

SERIES: Easter 2006

SERMON: Heartburn: The Antidote to Spiritual Depression

SCRIPTURE: Luke 24:13-35

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DATE: April 23, 2006

We had a wonderful Easter Sunday—both weather and worship. Today I would like to stay with the theme of the season for one more week by turning your attention to an event that occurred later in the day on that first Easter Sunday as two of Jesus' disciples were walking dejectedly from Jerusalem to Emmaus, as recorded in Luke 24. But first let me lay the groundwork by telling you why I have chosen this passage.

Today is a day of unprecedented psychological and emotional illness in our country. We hear much about depression, schizophrenia, paranoia, passive-aggressive tendencies, bi-polar disease, megalomania, ADHD, OCD and a host of other diagnoses. Professional counselors are being trained at an unprecedented rate to help take care of all these troubled people. According to recent statistics, the following is the ratio of psychiatrists and psychologists to the population of various Western countries:

Italy has 1 for every 333,000 people

Germany has 1 for every 43,000 people

France has 1 for every 32,000 people

Britain has 1 for every 22,000 people

U.S.A. has 1 for every 8,500 people (40 times the number per capita in Italy).

This phenomenal increase in demand for psychotherapy has also impacted evangelical Christians. Virtually every seminary has increased the number of courses designed to help pastors do effective counseling. Christian counselors have full caseloads, while pastors are at times overwhelmed by the number of people seeking help. Furthermore, if you go to your Christian bookstore you will notice that Christians are buying "How to" books like they're going out of style:

How to Win Over Depression

How to Be Happier in the Job You Can't Stand

The Transformation of the Inner Me

Growing Up Emotionally

Understanding Yourself

The Christian's Use of Emotional Power

The Art of Learning to Love Yourself

Rebuilding Your Broken World

At the same time, many are neglecting the greatest source book of all, the Bible. One of my Seminary professors said 30 years ago, "Christians are voraciously devouring La Haye, Gothard, Narramore and Tournier (today we would just change the names to Smalley, Dobson, Allender, and Trent, but the point is the same), literature which is to the Bible like Jack Benny is to Yasha Heifetz." (For the sake of the young, Jack Benny played around with a fiddle while Heifetz was a true virtuoso on the violin).

My purpose this morning is not to level criticism at professional therapists. I have a very healthy respect for psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors when it comes to their expertise in dealing with emotional problems induced by complex environmental factors, chemical

imbalance, glandular disorder, or some such cause. I personally refer people to professional Christian therapists and have even used their services myself a few times. However, I believe that many (certainly not all) of the problems we see in Christian circles are due to spiritual depression of one sort or another, and spiritual depression calls for a spiritual solution.

Let me define spiritual depression as “a state of emotional or psychological disturbance characterized by defeat, apathy, pessimism, and a negative self-concept, brought on by spiritual factors such as false doctrine, sin, unbelief, failure to respond properly to divine discipline, or just plain spiritual laziness.” I believe spiritual depression is troubling many, many believers, so I would like for us to ask ourselves, “What is its cause and what is its solution?” At least part of the answer to these questions is found in Luke 24:13-35. Please turn there with me.

“Now that same day (Easter Sunday) two of them (Jesus’ disciples) 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! {26} 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.”

It should not be any great shock to us that these two disciples are spiritually depressed. While we do not know anything about their personal lives, we do know enough about their circumstances to sympathize with their predicament. Several years before they had cast their lot with a strange itinerant preacher from Galilee. Times were rough from the start. Never having a permanent place to stay or any extra money, they wandered with Jesus from Galilee to Judea to Samaria to Perea, watching His miracles, listening to his discourses, and trying to absorb His spiritual wisdom.

The most recent ray of hope had appeared just the Sunday before, as Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, hailed as king by thousands of onlookers. They could see for the first time the definite possibility of Jesus inaugurating a new kingdom, leading a rebellion against wicked Rome, and establishing righteous rule for the first time in human memory.

But then everything began to go wrong. First, Jesus began to hint more broadly that their expectation of the kingdom might not be exactly correct. At the Last Supper He even went so far as to say that one of His inner circle of disciples would betray Him and deliver Him to the authorities. And then, while they were praying with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was seized by the religious leaders, with the help of the Romans. A mockery of a trial resulted in an absolute miscarriage of justice, and Jesus was handed over to the mobs to be crucified.

