

JESUS RESOLUTELY SET OUT FOR JERUSALEM

Luke 9:51-62

Key Verse: 9:51

“As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”

In this passage we reach a pivotal point in Luke’s gospel. It is the end of the Galilean ministry and the beginning of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Luke dedicated almost half of his gospel, from 9:51-19:27, to Jesus’ ministry on the way to Jerusalem. During this time, Jesus continued to proclaim the kingdom of God, characterized as “already,” but “not yet.” Jesus also raised his disciples as kingdom workers. Jesus tells fifteen parables which are unique to Luke’s gospel. In today’s passage, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. We want to learn why Jesus did this and what it means to us to follow him. As he set out, Jesus encounters three disciple candidates. The key word in each encounter is “follow.” They had to decide to pay the cost, whatever it is, to give him first priority and commit themselves fully to him. It seems to be too much. Why did Jesus require this kind of commitment? Can we just ignore it? Or should we take it seriously? Jesus never forces us to do something. But in following Jesus, there can be no compromise. It is because following Jesus is the only way of salvation, victory and true glory. Let’s learn what Jesus did for us and how we can follow him.

First, the meaning of Jesus’ decision (9:51-56). After Jesus’ disciples’ evangelistic journey, Jesus’ name was spread far and wide. Jesus’ popularity was now at a peak. Everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did (9:43). Jesus’ Galilean ministry was very fruitful and prosperous. At this moment, Jesus predicted to his disciples his rejection, suffering, death and resurrection. Then Jesus acted based on this prediction, as we see in verse 51. It begins, **“As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven...”** Luke does not say, “...to die...” but “...to be taken up to heaven.” What does this mean? Jesus knew that he would be rejected, suffer and die. But that was not the end. God raised him from the dead; he ascended into heaven and reigns at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. Jesus was not fully absorbed in his suffering and death; he saw beyond it to his glorious ascension and final victory. It was because he trusted in God and his word of promise. Hebrews 12:2b says, **“For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”** In this way

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Jesus became the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. So we need to fix our eyes on this Jesus. Paul said, **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”** (Ac 14:22). If we see only hardships, we can be discouraged. But when we see Jesus, who endured with courage and joy, we find the strength to persevere to final victory.

With this faith, what did Jesus do? Verse 51b says, **“...Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”** Knowing the will of God is one thing, and doing the will of God is another. Many people say, “If I know God’s will, I will do it.” But as they begin to perceive that it involves rejection, suffering, and possibly death, they are afraid and become paralyzed. But Jesus was different. Jesus resolutely set out. The word “resolutely” comes from a Semitic idiom that means “to fix one’s face.” It means “to make a decision, with emphasis upon finality—to decide firmly, to resolve, to make up one’s mind definitely.”¹ Jesus firmly decided to obey God’s will with no turning back and no second thought. Through this decision, God’s salvation plan was fulfilled and Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb 5:9). Jesus gave us the forgiveness of all our sins and the gift of eternal life and living hope in the kingdom of God. Now a new and living way has been opened for us, so that we can approach God’s throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:16; 10:20).

Jesus is not only our Savior, but also our example. Jesus’ decision set the course of salvation history. Though Jesus is God, as a human being, it was not natural for him to accept this death. He had to struggle to deny himself and obey God’s will. Hebrews 5:7 gives us a hint about how Jesus struggled. It says, **“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”** Throughout history, those who were used greatly by God went through this kind of struggle to obey God’s will. When Apostle Paul was on the way to Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit warned him that prison and hardship were facing him. Many people discouraged him. But he firmly decided to obey God’s will, saying, **“...I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the**

¹ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 359). New York: United Bible Societies.

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race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Ac 20:24).

The 19th century missionary David Livingstone is now regarded as “the apostle of Africa.” Under the godly influence of Christian parents, he decided early in life to be a missionary. At first he wanted to go to China. When that door was closed, he heard an African missionary, Robert Moffat, share his experience. Moffat said, “Often, as I have looked to the vast plains of the north I have sometimes in the morning sun seen the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary has ever been.” Livingstone thought, “A thousand villages! No missionary! No Gospel! No Christ! No salvation! No life! No light! Nothing but sin and death and darkness! I will to go Africa.”² So he went to Africa as a medical missionary at the age of 27. Such was the resolve of this decision that he persevered through separation from family members, the deaths of loved ones, and extreme health problems to give his whole life for African mission. Through his labor of love, a way was opened for the evangelization of the entire continent.

