

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE, BUT TRUE!

Luke 24:36-43

By

Steven J. Cole

August 13, 2000

© Steven J. Cole, 2000

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

August 13, 2000  
Luke Lesson 115

Too Good to be True, But True!  
Luke 24:36-43

The phone rings. "Another telemarketer," I grumble to myself. "Hello, Mr. Cole?" "Yes." "This is Robert Jones with the Reader's Digest. I'm calling to tell you that you have just won our \$5 million sweepstakes!" "Yeah, sure!" Click!

I've never had a call telling me that I won a lot of money, but if I did, I wouldn't believe it. Even if they rang my doorbell and handed me the check, I would be skeptical. I probably wouldn't believe it until the check had cleared my bank, and even then I would often have to pinch myself and say, "It really *is* true! I really did win all that money!"

Some news seems too good to be true and, usually, it is *not* true. Whether to protect ourselves from disappointment or because it happens so rarely, we are prone to disbelieve really good news.

Even so, the disciples were all prone to doubt the reports that Jesus was risen from the dead. First, the women came telling them that the tomb was empty and that they had seen the risen Lord Jesus. "Nonsense," they said (Luke 24:11). Then, Peter and John went and looked into the empty tomb. Peter went away marveling, but not yet believing. Then the Lord appeared to the two men on the road to Emmaus. Late on that first Sunday, they burst into the room where the disciples were gathered and excitedly told about their encounter with the Lord. But the apostles did not at first believe these men (Mark 16:12). Maybe they were thinking, "Why would the Lord appear to *them*? They aren't even apostles! They must have just seen a vision!" Sometime during that day, the Lord had appeared to Peter, forgiving and restoring him, but the others still had not seen the Lord firsthand, and they still doubted.

Then, while they were still discussing all of these strange happenings, the Lord Himself stood in their midst. He hadn't opened the door. Can you imagine the chill of horror that would run down your spine if suddenly someone appeared in a closed room where you were standing? They thought that they were seeing a ghost.

But it was no ghost. It was the risen Lord Jesus. He greeted them with words of comfort, He gently rebuked their doubts, and He offered them assurances to strengthen their faith. But even so, "they still could not believe it for joy" (24:41). It just seemed too good to be true. But it *was* true, and they needed to believe it. This first resurrection appearance of Christ to the whole group of disciples (Thomas was absent; John 20:19-24) teaches us:

Though we are prone to unbelief and though Christ's death and resurrection on our behalf seems too good to be true, it is true and we must believe it.

1. Our fallen nature makes us all prone toward unbelief concerning the things of God.

One of the strongest proofs of the resurrection is the fact that the disciples were so prone not to believe it at first. If they had immediately jumped to the conclusion that Jesus was risen, we could think that their testimony to the resurrection was just wish fulfillment. They wanted it so badly that they convinced themselves that it was true, apart from solid evidence. But the gospel narratives show clearly how slow all of the disciples were to believe that Jesus really was risen. They were not gullible men, prone to superstitious ideas, who were easily persuaded to believe. Even though, just before Jesus appeared, they were saying, "The Lord has really risen" (24:34), when they see Him in their midst they immediately conclude, not that He is risen, but that they are seeing a ghost. And when the Lord confronts them regarding their doubts, "they still could not believe it for joy" (24:41). They were not prone to believe.

Neither are we! Some may be more gullible by nature than others, but gullibility is not saving faith. A gullible person easily believes something without much factual data. A person with saving faith believes on the basis of credible evidence. But no one is prone to saving faith. Saving faith does not originate in the fallen human heart; it comes from God as His gift (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:30; Acts 11:18; Rom. 12:3). But even as believers (the eleven apostles had all believed unto salvation), two things can get us into trouble with regard to faith:

- A. Our fallen thoughts and reasonings make us prone to unbelief.

Jesus asks the disciples, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" (24:38). I can understand why they were troubled. It would be startling to have someone instantly appear in a room without walking in through the door! Jesus, however, is trying to calm their hearts so that they can think more clearly. But they weren't just troubled; they also were doubting. The Greek word for "doubts" refers to inward reasoning and disputing. Because of our fallen human nature, we all are prone to doubt the things of God, revealed to us in His Word.

God does not expect us blindly to believe without thinking matters through. He gave us the capacity to reason and He expects us to use our minds. But we need to be careful, because of our sinfulness, not to go to excess and to demand unreasonable proof for that which God has plainly revealed. To continue raising objections and disputing about matters that God has made reasonably clear is to yield to our fallen nature, not to rise above it by faith.

John Calvin gives the right balance: "We have a right, indeed, when any appearance of absurdity presents itself, to inquire by weighing the arguments on both sides; and, indeed, so long as matters are doubtful, our minds must inevitably be driven about in every direction: but we must observe sobriety and moderation, lest the flesh exalt itself more highly than it ought, and throw out its thoughts far and wide against heaven" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], "Harmony of the Gospels," [3:369-370]).