Their hopes were shattered. All their grand dreams vanished as Roman guards led him off to the place of the skull. Still a faint glitter of hope remained in some of their hearts. Perhaps He would wait until the last minute and then perform one of His mighty miracles to escape from their midst. But then even that hope was gone as they saw Him die and His body was given to Joseph of Arimathea for burial in a nearby tomb.

Now it is Sunday, the third day after the crucifixion, and these two disciples are terribly confused. They have heard a rumor that Jesus has risen from the dead earlier that morning, but to their knowledge no one has seen Him. They are on the way to their home in Emmaus, just seven miles or so from Jerusalem, and are discussing the events that had just recently occurred. I would love to have a tape recording of their conversation. Perhaps it would have gone something like this:

"Jacob, what do you make of it all anyway?"

"I don't know, Cleopas. The biggest problem to me is why He allowed our people and the Romans to mistreat Him so? How can that possibly be honoring to God? After all, the right of self-defense is a basic human right, but He just let them abuse Him without any attempt to defend Himself."

"The thing that I find especially hard to understand," adds Cleopas, "is that we know He had supernatural power. He could have obliterated those soldiers at will."

"You don't think those miracles He performed were fake, do you?" asked Jacob.

"How could they have been? You saw several of them with your own eyes. No, somehow He must have believed it necessary to die on the cross. In fact, I even remember Him making comments to that effect. But why? What about all His talk about the

Kingdom?"

"It beats me," said Jacob. "By the way, do you think there is any chance at all that those women really did see an angel? And what about their claim that He was resurrected this morning?"

"I don't know what to think. Wouldn't He have shown Himself to us by now? The women probably wanted to believe it so much that they talked themselves into it." Cleopas continued, "All I know is that we'd better stay away from Jerusalem for a good long time. The Romans will probably try to find all of His disciples now and kill us."

While they are conversing Jesus catches up with them, but they fail to recognize Him. For reasons we may not fully understand, Jesus' resurrection body was not always immediately recognizable. It was the same, yet very different. But I find it interesting that the text tells us "they were *kept* from recognizing him." God had purposes in this interaction that could only be achieved by temporary anonymity.

How often we get caught up in the hopelessness of a situation, blinded to the spiritual realities behind the events. And, without doubt, there is much to be discouraged about even today. When our President's popularity tanks and international unrest grows, when we see children killing children and adults murdering babies, when gasoline is nearly \$3 a gallon and possibly heading to \$5, when natural disasters strike far and wide—frankly it takes a strong dose of confidence in the presence and power of Christ to keep us from despair. And Jesus is going to offer just such a prescription to them shortly. But the first observation I want to make concerning these two disciples is this:

Jesus' disciples suffer from certain spiritual liabilities.

Loss of joy. When Jesus asks them, "What's up?", their first spiritual liability surfaces. Look at verse 17b: "They stood still, their faces downcast." Their dejection could not be hidden. They had lost their joy. You know something? Negative thinking can actually lead a person into depression. There is such a thing as a downward spiral where negative thoughts lead to depression and depression in turn leads to more negative thoughts.

Dr. Frank Minirth wrote a book a number of years ago entitled, *Happiness Is a Choice*. While I don't think that's always true (certainly not for those who are undergoing chemical imbalance), it is true for many of us. We can choose to pout and withdraw and complain, or we can choose to believe God when He tells us that we are on the winning side, that our trials are momentary, and that they all have a divine purpose.

Loss of hope. The second spiritual liability related to the depression of these two disciples is loss of hope. Notice verses 21: "We had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel." Notice the past tense, "we *had hoped*." In other words, we had it and we've lost it. The cross had not destroyed the love of these two disciples for Jesus, but it had certainly shattered their hopes and dreams.

Unbelief. The third and greatest spiritual liability of these two is simply unbelief. Jesus says to them in verse 25: “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets have spoken!” Slow to believe *all*. They had seen and believed *only some* of the Messianic prophecies—the ones which spoke of Messiah's kingdom and victory. And when that kingdom failed to come about as they expected (or in the time frame they expected), they became victims of unbelief. The Scriptures had all along taught that Messiah would have to suffer before He reigned. This should have been obvious from such passages as Genesis 3:15, Psalm 22, and Isaiah 53.

