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Gospel Sadness

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The President's

DESK

Tom Shepherd

Gospel Sadness

I enjoy attending the Society of Biblical Literature meetings each year in November, where Bible scholars from all over the world come together to hear and discuss papers on many topics. Several other professional societies meet at the same time, and the total number of attendees sometimes reaches 10,000.

Some years ago, when I attended these annual meetings, I sat in on the presentations at the "Historical Jesus" section. The scholars were debating the historicity of the information in the canonical Gospels regarding the trial of Jesus. Some maintained that it could not be historical because the disciples were not present at the trial.

I raised my hand to make a comment. I told how I had recently returned from mission service in an African country where several years before the president of the country had had one of his government department leaders killed because the man did not agree with the president's policies. The government-controlled newspaper reported that the man had died in a car accident.

"Everyone in the country was talking about it," I continued, "No one was fooled by what the paper said. In Jerusalem, when Jesus was crucified, everyone would have been talking about the event. The details of the trial could not have been kept secret." I sat down.

"Well," said the leader of the discussion, "that was an interesting comment." The session ended shortly thereafter.

Evidence in the Bible for the very situation I have mentioned here is found in Luke 24:13-35, the story of the walk to Emmaus. Two disciples mentioned nowhere else in the Gospels were walking to a village some seven miles from Jerusalem, talking about the events of Jesus' death. It was the Sunday after that dark Friday of the crucifixion, and these disciples were aware of the reports that Jesus had been raised from the dead. As they discussed the matter, Jesus Himself drew near, walking in the same direction.

But they did not recognize Him (vs. 16). Why not? The form of the verb for "recognize" helps explain. It is in the passive voice, and not uncommonly in Scripture, this type of structure suggests that it was an action

of God. Indeed, this type of passive voice verb is so common it is called a "divine passive." This deliberate veiling of Jesus' identity might strike us as a little strange, but the end of the story explains why God did this.

Jesus asked a seemingly innocuous question. "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" (vs. 17).^{*} The two disciples stopped still with downcast faces. They asked incredulously, "Are you the *only* visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" (vs. 18, italics supplied).

Just ponder a similar scenario today. You are talking with someone about the events of September 11, 2001, the fall of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Then you meet someone who knows nothing about it at all. You wonder, "Where has this person been? In a hole somewhere? Off the planet in outer space?"

Jesus simply asked, "What things?" The disciples recounted the unforgettable experience they had just been through. They told how Jesus of Nazareth was a mighty prophet but that the religious leaders handed Him over to be crucified. They sorrowfully expressed how they had hoped He was the One to redeem Israel. Then they told of the resurrection reports.

Jesus the mighty Prophet, the One to redeem Israel, the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection—when you look at this list, it has all the components of the gospel story. It is not unlike Paul's description in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve."

What amazing news is this! So why the long faces? Why this "gospel sadness"? It is the conclusion of their speech that tells it all: "*but him they did not see*" (Luke 24:24, italics supplied). Without the resurrection verified in appearances, it would all just be the sad story of a good man who got on the wrong side of powerful leaders and met a tragic end.

Ponder to whom they were telling this sad story. It was the risen Lord Jesus. Why did He not simply reveal Himself to them in a flash of glorious light? His discussion with them indicates why: They needed the testimony of the Scriptures to verify to them that their sense experience of the risen Lord was predicted by the prophets and was an historical fulfillment of those prophecies. Then, every time they would read those same Scriptures, they would be reminded of that afternoon walk with Jesus.

The Scriptures confirmed their sense experience. This is well expressed in the difference between where they began and where they ended on that fateful day. It was not simply a matter of a seven-mile walk. When Jesus confronted their gospel sorrow, He said, "O foolish ones, and *slow of heart* to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (vs. 25, italics supplied).

But when they finally recognized the Lord at the breaking of the bread they said, "They said to each other, "Did not our *hearts burn* within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (vs. 32, italics supplied). Their hearts went from slow (*bradus* in Greek, from which we get the word *bradycardia* = slow heartbeat) to *burning* within them, perhaps like a person who has just finished a 100-yard dash.

What made the difference? What got their spiritual blood pumping? It was the explanation of the Scriptures by the risen Lord—the teachings of the Bible and visible experience combined.

There are those today who want to separate sense experience and the Scriptures. They accept some

teachings of the Bible as wonderful moral standards but toss aside the miraculous, the supernatural, and any teachings that go against their own assessment of "what really happened." But to do so is to decapitate New Testament—let alone biblical—theology. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is tied in New Testament theology to at least six major categories of belief: Christology, Anthropology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology, and, quite interestingly and strongly, Ethics.

Without the Resurrection, Jesus is not the Son of God and does not intercede for us today in heaven (Rom. 1:4). Death reigns and our friends who have died are gone forever (1 Cor. 15:18). We cannot count on the Holy Spirit making alive our mortal bodies (Rom. 8:11).

Without the resurrection of Jesus, we are still in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17). We do not walk in newness of life (1 Peter 1:3). We are robbed of our escape from wickedness (Acts 3:26); we have not passed from death to life or from judgment to salvation (John 5:24-29). Our justification before God is a subterfuge (Rom. 4:24, 25) and we cannot bear fruit for God (7:4).

Without the resurrection of Jesus, the church has no foundation and no head (Eph. 1:19-23). Our baptism is meaningless (Col. 2:11, 12) and the Communion service is an empty pretense (John 6:54), for He was neither raised nor is He coming again. We have no future hope or present solace in our troubles (1 Peter 1:3-9). We have not been delivered from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10). We cannot trust the Lord to heal and raise our ill loved ones (James 5:15). We have lost the foundation of our faith and hope in God (1 Peter 1:21).

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, our Lord was a liar or hopelessly deluded, for He foretold His resurrection over and over again (Matt 16:21; 26:32; Mark 8:31, 14:28; Luke 9:22; John 2:19-22). His disciples were charlatans and their teachings a sham.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the Old Testament Scriptures also cannot be trusted, for they foretold His resurrection (Psalm 2, Isaiah 53). The moral guiding star for our life has gone out (2 Cor. 5:15), and we are misrepresenting God (1 Cor. 15:15). We do not have resurrection power to resist sexual immorality (6:12-20). If Christ was not raised, the hedonists are right (15:32), and we are to be pitied more than all other people (vs. 19).

No, no. Sense experience (the personal face-to-face meeting that the early believers had with the risen Lord) and our own experience of the healing power of the Word of God (both physically and spiritually) in our life must always be linked with belief in the teachings of the Scriptures. Without this, we become those two disciples walking to Emmaus with gospel sadness.

Today I rejoice in the truth of the risen Lord. His tomb was empty and He was seen by many witnesses. Because He rose, our dead will rise. Our salvation is secure, and our church has a mighty Savior at the helm. He is coming again, and He empowers His people today to live and walk in newness of life. He calls you and me not to gospel sadness but to gospel joy.

*All Scripture references in this column are quoted from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible.