

The Scriptures Opened To Us
By Jason Huff
Proverbs 2:1-11, Acts 28:23-24,30-31, Luke 24:13-35

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 24:13-35. Listen now to God's Word. "Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread."

Life-changing events don't always happen the way we think they should. Births and weddings and funerals, we see them as momentous occasions, points of passage for all who are a part of those experiences. We plan for the big anniversary celebration and the surprise birthday party, and those are great times in life. But most of the biggest moments in our lives happen in small, unexpected ways.

I still remember a place about a half hour from college called Café 37. It was a cheap all-night diner with bad coffee and a waitress who would have rather been asleep. I had the car, so I was called upon once a week or so between midnight and 1am to haul a crew out for a meal and conversation. I ate toast mostly, lots of toast. We never solved the world's problems or had startling theological revelations. But in that time of discussion and debate and fellowship, I realized just what a gift God had given me in that group of guys. Eventually, one guy flunked out, probably because he wanted to hang out at the café more than he wanted to do his art projects; another's schedule didn't handle late night runs. But I still think about them to this day.

Two of Jesus' disciples are heading to Emmaus. We don't know why. We don't know if they had business there or they lived there. It seems as I read the passage, though, that this was a regular journey. Otherwise, we'd know why they were making the trip. They are simply heading out of town. They have no expectations. They are simply on the road together. And it's in the middle of this ordinary trip that something extraordinary happens. They have an encounter with the risen Lord.

Now in this passage I see three pivotal points in the journey. They show us the nature of discipleship and the church, as well as the need to be exploring the Scriptures and fellowshiping with one another. Here are the three things we'll learn today: *following Jesus brings familiarity with Him, but explanation of the Scripture brings understanding of Him, and fellowship combined with understanding of God's Word brings recognition of Him.*

Let's take a look at the first one: *following Jesus brings familiarity with Him.* Cleopas and his friend were obviously on the inside of Jesus' circle of friends, not part of the twelve, but very possibly part of the seventy that regularly traveled with Him. They knew Him well enough to call the women who went to the tomb and found it empty – we talked about them on Easter Sunday – “our women,” meaning “part of our group.” They know about the empty tomb and seemed stunned by it, even though they don't understand it. They were among the faithful followers of Jesus.

They followed, but they didn't really get Jesus yet. Cleopas calls Jesus a “powerful prophet” but not the Christ. He says they *had hoped* Jesus would be the one to restore Israel – in the Greek, it's the imperfect tense, a past tense, not a present tense. They've heard the story about the angels telling the women that Jesus is risen, but they don't act like they believe it so much as they act confused. When Jesus chastises them, it's not because they weren't followers, but because of their faltering belief in the words He had told them.

Our nation is full of Christ-followers. 76% of Americans self-identify as Christians. Yet only roughly 35% of Americans go to church on a weekly basis. Another 15% of Americans make it once a month or so. That leaves a huge number of people who say they follow Christ, but aren't involved in a church regularly. Fewer still are really devoted to a church. Now we've heard a number of people say, “I don't need to go to church to experience God.” Many people have been burned by the church; things that have been said to them or done to them by church members have soured them on it. But they still want to follow Jesus in some way, and they are familiar with Him enough to know that He's something special.

I want to be clear that following Jesus is a great first step. Many of us don't come to faith fully understanding everything. Many of us came to believe in Jesus with little more than the Sunday school lessons we were taught as kids. We *need* to be Jesus followers. But many who say they follow Jesus don't know Him at all. They have a limited understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and *they* may sour others on Christianity based on the way they practice it. If we say we follow Christ but don't do what He taught or think we can be in a right relationship with God without fellow believers alongside of us, we have to question whether or not we are really followers at all. Real followers want more than just to be spiritual infants; they crave growing with Christ. Following is good, but following alone is never enough.

But thankfully as our passage shows, Cleopas and his friend were not content with it either. This is where we reach our second point: *explanation of the Scripture brings with it understanding of Jesus*. Luke says that Jesus explained from the very beginning of Scripture what it had to say about Him, about the Christ who would come. He goes back into the very beginnings, back to Adam and Eve and their sin, charting through the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and God's promise of an eternal kingdom through one of their heirs. He goes through Moses and the giving of the Law, the proof that God wants to be in relationship with us, and proof that none of us can be completely righteous before Him. He points to the Passover, where God saved the Israelites through the blood of a lamb and then led them to the land that was promised. He shows them how the nation of Israel needed a redeemer, a suffering servant, who would provide a once-and-for-all sacrifice for all those who would believe. By the end of their journey, the Christ is not just some idea of a rescuer who would save Israel from all its troubles. They learn that the Christ was chosen by God to be the one who would save Israel not from Rome but from sin, the thing that has plagued humanity since nearly our very creation. And as He does so, the hearts of His two travelling companions burn within them as they listen and finally understand. Once they followed to get a glimpse of this man who might be King; now they understand that God has destined Him to be Savior and Lord of all.

