

Luke 24:13-35
The Road to Emmaus

For those of us who wish to follow Christ, one of the things that must be most important is the proper understanding of and application of the truth of God's Word. Scripture itself makes that clear.

“The sum of Your word is truth,
And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting” (Psalm 119:160).

“For the word of the Lord is upright,
And all His work is done in faithfulness” (Psalm 33:4).

“Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

“The one who despises the word will be in debt to it,
But the one who fears the commandment will be rewarded” (Proverbs 13:13).

“He who gives attention to the word will find good,
And blessed is he who trusts in the Lord” (Proverbs 16:20).

Jesus, God Incarnate, said “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). As believers, we know that it is not possible to fully comprehend the reality of sin, its spiritual consequences, and our need for salvation apart from an appropriate understand of the truth of Scripture. We can only be sanctified as we fulfill our calling to be obedient to God, and we can only know what it is we need to obey if we rightly understand God's Word. We cannot appreciate the temptations of this world, or discover how to fight the fight of the faith without knowing and applying God's Word. His purpose for us, indeed His purpose for all humankind can only be truly known in Scripture.

But while that is true for us in the Church age, it also applied to those at the time of Christ. To the earliest believers as well, the need to properly understand and apply the truth of Scripture was paramount. As we have seen, confusion over the purpose and meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus resulted largely from a misunderstanding of God's Word as it related to the Messiah.

In this account, the first Luke records after his narrative about the resurrection itself, Jesus has a conversation with two of His disciples as they are traveling along a road. The drama of the moment is that it is the risen Christ Himself (unbeknownst to His fellow travelers), Who is explaining what the Scripture said about His own death and resurrection. Recognizing their confusion, and resulting heartbreak, Jesus took them through the Scriptures they should have known, to demonstrate that God's plan had not been thwarted.

The Misunderstanding

Luke transitions abruptly to the next part of his narrative. Having finished his account of the resurrection, Luke shifts the scene to a location a few miles away later that same day. After the dramatic events of the last two days it seemed the group of disciples that had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with Jesus was going their separate ways, for “two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus” (v. 13). Perhaps they lived there or perhaps it was just the first stopping point in a longer journey. Whether these were two of the innermost circle of Jesus’ followers, or not, is not recorded.

Luke informs us that the story of the resurrection was not limited to the eleven remaining disciples only, as the women who say the empty tomb and the risen Jesus had “returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest” (Luke 24:9). But, from the conversation that followed on the road to Emmaus, we can conclude that these two men were at least intimate enough with Jesus and the other disciples to have heard of the resurrection and the varying accounts from both the women at the tomb and Peter and John.

The encounter Luke records took place on the Sunday Jesus had risen, later in the afternoon (v. 29). The town of Emmaus is unknown to us today, but Luke claims it was a bit less than seven miles from the walls of Jerusalem. Since the encounter took place on Sunday afternoon and the walk could not have taken more than two hours at most, the two men would have had ample time to hear the many conflicting reports about the resurrection of Jesus as word spread throughout Jerusalem that day. The men probably had walked for a while in silence. No doubt each was wrapped up in his own thoughts as to what it all had meant. They were discouraged, confused, and dared not to hope. They had believed Jesus to be the Messiah, but their theology had no room for a Messiah who died.

Eventually they began to talk, and there was only one subject to talk about, “they were talking with each other about all these things which had taken place. (v. 14). What things? Clearly everything. We do not know how long these men had followed Jesus, but surely they discussed the triumphal entry into Jerusalem less than a week previous. Perhaps they remembered how Jesus had cleared the temple and disrupted the profitable exchange by which the rulers of the temple made a handsome profit each Passover. Maybe they talked about how Jesus had confounded the Pharisees, Sadducees, and others sent to trick Him into betraying some false word by which they could accuse Him.

Surely the conversation turned at some point to the moment when they heard the news that Jesus had been arrested and was being tried by the Sanhedrin. They may have been in the crowd that gathered outside the praetorium as Jesus was brought before Pilate. No doubt they trembled with fear as the masses cried out “crucify Him!” They perhaps followed along the road to Calvary and watched from a safe distance as Jesus suffered and died. They felt the earthquake. They saw the sky darkened.