Here we learn that knowing the will of God is not enough; we need to make a decision to obey the will of God. What is the will of God? The Bible tells us that it is for the gospel to be preached to all nations (24:47), and for us to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances (1Th 5:16-18), and to be sanctified (1Th 4:3). In addition, God gives each of us a personal calling and mission. It may be to establish a Christian family, or to go as a missionary. It may be to teach the Bible to one person, establish a peer fellowship group, or initiate student ministry on a campus. It may be to have a “hard conversation” with a friend, or to intentionally express love to someone who is full of weaknesses and likely to wound us in return. Whatever we know is the will of God, let’s resolutely decide to do it. God will surely guide and bless us.

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus decided to go through Samaria. At that time, Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other due to conflicts, among others, about the place of worship. Jesus clearly taught that salvation was from the Jews (Jn 4:22). But Jesus did not discriminate against the Samaritans. He had a great shepherd’s heart for them and wanted to preach

² http://www.pacificbaptist.com/missions/david_livingstone_bio.pdf

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the gospel to them positively. So he sent messengers on ahead, who went to a Samaritan village to get things ready for him (52). However, the people there did not welcome him (53). It was their habit, out of strong animosity, to refuse overnight shelter to pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John, who had hot tempers, saw this, they asked, “**Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?**” (54) Maybe they were inspired by the vision of Elijah on the mountain. They thought they had spiritual authority to destroy people. We can understand James and John. It is not easy to bear rejection, especially when one has a shepherd’s heart to preach the gospel. In fact, rejection is very painful. Martin Luther said that if he were God he would destroy all mankind twice a day.

However, Jesus’ mindset is quite different. Jesus turned and rebuked them (55). This was unusual. Jesus had always encouraged and served them. But this time he rebuked them. Why? It was because their ethnocentric mindset and religious pride and prejudice were enemies to the gospel ministry. Instead of understanding and embracing people who were different from them, James and John wanted to destroy them in the name of Jesus. Throughout history, Christians have made grievous mistakes by carrying out violent acts in Jesus’ name, such as the Crusades and the Thirty Years’ religious war in 17th century Europe. Jesus rebukes such a mindset. Jesus wants us to have his mindset and embrace marginalized people with God’s compassion. In contrast to his disciples, Jesus was not upset at all with the Samaritans. He and his disciples simply went to another village (56). Jesus did not give up on these Samaritans, or on James and John. After his death and resurrection, God worked in Samaria through Philip the evangelist and many people believed the gospel. James and John were changed by the work of the Holy Spirit and positively blessed the Samaritan believers as fellow brothers in Christ (Ac 8:14-15). This gives us hope as we struggle with our own kinds of prejudices. Let’s ask for the Holy Spirit to transform our own hearts, so that we may have the compassion of Christ for all kinds of people.

Second, the cost of following Jesus (9:57-62). As they were walking along the road, Jesus encountered three disciple candidates. Two of them volunteered to follow him, and in the other case Jesus said, “**Follow me.**” We don’t know their names or what the result of these encounters were. But Luke includes these three encounters to teach us how to follow Jesus in his way, and not in our own way. The first man said to Jesus, “**I will follow you**

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wherever you go.” Wow! “Wherever you go”? He seems to have been a great candidate. Apparently, he did not know where Jesus was going. If he knew, he might not have been so positive. Nevertheless, he made a spontaneous confession of loyalty and commitment that seemed to have no limit. We might think that Jesus would welcome him gladly. But to our surprise, Jesus replied, **“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head”** (58). What Jesus said is true. Though he is the Son of God, he came into this world as a human being and at birth he was laid in a manger. He lived a most humble life. He had no house or car or personal property. He had to borrow another’s donkey to make his entry into Jerusalem. After death, he was laid in a tomb that belonged to someone else. In fact, Jesus lived very poorly and humbly while on earth. Why? 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”** Following Jesus is the way of humility and sacrifice for the sake of others. Actually, this is the way of true glory.

