

Counting the Cost

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Date: 26 April 2020

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- [0 : 0 0] Our Bible reading this morning is from Luke chapter 9 verses 51 to 62. As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.
- And he sent messengers on ahead who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him. But the people there did not welcome him because he was heading for Jerusalem.
- When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them? But Jesus turned and rebuked them.
- Then he and his disciples went to another village. As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, I will follow you wherever you go.
- Jesus replied, foxes have dens and birds have nests. But the son of man has nowhere to lay his head. He said to another man, follow me.
- [1 : 0 4] But he replied, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. Jesus said to him, let the dead bury their own dead. But you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.
- Still another said, I will follow you, Lord. But first let me go back and say goodbye to my family. Jesus replied, no one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.
- Okay, so we are returning to Luke's gospel. Let me get that chair out of the way or the graphics are not going to work very well.
- We are returning to Luke's gospel to this orderly account compiled from eyewitness testimony. That's how Luke describes it in the first couple of verses of his book, an eyewitness testimony.
- We're rejoining this narrative at the start of a major new section. Not quite the second volume of a trilogy, more part two of the same book.
- [2 : 1 0] And this new section, this is characterized by a journey as Jesus travels from Galilee down to Jerusalem. Luke, as he compiles this account, he doesn't seem to be massively concerned about the geography of it or the chronology of the journey for that matter.
- What he is interested in, he's interested in using this physical journey to teach us about another journey. Along the road, Jesus is teaching his disciples about the journey of life, the journey of discipleship.
- He's teaching them and by extension teaching us, he's teaching us about what it looks like to follow him. And this is certainly instruction that they were in serious need of.
- Just a few verses earlier, we found the disciples squabbling like little children, squabbling about who is the greatest. And so as the journey begins in these closing verses of chapter nine, we see here in this section today, we see that the journey has a clear destination.
- We see rejection on the journey and we see the cost of the journey. Destination, verse 51. Rejection, verses 52 through 56. And cost, the last verses of the section.
- [3 : 2 6] So first, the journey's destination. Verse 51 says, So, Jesus is heading for Jerusalem.

Why? Well, because the time is approaching for him to be taken up. And by that taking up, we're not talking just about the ascension. But by that, more broadly, we're talking about the climactic events of Jesus' crucifixion and burial and resurrection and then ascension.

From chapter 19 onwards, Luke is going to deal with those events of the last week of Jesus' life and beyond. So that's going to be kind of the part three of the gospel.

But Jesus' life has always been headed to that destination. He was born with this in mind. That the plan that was agreed by God even before the foundation of the world had him on the road to the cross.

As a song we sometimes sing that proclaims, you lived to die, rejected and alone. Now, there's other important aspects of Jesus' life for sure. Of course there are.

[4 : 40] But it's also true to say that he lived in order to die. He's headed for the cross. That's his destination. That is his clear intention. And he knows it.

Verse 51 says he set out resolutely. There's determination. It's going to take him a while to get there. The route is not very direct. But he knows that's where he's going.

He's headed for Jerusalem. He knows the time is coming. He knows the price he will pay. And he goes. The 19th century bishop, J.C. Ryle.

He says Jesus knew full well what was before him. The betrayal. The unjust trial. The mockery. The scourging. The crown of thorns. The spitting. The nails.

The spear. The agony on the cross. All, all were doubtless spread before his mind's eye like a picture. But he never flinched for a moment from the work that he had undertaken.

[5 : 35] His heart was set on paying the price of our redemption and going even to the prison of the grave as our surety. He was full of tender love towards sinners.

It was the desire of his whole soul to procure for them salvation. And so, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame.

So this journey has a destination. Jerusalem. The cross. Resurrection. And ascension. However, no sooner has the journey begun than it meets a pitfall.

Jesus encounters rejection on the journey. Verse 52. He sends messengers ahead in order to get things ready for him. There's a good chance that at this point, as he's travelling along, he's travelling not just with his 12 closest friends, those 12 disciples, as we often call them.

