

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Luke's Gospel: Peter's confession, Jesus predicts His death, and taking up the cross (Luke 9:18-27)

Introduction

The passage we will be considering this morning is Luke 9:18-27. I will break down the section as follows:

1. What Jesus did;
2. Who Jesus is;
3. What Jesus will do;
4. Following Jesus;
5. Being disowned by Jesus; and
6. Seeing Jesus' kingdom.

See if you can recognise the divisions as I read the whole passage.

"And it happened, as He was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them, saying, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' So they answered and said, 'John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered and said, 'The Christ of God.' And He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.' Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:18-27).

1. What Jesus did

The first thing we find Jesus doing in our passage for today is praying (Luke 9:18). We have noticed on previous occasions that Luke is the gospel that presents Jesus as the perfect man. For this reason, Luke often draws our attention to the prayer life of the Lord. As a man, He expressed His dependency on God by regularly taking time to speak to Him in prayer. Both Matthew and Mark give an account of the Lord questioning the disciples about who He is (see Matthew 16:13-20 and Mark 8:27-30), but only Luke records the fact that it immediately followed Jesus being alone in prayer.

Whenever I read these references to Jesus' prayer life I am challenged by my own comparative prayerlessness. In today's busy world, the first thing that gets squeezed out of our schedules is often prayer. But no matter how busy Jesus was, and the Gospel accounts show that He had many very long days, when there was hardly enough time to eat, He always made time to pray. When we played cricket in the summer as kids, we always asked ourselves who had booked their place on the plane that day! It's a metaphor that sports writers still use. Somebody who has played well enough to show they are indispensable to the team, has booked themselves a seat on the plane for the next tour abroad. In football circles, they talk about 'the first name on the team sheet': the person you would always want to play.

My point is that prayer should be the first item on our daily "team sheet", the one player who always has a seat on our plane. Whatever else has to be bumped off our schedule to make room for today's emergencies, prayer needs to stay on there!

2. Who Jesus is

Jesus asked His disciples who the crowds were saying that He was (Luke 9:18). This is an important question for all of us as Christians, "What are people thinking about Jesus?" We will see, in a moment, that the crowds in that day had some confused and incomplete ideas about who Jesus really was, and it is no different today (see Luke 9:19). It is important for us, before we can talk to other people about our Lord, that we have some grasp of what they are thinking. Given that we live in a time of increasing ignorance of the Bible and all it teaches, we shouldn't be surprised that people have some mixed up ideas of who Jesus is and what He came to do. Before we can make ourselves understood to the people we meet, we may have to do some careful listening, to understand where they are coming from.

The disciples had obviously been listening to the crowds in Israel, and were ready to answer Jesus' question. In fact, the views have already been mentioned previously in this chapter, when Herod was puzzling over who Jesus was (see Luke 9:7-9). The most popular view was that Jesus was John the Baptist, somehow returned from the dead, after Herod had ordered his execution. I can see how they might have arrived at this conclusion. There had been no prophets in Israel since the time of Malachi, around 400 years earlier. Imagine the impact John the Baptist must have made as the first, real-live prophet in over 400 years!

He created an enormous stir across the nation, and spoke to them about the imminent arrival of the Messiah they had been expecting for many more hundreds of years. John's death must have been an enormous shock to his many followers, and it is easy to see why somebody else, speaking with a similar directness, and bringing a message from God with real conviction, made them think that John was back on the scene again. He was the only prophet any of them had ever known first hand. So, the idea was not without logic, but it was fundamentally wrong. John the Baptist had told people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah (see , and had actually identified Jesus as the Person he had been speaking about. John was the greatest of the prophets, but Jesus was much more than that! These people remind us of those today who reach conclusions about who Jesus is based solely on their own direct experience and personal perspectives.

The next most popular answer was, Elijah. These people were obviously familiar with Malachi 4:5, which says, "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the dreadful day of the LORD.*" Presumably, they were thinking, perhaps even hoping, that the days they were living in were the time when God would bring everything to a conclusion in the great Day of the LORD. They knew that Elijah would be sent before then, so, they reasoned, Jesus must be Elijah. This group reminds us of those people today who have some vague ideas from the Bible about Jesus, and some wish that God will sort everything out in the world, but get no further than that.

Still others thought that Jesus was one of the old prophets who had risen again. Whether they thought one of the prophets had been resurrected, or simply that Jesus seemed to be speaking with the same kind of authority and power as a prophet such as Jeremiah, or Isaiah, is not clear, and it probably doesn't matter too much.

The fact is that they acknowledged Jesus as a powerful prophet, somebody who spoke as God's mouthpiece, but nothing more. There are still many today who will acknowledge Jesus as a good man, and a great teacher, but no more than that.