When Jesus teaches the cost of following him, he often includes a promise of blessing. For example, Matthew 6:33 says, **“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”** In Mark 10:29-30 Jesus promised that whatever we sacrifice to follow him, we will receive 100 times as much in this lifetime. Jesus also guaranteed eternal life along with persecution. But here Jesus only emphasizes the cost of following him. Why? Usually people follow others to learn some secret of success and to live a better life in this world. That is why the prosperity gospel is so popular. Perhaps this man saw the future with Jesus through rose-colored glasses. He expected success, fame and wealth, and to find earthly security in Jesus. But there is no such earthly security. **“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever”** (1Pe 2:24-25). James 4:14 says, **“You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”** To follow Jesus is to put our hope in the living God and his kingdom. While on earth we carry out our mission with all that we are and all that we have. With this hope, we sacrifice and serve others, even though no one may recognize us. We live a humble life. When Jesus, our

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Chief Shepherd, appears, we will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1Pe 5:4).

The second encounter was initiated by Jesus. He said to another man, **“Follow me”** (59a). It was the glorious invitation of the Son of God. Jesus had a great hope for him and wanted to use him as one of his disciples. When Peter, James and John, Andrew and even Matthew heard these words, they made an immediate decision to leave everything behind and follow Jesus. But this man replied, **“Lord, first let me go and bury my father”** (59b). To bury a deceased parent is an important duty, and Jesus upholds the duty of honoring one’s parents (Mt 15:1-9). The request seems reasonable on the surface, but this man’s first response was not to obey Jesus immediately. In fact, he made an excuse for not following Jesus. It may be that his father had died some time before this. In Judaism, burial often involved a year-long period from the time the body was buried.

How did Jesus answer? **“Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God”** (60). This does not mean that Christians should not attend the funerals of their parents. It does mean that we should put first priority on the kingdom of God. In reality, we all have many duties and responsibilities. Sometimes we are so burdened we don’t know what to do first. Many things seem to be important when we consider our life’s direction and what kind of value system to live by. We cannot accomplish everything and we cannot please everyone. We really need to know what is of first and foremost importance. Jesus tells us clearly that it is the kingdom of God. If we fail to gain the kingdom of God, but gain many other things, we gain nothing. If we gain the kingdom of God, but fail to gain anything else, we still have everything. What really matters is that we, and our family members, and our neighbors enter the kingdom of God. To God, each person is so precious that he gave his only Son for that person. God wants all people to be saved (1Ti 2:4). That is why preaching the kingdom of God is most important.

A third person came to Jesus and said, **“I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family”** (61). He made a conditional offer to follow Jesus. He knew that following Jesus was good, but he was very attached to his family members. However, there can be no “but” in following Jesus. We cannot follow Jesus with a divided heart. Jesus said,

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“No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (62). Here Jesus uses a metaphor to explain the importance of singlehearted devotion. In ancient Israel, fields were ploughed by draft animals pulling iron devices. One who guided this process needed to pay full attention to going forward in a straight line. Otherwise, his furrow would be crooked and the field would be messed up. In the same way, anyone who follows Jesus needs full commitment and single-hearted devotion. There can be no looking back.

What causes people to look back? Sometimes it may be sentimental feelings about the past, or regrets, or attachments to worldly things as Lot's wife had. Or it may be present hardships or persecutions. In times of persecution, the Hebrew Christians were tempted to drift back to Judaism for their security. The author of Hebrews strongly warned them, **“We must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard so that we do not drift away...how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?”** (Heb 2:1,3). This is why we have to fix our eyes on Jesus and run the race, going forward. There is no regret. When I left my home in Oregon and moved to Chicago back in 1983, I had a conviction that God called me to preach the gospel for his kingdom purpose. I was so busy for this that I had no time to visit my family for 21 years. I missed so many family gatherings, even though I am the only son. They did not complain, but understood my calling from God. A couple of years ago, I had a chance to visit. At that time, my parents listened to the gospel message through me and accepted it from their hearts. This brought such great comfort to us all. Now we are sure that we will all be together in the kingdom of God forever. I have no regrets and am not looking back, but going forward according to God's calling. Many here have a similar story.

Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, who resolutely set out for Jerusalem to save us. Let's follow his footsteps, not looking back, but going forward toward the kingdom of God. This is the way of true glory.