

Easter Sunday: Encountering Jesus along the Rocky Road of Life

By Tom & Alberta Ecker

Just days prior to the late night arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had mounted a colt, the foal of a donkey, a recognized symbol of peace and an unmistakable prophetic identification with the Messiah, and rode into Jerusalem to the cheering of thousands. Willing subjects of the coming King paved His path with their cloaks. Others cut palm branches, laid them along the stone pavement, and shouted, "Save us! Save us!"

He was their Messiah. He had promised abundant life. He had taught the good news of the Kingdom of God. His followers fully expected He would become their king and that Israel would again be prosperous and free. Expectations and emotions were running high on what came to be known as Palm Sunday. But less than a week later, as the sun fell behind the horizon toward the end of an unforgettable week, the Son of God hung cold and lifeless on a Roman cross just outside the city gates.

His most faithful followers sat in dejected anguish as the sun set on that crucifixion day and the Sabbath began. In light of the prophecies, which Jesus had fulfilled, in light of the promises He made, and given the complete confidence they had placed in Him, nothing made sense. Their world had suddenly been turned upside down. Not only had Jesus failed to improve and save Israel, according to their expectations; but the nation's future seemed bleaker than ever. Discouragement, desperation, disappointment, and dejection reigned supreme in Jesus' disciples.

Perhaps you can identify with the pain of Jesus' followers. Perhaps you have experienced the death of a dream or had the bridge to *your* ideal future crumble beneath your feet. Maybe you have had to make a major change of direction in your life, stepping out of what is familiar into an unfamiliar future. Maybe your expectations became disappointing and discouraging. Maybe you're suffering in a difficult, disillusioning situation right now. **If so, this is your opportunity to experience abundance and intimacy like no other time in your life.**

Does that surprise you? I mean, isn't spiritual enlightenment supposed to be enthralling? Isn't divine wisdom the result of an ecstatic encounter in which

God's Spirit mystically touches ours? Many television and radio preachers make the spiritual life sound so exciting, like a miracle a day will drive all our problems away. Some talk of "victorious living" and the "the good life" in which all our dreams will come true if we'll only choose to live by faith and claim God's best!

That's not abundant living. That's nothing more than a spiritualized spin on "the power of positive thinking." It's the same talk you'll hear from any motivational speaker in the country with the addition of a few Bible verses tossed in (usually out of context) to give it a sanctified shine.

Thanks to blockbuster movies, thrill rides and Madison Avenue ad campaigns, we have come to expect that if life isn't "sensational," something must be wrong. We must be skinny and beautiful, or tall and handsome. We must pursue a career that's continually challenging and rewarding, become rich and famous and enjoy a family life that's dynamic, fulfilling and laced with fabulous vacations.

If we're not careful, we can apply those cooked up Madison Avenue expectations and the hyped up positive thinking expectations to our spiritual journey. The danger is that we may fail to see the hand of God and his presence in the ordinary, mundane, and repetitive events of life. Even more tragic, we might fail to recognize His gentle teaching in the midst of life's most painful trials.

Let's see how Jesus turned the tragic, disillusioning event of his crucifixion into a continuing journey of faith and trust in him. Jesus starts us off on this journey of faith with the 7- mile walk of two disciples who are intently discussing the recent events that took place in Jerusalem and are **trying to make sense** of these events.

The Road to Disappointment

As the sun rose on Sunday morning and the Passover feast had come to an end, two of Jesus' followers left for home, clearly disillusioned and resolving to leave their foolish dreams and high expectations back in Jerusalem forever, they were going to leave it all behind them. Even as rumors of resurrection circulated, the dejected pair began the 7-mile walk to the village of Emmaus.

They were talking intently to each other about all the things that had happened. While they were talking and debating these things, Jesus himself approached and began to accompany them. Then Jesus, **whom they did**

not recognize, said to them, "What are these matters you are discussing so intently as you walk along?" (**Luke 24:13-17 NET**)

Jesus Walks the Road to Emmaus

^{24:13} Now that very day two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ^{24:14} They were talking to each other about all the things that had happened. ^{24:15} While they **were talking and debating** these things, Jesus himself approached and began to accompany them ^{24:16} (but their eyes were kept from recognizing him). ^{24:17} Then he said to them, "What are these matters you are **discussing so intently as you walk along?**" And they stood still, **looking sad.**

Luke describes the disciples' conversation as bantering ideas back and forth with great emotion in a shared search for answers. When Jesus asked, "What are these matters you are discussing?" (**Luke 24:17 NET**) Luke uses the term *antiballo*, which literally means "to throw back and forth." The disillusioned followers desperately wanted to know why their expectations of the Messiah had come to such a tragic end, and so they were exploring a number of theories.