He's travelling not just with them, but with a wider group of followers. Disciples in the broader sense. People who travelled with him maybe for a shorter time or who kind of came out to hear him when he was nearby.

[6 : 40] I mean, even a group of 13 would potentially tax the hospitality of a small village, let alone the larger group that's probably in mind. And so Jesus wisely makes preparations by sending ahead to let them know that he's coming.

But all is not well, is it? This Samaritan village refuses to welcome him. Why? Well, because he was heading for Jerusalem. The animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews is well documented both in the Bible and in other sources as well.

When Jews headed from Galilee up in the north down to Jerusalem at the bottom there, when they headed that way for the festivals each year, Samaria is kind of a convenient route to travel.

You can go through Samaria to get a little bit more directly down to Jerusalem. The wiggly line there, by the way, is one theory of the route that Jesus took along the way.

So Samaria is a convenient route to travel, not just for Jesus, but for pilgrims to Jerusalem more broadly. And so many of them took that route. But it's a risky option.

[7 : 51] They were rarely well received by the Samaritans. Indeed, the historian Josephus, he says that murdering these Jewish pilgrims was well within the realm of possibility.

So the rejection of Jesus here is perhaps not quite that extreme, but it's a cause of difficulty and frustration to him and to his followers. Now, in considering this rejection, we could note in passing how much these Samaritan villagers miss out on by refusing to host Jesus.

Jesus, as he's travelled around in the preceding chapters, he's both proclaimed and demonstrated the good news of the kingdom of God. He's told people about this hope that is available to them.

He has demonstrated it in practice as he's healed and driven out demons and so on. And they miss out. They miss out on hearing about that and receiving that because they don't like the source.

There is hope for the Samaritans later on. In Acts, Samaria hears the gospel and there's more of a response there. But here in this account, in Luke chapter 9, they miss out on hearing about this because they don't like the source.

[9 : 02] But that's not Jesus' focus as he tells this story. Sorry, that's not Luke's focus. Luke is focused more on the reaction of the two disciples. When the messengers rejoin the group of Jesus' followers, James and John, two of the disciples, they hear what's happened.

They hear about this rejection and true to their name as the sons of thunder. They are angry. There's echoes here of Elijah the prophet.

There's more echoes later on as well on the cost of the journey. But here in verse 54, there's parallels to the deeds of Elijah that are recorded in 2 Kings chapter 1, when fire came down twice at Elijah's request to kill the messengers of Ahaziah, king of Samaria, the king who'd rejected the God of Israel by turning to Baalzebub, the god of Ekron.

So, when the king rejected God, fire fell from heaven. And hot off the recognition in verse 20 that Jesus is God's Messiah, well, the disciples, James and John, they expect that the consequences for those who reject Jesus will be similar to the consequences for kings who reject God.

But these disciples have misunderstood the nature of this journey, haven't they? Because this is not a triumphal march. This isn't about crushing enemies and dismissing resistance along the way.

[10 : 30] God's kingdom arrives in the world not as a conquering empire, but rather it arrives with love, with grace. Back in chapter 4, you might remember it from the video, back in chapter 4, Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah and declared that he comes with good news for the poor, that he comes proclaiming freedom from oppression, that he comes declaring the year of the Lord's favour.

So, as they journey along, this is not the time for judgment. This is not the time for punishment. And so, Jesus rebukes his disciples and they move on.

As we'll see when we come to look at chapter 10, the right response during the disciples' ministry, the right response during our ministry too, the right response to rejection, is to warn of the judgment to come and to move on.

Not to try and bring down wrath ourselves, but to warn of the need to escape from it. Before sending the disciples out to minister themselves in chapter 10, Jesus demonstrates for them here in chapter 9, the attitude that they should have when they go, and that we too should share.