Having established what the general populace thought about Him, Jesus goes on to ask the much more vital question, "*But who do you say that I am?*" (Luke 9:20) All of us need to be clear on this most important of questions: our salvation depends on it! Peter had no hesitation in replying, "*The Christ of God*" (Luke 9:20). Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah. Both words mean "The Anointed One". It refers to the promised Saviour that Jehovah would send to Israel. It is plain from the Old Testament scriptures that the Messiah is much more than just another prophet. He is greater than the prophets (Deuteronomy 18:15-22), will reign as King over the people for ever (1 Chronicles 22:10), and is ascribed the characteristics of God Himself (Psalm 45:6).

Peter's confession, stated in Matthew 16:17 to be the result of a direct revelation from God to Peter, is a wonderful acknowledgement of who Jesus really is. We might have expected Jesus to be keen for the disciples to share this revelation of God as widely as possible, and make public announcements of the coming of God's Christ. It therefore comes as a bit of a surprise to read, "*[Jesus] strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one*" (Luke 9:21). Why the strange desire for secrecy? The answer lies in the contrast between what Jesus says will happen to Him in the next few verses, and the general conception of what the Messiah would do, among the Jews of that day. The popular understanding of the Messiah was of a political and military figure. He would come to free the nation from the oppression of the Romans. He would establish Israel as the chief nation of the world once again, and would immediately usher in an everlasting, physical kingdom.

Now I firmly believe that Jesus will, one day, do those things, but they had totally forgotten the need for God to do something about the enormous problem of human sinfulness first. It was this misunderstanding of what Jesus had

come to do, that resulted in the people wanting to come and make Jesus their king by force, as recorded in John 6:14-15. Indeed the events of John 6 and Luke 9, are around the same time. It is for these reasons, that Jesus carefully avoided the public use of the title "Christ", or "Messiah", concerning Himself, even though He would happily confess it in private, such as here among the disciples, or to the Samaritan woman in John 4:26.

3. What Jesus will do

In Luke 9:22 Jesus spells out plainly to the disciples what will happen to Him: His suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. This is the first occasion in Luke's gospel when Jesus tells the disciples about His death and resurrection. There are three more occasions before His death, later in this chapter (Luke 9:43-45), then in Luke 17 and Luke 18:31-34. On two of these occasions it is expressly stated that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying. In Luke 24 both an angel at the tomb (Luke 24:6-7), and the Lord Himself in resurrection (Luke 24:46), refer back to what Jesus had told them previously about how He would die and rise again. Perhaps, like me, you have sometimes wondered how the disciples could have totally failed to grasp what Jesus told them, in very explicit and simple language. The truth is that they had been brought up with the same understanding of what the Messiah would do as the rest of the Jews. They simply had no conception of a Messiah who would suffer and die.

With the benefit of a complete New Testament, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we might think that passages such as Isaiah 52:13-53:12 should have given them a clue about a suffering Messiah! But we are making the mistake of applying everything that has been made plain by the teaching given to us in the New Testament epistles, and then being surprised that the disciples did not work all this out for themselves, years before the epistles were written!

What the Lord is beginning to set out, for the first time, is the basis for salvation and the forgiveness of sins, including the way that this salvation will extend beyond Israel to the whole world. Luke 9:22 sets out four elements:

- Suffering;
- Rejection by Israel;
- Death; and
- Resurrection.

Suffering

"The Son of Man must suffer many things". We have already considered how the Jews were baffled by the idea of a Messiah who would suffer. The suffering arises from the sinfulness of mankind and, more specifically, our second point His rejection by Israel.

Rejection by Israel

Luke presents this rejection very comprehensively it is by, "*the elders and chief priests and scribes*" (Luke 9:22). **The elders** are those who should have the wisdom of age, and therefore have a duty to guide the people by their behaviour and good counsel. The **chief priests** are those who have a specific responsibility, given to them by God, to represent Him to the people, and the people to Him.

They are the **chief priests**, so their responsibility is especially marked. The **scribes** are a category of people who arose after the Old Testament times. They took on themselves, not just the responsibility to copy and preserve God's word (as the English word scribe suggests), but to teach the people its meaning and encourage them to obey it. In short, the whole leadership of the nation is categorised as rejecting their own Messiah. John 1:11 summarises this, saying, "*He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.*" Solemn though this is, we who are Gentiles, can rejoice that, as Paul states in Romans 11, this failure of Israel is the means of blessing and salvation to us!

Death

The disciples could not understand how the Christ, who must reign forever, could die. We now know that without Christ's death, there could never be any salvation, or eternal life, for anybody at all. The kingdom they were longing for, could never have a single subject if Christ did not die! If there is not a death, there is no possibility of a resurrection.

Resurrection

Christ must be, "*raised the third day*" (Luke 9:22). In His death, Christ would take on Himself all our guilt and condemnation. His resurrection would demonstrate that every last sin had been removed! It was on the third day, because "God would not *allow [His] Holy One to see corruption*" (Psalm 16:10, quoted in Acts 2:27 and Acts 13:35).

So, Jesus sets out the work that He has come to do as the Christ of God. It is so far removed from what the disciples, and the rest of the Jews, imagined, that it is little wonder that Jesus does not want Himself proclaimed as the Christ, until it is clear what the term really means.

