

Luke 9:51-62
The Cross's Shadow

We are picking up the story in Luke 9.

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

Luke 9:51 is the pivot point for the Gospel of Luke. At this moment, Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, he begins the journey to Jerusalem where he will be crucified, die, be buried, and on the third day rise again.

D.A. Carson says that everything from here on takes place under the “looming shadow of the impending cross.”¹ So every moment from here on out in Luke takes place under the heading of “things that happened on the way to the cross.”

And knowing that Jesus was going to the cross soon colors everything else we read in this book. We know where this is headed, Jesus will die for our sins and rise again. The disciples don't understand this yet, but we, the readers, do know this. Everything from here on out is different because we know the ending.

Tim Keller compares knowing the ending of the biblical narratives to knowing the ending of the movie *Sixth Sense*. *Sixth Sense*, starring Bruce Willis, came out in 1999. So I assume none of you are planning on seeing it but haven't seen it. So I'll feel free to spoil it for you. If you don't want me to spoil it I'll give you about 5 seconds to fast forward 30 seconds in this sermon.

In the movie, Bruce Willis is a child psychologist who is counseling a kid who sees dead people. And, here's the spoiler, you learn at the end of the movie that Bruce Willis is one of those dead people. It's a surprise ending, but then once you know that ending, when

¹ https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference_media/jesus-resolve-head-toward-jerusalem/

you watch the movie a second time, which you have to do, it is a totally different movie. Knowing the ending shapes every detail.

And knowing that this section of Luke is going to end with Jesus on a cross in Jerusalem changes how we see every scene in the book, it changes how we read and understand every teaching in the book, it is a totally different story if you're a disciple at that time that didn't understand it, and if you are a reader today.

So we'll come back to this verse often. And Luke will keep reminding of this - in chapters 13, 17, and 18 there are reminders that Jesus is headed to Jerusalem.

So keep that in mind for the rest of Luke, and even in these next couple of verses where it affects how we read this:

52 And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. 53 But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

So Jesus sends some messengers to a Samaritan village to arrange a room for Jesus to stay in on his way to Jerusalem. Remember Jesus had sent his disciples to go into towns and preach, and He told them to depend on this hospitality in the towns along the way. And if they didn't receive the hospitality, they were to shake the dust off their feet and move along.

So these guys go to Samaria to find a place for Jesus to stay on the way to Jerusalem, and the Samaritans say, "If he is going to Jerusalem, we're not going to house him here."

Samaritans were not Jewish. They accepted the first 5 books of the Jewish Bible, the pentateuch, Genesis through Deuteronomy. But they rejected the rest of it, the stuff about King David who established his kingdom in Jerusalem, the stuff about the Temple in Jerusalem. Everything about the prophets. They considered all of that to be extra and a twisting of the true faith. On top of that, the Jews had gone to war with the Samaritans 150 years before this, creating some serious bad blood between their nations

And here is Jesus wanting to go to Jerusalem, they probably assume because of the upcoming feasts and festivals, to worship at the temple, and they don't want to participate in any of that stuff. So they say, "No." They won't help.

They're not going to participate in what they think is false religion. We wouldn't house people who were coming into town for the annual witchcraft convention, they wouldn't house someone going to worship in Jerusalem.

So they say no to Jesus. Once again, there's no room for him at the inn. No place for him to lay his head.

And the disciples response is beautiful:

54 And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

You've got to be really mad that the motel didn't have vacancy to want to call down fire on them. But to refuse to show hospitality was more than an inconvenience, it was an insult, it was telling someone "stay out on the street, I don't care what happens to you." It was calling someone an enemy.

This is a total affront to Jesus. It is rejecting the Messiah, the Christ. It is rejecting the greatest King of Israel, the greatest prophet.

And in the Old Testament, fire did fall when people rejected true prophets of God. When the prophets of Baal rejected Elijah and his God, fire fell from heaven to consume a sacrifice and then those prophets of Baal were put to death.

When some youth mocked Elisha for being bald, he called a she-bear to maul them in judgment. Which I, for one, think is reasonable and measured.

And so they say, "We're sick of the Samaritans. Rejecting our God, rejecting most of our Bible, a long history of rejecting our prophets, and now rejecting our Messiah. That must be the limit! Can we call the fire down?" They're just like Jonah in the Old Testament who wanted God to destroy the city of Nineveh which was full of God's enemies.

