

HEARTS AFLAME

Luke 24:32

For three happy, joyous, thrilling, and memorable years the disciples had followed Christ, charmed by his scintillating personality, held spellbound by His matchless messages, and amazed by His miracles; then, suddenly this One, Who had changed and blessed so many lives, had been crucified and buried. The high hopes of His followers had been shattered. Their happy anticipation had become like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. They stood helpless upon the margin of the blackest precipice they had ever seen. As they saw it, for the disciples there was not future. The blackest stormcloud shrouded their hope of a better and a brighter day. Not one star of hope appeared on their horizon. They never expected to see Christ again. To them everything was dark and despondent.

Among the disciples who were in Jerusalem when Christ was crucified were Cleopas and his unnamed companion. After they had received the information that the tomb in which Christ was buried had become empty, these two disappointed and disconsolate disciples started down the road which led from Jerusalem to Emmaus, which was their home, a distance of approximately seven and one-half miles. They were going on back home to their normal routine.

Each was opening his heart to the other in the midst of the gloom that had settled upon them with the eclipse of their faith and hope when the Lord Jesus was crucified. They received some comfort in going over the various incidents in the stupendous career of Christ, but they were grief-stricken.

When these two disciples set out from Jerusalem, they never dreamed that their journey would make history, and that it would be spoken of through out the world in all of the centuries that were to follow. Their journey to Emmaus was not one of forgetfulness. They were still talking about Christ and the things which had happened to Him. As they walked along together, these two discouraged disciples could not think of anything except the greatness of their former hope and the bitterness of their personal disappointment. Again and again Christ had told them about His approaching death, but they had not been able to comprehend the significance of what He had said. Had they only studied the writings of the prophets and understood Christ's teachings, they would have known that He was going to be crucified and buried and rise again. Many of us today have the same fault which those men had, namely, we fail to search, accept, and apply the teachings of the Scriptures.

Not long before the hopes of these two disciples had been burning brightly. Prior to His crucifixion, they had known the Lord Jesus, had been impressed with His great personality, had heard His remarkable words, had witnessed His gracious deeds, and had followed Him with the expectation that He would redeem Israel.

Now, that Christ had been crucified and buried their hopes were buried also. As they journeyed homeward they were in darkness, doubt, and despair. They were going home from a grave. Theirs was, therefore, an experience that most of us have had. They were going back to take up the heavy burden of life without one whose presence has been their supreme joy. It is an old story, terribly unique for the one who is experiencing it, yet at the same time it is universal. They were going home from the tomb of their Lord, which is "sorrow's crown of sorrow."

They did not expect to see their Lord again, nor to hear His words, nor to follow Him along any street or road. Having lost all hope in this realm, their minds were occupied with themselves, with the bitterness of their disappointment, and with the feeling which comes from thwarted hopes.

As they trudged along that road through a picturesque part of Palestine, these disturbed, disappointed, depressed, and distressed disciples were discussing their blighted hopes. Unexpectedly to them, a Stranger overtook them and listened intently to their conversation as the three of them walked along together. At length, the Stranger asked politely: "What are the words that ye are exchanging with one another as ye walk?" The word for "are exchanging" literally means to toss back and forth like a ball, which is indeed a vivid picture of the conversation between the two. The disciples were astonished at His question and stood with downcast faces. Cleopas was quick to express his surprise at Christ's question. He inquired if it were possible that He had been dwelling in Jerusalem and had not known the things that had taken place there during the last few days. Christ asked, "What things?" The disciples then told the Stranger of the greatness of Jesus of Nazareth, of the fate which had befallen Him at the hands of the high priests and the rulers, and of their own disappointment. Because they were allowed to tell their story and set forth in order the causes of their misery, they were greatly relieved. If they had only recognized the One by their side Who was there to cause their cold hearts to burn, their blind eyes to see, their clouds to vanish, and their faltering feet to become steady! To His followers Christ is always closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet. This fact reminds us of the famous missionary, John G. Paton, who buried his wife and baby at midnight in the far-off New Hebrides. He had selected that hour of the night for the burial in order to save their bodies from the cannibals. Concerning this incident Paton said: "I must needs have gone mad by that lonely grave but for the presence of Jesus Christ."

