



Sermon

Following Jesus – all the way to Heaven

Luke 9:51–62

26th June 2022

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The thoughts I share today are based on the Gospel. The theme is following Jesus. Obviously there are a number of different way to approach this. I have elected to consider the reading from the point of view of following Jesus – all the way to heaven. In doing so I acknowledge that heaven is not something I think about very often – and when I do it is invariably that heaven is somewhere in the future, with Jesus waiting to lead me home.

Reading the passage before I found myself with questions.

Are we to seek after heaven?

Should we do so with purpose?

Is there something we should be doing to be prepared for heaven?

Are we ready to live eternally in God's presence?

Beginning at verse 51 - "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem".

Jerusalem

betrayal

the mock trial

Flogging

Humiliation

The cross

Although we are only about a third of the way into Luke's Gospel, we have reached the stage where Jesus is about to set out on his final journey to Jerusalem.

Earlier in Chapter 9 we read "When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, ² and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick".

Not long after Jesus takes Peter, John and James to the top of a mountain where these disciples witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah.

With this immediate experience, it is not surprising that the disciples could not imagine the horrors that await Jesus in Jerusalem.

But Jesus knowing what is to happen, is resolute in his intention to fulfil his mission.

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

To some, not least his disciples, Jesus’ death on the cross looks to be the end, and Jesus followers are found in hiding, fearing for their lives.

But there are two sides to the cross

On one side is death

On the other side is the resurrection

If we consider the two sides of the cross – death and resurrection – we come to see that the cross is a portal; a doorway; a means to eternal life. It is Jesus who opens this door for all who follow him.

John 14:6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”.

Jesus opened the way the way to eternal life by his death and resuscitation is the atonement for all mankind.

In the same way as Jesus was obedient to lay down his life by way of the cross, those who follow him are called to lay down their lives in submission to him. It is here we begin the struggle between self and God.

To put it another way, all who profess to follow Christ at some time reach a point where we confess that we are sinners, and seek redemption (turning our lives around), promising our allegiance to Jesus. For some this is not easy, especially for those who are self-sufficient and used to getting things done in their own way.

What to Expect on the journey

Opposition

⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.

When we follow Jesus, we can also expect opposition.

In New Zealand we will find that opposition to the proclamation of Jesus is quite subtle. People, both in and outside the church are rather taken by some of Jesus’s teachings.

“Doing unto others as you would have them do to you” is a sentiment that most New Zealanders would aspire to. What is not accepted to the secular world are miracles, the virgin birth, and the resurrection. The thought of a living God, claims to eternal life and heaven are renounced and scorned. In the secular world, the only way we live on after death is through the memories of family and friends.

While those of us in the church believe and proclaim our faith in God, for example in the words of the Apostles Creed, we are also influenced by the views of our world.

I was talking to a friend about this who suggested the biggest threat we face in this regard is that we follow the world, accepting a form of Christianity that is domesticated, and non-threatening or invasive.

This can become a struggle between giving into the world, instead of submitting to Jesus.

We come now to the next section headed in the NIV “The Cost of Following Jesus”.

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

⁵⁸ Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

Essentially Jesus is saying that here on earth, he has no permanent home. As followers of Christ, we also may find that there are times when we long for something that is not fully satisfied here on earth.

Some writers suggest that what we are unknowingly longing for is our ultimate destination in heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:11 puts it like this,¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet^[a] no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

It has been suggested, that here in the west we are so comfortable that any such feelings are suppressed, and a longing for heaven or something beyond this life is rarely spoken of or sought after.

When we begin to accept the ways and thinking of the world such as:

- That there is a logical explanation for the miracles
- That there is no one God,
- The resurrection could not have occurred
- Life ends when we die

When we begin to think in this way we draw away from God, and any vision of heaven becomes distant and indistinct

The final verses deal with two people who would follow Jesus.

He said to another man, "Follow me."

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 plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

This is one of those passages of scripture that can be difficult to understand.

The difficulty is that we are naturally drawn to the "father" and to the "family". In Matthew 7:12 we read:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. It seems inconsistent with this teaching that Jesus would have us deny or forsake our family in a time of need, or simply go off and follow him without letting our family know what we are about.

If we take our focus off the father or the family, we are better able to see the words that are repeated by both would be followers of Jesus. These, I believe give a clearer insight to what it is that this passage highlights.

"First let me"

To be more succinct: "First me".

This brings us to the struggle we often find ourselves in when we profess to follow Jesus. That is, we proclaim allegiance to Jesus, but find ourselves putting our own interests and wants first.

If this interpretation seem harsh, consider other sayings of Jesus.

For example, Jesus says much the same when he is teaching his disciples to pray:

Matt 6:31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Could this be an answer to overcoming the "first me" inclination we are all have.

Seek first his (Gods) kingdom and his righteousness.

Spend time with God. Not to bring him our needs, but simply to experience his presence, to get a sense of his majesty, his power, his eternity

Read his word. Dwell on the words of the promise of what is to come. For example

John 14:1 - 3 Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Choose to believe the key elements of faith. The virgin birth, the resurrection, the Holy Ghost, the giver of life

Believe in God the creator of all things seen and unseen

Trust Jesus and consciously accept that Jesus died for your sins

When we do these things we draw near to God, and learn to "seek after the Kingdom of heaven"

To conclude consider Matthew 7:7-11:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened

We normally apply these words to petitions for ourselves or to prayers for those near to us. What would happen I wonder if we were to apply this teaching of Jesus to seeking out the kingdom of heaven?

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