But the narrative moves swiftly on. And from verse 57, we have another incident or series of incidents. And these ones show us the cost of this journey. See, there's a danger that Jesus' disciples, that they might undertake this journey lightly.

- [11 : 57] A man comes in verse 57, and he expresses his willingness to go anywhere with Jesus. And it sounds good. It sounds like an offer that Jesus surely would be pleased to accept. Isn't this the sort of wholehearted devotion that Jesus is supposed to be looking for? Well, yes, it is. Except Jesus can see below the surface.
- Jesus knows the reality of the situation. See, from Jesus' response in verse 58, what we see is it's apparent that he knows this man has not thought it through. He hasn't thought through the consequences.
- Most likely this man in verse 57, he's most likely one of that wider group of disciples. He's traveling with Jesus for a time, and now he's saying he's willing to do more.
- But it's all a bit too glib. Maybe, maybe he thinks there's glory to be shared. Maybe like the other disciples earlier in the chapter, if you read back in chapter 9, maybe he thinks that the path to greatness is through association with Jesus.
- [13 : 03] Maybe that's what he's looking for. But he's not going to find it, is he? There's no glamour to Jesus' life, and by implication there will not be for his disciples either.
- Jesus says, the foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. There is no glamour to his life. Jesus' disciples must carry their own cross.
- We, as his disciples today, we must expect to be despised, rejected, afflicted. Jesus is set on this journey to Jerusalem, where that's going to be definitively his experience, and we should expect it to be ours.
- So what we see from this first man is that it is unwise to start this journey with false expectations. The reality of life in the trenches of the First World War was a far cry from what many recruitment drives suggested, wasn't it?
- But the soldiers headed for that battlefield were not encouraged to count the cost of enlisting. But Jesus is not interested in getting someone to sign on the dotted line by any means necessary.
- [14 : 27] And for us, as believers sharing our faith with other people, it is unwise for us to imply that the Christian life is an easy life, because there is no such promise.
- In fact, there's numerous indications in the New Testament that the reality will be very different to an easy life. And if you win someone with that promise of an easy life, then you will quickly lose them when they discover the truth.
- Now, of course, when we share our faith, we can, that we should, we must point to the ways in which God has brought us through those difficulties, through the storms of life, how he's carried us, how he's preserved us, how this is good news.
- I'm not saying we should proclaim doom and gloom. The news of the gospel is absolutely good news. Good news for the future. Good news for the here and now.
- So let's proclaim enthusiastically that it is worth the cost. But let's not pretend there isn't a cost. So let me be clear.
- [15 : 31] If you're listening in because you're curious about what Christians believe, maybe recent events are causing you to evaluate your life and your beliefs. Maybe even you've seen some of the news footage from America of churches refusing to close their doors and pastors saying, Satan and a virus will not stop us.
- God will shield us from all harm and sickness. We are not afraid. Well, if you've heard that and you've thought, I want to get in on that.
- I want that kind of protection. I want that kind of confidence and safety. If that's what you're thinking, well, I have bad news for you. Because I do not have that protection to offer you.

And neither, by the way, does the pastor who said it. Because that's not what the Bible says. There isn't a promise in God's word that believers won't get sick. So don't come follow Jesus because that's what you're looking for.

The son of man has no place to lay his head, said Jesus. He lived a difficult life, died an awful death, and expects his followers to follow the same path. I can't promise you safety.

[16 : 39] So why follow Jesus then? If it doesn't offer protection from a virus, if it doesn't offer respite from the pains of life.

Why? Because he's worth it. Because Jesus is worth it. He himself is lovely. He is the one true God.

He is the creator of the universe. And he's inviting you to come and to depend on him. The creator of all things is inviting you to call him father.

Isn't that good news? He's promising you eternity in his presence. Yes, there might be sickness. There might be tears now. But one day we will live in the new heavens and the new earth, where there is no more crying and no more pain and no more sickness and no more viruses and no more pain and no more death.