55 But he turned and rebuked them.

To rebuke someone is to command them forcefully to stop. Jesus didn't just say, "Maybe calling down fire from heaven isn't the best idea, let's think of a different activity," and put them in time out. He got in their faces and said no, stop this now.

Why?

There was precedent for calling down fire on those who rejected the prophets, so surely to reject the greatest prophet would require a greater punishment.

But remember the key verse in verse 51. Jesus had his face set to go to Jerusalem.

He wasn't going to Jerusalem to rain down judgment on the enemies of God. He was going to Jerusalem to have the judgment of God rained down on Him.

The only one the fire would be falling on, so to speak, would be Jesus.

But the disciples didn't yet understand what we understand. We know He was going to endure the cross, but they didn't get that.

And when you don't understand the message of the cross, it's easy to get moralistic and indignant against *those sinners over there* while not realizing that you're just like them.

Yeah, these Samaritans were rejecting Jesus, the greatest of the prophets (and far more.) But these disciples, who wanted to rain fire on them, would also soon reject Jesus in Jerusalem as well. Judas would betray Him. Peter would deny Him. They're going to run away in fear and abandon Him. Peter will swear that he doesn't even know him. They're all going to treat him like an enemy.

Most of the guys who voted for the fire in Samaria would be proven to deserve the same fire for the same reasons when they get to where they're going on this very trip.

They didn't understand the cross yet. And when we are indignant and outraged at other and their failures and feeling pretty good about our own performance, we are misunderstanding what the cross says about us as well.

The Gospel is humbling. Christians who are constantly outraged at the deficiencies of others either don't know their own hearts, or they're trying to avoid them.

When we get real loud, and real focused, and real zealous about somebody or some church's failures, that is usually an effort to drown out what our consciences are saying about us. Moral outrage can be like noise-cancelling headphones so we don't have to listen to what the Spirit is saying about us.

It's far more comfortable to be outraged at you than it is to address my sins.

I've now seen so often that the people I know who have been the most obsessed with other peoples' lack of performance are often the ones with some of the darkest sins going on in their hearts.

This has become a predictable pattern. Those who are the maddest at church and maddest at others - at things that seem small, almost always have their own large issues simultaneously. I've known Christians to pursue the punishment and exposure of others with a Javert-like intensity, and it was later revealed that they had similar things going on themselves at the same time.

Be careful if you are always campaigning against, a warrior against, obsessed over what you are against.

There are injustices Christians should be outraged by and a place for righteous anger in our lives. When Jesus flipped over tables he wasn't avoiding His own issues - He was righteous.

But when we're outraged at others, that should, at the very least, be a caution flag.

When we think someone else deserves judgment and I deserve mercy, we are not behaving like Christians who know better and understand the cross. We are more like these disciples who don't understand the cross yet.

Jesus rebuked these disciples for wanting judgment and not mercy, and we should consider whether he might be rebuking us when we want to see judgment and not mercy. Maybe we're forgetting the story of His mercy and His cross for sinners like us.

Reading this passage in light of the Gospel and in light of what Jesus is about to do at Jerusalem is the only right way to interpret it.

Luke 9:56 And they went on to another village. 57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 58 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

As they are headed to Jerusalem, someone comes and offers to follow Jesus anywhere. This will be the first in a series of three people contemplating following Jesus. And Jesus, surprisingly to us, tries to talk him out of it.

I've never done that. If someone calls or emails and says, "I want to become a Christian," I've never replied with "wouldn't recommend it." Nah, you don't want to do that.

And Jesus here is not really trying to talk him out of following him. But revealing to him that he doesn't know what he's signing up for. He doesn't know the cost of following Jesus.

And He tells them that he doesn't have a place to lay his head. Wanna know what just happened in Samaria to this great teacher you want to link yourself up with? They rejected me and left me out on the street and I didn't have a place to lay my head.

If you think I'm your rocket ship to a life of glory and you just need to strap in, please know what you're really headed for.

He compares himself to foxes, that have holes they can call home, and birds that have nests they can call home. But for Jesus, the world isn't his home. (Jesus is not saying he was always homeless, anymore than he is saying that he never laid his head down. Of course he slept, and of course he had places to stay, but just as he experienced in Samaria, there was no place he could really call home.)

The world was never a welcoming place for Jesus.