Christ was near and with them, but they did not recognize Him. "But their eyes were holden that they should not know him." Until the "trumpet" sounds, and we are "caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air," we shall have the presence of the Lord with us. He has told us, "I will not leave you orphans." To all who go forth doing His will he says, "I am with you all the days, even unto the consummation of the age." So the great privilege of every Christian is the realization of the presence of the living Lord by his side. But the Lord's presence is not always recognized. What a sad fact that is to us, and how unspeakably sad to our Lord Himself!

Since these two men had been in the presence of Christ many times, had been eyewitnesses of His miraculous healings, and had heard His masterful teachings, why didn't they recognize Him? The Bible says that "Their eyes were holden," which means that they were open but not focused. You know how at times you have sat in a room with others and stared out a window not seeing anything or anybody.

Obviously one reason why they did not recognize Christ is that their minds were preoccupied. They were running all the mental races, trying to work it out for themselves. This is one of the curses of our day, that our minds are entangled with our own obsessions, disappointments, frustrations and worries. The Son of God passes by and we never see Him at all.

There was a deep sadness in the hearts of these men because they failed to recognize Christ. There are a great many sad people today, people who carry about great burdens of anxiety. If they do not recognize the living Christ, one need not wonder at it. Those sad men wondered why their brethren were so credulous as to believe what the women had said, namely, that Christ had risen from the dead. That He had risen from the dead was "too good to be true." And yet it was true. Why is life in the joyous presence of the Lord Jesus Christ regarded as "too good to be true." It is blessedly true, thank God! But these two men could not utter any glad testimony. Their words were sad when they might have been glad. Is that true of you? If so, are you not tired of it, and eager for something better than the sad life you have lived apart from the recognized presence of the Lord?

There are those who recognize Christ in sorrow and those who do not. Two parents had been blessed with a beautiful golden-haired girl. Her lovely curls hung around her shoulders. Her beauty and charm enraptured both father and mother. She was the apple of their eye. But she became sick, and died. The father looked upon the cold, lifeless form, gritted his teeth, and declared that God was unjust. The mother looked at the child, raised her eyes toward heaven and said, "Father, I thank Thee for sending this flood of light into our hearts and home. Life is sweeter and heaven is dearer because she passed this way. I will love Thee more and serve Thee better."

As the two disciples listened to their Master expound the Scriptures and authenticate the events that had taken place, they were overwhelmed, surprised, and shocked out of their misery by the words which their unknown companion spoke to them. They were aroused from their sadness, they saw new possibilities opening up before them, even the possibility that their Lord really, after all, might have risen from the dead. Their hearts warmed and glowed as they listened; there was a great and burning desire in their souls; and by the time that they arrived in Emmaus their outlook upon the world had changed. This is a splendid example of how companionable Christ is to His troubled followers. When Christians tread the way of grief, He speaks to them along the way. Christ enkindled the hearts of the two disciples with joy and with hope to such an extent that they forgot their former sadness. The enkindling was permanent. The episode was over, but the influence of it lingered. The fire was burning still.

When they arrived at their destination, this Stranger would not presume upon the slight acquaintance of the way, so the Bible says, "He made as though he would have gone further." The two were so completely fascinated by His talk that they did not want Him to go on, but they feared that He might do so. He certainly intended to travel on unless they asked Him to remain, for it had never been His practice to force Himself on anybody, but it had always been His custom to accept invitations from those who sincerely desired to extend hospitality to Him. With eager words of invitation "they constrained him, saying Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent." Both of them felt an instinctive yearning for more fellowship with Him. It was from this incident that Lyte received his inspiration to write his wonderful hymn, "Abide with Me."

"Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me!

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see:
O Thou who changest not, abide with me!

I need Thy presence every passing hour:
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who life Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me!

Hold Thou Thy word before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies:
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth vain shadows flee --
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!"

This Stranger was just as willing to be entertained as they were to offer hospitality to Him. He never refused hospitality, although it was refused Him on different occasions. He never refused to enter the house of any man, when properly invited. He never intruded in any man's life. It was always His habit to wait until He was invited. When He was invited to abide with these disciples, He gladly accepted their invitation.

When the simple and frugal meal was spread that evening, their invited Guest became the Host, for the Word says, "He took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them." Instantly the scales fell from the eyes of the two disciples, and they recognized their Guest as the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "Their eyes were opened, and they knew him." It dawned on them that they had walked that day with Christ, Who was alive from the dead, and that He was then at the table with them. It was through a change in them, and not through any change in Him, that they came to recognize Christ. He was the same at the table as He was by their side along the road. If we could only recognize Christ when He is with us in our daily toil, how much sweeter and richer our tasks would be.

As soon as they recognized Christ, Who had been with them in their walk, their talk, and at their meal, He vanished out of their sight. A sense of awe stole over their spirits. In imagination I can see each looking into the face of the other with a deep and unutterable sense of wonder and joy. "They said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?"

The secret of the burning heart is personal, intimate and vital fellowship with the living Christ, as He opens to His followers the treasures of the Holy Scriptures. Nobody ever expounded the Scriptures as Christ did to those two heavy-hearted disciples, changing their ignorance into knowledge, their dullness into brightness, their despondency into hope, their doubt into faith, and their cold hearts into burning ones. Notice that it was when Christ talked to them about the things which were taught in the Scriptures that their hearts were aflame, and not while they were doing the talking. Certainly one of the greatest needs of Christians in these days of unparalleled difficulties and wonderful opportunities is hearts that are aflame for Christ. Christians need burning hearts to give them earnest desires to work for Christ. This world desperately needs hearts aflame with zeal and compassion.

What were the results of the opening of the eyes of the disciples whose hearts were aflame, after Christ expounded the Scriptures to them?

(1) A new sight.

When "their eyes were opened" they saw Him as they had never seen Him before. He was grander by far than they had ever dreamed. They had known Him as a Prophet, mighty indeed and word. Now they saw Him as their living Lord, victorious over sin and death, the triumphant Redeemer.

(2) A new energy.

They rose up and went back to Jerusalem with great joy. They had gone out from Jerusalem with sad, reluctant steps. They returned with eager steps. There was a holy rapture in their souls. The joy of the Lord was their strength as they went back to Jerusalem to tell the good news that they had seen the Lord. Our work for God depends upon the new energy that we get from a vision of the Master's presence.

(3) A new fellowship.

They went back and told the rest of the company what had taken place. Some of them had seen Him also, so they listened to these two as they told their story. The new experience had widened their fellowship. As we get a vision of the Master's presence, our fellowship will be widened amazingly.

(4) A new eloquence.

They told what things were done in the way. What a contrast that must have been to the sad words that they had spoken on the way to Emmaus! They had a new joy as they delivered the message, such as they had never known before; the risen Lord was a new glory to them, and they were eloquent about it.

Russell H. Conwell was a captain in the Civil War. In the heat of a pitched battle, Conwell rushed across a bridge but thoughtlessly left his sword on the other side. One of the men in his group, seeing the plight, rushed across the bridge to get the sword, only to be burned to the point of death by a flaming bridge. When the enlisted man died, Conwell knelt by his side and vowed that he would live two lives to make up for the one who died for Him. He went out to be a great preacher, founded a great university, and preached his universally known and loved sermon "Acres of Diamonds."

Friend, did anything ever set your heart aflame? Are you trying to live at least one life for the One Who gave His life for you?