Frankly, I see a lot of unbelief in the church today, or what might be called “selective belief.” There is a real tendency to believe in the goodness and love of God, but not in His wrath or His judgment of sin. Many believe in the prosperity Gospel, but not in the promises about suffering and persecution. Many believe in the gifts of the Spirit, but not in the fruit of the Spirit. Many believe in the call of discipleship, but not in the cost of discipleship. We desperately need to teach and believe the whole counsel of God.

In summary, the spiritual depression of the two Emmaus disciples is both experiential and doctrinal. They have lost their joy and their hope, and they are victims of unbelief. They are in trouble because of their spiritual liabilities. But lest we think they are in a hole of depression too deep to escape, I hasten to turn your attention to a second observation, namely that they enjoy certain spiritual assets.

Jesus' disciples enjoy certain spiritual assets.

While their faith had somewhat failed them and there was more of pessimism and confusion in their minds than trust and understanding, let it not be said that they are at the point of giving up and throwing away their faith in Jesus. As a matter of fact, I see several spiritual assets that serve to counterbalance their liabilities.

Their topic of conversation is Jesus. Though they don't understand what has happened, they still have their thoughts on Him. If we're spiritually depressed, if we're disappointed in Jesus, we're not going to solve the problem by drowning it in a bottle, or going on a spending binge, or quitting church in favor of golf. If we really want to get well, then we'd best get our minds on spiritual things in general and Jesus in particular. God doesn't mind hearing our honest doubts and having us express our confusions to Him, nearly so much as He minds being ignored. If we are asking questions, then at least God can answer them. But if we're running away from Him in anger, how do we expect Him to help us then?

Their focus is on the historical facts. Look at verse 19. When Jesus asks them what events in Jerusalem they are talking about, they respond, "About Jesus of Nazareth. 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." The facts they recognized started with who Jesus *was* (past tense, because as far as they can tell, He's gone now).

He was a prophet mighty in deeds. He did many signs and miracles. Remember how Jesus reassured John the Baptist by telling 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." Not only was he mighty in deeds; He was also mighty in word. When He spoke, His words rang with the power and authority of God. Frequently we read that the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their mealy-mouthed scribes.

Friends, we have to start with what we know. We need to continually go back to the basic truths of Christianity, the historical facts which are verifiable, for that is where we will find a secure foundation. Every believer needs to have a solid foundation in biblical truth. In our Lay Bible Institute we offer at least one class on Basic Bible Doctrine each semester. I have been encouraged in that it has been our largest class. I am convinced that biblical truth is a preventive to much of the spiritual depression Christians experience. The more solid our foundation, the quicker we will go back to the basics when trials come, and the less likely we will be blown out of the saddle.

They demonstrate a spirit of hospitality. Verse 29 says that they urged Him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." Notice how different this is from our normal inclinations. When we are depressed generally the last thing we usually want is to be around other people (or certainly to invite people into our home). We tend to withdraw from our Christian friends, though that is just when we need them most.

I am convinced that there is often a direct relationship between spiritual depression and a lack of meaningful fellowship and contact with other believers. God didn't give us Hebrews 10:25 because He was trying to increase attendance at local churches (that's the verse, by the way, that exhorts us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together). He gave us that command because He knows that we need each other.

Incidentally, did you ever see a greater example of the truth of Heb. 13:2 than is found in the hospitality of these two Emmaus disciples? "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels unawares." These two unwittingly entertained the captain of the angelic hosts!

So far we have seen that the Emmaus disciples are spiritually depressed; we have looked at the spiritual liabilities which contributed to the depression but also at some spiritual assets that can help them out of it.

Jesus is able to turn spiritual depression into joyful confidence.

It is indeed amazing to watch Jesus operate as He does in this incident. Imagine the smile that must have crossed His face when they asked Him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" No, He is certainly more than a

visitor! Initially He just listens, but He is not beyond correcting them.

He corrects them. "How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe . . . !" More significantly, He begins to instruct them in the OT Scriptures.