And how much more does that mean in light of verse 51 - they are headed to Jerusalem where the world will put Jesus to death. He will have enemies everywhere: the religious people will kill him, the irreligious Romans will kill him. It's like everyone will say to Jesus in the harshest way possible, "You don't belong here."

There's no room for you anywhere.

And so, to say, "I will follow you wherever you go" to Jesus is a huge promise. This person didn't know what he or she was signing up for. And Jesus says, "Before you say that, please know that to follow Me is to follow the one that has no place on earth where he fits, and it is to follow the one who is going to the cross."

This kind of talk is almost foreign to us because we try to make Christianity as easy as possible to sign up for. We want to be seeker sensitive, and grow the church at all costs. We treat people like potential customers that we have to sell a product to, and the

customer is always right. If there's something wrong with our product, we fix the product to capture as much market share as we can.

We try to coddle people into the faith. We ask, "How do we make Christianity awesome, totally non-offensive, and make it line up perfectly with your view of the world."

And, even in books on pastoral ministry, there's some fear peddled that says, "If Christianity doesn't change its message, the world will not welcome it. We will have no place to lay our heads."

Jesus here says, "Yeah, tell me about it. To follow me is to be unwelcome in the world."

Religious people won't welcome you because the idea of grace that is free is way too radical and strips them of their sense of earned righteousness. Wild-living irreligious people won't welcome you because you don't jump in and do the same things. Clean living irreligious people won't welcome you because you don't share their morality or self-righteousness. You're not at home anywhere politically, you're not at home in schools and institutions that don't share your values.

There just isn't a permanent perfect home here. Hebrews says we have no abiding city here.

And this can be freeing. Because that means we don't have to pursue the perfect place here. We can live in imperfect cities, and be part of imperfect institutions, and around people that we feel a little distant from, and we don't have to feel the need to fix that.

We're following Jesus who had no place to lay his head, and when we sense that we have no place to lay ours, we can let that fix our hopes on the return of Jesus, the resurrection when he makes all things new, and when finally the world is our home, and even Jesus's home as he comes and dwells in the midst of the new city (the book of Revelation tells us.)

We don't have to be so angsty about being out of place and not feeling like we fit and having so little power. Jesus had no place to lay his head, and we're following Him!

To follow the one who went to the cross is to have no place here to lay our head.

Luke 9:59 To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” 60 And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

Now, on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus calls a man to follow him. And the man says, “I need to bury my father, and then I’ll be right there.”

If anyone has an excuse to delay following Jesus it is this guy. His dad has died, or is near to death. And he has a solemn obligation to give his dad a proper burial.

Ecclesiastes 6:3 “If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life’s good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.”

You had to bury the dead. And In Deuteronomy it was commanded that people be buried the day of their death - you didn’t delay. So this guy wasn’t requesting a long extension from Jesus - one day - and it was for the greatest of all possible reasons that he wanted to delay his discipleship: to do his basic duty as a son and bury his father.

The first funeral that I officiated when I was 24 was for my dad. He died of cancer very quickly after being diagnosed. And I had no experience, I didn’t know what to do, the nerves were all piled up on top of the emotion of it all, but I felt a sense of duty: of course I have to do this funeral. And no amount of nervousness would be an excuse - it was my duty as a son who is a minister to bury my dad.

In this situation, Jesus tells this guy, whose culture valued burial and honoring of parents a thousand times more than ours, not to bury his dad. The duty to follow Jesus superseded even the greatest of all cultural duties.

Which seems shocking: can’t he just bury his dad and then run at catch up with Jesus?

Jesus is teaching here that to be a follower of Jesus, following Jesus has to be the highest priority. Not just *a* major priority, but *the* priority.

People came up and said they wanted to sign up to follow Jesus, but they thought they were basically enrolling in some courses. They were going to add Jesus to their busy lives and learn from him for awhile.

But Jesus here says that if you want to really follow Him, the first thing you have to learn is that He isn't an add-on. He supersedes all other relationships. He isn't just a teacher.

If on their first day of school, the teacher told one of our kids, "Your relationship with me is now your most important relationship. More important than even your relationship to your parents," we would pull them out of that class. But Jesus isn't just another teacher.

If he is the Christ, as Peter had confessed earlier, than this would be different than learning from any other Rabbi.

And if we are going to be Christians, we are agreeing that Jesus is more important than even the most important of loyalties that we hold.

And someone that demanding, that calls for that much loyalty, can certainly be off-putting and even spooky.

But he was going to Jerusalem.

