

Letting Down and Lifting Up: The Emmaus Road (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹³ That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” ¹⁹ And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. ²² Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” ²⁵ And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:13–27)

Walking the Emmaus Road

- A. These two disciples on the road to Emmaus (whether two men or a man and woman we don't know)
- ...
1. . . . their dreams, it would seem, have just been dashed to pieces against the unforgiving rocks of reality.
 2. Their hope, once buoyant and lively, is now like a ship taking on water and going under.
 3. Their joy, you could liken it to a balloon that, rather than losing its helium slowly over time as is typically the case, it's instead just been violently and dramatically popped.
 4. Their hearts are broken like old pottery and heavy as lead.
 5. The sun may be shining on everyone else, but there's a dark sky looming over them.
- B. This is the Emmaus Road. And even though scholars today aren't quite certain as to where precisely this road was located in Jesus' day, I think it safe to say we've all walked down it a time or two ourselves, have we not? Indeed, some of us, no doubt, are dragging our weary feet down this road even now.

1. You thought life would play out differently for you. You thought things were on the up and up. You thought you could see the future and it was bright. You thought God would come through for you and he'd set your story to music and your feet to dancing.
 - a. But now all you want to do is curl up into a ball on the floor in the corner of your bedroom and weep.
 - i. The loved one is dead . . . and they're not coming back.
 - ii. The relationship with your spouse is unraveling and you don't know how it's going to end.
 - iii. The cancer is back . . . with a vengeance.
 - iv. The new job prospect promised a call back and a good offer . . . and the phone never rang.
 - v. The kids won't stop crying and fighting and needing you . . . and you just want a break . . . before you break.

- C. This is the Emmaus Road. That's where these two disciples are. And, if that's where you are, I wonder if you'd permit me to draw out straightaway here some questions that I think this text is inviting us to consider. From right where you are, in that ball on the floor, if you can find the strength, open your heart to God for a moment, and reflect on these with me . . .
 1. What if . . . right when you're thinking all hope is lost, truly all hope is on the cusp of being found?
 2. What if . . . right when you're thinking your life is coming to a bitter end, truly it is just about to begin?
 3. What if . . . right when you're thinking God has abandoned you, truly he is right there walking with you?
 4. What if . . . right when you're thinking Jesus has let you down, truly he is lifting you up?
 5. What if . . . all you ever wanted is actually right in front of you right now and you just don't yet have eyes to see it?
 6. What if . . .?!

- D. I open this way because that's what's happening in this text. And that's what's happening in our lives. This is what the gospel does. It takes our hardest moments, our Emmaus Roads, and just flips them on their heads.
 1. The Emmaus Road doesn't dead-end into some ditch.
 2. No! However hard it may get, it is truly a pathway to glory. And Jesus is walking with us as we go . . . even now!

- E. The title of this sermon is "Letting Down and Lifting Up"—because I think that's what's happening here at one and the same moment.
 1. Jesus is letting down these two disciples. He's not what they thought he would be, nor what they really wanted him to be.
 2. But truly he's so much more. And he lets them down with regard to all their little nearsighted, misguided expectations so he could lift them up to a whole new plane of existence in the end.

- F. So, with that, I've got three headings I'll be organizing my thoughts under for us this morning: (1) He Lets Us Down; (2) He Lifts Us Up; and (3) He Leads Us Back to Scripture.

(1) He Lets Us Down

Three Observations

- A. On this first point, I want to make three observations for us with regard to these two disciples in our text . . .

Observation #1: They Were Looking Sad

- A. This is what we see there in v. 17 as Jesus first approaches them: “[H]e said to them, ‘What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?’ And they stood still, looking sad.”

1. The Greek here pertains to the idea of looking “gloomy, sullen, dark” (BDAG). Again, they were under shadow of a cloud and Jesus, and everyone else, could see it.

- B. But why, why are they looking sad? Well, this leads to the second observation . . .

Observation #2: They Had Hoped that He Was the One

- A. We keep reading and we see that these disciples answer both Jesus' question and ours. The thing they're discussing is the very thing that's got them so dejected.

1. Look at how they begin to respond there in vv. 18ff.: “¹⁸ Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?’ [Pause here for a moment: This question, this insult really, is dripping with irony. For in reality Jesus is the only one who truly knows what has just happened there in Jerusalem. All the rest of them only think they know, but their interpretations, their conclusions, their knowledge—it's all mistaken. But we keep reading . . .]¹⁹ And he said to them, ‘What things?’ And they said to him, ‘Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰ and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him.²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened.’”

- a. It's in this last bit that we really get our answer as to why they're marked by such gloom. Ironically, again, it's all centering in on the cross of Jesus.