He instructs them. I wish I had heard the conversation between the two disciples, but how much more this little sermon by Jesus! Can you imagine the joy of hearing the Messiah Himself preach on the Messianic Psalms and the OT prophecies? I suspect He started with

Genesis, where He is shown to be the Seed of the Woman

Exodus - the True Passover Lamb

Leviticus - the Atoning Sacrifice

Numbers - the Manna from Heaven, the Serpent lifted up in the Wilderness

Deuteronomy - the Prophet like unto Moses

Ruth - the Kinsman-Redeemer

Psalms - the Good Shepherd

Isaiah - Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace

Jeremiah - the Branch of Righteousness

Ezekiel - the Plant of Renown

Daniel - the Stone Cut without Hands

Hosea - the Lion of the House of Judah, the husband with an unfaithful wife

Joel - the Stronghold of the sons of Israel

Amos - the Roaring Lion

Obadiah - the Deliverer on Mt. Zion

Jonah - the counterpart who was delivered after three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Micah - the ruler from Bethlehem Ephrathah

Nahum - the One Standing on the Mountain Publishing Peace

Habakkuk - the Rock who goes forth for salvation

Zephaniah - the Victorious Warrior

Haggai - the Signet Ring

Zechariah - the Rider on the Red Horse, the Branch, the King mounted on the donkey, the Cornerstone

Malachi - the Refiner, the Sun of Righteousness, and the Fuller that whitens like no other whitener can

What a sermon that must have been, as Jesus pointed out truth about Himself on every page of the OT! Friends, we need to read our Bibles with our spiritual eyes open to all that it says about Jesus. He's there, because this is not just a history book; it is not just great literature. It is the biography of Jesus.

The most important thing Jesus does to turn their spiritual depression into joyful confidence is to reveal His presence to them.

He reveals Himself to them. *As He breaks the bread* they recognize Him. Perhaps He did so in a way peculiar to Him. Perhaps their attention was drawn to the nail prints in His hands.

No doubt He said grace, and maybe it was the way only He could pray. What ultimately turns them from depression to confidence is the knowledge that Jesus is still alive.

The ultimate antidote to spiritual depression is “heart burn.”

In case you hadn't figured it out, the kind of heart burn I'm advocating today has nothing to do with acid reflux or diet or anything physical. In verse 32 it says that after Jesus vanished from their sight, they said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" The answer to spiritual depression is a personal encounter with the risen Christ through the Scriptures. As these disciples realized they had been with Jesus, their road of despair turned into a highway of hope.

Is it possible Jesus would say to you and me today, "How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!?" He might have to if we don't know the Scriptures, for it's impossible to believe in something we're ignorant of. Now I'll grant that listening to your S.S. teacher or pastor or favorite radio preacher is a far cry from the privilege these two had in listening to Jesus Himself, but there is much that we can learn today, even on our own, if we have a hunger to know God and His Word.

Coming to grips with that truth and experiencing it will do more to cure your spiritual depression than anything else you can do. These two disciples are so cured that they get up immediately and walk seven miles back to Jerusalem in order to share the good news with the other disciples. They cannot be satisfied to just sit on the experience.

Conclusion: Everyone of us faces trials and circumstances that have the potential of bringing on spiritual depression. At such times we are tempted to think that all hope is lost, that God doesn't really care, and that unbelief (or at least pessimism) is our only choice. We must resist such a conclusion.

I am not suggesting that we start living in a dream world—denying our difficulties and frustrations, or gullibly accepting religious dogma as the answer to all our problems. I'm not even suggesting that you quit going to your therapist if you are receiving godly counsel. Rather I'm suggesting that when the risen Christ is seen in all His glory, He enables a person to have new hope in his circumstances and to gain a sense of well-being unavailable through any other means.

During the Battle of Waterloo, England waited eagerly for news of the outcome. Its citizenry knew full well that if Wellington, the English general, could not defeat Napoleon, England would be lost. Patience was exhausted, nerves were frayed. Finally, semaphore signals appeared from a ship in the English Channel. From the top of the Winchester Cathedral trained eyes read the news: WELLINGTON DEFEATED . . . But then fog set in and no further transmission was possible. "Wellington defeated" was relayed throughout England. Despair reigned as the people prepared for the worst. What would Napoleon do to their beloved England? Later, the fog lifted and the full message was communicated . . . WELLINGTON DEFEATED THE ENEMY!

When Jesus died on the cross, the hopes and dreams of His disciples came to what they believed was an insoluble end. The only message that seemed to come through was the message, JESUS DEFEATED But on the third day the stone which secured the tomb was rolled away and the full message was communicated—JESUS DEFEATED THE ENEMY! He defeated Satan and He defeated death. And today He lives and His presence is available to all of us. He wants to be your Savior and Lord. Through believing in Him and receiving Him as your personal Savior, you may have life, not just eternal life, but abundant life right now.