

LUKE AND THE MISSION OF JESUS
(7) JESUS AND JERUSALEM

Luke 9:51-55

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SCRIPTURE

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them (Luke 9:51-55 NRSV).

MESSAGE

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem (9:51).

Luke likens the mission of Jesus to a journey – a journey to Jerusalem. More than one third of Luke’s Gospel is devoted to this journey. We are explicitly told in 9:51 that Jesus is heading for Jerusalem but he doesn’t arrive for ten chapters (19:28). This section (9:51-19:28) of Luke is known as the “Travel Narrative” or the “Journey Narrative.” Jesus visits various places along the way but uppermost in his mind is the fact that Jerusalem is his final destination, he is on a journey to Jerusalem. Luke stresses this more than any of the other gospels:

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem (Lk 13:22 NRSV).

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee (Lk 17:11 NRSV).

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished (Lk 18:31 NRSV).

After [Jesus] had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem (Lk 19:28 NRSV).

Luke emphasizes repeatedly that Jesus is going to Jerusalem to die and rise again. Everything from 9:51 on takes place under the looming shadow of the cross. The journey to Jerusalem reveals to us that Jesus' mission is to give his life to save the world.

When the days drew near for him to be taken up (9:51a).

Luke indicates not only that something was soon to happen but that it was also the completion of something in progress. The phrase "taken up" could refer to Jesus being lifted on the cross or taken up from the tomb. But in Acts, Luke uses it to refer to the ascension of Jesus – when he was taken up into heaven forty days after the resurrection.

He set his face to go to Jerusalem (9:51b).

Luke employs an Old Testament phrase (see Jer 3:12; 21:10; Ezek 6:2; 13:17; 21:2) to indicate resolute determination. Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem knowing full well what awaits him. He is resolved to fulfill his mission.

The Journey Narrative is dominated by the teachings of Jesus. It contains many of his more well known parables such as the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Great Banquet, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Persistent Widow, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The story of Jesus' transforming encounter with Zacchaeus brings the Journey Narrative to its penultimate end.

Because these ten chapters contain an ordered collection of the teachings of Jesus that seem to stand on their own this has led some authors to drive a wedge between these teachings and the death and resurrection of Jesus. They tend to start out by saying something like: "In this book I'm not going to talk about the passion story. I'm not going to mention the cross or the resurrection. I'm just going to focus on the teachings of Jesus which is the real heart of the matter."

But this is a distortion. The teachings take place in the context of the journey to Jerusalem. Jesus expresses his resolve to go to Jerusalem. Everything he says is under the shadow of the impending cross. He cannot simply be a great religious teacher. Luke does not allow that interpretation. Jesus knows what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem and why it matters. This makes him either insane or the savior of the world. There is not really any middle ground. Is Jesus a great teacher? Of course. But he is far more than that. The truth is, you cannot know the real Jesus without seeing him on the cross and seeing him emerge from the tomb.

The Journey Narrative also shows us the scope of Jesus' mission. The journey begins in a

Samaritan village that has no interest in extending hospitality to Jesus and his party. I have mentioned on previous occasions the intense racial and religious prejudice that marked Jewish-Samaritan relations. Passover was an especially tense time. One Passover some Samaritans dug up graves and threw human remains into the Temple in Jerusalem in order to keep the Jews from celebrating their feast. The next year Jewish soldiers burned the Samaritan temple to the ground.

When the Samaritans do not welcome Jesus, James and John want to call down fire from heaven to wipe them out just as the prophet Elijah had done centuries earlier (see 1 Kings 18:38; 2 Kings 1:10, 12). But Jesus forbids it. Ironically, the disciples themselves will turn their backs on Jesus after they arrive in Jerusalem. So if the Samaritans deserved condemnation then so did the disciples. But Jesus did not come to condemn but to save. He came to save Jews. He came to save Gentiles. He came to save Samaritans. He came to save the world – to give his life for its redemption.

The Journey Narrative shows us the object of Jesus' mission – the cross. It shows us the scope of his mission – all of humanity. It also shows us the implications for this mission – we are all on a journey.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive." I suppose for many people that is true. But Christ followers have a unique advantage in that because of what Christ has done for us we can do both – travel hopefully and arrive.

Life often puts us on journeys. Life itself is a journey, a journey from birth to death. Between our birth and our death we are pilgrims on the road to God. We are but travelers on a journey.

There is hardship in the journey, yes, but also signs of God's love and grace. The tender flower, the strong tree, the majestic mountain; the love of family, the companionship of friends, the joy of helping others along the way.

Staying active while on the journey is also important. Some take this to mean remaining physically active by engaging in such activities as golf or tennis. Tennis, as you may or may not know, is a thoroughly biblical game. The first match is mentioned in Genesis where it tells us Joseph served in Pharaoh's court. Tennis scoring probably makes no sense to anyone who is not familiar with the game. For example, instead of saying zero they say "love." This leads to the old adage, "never fall in love with a tennis player because for them it means nothing." Fortunately, this does not apply to God for whom no one is ever a zero in his eyes. For we are made in his image and are the recipients of his great love.

Because we are but travelers on our journey through life, knowing that our final destination is with God, we keep our sight fixed not just on the appearance of this life, but on the fact that we were created by God, that we cannot be truly happy without God, and of course God wants only what is good for us – we keep our eyes fixed on the fact that our destination is the new Jerusalem where we can enjoy God forever.