- i. The very thing we now come in here on Sundays and sing about is the very thing that had them so troubled and depressed at the time.

- B. “[W]e had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel . . .’ but alas he's dead,” they say.

1. “And when we say dead, we mean really dead.” Hence, the mention of three days having already passed. In other words, you can drive that last nail into the coffin, this thing is over.
 - a. “We had perhaps at one point thought he might be the Christ but now we realize he is just another prophet. He preached a lot of powerful sermons and performed a lot of jaw-dropping miracles, but, alas, he’s gone the way of all the prophets who preceded him—he’s dead now, and our hope for redemption has died with him.”
- C. When they talk about the Christ redeeming Israel, what are they referring to?
1. Well they’re thinking in physical, tangible, earthly terms. They’re thinking of something more immediate and dramatic.
 - a. The word means “to liberate from an oppressive situation” (BDAG).
 - b. And it actually has its roots in the Exodus. You remember, perhaps, when God says to Israel through Moses: “I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment” (Exod. 6:6).
 2. And so here, no doubt, these disciples (as was typical of Jews in their day) they were expecting the Christ to come and do something similar now on Israel’s behalf. They had hope that the Christ, the Messiah, the King coming in the line of David, promised by God, would come and redeem Israel by way of delivering them not from Egypt now, but from Rome.
 - a. These Gentile overlords have been in their land and on their backs for far too long already. And the coming Christ would surely redeem them from all this, establish the kingdom of God here in some physical, geographical way and God’s justice and shalom would finally prevail.
- D. And so, for them, the cross of Jesus was not the climax and center of their hope as it is now for us, it was the undoing of it. They had no category for a crucified Christ. An executed Messiah is a failed Messiah.
1. It’s as Paul says in 1 Cor. 1:23: “[W]e preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews . . .” They don’t sing about it. They stumble over it.
- E. And that’s where these two are. Stumbling down the Emmaus Road . . . “looking sad.” Jesus, and God, it would seem, have let them down.

Observation #3: Their Eyes Were Kept from Recognizing Him

- A. Back up in vv. 15-16, at the start of this whole exchange, Luke makes this little passing comment that is quite intriguing when you really stop and consider it: “¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

1. And you say “kept from recognizing him”?! How? Or, perhaps more pointedly, by whom? Who’s doing the keeping here? Man? Satan? God? I think it’s maybe a little bit of all of that. Here’s what I mean . . .
- B. With regard to man, we know that in our sin we go blind to the things of God. We don’t see who he is or what he’s doing. And we certainly don’t find it all that desirable at first.
1. As Paul goes on to say in [1 Cor. 2:14](#): “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them . . .”
 2. This is why Jesus comes out with those seemingly harsh words down in [v. 25](#): “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” “What you in your sin and blindness are calling foolish is truly the wisdom and power of God. It is not the cross that is foolish but you yourselves.”
 - a. He doesn’t mean this as a put-down the way you or I might. He means it as a statement of fact. We are, by nature, fools. We are hard of learning. We are blind in our sin to the things of God.
 - i. And he really drives all of this home there with the mention of our hearts—you’re “slow of heart.” The real problem isn’t with our brains or our eyes. No it goes much deeper than that. It originates in our hearts.
- C. But with regard to Satan and how he could be in the mix here, keeping these two from recognizing Jesus, who he is and what he’s done . . .
1. Do you remember what Jesus says to Peter back when he refuses to pay any mind to this idea that the Christ must suffer and die on a cross? “Get behind me, Satan!” ([Matt. 16:23](#)).
 2. And Paul later write in [2 Cor. 4:4](#) that Satan “has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.” Wherever you see unbelief you can know Satan is close at hand.
 - a. So you have man’s sinful nature playing into the hands of Satan. And all of these things in the mix keep us from seeing Jesus as he really is in the deepest spiritual sense.
- D. But even in spite of all this, I do think it most likely that the proper subject of the action verb here in our text is Jesus himself.
1. I think Jesus kept himself from being recognized in these moments and by doing so he was trying really to give us a sort of parable on the outside of what’s happening on the inside. The physical is mirroring the spiritual in this sense. Since they cannot see him with the eyes of their hearts, well he is going to keep them from recognizing him with the eyes of their head.
 - a. Assuming some sort of continuity between Jesus’ pre- and post-resurrection body, chances are they would have physically recognized him had he not concealed himself in these moments. But you see, because they were spiritually undiscerning

and blind, Jesus chose to mirror that in the physical dimension while he began to press in and get to work in on their hearts.

- i. He will open their physical eyes in the end but only after the lights really start to come on in their hearts.

How about You?