Interestingly, the eyes of the two disciples were divinely prevented from recognizing Jesus. To them, He was just an ordinary man, a stranger on his way to Emmaus joining them on their journey. As Luke recorded the story, he employed a clever narrative device called **literary irony**, in which the reader is aware of important facts that are hidden from the characters. Note the delightful paradox we can enjoy as one of the Emmaus bound disciples responds to Jesus' question.

As they stood still looking sad, one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened there in these days?" (**Please read for context(Luke 24:17-19 NET)**)

^{24:17} Then he said to them, "What are these matters you are discussing so intently as you walk along?" And they stood still, looking sad. ^{24:18} Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know the

things that have happened there in these days?" ^{24:19} He said to them, "What things?" "The things concerning Jesus the Nazarene," they replied, "a man who, with his powerful deeds and words, proved to be a prophet before God and all the people;

Cleopas' question is truly laughable, when we consider the person to whom he is addressing this question. **If anyone understood what had happened, it was Jesus!** If anyone was clueless, and in need of answers, it was Cleopas! Nevertheless, Jesus encourages the disciples to talk by not humiliating or chastising them, he wants to know their thoughts and feelings. He plays along with them by asking, "What things?"

"The things concerning Jesus the Nazarene," they replied, "a man who, with his powerful deeds and words, proved to be a prophet before God and all the people; and how our chief priests and rulers handed him over to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." (**Please read for context (Luke 24:19-21 NET)**)

*^{24:19} He said to them, "What things?" "The things concerning Jesus the Nazarene," they replied, "a man who, with his powerful deeds and words, proved to be a prophet before God and all the people; ^{24:20} and how our chief priests and rulers handed him over to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ^{24:21} But we **had hoped** that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. Not only this, but it is now the third day since these things happened.*

And with that statement, Cleopas revealed the source of his trouble. His noble expectations for a social, political, and economic Messiah had failed to materialize. His limited perspective would not allow him to embrace the Messiah's true agenda, of which economic prosperity and political liberation were only a tiny fraction. Cleopas' expectation yielded another tragic consequence.

(Cleopas continued,) "Not only this, but it is now the third day since these things happened. Furthermore, some women of our group amazed us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back and said they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." (**Please read for context(Luke 24:21-24 NET)**)

24:21 But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. Not only this, but it is now the third day since these things happened. 24:22 Furthermore, some women of our group amazed us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 24:23 and when they did not find his body, they came back and said they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24:24 Then some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him."

Cleopas and his companion saw everything clearly in the sense that they had all the facts; nevertheless, **they lacked the ability to spiritually interpret what they knew and to see what was plainly visible.**

Three faulty perspectives coated their eyes like layers of dark film, shielding them from the truth and keeping them perpetually groping for answers in a despairing darkness. Jesus came to them to peel away the faulty perspectives **one layer at a time** until they could see clearly.

First, their viewpoint lacked a spiritual dimension, leaving them with a merely human understanding of the events.

Take note of how Cleopas characterized the death of Jesus. Don't miss the lack of divine involvement in his statement. He saw Jesus as "a prophet before God and all the people," but the chief priests and rulers "handed Him over" and "crucified Him." Despite the news from the women who had visited the empty tomb, these disciples still thought of Jesus as being crucified and dead because no one had seen Jesus, there was only the testimony of the empty tomb. The words of the angels at the tomb failed to give them a divine perspective on the events.

Why didn't Cleopas have a divine perspective? Before we start criticizing Cleopas and his companion, let's acknowledge a principle. When life is no longer "fantastic," when our expectations crumble and dreams fade, it's easy to slide into discouragement even into a time of depression. **Circumstances become our taskmaster.** People - especially those who took pains to cause our pain - seem to stand taller than God. Our vision becomes earthbound, horizontal. Our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling, and God seems far removed from our pain. Let's face it that's a natural response we all choose when our carefully constructed futures collapse under false or fantasized expectations.

