who would bring in the 'New World Order,' the kingdom of God in which Israel would once again become the true vine, the salt and light, and the righteous nation which would bring salvation to the nations. If he was the prophet, the Messiah, the Son of God and the King of kings; if he promised us he would rise again from the dead-where is he? After all, it has already been three days." Jesus had told his disciples four times in the gospel of Luke, "He will be delivered up to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." (9:22; 9:44; 18:32,33; 22) At that time, however, the full meaning was hidden from them. Now they were slowly beginning to understand on "the third day" but were showing impatience because of their shattered dreams and hopes.

They went on to tell Jesus of the mystery of the empty tomb, relating all the events from the story of the women to the disciples' own investigation. These strange things left them saddened, for they were blinded to the spiritual realities behind the apparently tragic events of the past few days. They did not fully understand that it was necessary for Jesus to go to the cross as the perfect, innocent, unblemished lamb of God in order to cancel the sin, guilt, and shame of humanity for each and every individual who placed their faith in him as their Lord and Savior.

But thanks be to God for the empty tomb! The bodily resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. For without the resurrection the cross would have been in vain. It is his resurrection that validates the atoning death of Jesus, that proves Jesus' death for our sins has been accepted by God the Father. Without the resurrection there would be no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, no hope now or in the future, no life filled with righteousness, peace, and joy now or later. Peter, some thirty years later, would summarize the value of the resurrection in a letter written to the suffering church in Turkey: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3)

I have seen this hope clearly illustrated at memorial services or funeral services where there is an open casket. You can divide the room right in half between those who have a living hope and those who have a living death. On one side are those who believe that the life of the person in the casket is over. They think that's it; they'll never see them again. There is such despair and anguish, such mourning and weeping over the body, touching it and kissing it as though that were the end. Then there are the Christians on the other side. They walk up, they glance... they know the person is not there. They are already with the Lord. And there is a joy-a sadness because they won't see them for a while, but a joy. The separation is only for a moment. That is hope based on the resurrection of Jesus.

Our resurrected Lord Jesus lovingly and patiently listened to his disciples trapped in their blindness, despair, grief, perplexity, and incredible unbelief. Then he moved them from the apparent tragedy of the last three days to a higher spiritual plane, a place of spiritual reality, and once again reminded them of the eternal truths which had been written by the prophets concerning the suffering and glory of the Messiah.

Are you reading your Bible?

Luke 24:25-27

And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

The Lord told these two men that they, as well as the other disciples, were suffering from a spiritual illness. The symptoms of this illness were foolishness in their thinking and slowness of heart. He said, "You kept foolishly hoping that the Son of Man would be the great warrior Messiah who would come with an army, defeat the Romans in a war, and set up his physical kingdom on this earth. Instead, he came into Jerusalem riding on a colt, symbolizing peace, and desiring to set up his spiritual kingdom in the hearts of his people. He told you on more than one occasion, the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. [Luke 19:10] His offer has always been a message of spiritual salvation, not a war against Rome." Then he said, "You had in hand the many prophecies of first the suffering and then the glory of Messiah. But you were slow to believe them; you kept trying to skip the suffering of the cross as recorded in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 and to get right to the glory as recorded in Isaiah 60-66.

Then the Lord took this teachable moment, "and beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." The spiritual review may be summarized something like this:

"The Christ is the Passover Lamb in Exodus.
The Christ is the Atoning Sacrifice in Leviticus.
The Christ is the Smitten Rock in Numbers.
The Christ is the Prophet to come in Deuteronomy.
The Christ is the Sheep that was lead to slaughter in Isaiah.
The Christ is the Branch of Righteousness in Jeremiah.
The Christ is the Plant of Renown in Ezekiel.
The Christ is the Stone that smote the image in Daniel.
The Christ is the Ideal Israel in Hosea.
The Christ is the Hope of the people in Joel.
The Christ is the Heavenly Husbandman in Amos.
The Christ is the Savior in Obadiah.
The Christ is the Resurrection and Life in Jonah.
The Christ is the Restorer in Micah.
The Christ is the Publisher of Peace in Nahum.
The Christ is the Anointed One in Habakkuk.
The Christ is the Mighty One to save in Zephaniah.

The Christ is the Desired One of all the nations in Haggai.
The Christ is the Headstone of the House of God in Zechariah.
The Christ is the Son of Righteousness with healing in His wings in Malachi."

What a lesson! How blind they had become! But he spent the time to show them that he was on every page of the Old Testament. He reminded them of what the Scriptures taught of his need to suffer and to die for the sins of humanity, and that on the third day he would be raised from the grave by the power of his Father. The truths that Jesus shared with the disciples on the road to Emmaus have important applications to us today. He was the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, but he is now the risen Messiah, the one and only Son of God, the Savior of the world, as well as the righteous prophet, priest, and king over all mankind in the past, present, and future. And he desires to be that prophet, priest, and king within our hearts. He wants to work out his plan of redemption in and through us, his people.

