



Questing With Jesus

Luke 9:51-62

Grace Waco | 5.12.24

Some of the greatest stories of all time follow what is commonly known as the “quest” storyline. Every quest has three parts: 1) a call; 2) a cost; and 3) a conclusion. In a “quest” story, the hero receives a **call** to some sort of weighty task, and sets off from where he is to another, often unknown destination, typically far from home. Many quests have some sort of search for a place, item, or person. One you may identify with is *The Half-Blood Prince*, where Harry Potter is sent by Dumbledore to find and destroy horcruxes that host pieces of Voldemort’s soul.

All quests also have a **cost**. Usually the hero must endure some sort of wilderness or barren place. Their journey isn’t comfortable. They must abandon thought of anything else. *The Lord of the Rings* is a classic quest storyline. The destruction of the ring nearly costs Frodo and Sam everything—and Frodo carries a soul wound on Weathertop that can only be healed by sailing away to the undying lands.

Lastly, quests have a **conclusion**. What happens when you reach your destination or receive that item you are after? *Pilgrim’s Progress* is a quest story—and the best selling non-Biblical book of all time. In it, Christian achieves the desire of his quest, and it concludes in the Celestial City, the exact opposite of the City of Destruction where he began.

Why all the literary and plot analysis? Because we find the same structure in our text today. **Verse 51** carries an ominous call of Jesus, and subsequently of us. All throughout this text, Jesus outlines what following him on this quest will cost. And finally, we see hints of what the conclusion of Jesus’ quest will mean. And what we must see is that in seeing Jesus’ quest, we are invited into it. If we really want to follow Jesus, if we are to be called Christian, “little Christ”, than we must receive too his call, his cost, and his conclusion.

The Call: Saying No to Shortcuts

Let’s turn again to **verse 51**. I have several two volume commentaries on the book of Luke: all of them separate the two volumes on this verse. 9:51 is *the* turning point in Luke’s gospel. Remember that on the mount of transfiguration Jesus spoke with Elijah and Moses about his “Exodus”. The rest of the book of Luke will be the playing out of this Exodus—out of Egypt to the Promised

Land—as the whole rest of the book is about this journey. He never returns to Galilee. Many traditional churches paint the doors to their sanctuary red. When Jesus gathers with his disciples for the Last Supper, he is instigating the New Passover, where he will go as the passover lamb and paint his blood on the door of the church.

That phrase in **51**, “when the days drew near” is literally “when the time was almost complete”. This means Jesus’ journey was planned. Once he dies as the new passover lamb, he will also pass through the sea of death, as resurrection signals the defeat not of Pharaoh, but of Satan, and in his obedience there is no wandering after his Exodus. Only a few weeks before his ascension: where he will enter into the true promised land.

Today, by God’s providence, is the Sunday where the global church remembers and celebrates the Ascension. Next week is Pentecost. And it is the Ascension of Jesus to the Father that frames our text today. This is what Luke means when he says “the days drew near for him *to be taken up*.” He is foreshadowing not just his death and resurrection, but his ascension.

This is, of course, why Jesus’ story is a quest. He is called out of heaven for this very purpose. Not to labor in his hometown, not simply to teach and heal and prophesy, but to go to Jerusalem. His call is to set his face, stalwart and without looking back, towards Jerusalem, so that in the ancient city of David he might face the ultimate cost, and in Jerusalem he might see the glorious conclusion of his quest result in his homecoming back to God.

Hold that thought. For now, let’s consider what it means to receive the call of Jesus. He sets his face to Jerusalem—what is our call? Earlier in chapter 9, next week in chapter 10, and right here in **verse 52**, Jesus does this curious thing where he sends his disciples before him on his journey. The text says that they were to “make preparations for him”. We know, however, that the content of these preparations was not just finding a place to sleep and receive hospitality, but a “proclamation of the kingdom of God”. This is *how* they are to prepare the way in **9:2**, and in **10:9**, and it is what Jesus tells his would be disciple in **9:60**.

As the disciples go to proclaim the Kingdom, the Samaritans reject Jesus, in **verse 53**, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. That is a curious reason, don’t you think? On the surface, we might say that they rejected Jesus because he was a Jewish prophet. Remember that the Samaritans were a kind of half-Jewish people, some of whom believed in Yahweh but didn’t follow normal Jewish customs and had intermixed and married with other cultures and religions. They believed that true worship was done at Mt. Gerizim and not Jerusalem. Perhaps it was Jesus’ Jewishness that was so offensive to them.

But I think the Samaritans also rejected Jesus because they noticed something about his kingdom. They smelled the scent of death on Jesus. Something about his resoluteness, his “setting his face” unnerved them. They knew he meant business. They were not yet ready to receive this man on a mission, because they weren’t yet ready to mix their lives up in his mission. It’s why in the days of Antebellum slavery, some Northerners in free states harbored and protected runaway slaves, but

most of them turned them back loose to their oppressors. The commitment it would take to be mixed up in it all is a big one.

What is Jesus teaching his disciples? That if you proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, your message is a serious one. The commitment is to follow Jesus to Jerusalem. What is in Jerusalem, if not rejection and death? Samaria was a taste of Jerusalem. The disciples get a picture here of what is coming for them and Jesus later. Jesus knows what they still don't understand—he is going to certain death.

James and John's response betrays their misunderstanding. They desire to call down fire from heaven because in their mind, Jesus is going to Jerusalem to be the *judge*. He is going to reign and put everyone in their place, so why not start now! Why go to die when you have the power to take the throne now? In the disciples' reply to Jesus, we hear a call back to Satan in the wilderness for Jesus to shortcut suffering and instead achieve kingdom by bowing to Satan. And we also hear a foreshadowing when, on the cross, he is mocked and the crowds say: "if you really are the Son of God, take yourself down from the cross!" But Jesus is not going to Jerusalem to deal out judgment, he is going to take on judgment. Instead of calling down fire, he will be baptized in the fire of God's wrath.¹

So what is the call of Jesus, if not a call to say no to shortcuts? It is a call not to judgment, but to death. It's a call to harbor and welcome the messengers of the kingdom, and proclaim and leverage your life and your reputation in order to be associated with Jesus, the fugitive.

I do not know what kind of shortcut you are tempted to take in your discipleship of Jesus, but I do know that Satan would love nothing more than for you to downplay the seriousness of following Jesus.

Easy-believism is not the gospel. It's a false gospel because it promises the gift of the reward without the heart that is able to receive it. Do you understand that? If God said: "keep your pride, keep your way, deal out your own judgment, keep your sin", here is the reward of heaven—then you wouldn't be able to receive it. Not because you were too sinful—God's grace *can* and *will* cover that in Christ—but because your appetites would not have changed to even desire what is really good. If you do not die with Jesus, you won't even *want* resurrection life with Jesus!

When you take shortcuts with Jesus—and by that I mean when you skip over the call to lay down and die to self—the lie is that you can skip over the bad and still get the good. But the truth is that if getting Jesus is *really* worth it—and it is!—then we cannot skip over the necessary means to get there.

¹ Arthur Just, *Luke*

This means that we must be willing to lay down *anything* that is secondary to the reward of following Jesus, including our comfort or desire not to suffer with Jesus. But it also means that we must learn to lay down even *good* things at the feet of what is best. This is the true cost of the call.

The Cost: Laying Down What is Good for What is Best

The first disciple in **verse 57-58** has a good heart. He wants to follow Jesus wherever he would go. The issue is that he doesn't really understand where Jesus is going. Perhaps, like the disciples, he believes that Jesus is going to establish his kingdom, where he might have a cushy position. But the opposite is true. Jesus is going to Jerusalem, he is going now, and it will not be easy.

Many people turn back from the call of Jesus the moment it gets hard—so it's best to get that out of the way now. When he says we must follow him into homelessness, Jesus means that you must be willing to lay down the goods of this world, the comfort of being known, of being welcomed by all, the comforts of familiarity and what you expect. The hardest part about homelessness is not knowing what the next day holds. A home is the epitome of stability. Whatever else happens, we can always go home.

And so the hardest part about being a pilgrim and an alien in this world is that we might say to Jesus: "I'll follow you wherever you go", but we really don't know where that might take us. True discipleship is a joyful openhandedness for God to take you wherever he wants you. We must face the facts: If we are going to follow Jesus, we can't count on comfort. We can't expect God's unqualified assent to our plans. But we can receive the guarantee of Jesus himself—and his kingdom.

As we look at these other two would-be disciples in **verses 57-62**, the operative word I want you to focus on is *first*. "Lord, let me *first* go bury my Father"; and "I will follow, but let me *first* say farewell to those at my home."