Jesus is going to change their understanding and their expectations. He would explain to them from scripture that the recent

events were not set in motion by mere humans. He would explain to them that the events that happened were carefully preplanned and orchestrated by God.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were two very disillusioned disciples but let's reiterate that this is a natural response **we all choose when our carefully constructed futures collapse under false or fantasized expectations.** The two disciples could not grasp that as Jesus walked and talked with them God himself could not have been closer or more involved. But He prevented them from recognizing Him. Still speaking as an anonymous stranger, Jesus turns to the scriptures and peels away that first layer by **taking away** their lack of a spiritual dimension **and taking away** their merely human understanding of the events.

So he said to them, 'You foolish people - how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things written about himself in all the scriptures (**Please read for context (Luke 24:24-27 NET)**)

24:24 Then some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." 24:25 So he said to them, "You foolish people - how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 24:26 Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and enter into his glory?" 24:27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things written about himself in all the scriptures.

Second, their own agenda determined their expectations.

Remember that Cleopas had wistfully added, "**We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel**"(**Luke 24:21 NET**)

As I said earlier, the people of Israel made the mistake of thinking the Messiah would merely recapture the glory days of King David and victoriously lead Israel to become a Jewish world empire. Throughout His ministry, Jesus combated this limited perspective and tried to help people appreciate the much grander designs He had for the world. But **as long as the people clung to their own agenda, they remained blind to the reality** that God was in the process of creating through his Son, Jesus.

God had a New Covenant in mind. Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God here on earth, and the whole world was going to be invited to become citizens of this new Kingdom. **But the people and the disciples clung to their own agenda for Jesus.** He was there to fulfill their expectations. They certainly saw over and over that he had the power to fulfill their expectations of recapturing the glory days of Israel. So they clung all the more to their own agenda.

Let's pause for a moment and consider a few questions: To what expectation(s) are you clinging? What future have you determined for yourself? What agenda of yours do you have in mind for Jesus to fulfill? What perspectives will you choose when your plans come unraveled or someone (including Jesus) shatters your dreams?

We typically view circumstances, especially those involving loss, as difficult because the reality of those circumstances have not fulfilled our expectations. Moreover, the impression that God has abandoned us to our suffering only intensifies the pain of loss and the frustration of difficulties. The two followers on the road to Emmaus undoubtedly felt God-forsaken as they mourned the death of their dreams. **Ironically, the very agenda they clung to is what caused their pain and kept them from seeing Jesus in their presence.**

We need to be encouraged to release our own expectations and our own agendas. We need to hand them over to God, and open our hands to receive whatever He chooses to place in them. Here is a simple prayer that will be helpful in this area of releasing our expectations and our own agendas:

*Lord, I am willing
To receive what You give;
To lack what You withhold;
To relinquish what You take
To suffer what You inflict;
To be what You require.*

It was this yielded mentality that the two disciples lacked. Jesus helped them gain a divine, eternal perspective by teaching them from the Scriptures. Starting with the story of Genesis, applying the lyrics of the poets, and expositing the words of the prophets, He demonstrated how the sacrificial death of the Messiah was required to defeat evil. He very likely reminded them of the "Servant Songs" in the book of Isaiah, one of their favorite prophets. These songs feature a recurring figure called "the Servant of the Lord," who will bring justice to the world (**Isa 42:14 NET**), lead His people into a right relationship with God (**Isa 49:5 NET**), enlighten the

nations and bring salvation to everyone (**Isa 49:6 NET**), endure unjust humiliation (**Isa 50:6 NET**), and bear the divine punishment others deserve (**Isa 52:13 – 53:12 NET**).

The final song applauds the Servant for His sacrifice and extols His path to glory through His own humiliation. He is portrayed as a lamb led to an altar and slaughtered upon it as a sin offering. As it says in **Isa 52:6 NET**.

*He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.*

As they approached the town of Emmaus, the two disciples find themselves very intrigued by this stranger. So, in keeping with ancient Near Eastern rules of hospitality, they urged the stranger to stay the night. Jesus accepted the offer. **Jesus had clearly brought out in the Scriptures that God had a completely different agenda than the one the disciples had clung to.** But Jesus still maintained His anonymity because the disciples were not yet ready.

Third, they failed to acknowledge the resurrection.