But that had been Friday. They had returned to their place of lodging and tried to celebrate the Sabbath. Each told the other of what their thoughts had been when they heard the news from the women that Jesus had arisen. And then it was confirmed by Peter and John. But what did it all mean? With no answers, they had probably decided to head for home. And then, “while they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them” (v. 15).

This was likely not a surprise. We must remember that in the time Jesus lived most people walked from place to place and, to both pass the time and to secure some sense of security, people often traveled together. For another traveler to join them on the way was nothing out of the ordinary. What might seem out of the ordinary though, is that they did not immediately recognize the risen Christ as Who He was. Yet, Mary Magdalene had the same experience at the tomb. And, Luke tells us, “their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him” (v. 16).

Apparently, Jesus did not appear as transcendent as He had done to others after His resurrection, nor did His appearance even approach the glory of the transfiguration. In his very brief mentioning of this event, Mark wrote that Jesus “appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking along on their way to the country” (Mark 16:12). Whatever that form may have been, it certainly appeared to be perfectly normal. And, certainly these two disciples were not expecting to meet Jesus along the way. They had not quite understood the stories the women told of His resurrection, and they were no doubt puzzled by the reports of Peter and John that the tomb had been found empty, but it is not possible to think that these two men *expected* Jesus to rise from the dead. No one did. Think of the others in the room. Peter, overwhelmed with regret for having denied Jesus. Thomas, forever the cynic. John, more worried about Mary than anything else.

Like any traveler might, Jesus began by asking them “what are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?” (v. 17). Jesus did not ask because He did not know, of course, He did so to begin a conversation. It was a seemingly innocuous question, but it stopped the men in their tracks. “They stood still, looking sad” (v. 18) wondering where this man had been in the last forty-eight hours. Finally, “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?’” (v. 19). It has been suggested that Luke mentions Cleopas by name since he was the source of the story. That is certainly not out of the question. Perhaps this was the same Cleopas who was married to the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus and had witness the crucifixion close hand (John 19:25). In any case the question was a valid one. How could anyone, even a pilgrim only there for Passover, have missed the news about a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus continued to claim ignorance. Staring at them blankly He responded “what things?” (v. 19). That question produced an overflow of detail. Everything they had been talking about recently came out. In a rapid fire succession of declarations, they said

“¹⁹the things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, ²⁰and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. ²¹But 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. ²²But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. ²⁴Some 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.” (v. 19-24).

First, they declared that Jesus was a prophet, that is He was one Who spoke the words of God. It was a description Jesus had heard before, both from a Samaritan woman (John 4:19) and a blind man He had healed (John 9:17). And His role as a prophet had been validated by miracles. He had demonstrated His power over sickness and demons, famine and storms, life and death. He was indeed “a prophet mighty in deed and word” (v. 19).

And He had been affirmed by God. We do not know if these two men were present at the baptism of Jesus, but surely they had heard the reports that “²¹while He was praying, heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, ‘You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased’” (Luke 3:21-22). And, presuming they had been in Jerusalem when Jesus entered, they had heard His praises sung by “all the people” (v. 19).

And Jesus was not just any prophet. It had been hoped “that it was He who was going to redeem Israel” (v. 21). He was thought to be the Messiah. He was the One Whom God had sent to crush Israel’s enemies and restore the nation to its former place of prominence. He was expected to be the One of Whom God had said, “I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deuteronomy 18:18).

But that had not happened. Instead, “the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to the sentence of death, and crucified Him” (v. 20). Interestingly, though Jesus had been crucified by Roman soldiers after receiving the sentence from a Roman governor, these two men saw the true culprits as the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. Neither did they lay the blame at the riotous crowd that had demanded His death. These two men were not fooled by circumstances. They knew that the Jewish religious leadership was to blame and that is precisely where they placed it.

But here was the disconnect. Every Jew understood that to redeem something a price was required to be paid. That was the entire principle behind the sacrificial system (Leviticus 27, is a fine example). Though they knew that redemption required death, and though they knew that the Messiah would be sent to redeem mankind, they never put the two together and understood that therefore, the Messiah must die.

Now it had been three days since this had occurred. It was Sunday. Upon awakening from what must have been a very restless night “some women among us amazed us” (v. 22). These women told the unbelievable story that “²²they were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³and did not find His body, [and] they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive (v. 22-23). This had been confirmed by “some of those who were with us,” presumably Peter and John (v. 24). Yet, though what the women had said about the empty tomb had proved correct, there was still disbelief about whether Jesus had, in fact, risen from the dead, for “Him they did not see” (v. 24).

