

# Sorrow into Joy: The Transforming Power of Jesus' Resurrection

By Marco Scouvert



At the heart of the gospel is this message: Jesus of Nazareth is alive from the dead! According to the Apostle Paul, that reality is the linchpin of the Christian faith, both for those who proclaim it and those who believe it (1 Corinthians 15:14-19).

So, what difference does it make that Jesus is risen? I want to draw your attention to how Jesus' resurrection transforms the sorrow of those who trust in and follow him.

## *Their* sorrow into joy

On the eve of his death, Jesus, in anticipation of his suffering, said to his disciples, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will *weep* and *lament*, but the world will rejoice. You will be *sorrowful*, but your *sorrow* will *turn into joy*. When a woman is giving birth, she has *sorrow* because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the *anguish*, for *joy* that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have *sorrow now*, but I will see you again, and *your hearts will rejoice*, and no one will take your *joy* from you” (John 16:20-22, emphasis mine).

Weeping . . . lamenting . . . sorrow . . . anguish. In fulfillment of *those* words, it is easy to imagine how Jesus followers were heartsore over his betrayal, arrest, mistreatment, condemnation, crucifixion, and death. Three days after his burial, we are explicitly told that when Mary Magdalene discovered that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb she “stood weeping” (John 20:11). Later that day two disciples were traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, discussing what had happened to their Lord. When asked (ironically, by the risen Christ!) what they were talking about, “they stood still, looking sad” (Luke 24:17).

Rejoicing . . . joy! In fulfillment of these words, that very night Jesus appeared to his disciples and turned their sorrow into gladness: “he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20). They rejoiced! Their Lord was alive from the dead.

Jesus had predicted his death, at least three times, to his disciples. And all three times he also told them that he would rise to life (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34). If Mary would have believed his words, she would have concluded that an empty tomb and missing body meant that Jesus was alive from the dead. She wouldn't have been “looking for the living among the dead” (Luke 24:5) and lamenting, but rather rejoicing that Jesus had risen, “just as he said” (Matthew 28:6).

Therefore Mary was tenderly asked twice, “Why are you weeping?” (John 20:13, 15), because she shouldn't have been crying. The repetition was intended to help her realize that. Ultimately her excessive sadness was due to the fact that she wrongly believed her Lord was still dead. But when she saw the Lord, like the disciples, she was convinced he was alive and her sorrow fled as joy flooded into her heart (John 20:16-18).

## *Your* sorrow into joy

You may be going through something painful: failing business; protracted sickness; unmet desire to be married; unfaithful spouse; inability to conceive; rebellious children; the death of a loved one; grievous sin (either that you have committed or someone has committed against you); lack of assurance; recurring temptation. You are discouraged and sad. Your heart is heavy. Perhaps your face is continually soaked with tears.

Some grief, even deep and prolonged, is natural and sometimes appropriate. Christians must be given space to experience certain levels and lengths of sorrow, informed by their constitution and what they are going through. Believers should be allowed to freely express their discouragements, both to the Lord and to others, in a godly way. The people of God have done this for centuries (cf. Psalm 102). Jesus did this in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 10:33-36).

But there does come a point when sorrow becomes excessive and ungodly. Several Puritans have helpfully listed out ways by which we can identify when this happens (e.g. John Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*). One obvious way we know that our mourning is inappropriate is when it is rooted in unbelief as we fail to believe the truth that God has given to us — especially truth that would at least comfort us in our sorrow and moderate it, maybe mingle joy with our sorrow, or perhaps even transform our sorrow into joy.

But what specific biblical truth should we believe, in light of Jesus' resurrection, so that our sorrow is not excessive but accompanied by faith-filled rejoicing?

1) *Jesus reigns over the circumstances that are causing your sorrow*. Following his resurrection, Jesus told the disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). As the risen Christ, Jesus possess total control over all of your experiences. Your sorrow is not meaningless. Jesus is working out his perfect, wise, and loving plan in your life.

Your suffering is not meant to harm you but to do you real benefit, ultimately to make you more like him (Romans 8:28-29). That is why Paul and James both say believers should rejoice in the midst of our painful trials, because we know they are designed by the Lord to grow us in godliness (Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4).

2) *Jesus is with you in the midst of your grief*. In the Upper Room, Jesus promised his disciples that after he had risen and gone back to the Father, he would send the Holy Spirit to come and live in his disciples: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:16-18). As the risen Christ, Jesus is with you by the Spirit he put inside of you when you believed in him.

Therefore Jesus has not forsaken you in your grief. He intimately knows what you are going through and is experiencing it alongside of you. He is not blind to or ignorant of your sadness. But more than that, you are not left to your own strength to bear yourself up under the weight of your grief. As the risen Christ, he strengthens you by his own resurrection power and life, through his Spirit.

If you will intentionally choose to believe these truths in your sharp pain and heavy grief, Jesus will bring you to the paradoxical place of “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10).