That is the hope that we have. He carries us through. He brings us to the end. However, Jesus isn't done.

[17 : 56] Verse 59, he says to another man, follow me. And this man replies with a very reasonable concern. First, let me go and bury my father. Sounds fair enough, doesn't it?

Who would refuse such a request? In their society, even more so than in our own. There's a massive social and religious obligation to do this. This duty to bury one's parents, it takes precedence over all other duties.

Some people have suggested that maybe the man's father wasn't actually dead yet. That it was going to be an unreasonably long time that he would have to wait to fulfil this. He's wanting to wait too long.

But actually, that suggestion is missing the point. It isn't that the man's overstepping and asking too much. No, the point here is, the duty of following Jesus is more important than anything else.

There is no duty higher than following Jesus. Literally, nothing more important. Let the dead bury their own dead, says Jesus.

[19 : 01] In other words, let other arrangements be made because you have more pressing duties. In fact, so urgent is the task of evangelism, so great is the level of commitment required from those who wish to follow after Jesus, so immediate is this call to discipleship that when we come to the third man in these verses, even for him to go and say goodbye to his family is not permitted.

Verse 61 is another parallel with the account of Elijah, whose disciple Elisha, who was permitted to go and say goodbye to his family before coming and following with Elijah.

But Jesus requires a greater commitment than Elijah did. There's more urgency in Jesus' mission even than in following Elijah. Presumably the request of this third man, it shows a less than wholehearted commitment.

But you can't serve Jesus with a divided heart. They'll all sound a little bit harsh, not very attractive.

Well, on one level, good, because we should count the cost. But it's also important to say that ordinarily, security, accepted customs attending, funerals, family commitments, so on and so forth, ordinarily, these are still the norm.

[20 : 21] We can assume that, broadly speaking, Jesus approves of these things. Why do we assume that? Well, because they're part of the good world that Jesus and his father created.

He designed us to be social beings. He designed us to live in families. Ordinarily, ordinarily, it is perfectly possible to live the life of a fully committed disciple of Jesus and still do these things.

Ordinarily, we should do these things, keep our family commitments, honour our parents. The crunch point comes when there is a parting of ways, when you can't do both.

One commentator rephrases this and imagines Jesus asking, Well, suppose I were to lead you towards work in which your income would be lower, and your prospects, humanly speaking, were more uncertain, and your accustomed standard of living was non-existent.

Suppose I were to ask you to do something for me, which, according to most people of your class and background, is simply not done. Or suppose I were to summon you to my service with such a peremptory call that your nearest and dearest would be left without an explanation of where you had gone.

[21 : 39] Would you even then come my way? It's not incompatible to be a follower of Jesus and have a good salary. But would you give it up if he asked you to?

It's not wrong to seek the best possible education for your children. But would you be willing to see their academic attainment reduced, but their commitment to Jesus increased?

Or your ability as a family to do good for the kingdom improved at the cost of their education? The question isn't, will you answer the call when it costs you nothing?

The question is, will you come even when it is the costliest decision that you have ever made? And maybe God will test the genuineness of your commitment in order that you might see it.

Maybe he will test it by bringing you to this fork in the road, this crunch point, just as he did for these would-be followers in chapter 9.

[22 : 52] I think the implication here is probably that none of these three did, in fact, commit to following Jesus wholeheartedly.

Maybe they repented after being rebuked by Jesus, and maybe they did follow committedly. Ultimately, we don't know about them. But their stories are here as a challenge to us.

We don't know how they responded to Jesus, but we do know what our response is. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, help us to recognize the cost of following you.

Help us to see that you demand our everything. That you expect nothing less than our wholehearted commitment. And help us to see that it is a price worth paying.

Help us to see that you are worthy. Help us to see that Jesus himself is lovely. That we might run into his arms. Because it is worth the cost.

[24 : 04] Amen. Amen.