

Discipleship - A Journey with Jesus

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[0 : 00] All right, let's read together from Luke's Gospel, chapter 9, verses 51 to 62, as we begin a new series tonight called The Call to Discipleship from Luke 9-12.

This is the word of the Lord. When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem. And He sent messengers ahead of Him who went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for Him.

But the people did not receive Him because His face was set towards Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw it, they said, Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?

But He turned and He rebuked them, and they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, I will follow you wherever you go.

And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. To another He said, Follow Me. But He said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

[1 : 11] And Jesus said to him, Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Yet another said, I will follow you, Lord. But let me first say farewell to those at my home.

And Jesus said to him, No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. This is God's holy word. We turn this evening to that passage that Corey read for us in Luke chapter 9, just at the end of the chapter from verse 51 to verse 62.

Some years ago now, I conducted the funeral of a lady from a small holding, a farm near Trenent in East Lothian.

She was a woman and she died in her mid-80s. And I went to visit her sister in Portobello and to kind of find out a little bit about her and her life.

And one of the striking things I learned about her was this, that in all her days, she had never traveled any further than Edinburgh.

[2 : 23] She'd never been abroad. She'd never been to England. She'd never been to Fife. Well, you can understand that. But she'd never even, she'd never even been to Glasgow.

And it seems incredible to us. I was quite astonished. In our age, trains, planes, automobiles, and the rest, someone could live their whole life and never travel more than just a few miles from their home.

And yet, as I reflected on it, in times past, this woman's experience would have been the norm rather than the exception. In ancient times, people didn't travel far from their homes.

People seldom have ever traveled anywhere. Travel was often the luxury of the rich or merchants or perhaps those conscripted for military service.

Those wealthy enough for horses could travel a distance, but frequently didn't because of the potential dangers. Many people stayed in their local communities all their lives.

[3 : 27] And that was true for most people in Jesus' world too. Perhaps with one major exception, Jews regularly made one journey each year as a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Often it might take a walk of two or three days. And this was frequently made at the time of the Passover. As the people traveled, they would retell the story of the Exodus, of God's redemption of His people when their ancestors made that journey from slavery in Egypt to ultimately the Promised Land.

And I think it's that kind of journey that provides the background to what is happening here in this section of Luke's Gospel. Here, Jesus is kind of beginning a journey to Jerusalem that will mark His own exodus.

We read in verse 51, when the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem.

And these words really mark a turning point in Luke's Gospel. From this point onward, Luke traces the journey of our Lord Jesus Christ towards the city where He would accomplish His great work of redemption.

[4 : 46] Earlier on in chapter 9, we don't have time to read that, on the Mount of Transfiguration, we're told there in verses 30 and 31, Behold, two men were talking with Him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His departure, which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

And that word translated departure is literally the word Exodus. Jesus is here beginning a journey that will lead to His departure or Exodus in Jerusalem.

And all through this great section of the Gospel really runs into chapter 19. Luke reminds us that Jesus is on a journey. In fact, one might say that Luke is presenting us here with the most significant and important journey ever taken by any human being.

A journey that leaves Christopher Columbus and Marco Polo and Neil Armstrong all together in the shade. And over the next couple of months, God willing, in our evening service, we're going to follow part of that journey with Jesus.

Much of the material here relates to the whole issue of Christian discipleship and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It's a journey that's not just to be understood in some geographical sense.

[6 : 13] Because in truth, it is a redemptive journey that Jesus is taking. And in a sense, it's a journey that Luke invites us to join with Him.

He invites us to follow Jesus on this journey towards His exodus to heaven and glory. He invites us, in fact, to become His followers.

Through Luke's words, Jesus Himself calls us to come and to follow after Him. And so, in this little section before us this evening, let me highlight three things about Jesus and His journey.

And the first thing I want you to notice here in the text is the resolve that Jesus displays. The resolve Jesus displays here. We find that in verse 51 and again in verse 53.

When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem. Verse 53, the people did not receive Him, that's the Samaritans, because His face was set toward Jerusalem.

[7 : 22] It's as if in these verses, if you imagine a camera, a filmmaker, the camera lens lens, zooms in, as it were, on the countenance of Jesus.

He is resolute, He is steadfast, He is unflinching. He sets His face towards Jerusalem, knowing full well what will await Him there.

And that expression, set His face, it echoes words of the prophet Isaiah. It occurs as part of what we know as the third servant song in Isaiah 50.

The context there is that of the servant facing unexplained suffering, and yet he faces it with confidence and trust in God. So, we read in Isaiah 50, verse 7, But the Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced, therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.