As a college student, I used to wrestle with doubts over the doctrine of predestination, especially as Paul presents it in Romans 9. I would think, "It's not fair that God predetermines who will believe and yet He holds us responsible for unbelief." That is precisely where Paul takes the argument: "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'" (Rom. 9:19). I used to think, "Yeah, Paul, answer that question for me!" But then, I thought, he cops out: "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (Rom. 9:20). I would go around and around with my doubts, like a cat chasing its tail.

Then one day as I was in this cycle of doubt, Paul's point hit me: The questions I was asking reflected my arrogance and impudence toward Almighty God! At that point, I laid aside my reasonings and submitted to God's plain revelation, that He sovereignly has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires (Rom. 9:18), and I am not permitted to question His right to do as He pleases! Whenever doubts try to creep back in, I must control my thoughts by believing and submitting to the clear revelation of God's Word.

You are responsible to control your thought life! God knows your every thought, and you must seek to glorify Him in your thoughts, just as you should glorify Him with your words and deeds. If you allow your thought life to run rampant, you will be troubled and battered about by all sorts of doubts. Sound, biblical thoughts will result in biblical behavior and in biblical emotions. Unbiblical thoughts in line with your fallen nature that questions God ("Indeed, has God said ...?" Gen. 3:1) will result in sinful behavior and troubled emotions.

B. Our fallen and fluctuating emotions make us prone to unbelief.

The disciples were emotionally all over the chart at this point. Just before Jesus appeared, they were excitedly saying, "The Lord really has risen, and has appeared to Simon." But then Jesus appeared and they were frightened, troubled, and doubting. When they saw Jesus' hands and feet, they were joyous, and yet their joy hindered their faith! They were on an emotional roller coaster!

Many Christians live that way! When they come to talk with me about their troubles, I listen for feeling words. "I used to feel so good. I felt like Jesus was near. But I don't feel that way any more!" They are living by their feelings, not by faith.

Good feelings are wonderful and God wants us to have them. But the foundation for our faith is not in our feelings, but in the facts of God's Word concerning His Son. Our feelings will invariably fluctuate. Who knows all the reasons we feel up one day and down the next? But you can't allow yourself to live by your feelings. Christians must live by faith in the facts of God's unchanging

Word. Joy is normally good, but if it hinders our faith, it is not good. No matter how we feel, we must trust in God.

Thus we have to be careful, because our fallen nature makes us, like the disciples, prone to unbelief regarding the things of God.

2. The fact that the gospel seems too good to be true makes us prone to unbelief.

The disciples could not believe that Jesus was really risen because it seemed too good to be true. Not just the resurrection, but the entire gospel may hit us the same way. Christ died for all my sins and I can't do anything to merit it? All I can do is receive it by faith? What's the catch? It just sounds too good to be true. But it *is* true! We must believe it!

Every religion invented by man teaches that the way of salvation depends upon human effort and good works. If you work hard enough and do enough good deeds, you will earn salvation or eternal happiness. But the true way of salvation, revealed in God's Word, is that God sent His Son to die to pay the price for the sins of the *ungodly*. Paul puts it, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). He does not grant salvation to those who merit it, but to those who realize that they do not and cannot merit it: "Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:4, 5). As we saw with the thief on the cross, Jesus granted him salvation instantly and totally, apart from anything he could do and in spite of all of the terrible things he had done, simply because the thief asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom (23:39-43).

That runs counter to our human way of thinking! Surely, we have to pay a little bit for our sins? No, Jesus paid it all. He picked up the whole tab. You can't even leave the tip! Surely, we have to make promises to do better in the future? No, God's salvation is not based on your promises, but rather, on His promises. Surely, there's a catch in it somewhere? The fine print probably says that I must volunteer to go to the mission field or join a monastery. No, God offers total, instant, and eternal pardon to every sinner who will repent and trust in Jesus as his sin-bearer.

Many times I have explained the gospel to someone and asked, "What do you think?" The person has said, "That's too simple!" They are prone not to believe it because everything in life seems to have a catch. The news that Christ died for their sin, that He was raised from the dead, and that He offers eternal life as a free gift, just sounds too good to believe. But,

3. Our risen Lord wants us not to be unbelieving, but believing fully in His death and resurrection on our behalf.

All of the men in that room had believed in Jesus as Savior, and yet they were still struggling with unbelief regarding the resurrection. This shows us that believers must fight against unbelief and seek to come to a full assurance of faith. Our Lord's dealing with them shows us how gently He works with us to lead us to the place of full assurance. Here He did three things:

- A. To lead us to an assurance of faith, the risen Lord extends His peace in spite of our failures.

Although some Greek manuscripts omit it, I believe that Jesus' opening greeting, "Peace to you," was part of Luke's original gospel. While it was the common Jewish greeting, in these circumstances it surely meant more than just, "Hello." Jesus easily could have been angry with these men for deserting Him in His hour of need. He could have laid into them because of their doubts. While He rebukes them for their doubts, His tone is gentle and gracious. He extends to them His peace in order to lead them to a full assurance of faith.

- 1) The Lord offers peace to us even though He knows our pasts.

The Lord knew the disciples' pasts. He knew how little faith they had. He knew how they had slept in the garden when they should have been praying and how they deserted Him and fled. He knew how they had doubted the testimony of the women. Of course He had chosen them knowing fully their pasts. They were all sinners and they all had sinned repeatedly even after the Lord called them to Himself. Yet here He comes and offers them peace.