4. Following Jesus

It is in the light of the teaching about His own suffering and death, that Jesus now begins to talk about what it means to follow Him. It is wonderful to want to be a follower of Christ, but nobody should think it is without cost. Anybody who would be a follower of Christ must, *"deny himself, and take up his cross daily"* (Luke 9:23). We shouldn't think the person who "denies himself" is living the kind of life that we usually describe as self-denial. Jesus is not teaching about living a Spartan lifestyle, with just enough food and water for survival, and avoiding all pleasures and natural interests. Luke 9:24-27 make clear that Jesus is talking about what value we place on being connected to Him, in contrast to the value we place on being accepted, and having an easy life in, this world. To follow Jesus will be to deny the natural choice of avoiding opposition and persecution in this world.

Since Christ was about to suffer, be rejected and be killed, following Him will be like accepting the death of living selfishly, and might even result in physical death. A cross is a very stark symbol of an unpleasant death that is going to occur very soon. To take up a cross daily, is to accept this as an ongoing, regular reality. But, paradoxically, it is the only way to save your life! The Lord is referring to both physical and spiritual, or eternal, life. If we choose not to follow Christ because it will mean hardship, we lose all opportunity for eternal life. Accepting hardship by itself does not bring salvation, but if we are ready to lose our life *"for His sake"* then we will gain eternal life. If we choose to live for the "here and now", we might, conceivably, gain everything we seek for (although very few do!), even as far as gaining the whole world. But, says Jesus, what is the profit to us if we do so, but are destroyed or lost?

These verses are probably quite well known to you, but do you actually live your life on the basis they describe? Even after we have been Christians for many years, we can easily get sucked into treating things in the present as more important than eternal, or heavenly things. We have to truly value the Lord's company, and genuinely believe that blessings in heaven are real and substantial, before we can live out these priorities.

5. Being disowned by Jesus

Luke 9:26 contains a stark warning. How we respond to Jesus, His teaching, and His claims now, has a huge significance for the future. Right now, Jesus may be rejected and disregarded by the majority, but this will one day be reversed in the most radical manner. The Son of Man has His own glory, as the one who is the Son of God. In the day of judgment, that glory will be on display for everybody to see. He will also come with all the glory of His Father, and that of the angels. In fact, the angels are described here as, *"holy angels"* (Luke 9:26), to contrast them with sinful human beings. In that day, He will be the Judge of the world and every living being (including those raised for judgment!), will wish He would acknowledge and accept them. The hard reality is, that all those who rejected him in their lifetime, those who were, *"ashamed of [Him] and [His] words"* (Luke 9:26), will find that He is ashamed of them on that day. This isn't describing the Lord's assessment of how faithful a believer has been, it refers to His **complete** disowning of those who would have nothing to do with Him, and refused to follow Him.

How appalling it would be if somebody who is listening to these words today, has not decided to follow the rejected Christ as their Saviour. Choosing whether or not to follow Jesus is not like choosing a career, a place to live, or a car. Those kind of choices, can have many right answers, and what is best for you may not suit me. Following Christ has only one right answer, and there is only one Christ, and one salvation. Failure to follow Him will be utterly catastrophic in the day of judgment: don't make that most serious of errors!

6. Seeing Jesus' kingdom

In contrast to those of whom Christ will be ashamed, our last verse today talks about those who will see the kingdom of God (Luke 9:27). We might have thought that, given that all Jesus has said previously about His rejection, **and** not immediately coming to reign as King of Israel, His kingdom must be many years off into the future. But Jesus says emphatically that some of the people standing in front of Him would see the kingdom of God before they died! How could that be? There are two possible answers, and they could both be right!

Answer 1- The Transfiguration

The very next section of this chapter, Luke 9:28-36, contains Luke's account of the Lord's transfiguration - how Peter, James and John saw Jesus shining in all His glory and talking to Moses and Elijah. Certainly, this would represent Jesus being seen with all the glory that He will display in the day that He reigns as King in the glorious kingdom of God. Peter, James and John, saw, on that day, a little glimpse of what the glorious kingdom will look like. This was within eight days of Jesus making the statement in Luke 9:27.

Answer 2 - The Kingdom in the form of the church on earth

The kingdom of God is quite a broad concept in the Bible. At its widest, it covers the whole sovereignty of God, at all times, over the universe He has made. Sometimes, as we have just been thinking, it refers to the glorious reign of Christ, in what we call the Millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. It also has a spiritual, or mystery, aspect, where it refers to those who willingly submit to God's authority. In that sense, everybody who puts their faith in Christ as Saviour today enters God's kingdom. Therefore, the disciples all lived to see the kingdom established in this way, as they saw the church that was founded on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection, the death and resurrection that we have read about Jesus starting to expound to His disciples this morning.

Lord Jesus, we thank You that we can know for certain that You are much more than a prophet and teacher, You are the Christ, God's own Son. We give thanks that Your rejection, suffering and death, have given place to Your resurrection, and that we can now follow You as a living Lord. We look forward to Your glorious reign, and ask that You will teach us to give the same priority to prayer as You did. Amen.

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