The servant sets his face like a flint, for he knows that Yahweh will carry him through his suffering and bring vindication. And so, Jesus too sets His face towards Jerusalem, knowing what lies ahead, betrayal, suffering, the cross, and beyond that, vindication in His resurrection and ascension.

[8 : 51] We're told here that in Jerusalem, Jesus will be taken up. And that phrase is a kind of unusual one. It almost certainly, I think, refers to what will happen at the end of this gospel when Jesus ascends to the Father.

Remember, Luke's gospel ends not with the resurrection, but with an account of the ascension of Jesus. And this is the goal towards which the gospel is moving.

Jesus is accomplishing the redemption of His people and returning to His Father. He is making His exodus journey. It's a journey with a glorious goal.

But that road to glory is one that must pass through great sorrow and pain and rejection and suffering. Jesus must travel the way of the cross.

And so, He sets His face towards Jerusalem. He is determined to fulfill God's plan and purpose come what may. God's plan to fulfill His life.

[9 : 51] That's why already, again, earlier in this chapter, when we read of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus speaks of His impending death in just those kind of terms.

In chapter 9, verse 22, He says, the Son of Man must suffer many things. This suffering and death is a must for Jesus because it is a must in the very heart of God Himself.

It's the divine must that lies at the heart of the gospel, the divine imperative of God's love. Jesus must suffer and be killed for sinners to be redeemed, for sinful men and women to enter heaven.

Jesus, God's Son, must die. Jesus is no reluctant victim. He is the willing Lamb of God marching deliberately towards the cross for the joy set before Him, the joy of fulfilling the divine purpose, redeeming a people for Himself.

So, we have to be clear. The cross was not a surprise to Jesus. It wasn't something He sought to evade or avoid. He embraced it because it was the very reason He came.

[11 : 15] Before He would be taken up to His Father, He knew that He would be taken up and impaled on a cross. Lifted up was He to die. It is finished was His cry.

That's why He had come into the world to live and then to die on a cross. He had come to do His Father's will to secure His people's salvation.

Octavius Winslow, he was a Baptist preacher in England, a contemporary of C.H. Spurgeon, he wrote this, Who delivered Jesus up to die?

Not Judas for money, not Barabbas for freedom, not Pilate for fear, not the crowd for blood, not the Jews for envy, but the Father for love.

And so here we see Jesus setting His face towards Jerusalem, towards the agony of the cross, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross, preparing to shed His blood for the forgiveness of His people's sin.

[12 : 25] And as Jesus sets His face to the cross, so it is for those who would come after Him, for they too are called to travel the way of the cross.

And indeed, just a few verses earlier, again, earlier in this chapter, Jesus has spoken to His disciples in just those terms. Verses 23 and 24, If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. Those words fly in the face, don't they, of much contemporary Christian thinking.

He describes discipleship not in terms of personal piety and devotion, nor in terms of a kind of purpose-driven life, or any particular kind of spiritual experience.

No, Jesus says, Christian discipleship means losing your life to Me. Carrying our cross means nothing less than giving over our whole life to Jesus as our King.

[13 : 42] Bonhoeffer, who Corey quoted earlier, famously wrote, when Christ bids a man, He bids him come die. The man with the cross is one whose life is forfeit.

It's no longer his own. And so, Jesus confronts and challenges the sovereignty of our individual consciousness. He is Lord and God.

He is God, not us. He confronts the idolatry of self that is at the heart of all human rebellion against God. And He invites us and calls us to follow Him in the way of the cross.

He calls us to set our face not towards Jerusalem, but towards Him. The resolve Jesus displays.

And that brings me to the second thing here. And that's the rebuke Jesus gives in verses 52 through 56. We're told in verse 52, He sent messengers ahead of Him who went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for Him, but the people did not receive Him because His face was set towards Jerusalem.

[15 : 03] So, messengers are sent ahead probably to prepare suitable food and lodging and they enter a Samaritan village, but the villagers there refuse to receive Jesus.

They want nothing to do with Him. Why was that? Well, we're told because His face was set towards Jerusalem. And the background to their refusal is, of course, they can have age-old antagonism between the Jews and the Samaritans.

The Samaritans had their own rival temple on Mount Gerizim and they were in no way disposed to offer hospitality to Jews going to the temple in Jerusalem.

And so, with Jesus' approach, this long-standing enmity with the Jews flares up. They will not welcome one whose destiny lies in the holy city of their enemies.

When the disciples, James and Joss, saw it, James and John saw it, they said, Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them? But He turned and rebuked them and they went on to another village.

[16 : 16] Rejection is never easy to take. How we handle it can often be a very important issue. How we deal with, you know, maybe it's a failed interview or test or the person who doesn't want anything to do with us, with people who won't let us be part of what they're doing, with those who want to keep us at arm's length.