A. So, again, I wonder how many of us are here with these two—in the place of letdown?

1. You thought you knew what Jesus was up to in your life—you even had chapter and verse, claiming promises, standing on Scripture, you thought—and then it all just capsized and it feels like you’re drowning in the dark. You don’t recognize Jesus in this mess. It feels like he’s long gone.

- a. But he’s not . . .

(2) He Lifts Us Up

He Lets Us Down to Lift Us Up

A. Jesus lets us down to lift us up. If there’s one sentence I could drive into your soul this morning, that would be it. Jesus lets us down to lift us up.

1. When he doesn’t meet our expectations it’s not because he is less than we expected it is always because he is more . . . and he’s trying to help catch us up to just how much more he really is.

B. We have these boxes that we craft, from chapter and verse, a few proof texts here or there, cherry-picking from Scripture, some things we read in a book, some intuitive sense we have about how God should be and what he’s going to do, or whatever, and we fit and press Jesus into it.

1. But he is going to break out of that box every time. It’s not the box is too big for him. It’s always too small.

- a. And when he breaks out of that box, again, it is not because he doesn’t love us, but precisely because he does. Jesus lets us down to lift us up.

Luke 24

A. That’s what happening in our text here. They’re bummed.

1. They wanted redemption of the earthly, momentary variety. “Just take out Rome.”
2. Jesus says: “Ah, nah, how about instead of momentary, fleeting redemption, I give you eternal redemption?” [Heb. 9:12: “by means of his own blood, . . . \[Christ secures for us\] an eternal redemption.”](#)

- a. You want me to kick out Rome. How about I take the devil to the mat?!

- b. You want me to deliver you from the wrath of Caesar? How about I deliver you from the wrath of God due your sin?!
- c. You want me to give you justice and peace here on earth? How about I give you my righteousness so you can be justified, counted right, in the courtroom of heaven and live in the peace and presence of God forever?!
 - i. I'm not giving you less redemption here. I'm giving so much more!

John 6

- A. This is what he's always doing. When you're let down. He's trying to lift you up. Some of the men have been studying [John 6](#) with Paul Walton and this is what we see—there's a couple examples right there.
- B. You remember Jesus first feeds the crowd with bread for their bellies and they love that. And they come looking for more. And what does he do? He lets them down.
 - 1. Why? Because he doesn't care about their needs and desires?
 - 2. No! Because he does and he wants to satisfy them in ways they don't yet understand. So he says: "I'm not going to give you more bread. I am the bread of life. Eat my flesh and drink my blood."
 - a. And they say: "Well, that sounds creepy. We just wanted more bread. You didn't have to make things all weird. You could've just said no." And a lot of them leave.
 - b. But for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, they got it. Jesus knows what we need to be truly satisfied isn't more bread for our bellies. But a relationship with him. And the gospel, his body broken, his blood poured out, his life given for us, that'll fill you up.
- C. Or also in that chapter, Jesus withdraws by himself up on a mountain to pray alone with his Father. And the disciples get in this boat to go meet him on the other side, and while they're out on the water, this storm comes in and everything gets crazy. They think they're going to die. And then Jesus comes walking out on the water and he gets in the boat with them and then John just says almost anticlimactically: "[\[I\]mmediately the boat was at the land to which they were going](#)" ([John 6:21](#)).
 - 1. And you say what's happening there? Well, in one sense, it's a letdown, right? "Jesus, why did you have us get in the boat without you in the first place? Why would you make us go through that?"
 - 2. But then you realize, he's lifting them up. When he comes walking out on the water, they see him in a way they never would otherwise—his authority, his majesty, his power. And when he gets in the boat, again, they experience him in a way they never would otherwise—his care, his compassion, his comfort.
 - a. And that's why I think when Jesus is there they immediately get to where they're going. The storm feels like it's tearing your life and dreams apart but truly it's taking you somewhere, God is taking you somewhere good in and through it all.

Tickets to Disneyland

- A. Let me put an image on this for you that might help.
1. Imagine you have a little boy like I do and all he wants for Christmas is Disney stuff. His favorite is probably *The Incredibles* or *Onward*. But let's say that's all he wants for Christmas. Disney toys, movies, books.
 2. And you decide: I'm going all out this year. Forget the toys, I'm going to take my little guy to Disneyland. Sure we'll get toys and movies and books when we get there. But we'll also be riding rides and meeting characters and eating sweets, having the time of our lives.
 3. So instead of getting this or that toy I just put a little envelope under the tree with Levi's name on it and the Disneyland tickets tucked inside.
 4. Christmas morning rolls around he comes out all excited, can't wait to see what he's going to get. Already you can sense a little disappointment when he sees he's just got an envelope, what kind of toy could you fit in there? But you're hopeful, you know what's coming.
 5. Then he opens it, your face starts to lift, his starts to sink. "I don't want pieces of paper for Christmas. I want toys." He throws it down and runs off to his room.
 6. He couldn't read it and he didn't wait for you to explain. To him it's just paper. It's a big letdown. He doesn't realize what's being given, what those tickets mean for him.
- B. And I think these two disciples are like that and you and I are like that. We don't get it. We have such childish, small-minded anticipations and Jesus wants to do for us and give to us so much more, more than we can wrap our little minds around.
1. We want some cheap plastic action figure. He wants to take us to meet the real thing. He lets us down to lift us up.