They had heard the reports; they had all the facts. They simply refused to believe with their whole hearts. **And their lack of belief affected everything.** If these two disciples had believed that Jesus was alive, they would have behaved differently in at least two respects. *First*, they would not have left Jerusalem, where Jesus was last seen. *Second*, they would have accepted the trial, the crucifixion, and the burial of Jesus as the fulfillment of all He had promised, not as the end of their hopes.

As the afternoon sun drifted closer to the horizon, Jesus and the two followers prepared the evening meal and, no doubt, continued their discussion about the need for the Messiah to suffer and die. The disciples now understood that the Messiah had to suffer and die, and yet the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus was still heavy on their hearts, but not for much longer.

When he had taken his place at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. At this point their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Then he vanished out of their sight (**Luke 24:28-31 NET**).

***24:28** So they approached the village where they were going. He acted as though he wanted to go farther, **24:29** but they urged him, "Stay with us, because it is getting toward evening and the day is almost done." So he went in to stay with them.*

***24:30** When he had taken his place at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. **24:31** At this point their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Then he vanished out of their sight.*

The Greek phrase translated "their eyes were opened and they recognized Him" literally means "their eyes were completely opened and they came to fully comprehend Him." This was more than a passive, casual recognition of His features. **They came to recognize Jesus in all His significance as the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, the Son of God, and their risen Lord!**

Luke doesn't tell us why or how the breaking of bread opened their eyes. Perhaps they had seen him do this before and recognized the manner in which He broke the bread and held it up to offer thanks. All we know for certain is that the scales fell from the eyes of these disciples; **they clearly understood and saw their risen Lord for the first time.**

The Road Home

That's how it happens today. We can be going along through life, working and walking on whatever path - school, work, home, and ministry - and then something happens to upset the routine or worse, something reduces our life to rubble. At times like this God's presence can seem far removed. But just like the two disciples walking along with Jesus we can be assured that He remains close by, not only with us but he remains in us. However, we may have one or more faulty perspectives blocking the light of this reality from our eyes. As we conclude let's look at **three practical perspectives and transforming choices** that will help us **cope** with daily struggles **as well as recover** from life altering circumstances.

First, choose to view your spiritual life through God's eyes. This will not be easy because it doesn't come naturally to us. We cannot do this on our own. We have to allow God to elevate our vantage point. Start by reading His Word, the Bible. If you don't know where to begin, start with the New Covenant. Reading truth from the Bible - even when it doesn't seem to have a direct application to what I'm going through - gives my perspective a vertical dimension.

Pray and ask God to transform your thinking. Let Him do what you cannot. Ask Him to give you an eternal, divine perspective. Ask Him to replace your way of thinking with His. He delights to respond to our prayer(s).

Second, surrender your expectations. Stop trying to change the universe to work the way you think it should. Grief is essentially the process of adjusting your mind to accept a radically new situation. The sooner you accept that you will not get your way, the sooner you will see the truth (Jesus) standing in front of you. When you give up wishing things were different, you will start to change within. Let go of resentment and anger toward God and toward others. Release your grip on what you want, no matter how good or right you think it is. Don't exhaust yourself desiring what God does not want for you. The more you cling to your own agenda the more you remain blind.

As you surrender your expectations, ask the Lord to show you *His* specific plan and purpose for your life. Pray and ask Him to open your eyes to the work He is doing on earth, and determine to join Him in whatever He has chosen to do. Take your time with this, you are asking to live a life that is upward and outward; vertical and horizontal. **Transformation** is a slow and sometimes tedious process.

Third, acknowledge the resurrection of Jesus Christ and stake your future on his life dwelling in you. A genuine belief in the fact of His resurrection will **radically transform** how you approach life. The death of Jesus conquered sin and overcame death's penalty, but it's His resurrection that gives us life, hope, and reason to continue when everything appears hopeless. It's the resurrected life of Jesus in us that raises us up and puts us back on our feet when it seems that life has knocked us down once again.

So in summary,

First, choose to view your spiritual life through God's eyes.

Second, surrender your expectations.

Third, acknowledge the resurrection of Jesus Christ and stake your future on his life dwelling in you.

Now let's move on to the communion with greater understanding of how this participation of the breaking of bread is the reality of Jesus being broken bread for us and participation in the fruit of the vine is the reality of Jesus being poured into our lives.