Dealing with rejection is never easy. And here the disciples, James and John, appear not to handle it terribly well. In fact, they're very angry. They're raging about what has happened.

Those sons of thunder, actually, they're righteously indignant at this rejection of Jesus, their master. And they're rightly jealous of Jesus' honor. They're rightly, perhaps, enraged at this slight done to Him.

And so, they respond, Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them, obliterate them? They want those wicked and ungrateful Samaritans dealt with immediately and in no uncertain terms.

And commentators kind of surmise that they may well have had in mind that incident back in the Old Testament in 2 Kings chapter 1 verses 9 through 18, when fire fell and consumed King Ahaziah's captain and his fifty men as a judgment from God because they rejected and they gave ill treatment to Elijah, God's prophet.

[17 : 43] We read there in chapter 1 verse 10 of 2 Kings, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty. Because, you see, they're rejecting God's prophet is a serious business.

Yet, even so, here, Jesus does not endorse this suggestion. Quite the reverse, He returned and rebuked them. He immediately rebukes His disciples.

Their response is wholly inappropriate here. Well, we might have perhaps expected a fuller explanation. There is in the footnote in the ESV there, some manuscripts, you do not know what man of spirit you are, for the Son of Man came not to destroy people's lives, but to save them.

Perhaps the reason for that omission in many manuscripts is that the explanation is in the story itself.

It is in the journey that Jesus is taking to Jerusalem and to the cross for people who have rejected God.

[19 : 01] He's traveling the road of mercy for sinners. Now is not the time for judgment. Now is the time for mercy. Yes, we need to understand there will come a time for judgment and God's righteous anger will be shown to hard hearts.

But in this current age, the call of Christ's disciples is to reach out with the good news of His grace and mercy. Today is a day of grace.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6, behold, now is the favorable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation. We're living in a day of good news, a day of salvation and rescue from divine judgment.

We're living in a day of mercy, a day in which there is yet time for men and women to discover and experience for themselves the mercy of God. And friends, those of us who are Christian believers need to remember that judgment is Jesus' job, not ours.

Tragically, down through the centuries, many have discarded or ignored this teaching. And a misguided zeal for God. They've behaved despicably, inflicting pain and harm on others in the name of Jesus.

[20 : 19] Not just calling down fire of judgment, but actually enacting it. Crusades, Inquisition, great European wars of religion, thousands put to death in the name of Christ.

What a travesty of the gospel message. What a repudiation and rejection of Jesus and His teaching. And yes, of course, zeal and passion for God's glory and honor are good things.

And we are called to stand for the truth and to reject error. But we have no business seeking vengeance on others. Zeal that spills over into violence on others is unholy and unchristian.

Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, Romans 12, 19 and 21, Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. For it's written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good. And yes, it is a serious matter to reject Jesus, to despise His Word.

[21 : 28] But those caught up in theological error are not to be put to the sword. We're not in the business of burning heretics. But we are in the business of praying and interceding and holding out the gospel of God's grace, conscious indeed that the great day of judgment will come and men and women will have to be ready for it.

It's interesting that in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, he tells of a man, an evangelist, Philip, who traveled to Samaria and did just that.

What did he do? He preached the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection. You can read about it in Acts chapter 8. We're told there, he proclaimed to them the Christ, and there was much joy in that city.

So, let's not forget Jesus' words of rebuke here. The Son of Man came not to destroy lives, but to save them. And here is grace in the face of rejection.

Our Lord presses on undeterred, His mission one of mercy, not destruction. And in this, He teaches us that true discipleship is not marked by retaliatory zeal, but by the patience and long suffering of the Savior Himself.

[22 : 48] The resolve Jesus displays, the rebuke Jesus gives. And thirdly, finally, I'll not say briefly, but anyway, the reality that Jesus highlights in verses 57 to 62.

You notice there at the end of the chapter, there follows these three separate encounters with three would-be followers of Jesus. Each man expresses a desire to follow Jesus, to become his disciple.

But it's clear that each and in his own way has misunderstood what the discipleship is in the kingdom of God, what it really entails. And in these encounters, Jesus reveals to us something of the reality of discipleship.

In the first encounter, he reminds us that discipleship has a cost. The first man approaches enthusiastically, I'll follow you wherever you go. Sounds very promising, doesn't it?

And yet, Jesus replies, foxes of holes, birds of the air of nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. So, Jesus immediately strips away any romantic illusions about being a disciple.

[23 : 57] Discipleship may not mean health, wealth, and happiness, as some want to suggest. Indeed, it may mean poverty and homelessness. To follow Jesus, security in this world may have to be sacrificed.