God wants us to be knee-deep in the Scriptures. It's His way of letting us know about Himself. The gospels witness to Jesus Himself. The kind of explanation Jesus gave to His traveling companions of the history of Israel and the Savior's place in that history can be found in the book of Hebrews. Paul's letters show us exactly what Christ did for us and how it affects the everyday life of the Christian. James encourages us to live out our faith; Peter and John commend the faith. Revelation explains when faith will finally be made sight when Jesus comes again and the resurrection of the whole world becomes a reality. The Old Testament tells us how God was faithful to an unfaithful people and how He defended them through countless generations, keeping His promises despite their refusal to follow His ways. The Psalms extol His glory; the Prophets display His wisdom. And it all points to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

All of that sounds nice, but why bother? It's because the true follower wants to get close to Jesus. I'm not content with having a secondhand faith. I want it to be real. I want to know God. And if you're a real follower, you do too. You want to have that heart that burns within you for God when you hear the Word of God and have it explained and understand it. The Bible is not magical. You don't need a special pass or a decoder ring to get it. There are things that are hard to understand, but that's why the church exists and why pastors exist – to help you through the hard things, whether it's something in the Bible or something in your personal life. Jesus explained Himself to His disciples, and they explained Him through the rest of the New Testament. But what's so amazing is that God *wants* us to understand Him. There are some things about Him that are too much for us to grasp, but we can understand Him enough to grasp His incredible love for us and for us to return that love. And once we have that burning heart, once we are on fire for God because we have begun to understand Him through His Word, you just want more and more of Him in your life. You don't read the Bible because you think it will earn you points with God – the only way to salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ, and that faith itself is a gift from God. You read the Bible because this is a love letter to you from the very best friend you will ever have.

But we don't end there. We don't finish with just a mental understanding of Jesus. The story ends with our final point: *fellowship combined with understanding of God's Word brings recognition of Him*. Up to the tail end of the story, Cleopas and his friend don't recognize Jesus. We really don't know why; we can only guess. But God somehow has made it so that these two aren't certain of who it is they're travelling with...not until they invite Him in and show Him hospitality. Then Jesus blesses the meal and shares it with them. When they fellowship together around the table, suddenly they see Him for who He really is. It is so amazing, so profound, that when Jesus disappears from their sight, they immediately race back to Jerusalem. In fact, you can translate the Greek to say that they left that very moment. These guys are racing back to Jerusalem in the middle of the night! Who knows what dangers were typically found on that road when the sun went down? They didn't care – they had to tell someone they had met the risen Lord!

And while Jesus isn't going to literally appear before us today, when we have been in God's Word and then fellowship with fellow believers who desire to live out His love, He becomes real to us. Fellowship without delving deep into understanding God is pleasant, but at its core, it's just another thing to do. If we're not into the Scripture learning who God is, fellowship rarely is more than a meeting of friendly people trying to be nice to each other. In fact, without Scripture, that fellowship can become distant and cold and impersonal. But Scripture alone isn't enough either. God never meant for us to believe alone. The biblical witness tells us over and over again that we are the people of God – we are a collective. We are not a bunch of individuals who happen to get together – we are no less than the body of Christ active in the world now. R. C. Sproul, a famous theologian, has commented that the church of one, the person alone without other spiritual believers, is an anomaly to be corrected as soon as possible. You might have a believer out in the middle of nowhere who has come to faith through a gospel tract or some believer in a prison somewhere in solitary confinement, but that's the exception, not the rule. When we get into the Word and begin to understand God, pretty soon we will understand that we need other believers.

But it's not just about coming to church like we think of today. When we fellowship together after we begin working to understand God, we recognize Jesus when we see Him in other Christians. I've told the story many times about my 2nd grade Sunday school teachers Clyde and Fern Weber. They were older folks back then in the early 1980s; Fern has gone to be with the Lord since, and Clyde turned 101 in May. They had no reason to be teaching Sunday school well past their 70s save for their love of us and their love of the LORD. I'd started reading the Bible back then and beginning to make sense of it, but what made it come alive to me was Clyde and Fern and their love for us. I saw that love mirrored in our church's pastors and other people I met there.

When I got into middle and high school, as I continued to be taught the Word from the pulpit and at home, I saw Jesus reflected in youth group leaders who got involved with us just because they cared, because they knew God cared. I began to see Jesus in the other teens in the program. I can honestly say that in my darkest moments, being in that church saved me. Seeing God become real through people living out His love through the Holy Spirit's power had that kind of effect on me. It's the reason you see me up here with you today.

I am convinced of this: Jesus wants to be recognized among us. He wants us to see Him at work in us. It was Him working through the Holy Spirit that inspired people to give their hard-earned money towards the roof campaign. It's Jesus working through the Holy Spirit that leads people to come week in week out to Bible study and to help with Angel Food and Euchre and Praise Team. Each time we come together, we have the possibility of seeing Jesus among us, of our faith becoming real. When we see Jesus in others, it's no longer abstract. We can believe the Bible in our minds, but when we see God's love in fellowship, we realize that we can have this life, that we can be saved, that we can reach out to the world, that we can make a difference in Jesus' name.

Once that happens, once we've followed and understood and recognized Jesus, we will be like Cleopas. We'll want to share the story, and we'll race seven miles to do it. There will be no stopping us. When the Holy Spirit has revealed Jesus to you, the real Jesus, there will be a fire that burns within you, a holy fire that will not be quenched, a fire that wants to spread to everyone you meet. In the next several weeks, we're going to reach the end of Luke and touch on the opening of the other book Luke wrote, Acts. We're going to study how the apostles went from bunch of folks so scared that they hung out in a locked room after Jesus' death to brave believers who would witness to Jesus' resurrection in the face of death. We're going to see real and practical ways that we can share the fire of Christ with those in our community, ways that will help them see that God loves them. We're going to be a light in the darkness for Him.

But as we get ready for that adventure, let's pray that God would reveal Himself to us. Let's pray that we would follow faithfully and desire more of Him as we walk along His paths. Let's pray that He would guide us into studying His Word so that we might truly know His ways and His salvation. Let's pray that He would reveal Himself to us as we fellowship with one another and act as Jesus' hands and feet to others around us. We can know our God and experience Him today. That's what I want with all my heart, and I hope you do too.