Yes, he would call for all of his followers to give all to follow Him.

But compared to what He was about to do for them, any demand would be miniscule.

Luke 9:61 Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."

This is a reasonable. A guy comes up to Jesus and says, "I'll follow, but I'm just gonna stop home and say goodbye to my family. Give me half an hour.

1 Kings 19:19 "19 So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. 20 And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" 21 And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

So Elijah the great prophet comes to Elisha and chooses him to follow him. (He puts his coat over him as a way of identifying with him.) Elisha, amazed at this great opportunity,

goes home and has one last dinner with his family, gives up his farming job, and follows Elijah.

That was a big sacrifice, and a reasonable response to the calling of God to follow a prophet.

So now in Luke 9, a guy says to Jesus, "I'm going to do that - just like Elisha - just some final goodbyes and I'm with you."

62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Jesus says, "No, not even that."

Jesus is greater than even Elijah, the urgency is greater, the demands are higher, and the person who looks back, he says, is not fit for the kingdom of God."

Jesus is greater than all.

And the following of Jesus is so important that the person who becomes a follower of Jesus has to follow Him exclusively.

And if a person was plowing some land, he had to look straight ahead to make sure the line was straight. If he looked back or off to the side, he might drive his oxen sideways and mess up the work.

When I was learning to drive, I remember automatically drifting toward what I would look at. And the way to stay on the road was to focus down the road. If I looked off to the side at something, I would drift toward that something. So you didn't want me to see you walking along the road and wave to you to try to get your attention.

And Jesus here compares following Him to plowing - it's important work. And to do it well you have to have your eyes on Him, with no glimpses toward any other ultimates. Because other things are always clamoring to take the place of Jesus for us.

And when that seems harsh, when that seems like the sacrifices are too extreme, when a life like that wouldn't make any sense to us, it is because we are forgetting where Jesus went and what he did.

There are plenty of gods and religions that call for absolute allegiance.

And even when we ditch religion, there is always something that demands to be the ultimate priority and calls for absolute allegiance. Some relationship, some priority, some person will occupy the ultimate spot in our lives.

We think that getting away from religion will get us away from having to give our absolute loyalty to anyone, but we'll still have a new ultimate.

And Jesus certainly demands it all. But He's going to Jerusalem.

He is a God who gave his life for you. So he doesn't demand that you give anything that you don't get back a million times over in eternal life in him. And because he was good enough to give His life, you can know that all other demands are for our good and not for our harm.

The claim that to follow Jesus is to make Him first and ultimate isn't spooky if we know how kind and good He is. And the things we fear losing for the sake of following Him, we find, are lost for our good.

And maybe during this season of economic loss you'll have those moments of fear: we have so much to lose. What if we can't afford the toys we've gotten so accustomed to having, and the trips, and the comforts. And maybe you've had those moments when you think it all through and play out all of your worse fears in your head, and you think "what if we lost everything?" - but you run into a surprising peace. Where you sense, "Maybe that would be ok, maybe it would even be better. It wouldn't be that bad."

If everyone just rejected me so i wouldn't have to keep up appearances or anyone's favor. If I lost my job and my fortune and could just declare defeat at keeping up with the Joneses. If everything I've made such a high priority collapsed. Jesus would be there and it would be enough.

There is a high cost of following Jesus, but there is a high cost of living for anything, and we all live for something. And we have gotten so good at putting so many things and priorities in that ultimate place, and it has created in us anxiety and restlessness and dissatisfaction and fear for the future. Because none of those other gods went to Jerusalem for us.

They only demand. They only take. Popularity demands that you keep up an image, but never gives you peace in return. Wealth demands that you keep up an income, but never really leaves you feeling secure. Beauty demands you maintain the diet and the exercise and the looks, but as you age you feel it becoming more and more out of reach. Climbing the corporate ladder demands sacrifices at home and in your health, but it only presents you with another rung, another opportunity, if you'll just give a little more.

Jesus makes no secret that He demands it all. But He goes to Jerusalem and gives His life so you can have eternal life. He calls us to make him the top priority, and with no fine print at all tells us what following Him entails.

But everyone has an ultimate value or person or idea or pursuit that demands total allegiance. Only Jesus went to Jerusalem.

So maybe when Jesus calls us to forsake everything to follow Him, He isn't calling us to some unbearable sense of loss, but to an utterly surprising sense of freedom and joy. People who really have Jesus and nothing else really do have joy.