The Lord knows all about our pasts as well, and yet He extends us His peace and forgiveness. Listen to David extol God's mercies:

The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works... The Lord sustains all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down... The Lord is righteous in all His ways, and kind in all His deeds. The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He will also hear their cry and will save them (Ps. 145:8-9, 14, 17-19).

- 2) The Lord offers peace to us even though He knows our present doubts and fears.

The risen Jesus not only could pass through closed doors and vanish again at will. He also could read the disciples' thoughts. He knew that they were troubled and doubting. But in spite of this, He gently extended His peace to them and led them to faith.

You may have a terrible past, even after you professed faith in Christ. You may be struggling right now with doubts and fears, in spite of the Lord's many mercies to you. Jesus knows your every thought, and yet He extends His peace and forgiveness to you. Right after telling us that all things are open and laid bare before the Lord's eyes, the writer of Hebrews encourages us to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:13, 16). Let the abundant grace of our Lord lead your doubting heart to repentance and to a full assurance of faith.

- B. To lead us to an assurance of faith, the risen Lord gives us solid evidence to rest upon.

The Lord catered to their weakness and doubts by showing them His hands and His feet. He invited them to touch Him and verify that He was not a ghost, since He had flesh and bones. Then, to further verify that it was He, bodily risen from the dead, He took a piece of broiled fish and ate it in their presence (the words about the honeycomb were probably not original to Luke). Jesus helped their shaky faith by giving them solid evidence that His is who He claimed to be. If we are struggling with doubts and fears, we need a clearer view of who Jesus really is.

- 1) Jesus' wounds should lead us to believe in His death on our behalf.

Jesus' resurrection body is the only body that will be in heaven with scars on it. If you are scarred or disfigured, your resurrection body will be recognizable as you, but the imperfections will be removed. But Jesus will still be the "Lamb standing, as if slain" (Rev. 5:6). When He comes, Israel will look on Him whom they pierced and mourn (Zech. 12:10). Jesus' perpetual scars on His hands, His feet, and His side assure us that He who died is the same as He who was raised from the dead for our salvation. His wounds assure us of His great love, that He, the eternal Son of God, would endure such abuse for us. His wounds also remind us of the fact that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins. He bore our sins in His body on the cross! His wounds assure us that He is our high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses, since He too was tempted (the above thoughts are developed more fully by Charles Spurgeon, "The Wounds of Jesus," *The New Park Street Pulpit* [Baker], 5:233-240).

- 2) Jesus' risen body should assure us to believe in His resurrection from the dead.

Although His resurrection body was different than our mortal bodies, in that it could pass through walls and appear and disappear at will, it still was a *body*. He was not a ghost or spirit. Jesus took great pains here to prove to the disciples that He was raised *bodily*. They could see and touch Him, and He could eat.

Some have taught that Jesus' words, "flesh and *bones*," are significant, since Paul says (1 Cor. 15:50) that flesh and *blood* cannot inherit God's kingdom. They have argued that Jesus' resurrection body did not have blood. But that is to misunderstand Paul's words and to attach a wrong significance to Jesus' words here. Paul simply meant that our present mortal bodies must be changed to be fit for heaven. Jesus here says "flesh and bones" because that is what is visible and tangible.

The point is, He was raised *bodily*, and when He returns, He will raise up all who have died in Him and give us new, resurrection bodies (1 Cor. 15:20-54). The evidence that Jesus gave His disciples that He was *bodily* raised from the dead should assure us to believe fully in Him.

- C. To lead us to an assurance of faith, the risen Lord instructs us out of His Word.

I can only touch on this in passing today (24:44-47). Note the confidence that Jesus put in the written Word of God! Just as He did with the men on the Emmaus Road, so here with all the disciples, Jesus took them to the Old Testament to teach them how all of it pointed to Him and how it had to be fulfilled. If you are struggling with doubts, read your Bible and ask the Lord to open your mind to understand it, especially to see how the Old Testament predicted the person and work of Jesus Christ.

### Conclusion

It really is true that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that He was raised bodily from the dead, and that He offers forgiveness and eternal life to every sinner as a free gift. And, it really is important for you to believe the testimony that He gave to His disciples. It will flood your soul with eternal peace, knowing that He has forgiven your sins and accepted you because of Christ's righteousness. It will give you joy and hope, even in the most difficult trials, knowing that His resurrection guarantees your resurrection when He returns. It will make you "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Even though at times you will be tempted to doubt it, thinking, "This is too good to be true, that Christ died for my sins," the Lord wants you to know, "It is true!" It's far better than the news that you have won the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes! Believe God's Word about Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, and rejoice!

### Discussion Questions

1. Is all doubting sin? How can we know when we cross the line from honest questions that we need to work through to sinful doubting that we need to confess?
2. How should a Christian deal with his feelings? Are feelings neutral? How do we process wrong feelings?
3. How would you answer a critic who said, "Isn't Christianity just psychological?" How do we know that it is true?
4. What causes you the most doubts? How have you dealt with it?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2000, All Rights Reserved.