Understanding Revealed

Waiting no longer, Jesus cleared up their confusion. He knew that for these two men to have true belief, they not only need to have the mental acknowledgment that He had risen from the dead, but they also needed to understand what that implied regarding Jesus as the Messiah. The point of His questioning was to ascertain what they knew, and what they believed. One can appreciate the lesson implied here. Jesus

did not begin with a sermon. He first began by discovering where His audience was in regards to the spiritual understanding. This is an important point to take in, and we would do well to apply this as we share the gospel. It is also important not to miss the point that Jesus explained the Scriptures to these men before they knew Who He was. What is meant to be appreciated is that it is the Scriptures themselves, not the person doing the explaining, that is of importance.

But He did not begin kindly, rebuking them by stating “how foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” (v.25). It is hoped that He said this with a wry smile, but perhaps that asks too much. His point was clear, though. Their confusion stemmed directly from their misunderstanding of the Scriptures. They had looked for a Messiah Who would rule and reign, not suffer and die.

But, as Jesus explained, “did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? (v. 27). Jesus had pursued this line of questioning before. Often in His teaching He would say such things.

“Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ” (Matthew 12:3).

“Haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? “ (Matthew 12:5).

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,” (Matthew 19:4).

“¹⁰Haven’t you read this passage of Scripture:

‘The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

¹¹the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes?’” (Mark 12:10-11).

All of this should have been common knowledge. No explanation should have been necessary. All Jews understood that sin was paid for by death. It had begun with Adam and Eve, when God killed an animal to make skins to cover them. Abel’s sacrifice was accepted because it was a blood sacrifice, Cain’s was not. The sacrificial system had been established early in the history of Israel, and had been modified and structured into elaborate detail. It was the whole purpose of the Passover celebration and the Day of Atonement. And it was understood, that this process was, ultimately, insufficient to pay adequately for man’s sins. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, in speaking of the inadequacies of the Law wrote that

“¹it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ²Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins” (Hebrews 10:1-2).

But Jesus was a patient teacher, so “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (v. 27). Luke gives no details, but we must wonder if Jesus began with the promise God made after the Fall,

“And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

Then He went on to expound about the ram offered in place of Isaac, the Passover lambs, the offerings of Leviticus, the Day of Atonement, the scapegoat in the wilderness, the many prophecies of the Messiah, the details of His crucifixion predicted in Isaiah 53 and His resurrection predicted in Psalm 16.

The Response

The men were overcome. They had to hear more. So, “²⁸as they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, ‘stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over’” (v. 28-29). The two men had reached their destination, but their fellow traveler appeared to have not. Wanting to hear more, they implored Him to be their guests. Travel at night was never a good idea if one could avoid it, and stressing the lateness of the hour, they offered hospitality, but clearly their motivation was to hear more of what Jesus had been saying.

Jesus obliged. They continued talking and the interest of His hosts was so intense, that they forgot to play their role. Unwilling to cause them embarrassment, Jesus, “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” (v. 30). It was at this moment that “their eyes were opened and they recognized Him” (v. 31). We can wonder if it was not the familiar way in which Jesus served them that caused them to finally see Him as Who He was. In any case, they had only a moment to glimpse the reality of the risen Lord before “He vanished from their sight” (v. 31).

Interestingly, Luke does not record what they said about the immediate disappearance of Jesus. Instead Luke wrote, “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?’” (v. 32). They had been inspired not as much by the risen Lord as by the accurate and truthful revelation of the Scriptures. And as we might expect, the fire that now burned within them spilled out into wanting to tell others what they knew about Jesus. So, naturally “³³they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, ³⁴saying, ‘the Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon.’ ³⁵They began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread” (v. 33-35). Nevermind the lateness of the day. Nevermind that they had just reached their destination. Nevermind that there would be beasts and robbers to fear as darkness approached. They had to tell the others. What had been a contemplative slow walk to Emmaus, became a race back to Jerusalem.

Takeaways

It is true as ever that a genuine believer must have a solid understanding of the truth of Scripture. It is simply not possible to live a life pleasing to God apart from that. May God give us enthusiasm for His Word and discipline to study it carefully, that we might better know Him and serve Him.