To follow Him is to embrace insecurity in this world, to find no lasting home here because our citizenship is in heaven.

He Himself, the very Creator of all, became homeless for our sake. Discipleship means identifying with one who was despised and rejected, who had no place to rest His head until it was bowed in death on the cross.

Many of us here in the Western world want to hedge our commitment to Jesus with all manner of qualifications. Yes, Jesus, I'll follow You wherever You go, as long as it's not there, as long as I don't have to give up this, or as long as I don't have to give up that.

As long as I can still have what I want. But friends, Jesus tells us here genuine discipleship involves a cost. And then the second man, discipleship, not only has a cost, it has a priority.

[25 : 19] Jesus issues this man with a very direct call, follow me. But the response is this, Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

It seems a reasonable, maybe even a dutiful request, honoring one's parents as commanded in Scripture, after all. And yet Jesus says, leave the dead to bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

Harsh words? No. Simply, I think, an uncomfortable truth. almost certainly the man's father was not yet dead. Funerals in that time and culture followed on very quickly from the death of an individual.

Now, this was really a way of saying, let me wait until my family obligations are fulfilled. Then I'll follow you, Jesus. But Jesus reigns on this man's parade of allegiance because the kingdom of God will tolerate no delays.

The call of Christ is an urgent one. It demands precedence over even the most sacred of earthly times. Those who are spiritually dead can attend to earthly matters, but those awakened by grace must proclaim the life that is found only in Jesus.

[26 : 42] qualified discipleship isn't really an option. And so, Jesus demands first place, not out of tyranny, but because of who He is and because He alone is worthy.

The kingdom He proclaims is no marginal concern. It is the peril of great price worth selling all to obtain. Jesus must come first.

We mustn't allow anything to deflect us or take us away from making or following Jesus as our priority. Discipleship has a cost.

Discipleship has a priority. And then, thirdly here, discipleship has a focus. The third man, I'll follow you, Lord. Let me first say farewell to those at my home.

And again, that sounds innocent enough. Elijah, back in 1 Kings 19, permitted Elisha to say farewell to his family. But Jesus replies, no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

[27 : 50] Plowing a straight furrow requires fixed concentration. One glance back and the row becomes all skew-whiff, crooked. And so it is in the kingdom.

To follow Christ is to set your face resolutely forward, like Him, without nostalgic looking back to what lies behind. Those who look back all too often want to go back.

But following Jesus is not a short-term temporary commitment. The call to discipleship is not for a season, but for a lifetime. And so the question is, are our eyes focused this evening?

Are we looking back or are we looking forward? Are we fixing our eyes on Jesus or on something or someone else? What kind of furrow are we plowing?

Are you cutting a straight line? Are you veering all over the place? Friends, these encounters, three encounters, are not meant to discourage us, but to awaken us to the true nature of Christian discipleship.

[29 : 02] Jesus is not marketing a comfortable, kind of easy going religion. It's not your best life now. He's calling sinners like us to a cross-shaped life.

The cost is high. No earthly security, no divided loyalties, no looking back. Yet we must never forget that this apparently demanding Savior is the one who first set his face toward Jerusalem for us.

Going to the cross to bear our sin, bearing the ultimate cost, forsaken by God, homeless in death, cut off from every earthly tie that we might have a place in his Father's house.

The call to discipleship then is not to a life of grim self-denial, but to a life centered on Christ crucified and risen, a life joined and united to Jesus.

And to follow him is to lose our lives, but in losing them, to find them. Because in union with him, the cost becomes a joy and a delight.

[30 : 27] His demands become privileges. By the Spirit, his resoluteness strengthens our weak resolve. His rejection secures our acceptance.

His single-minded obedience covers over our wandering and often divided hearts. And so tonight, Jesus calls us to journey with him.

He wants to take us on the greatest journey of all, because that is what Christian discipleship is. It is to take the path to glory that Jesus took.

It is to place our faith in him, to follow him resolutely on the Calvary road, to follow him in showing mercy to others, to follow him by loving him and by putting him first.

Therefore, as the writer to Hebrews tells us, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[31 : 48] Lord, may we like him set our faces towards the heavenly Jerusalem and follow wherever he chooses to lead us.

Let's pray together. Lord, give us ears to hear your call to follow Jesus, to be your disciples.

Lord, we know that we cannot embark on that journey in our own strength, in our own wisdom. We need your help.

We need the guidance and direction and illumination of your Holy Spirit. Lord, open our eyes that we might see Jesus, and seeing him, follow him, and trust him always.

We pray this in his name. Amen.