At Dallas Seminary I had a Greek professor named Dr. Johnson who was from Charleston, South Carolina. He left a profound mark on my spirit. Sitting in his class, I would listen as he opened up the Greek text in the Gospel of Mark. He not only taught us Greek but he would share his thoughts on the spiritual truths and mysteries of a particular passage. I can still remember the first time I had the courage to ask him a question about his view of a verse in Mark. He looked at me, paused, and then said in that wonderful Carolinian accent, "Mr. Ritchie, are you reading your Bible? Because all the answers are right there in front of you." For the rest of our year together, with great humor each and every time I would ask a question, he, at first, and then later the whole class in chorus, would say, "Mr. Ritchie are you reading your Bible?" It was just as Christ was saying to the disciples: "You could have avoided all this despair if you had read your Bibles." It was right there in front of them, but they missed it.

These disciples had a very difficult weekend. The despair which already filled their hearts was made more intense in the meeting of a stranger who seemed to have missed all the events around Jesus' life, death and burial. And to make matters worse, this stranger began to rebuke them from the Scriptures about the Messiah's need to suffer before he could enter into his glory. But their despair was about to turn into a living hope.

Opened eyes and burning hearts

Luke 24:28-32

And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He would go farther. And they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over." And He went in to stay with them. And it came about that when He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?"

Upon reaching the village of Emmaus the two disciples asked this stranger to stay with them, for the sun was setting and it was time for dinner and a night of rest. After dinner was served, he reached out, took the bread, blessed it, and then handed it to them. It was at that moment that "their eyes were opened and they recognized Him," for here he was serving them again but this time with nail-pierced hands. And then he just disappeared, leaving them to ponder this revelation.

The disciples saw their road of despair begin to turn into a highway of living hope as they said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" Finally, we understand what the Scriptures mean because the risen Christ has explained them to us. The Spirit of God entered our hearts, and they were set on fire because we knew what he was saying was true.

At present, the Bible is the most published book of all time. Bibles are freely available in the western world

and are hungered for in the eastern block of nations. We can find them in hotel rooms, libraries, airports, and bus stops. But to read the Bible is not to understand it. The Bible can only be understood by spiritually hungry men and women who are willing to depend on our risen Lord Jesus to explain the spiritual truth contained within its pages. The Bible is not a magic book. We need the Spirit of God to open our eyes and show us who Jesus Christ is. Then our hearts too will start to burn within us, and we will desire to learn more about this wonderful Lord Jesus and the life he desires for all of us to live to his glory and our joy.

Back up the highway of hope

Luke 24:33-35

And they arose that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, saying, "The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon." And they began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread.

Hope had replaced despair, and, after rising from the table, they began what I am sure was a steady run back up the hills to Jerusalem, and were soon reunited with the rest of the disciples. As the two sweating but joyful disciples entered the room, their hearts filled with the good news, they walked into a cluster of men and women all confirming for one another and anyone else who would listen, the good news that "the Lord has really risen." Mary Magdalene had seen, touched, and spoken with Jesus in the garden (John 20:11-18). Peter, who had been struggling with his own guilt over denying Jesus at the trial, related how he also went to the tomb and found it empty. And then, sometime during that same day, the risen Lord had appeared to him. Finally, the two disciples were given time in the midst of all the rejoicing to share their experience on the road to Emmaus, and how they finally recognized him "in the breaking of the bread."

What a weekend those men and women had to go through. First, they felt great despair because they saw the cross as the end of Jesus' life, the end of their hopes, and the end of the story. But what a difference on that first Easter Sunday evening, the gloom and confusion ending as they finally came to the realization that Jesus had risen from the grave. Their despair turned to hope not hope that existed for its own sake, but hope in the truth of the resurrection based on the physical evidences of at least four witnesses: Mary, Peter, Cleopas, and his friend.

What a difference that day could make to so many of us who say we are followers of Jesus Christ but continue to struggle with the idea that his resurrection means that he is alive, and though invisible, present and available to empower us with the same resurrection power that raised him from the grave. That resurrection power will be needed in the days ahead, which promise to be filled with many changes. Those changes, seen from God's viewpoint, will be great opportunities to share the good news of our risen Lord Jesus as the world's only "living hope."

Those of you who are not only struggling with Jesus as the risen Lord and the world's only Savior, but are also struggling with the hopelessness and despair of your own personal lives, I would encourage you to go by faith to the risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Go to him with your unbelief, and ask him to open the eyes of your heart to see, based on the personal testimony of family members and friends all around you, that Jesus is the risen Son of God and is willing to become your Lord if you would place your faith in him as your personal Savior. What a difference that decision could make in your life today!

With the words Paul wrote to encourage the Ephesians, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places."

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