Personal Examples

- A. I wonder if you've already experienced this sort of thing? I know I have.
1. Conversion (wanted to be a rock star – let down and lifted up!).
 2. Calling (wanted to be a landscape architect – let down and lifted up!)
- B. So to wrap this second point up, here's what we learn in all of this:
1. When the deliverance you long for doesn't come, it's because he's working an even greater one.
 2. When the dreams that you have for your life go unfulfilled, it's because he's dreaming up something even better.
 3. When your belly aches for want of bread, it's because he has something even more satisfying for you to indulge.
 4. When the stormy seas throw your boat off course, it's because God is taking you to grander shores.
 5. When the Christ is hanging dead on the cross it's because he's redeeming you eternally.
 6. When he lets you down, it's because he's lifting you up!

(3) He Leads Us Back to Scripture

“All”

- A. There’s one last point I want to make here and I’m drawing it out from vv. 25-27 in particular: “²⁵ And he said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”
1. I want to draw your attention to that little word that shows up three times: “all”: “²⁵ ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! . . . ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”
- B. Jesus is here coming at one of the big problems with us and why he so often has to let us down before he can lift us up, why our expectations get all off.
1. You see we don’t read all the Scriptures. We read some of them, we pick and choose, and the stuff we don’t like we just kind of glide on by.
- C. That was the issue with these two disciples and the Jews of Jesus’ day, really.
1. They loved the idea of a glorious Christ!
 2. But they were not willing to consider the places in Scripture where it would seem the way to that glory would be through suffering. That couldn’t be. They didn’t want it to be. So they glazed over it or reinterpreted it or conveniently forgot about it.
 - a. This is the sort of thing that was hinted towards back in [Luke 9](#) when Jesus was first disclosing the matter of the cross to them. There we read: “⁴³ Jesus said to his disciples, ⁴⁴ ‘Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.’ ⁴⁵ But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying” (vv. 43–45).
 - i. It’s that last part there that I especially want you take note of. They heard him say it, but they were afraid to ask him about it. You know what I think this is: they had a sense of what he might be meaning by it, but they didn’t want to understand, because it didn’t match up with their own plans and desires.

You and I

- A. And, brothers and sisters, we do this too. We twist the Scriptures to say what we want them to say and then we wonder why Jesus has to come and let us down before he can lift us up.

1. We're off, we're worldly, we're not seeing what he's actually said in Scripture, we're not even open to it. We like this part and not that.
- B. I spoke with a guy last week when we did the prayer walk about the gospel and things and he knew just enough Bible to be dangerous, if you know what I mean. "I know God is gracious so I'm not worried about sin or judgment or anything. He'll forgive me, right?"
1. That's not what it says. That's not "all" Scripture there. You're not letting God speak for himself, you're twisting it to serve your selfish desires. You keep going this way and that's setting you up for a massive letdown.
- C. How many times have you heard someone quote [Phil. 4:13](#): "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." And, when they quote this, here's what they mean: "With Jesus I can go get that job"; "with Jesus I can get an A on that test"; "with Jesus I can run that marathon"; etc.
1. Now Jesus can strengthen us for these things. But that's not what text is talking about. Paul's not saying we're just going to high-step from one mountain peak to another.
 2. No! When you actually go back to the source and read "all" that's being said there, you realize he's talking about how Jesus can get us through the valley, how Jesus is with us there when it really hurts. We conveniently forget the fact that Paul is penning these words from prison. He's in chains for the gospel as he's writing. He's suffering. But he knows Christ will satisfy, sustain, and save him through it and get him to glory. That's what it means!
 - a. So you get your test back and you get a C or something and you think man Jesus failed me, God lied to me, but that's not what he promised. And he's let you down in love there because he wants to lead you to so much more.
- D. So I'd just encourage you, if you're in that place of letdown, know that Jesus is on the move for good. Let him lead you back to the Scriptures and read "all" of it, open your heart to all of it. Don't be afraid, ask.
1. He always has more for you than you can imagine. It's always better. Whenever he lets you down it's always with the end goal of lifting you up.