The problem with both of these disciples is not their family. Jesus cares about their family. The problem with these disciples' response is that in the equation of importance, their family is weightier. They have forgotten that the good things in the world only become good when they are secondary to the best: Jesus himself.

Put first things first and we get second things thrown in: put second things first & we lose both first and second things.²

Often our excuses seem quite reasonable—but every excuse that puts Jesus second is always backward facing. Jesus tells the first man: "let the dead bury their own dead". Isn't that a little harsh? But the point is that it is a hyperbolic lesson for us. It's an idiom, obviously dead folks can't bury people! But what Jesus means is that life is ahead, not behind. Those who would put anything

² C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Vol. III*

but Jesus and his call first are more like dead people than alive people. Those who always put what is good ahead of what is best are like the farmer who starts to plow the field and is always looking back and can't plow straight and crashes into the fence. Discipleship is always forward facing and future oriented. Which is exactly what is meant by faith. We reach backward for confidence in God's character, but faith is always a leap into the possibility of unknown circumstances.

If you are unwilling to lay aside what is good for what is best, you will never be fit for the kingdom of God. This is not to say that Jesus will reject you—or that you must be totally and completely sure before following him into anything—it means rather that if you cannot surrender yourself and your plans and your expectations to Jesus, you have misunderstood all of it. You're not a good candidate for the job of following Jesus. Jesus is pointing and leading us into the future—sanctification is always forward.

The Conclusion: A Heavenly Homecoming

Many classic quests are stories not just of setting off and doing or accomplishing or retrieving something, but also about journeying back home once you have done it. *The Lord of the Rings* is like this: there is a return to the Shire after the destruction of the Ring. The greatest example of this is *The Odyssey*, which my wife has been re-reading and so obviously pointed out to me this week. In it, Homer writes of the hero Odysseus' long journey back home from the Trojan War. His quest is not so much to get something, but to get back to something.

In all of these stories, the hero who returns home returns home differently. Again, there is a *cost*. Something has happened on their quest, something significant, something necessary. But home is the point. In both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Odyssey*, the quest is undertaken because of the desire to protect home, not simply for the sake of adventure. In *The Lord of the Rings*, it's the visions of the Shire that fuel the last final push to Mount Doom. It's only because Sam has not given up his imagination of the Shire that he has the energy to carry Frodo up the mountain.

Odysseus' is that true heroic moment, for example, comes when he chooses to reject eternal life with the goddess Calypso to return to his mortal wife, Penelope.

Look at my wise Penelope. She falls far short of you, your beauty, stature.
She is mortal after all and you, you never age or die ...
Nevertheless I long—I pine, all my days— to travel home and see the dawn of my return.
And if a god will wreck me yet again on the wine-dark sea,
I can bear that too, with a spirit tempered to endure.
Much have I suffered, labored long and hard by now
in the waves and wars. Add this to the total—bring the trial on!³

³ *The Odyssey of Homer*, Robert Fagles, Book V

He gives up what seems good for what is best. The call of home overcomes the temptation to settle for anything else.

What carries Jesus towards Jerusalem? What causes him to say: “bring the trial on!” What carries him through his Exodus? It’s his faith in the promised land, and the desire for his bride. Go back to **verse 51**. The days drew near for him to be “taken up”. On the cross, Jesus was taken up the hill to die, lifted up so all might see his suffering. But Jesus also knows that the cross is the way through to the other side. That the homelessness of the cross is the way through to the home of Heaven again.

And Jesus also knew that it was through the death of Jerusalem that he could take his church, his bride, up with him. Jesus has promised us that our pilgrimage has a happy ending. He has one more quest, you see. When he comes back he will be the judge. Soon, he will come back again, not to give up something but to take up something. And that something is us.

The Apostle’s Creed reminds us:

The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

And Paul reminds us in 1 Thessalonians,

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

What is it that we will find there, ascended and caught up with the Lord in the air? Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

What we will find in our ascension is nothing less than a heavenly home. As Malcolm Guite says, when we ascend with him, he will “take us with him to the heart of things”. To the new Eden, where we belong, the home we have always longed for. The quest of Jesus, and of those who follow him, is “There and Back Again”—East of Eden, down into the depths, and back again, up into the setting westward sun.

If Jesus never ascended, neither could you. And because Jesus ascended, you will never descend. Ascension Sunday means that in Christ, our only trajectory is homeward.