

“Inevitable—Toward Jerusalem”

Luke 9:51–62; Luke 11:1–4; Luke 12:8-12

The true story

The time has come. The hour draws near. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem and what awaits him there. His teachings turn a bit darker, with words of warning about what is to come. There is no time to waste, no other choice to be made than to embrace Jesus and his kingdom. This is the time for loyalty to Jesus and his way. And he gives his disciples the gift of a prayer, from Jesus’ own mouth.

Samaria is an area that lies between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. In Jesus’ day, the Samaritans despised the Jews and vice versa. So far as the Samaritans were concerned, the Jews were the descendants of those who had perverted the worship of Yahweh centuries before. So far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were of a vague heritage who claimed allegiance to Torah but understood nothing of God. Jews and Samaritans were often at each other’s throats. Perhaps their shared religious heritage only made things worse, not better. And violence was common. Herod Antipas, before whom Jesus was hauled, was removed from office by the Romans after the slaughter of Jews in Samaria. And it is through Samaria that Jesus is determined to go as he begins his long journey to Jerusalem and a cross.

“He set his face to go to Jerusalem”

And so it begins. Despite the enthusiasm of the crowds, despite Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah, the time has come for Jesus to begin his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus knows what lies ahead. He is under no illusions about the path forward. It will be difficult. As he told the disciples not long before, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day raised” (Luke 9:22). No one would look excitedly toward such a day, including Jesus. He must, using an old Semitic expression, “set his face toward Jerusalem” (v. 51, 53). Surely Luke intends that we recall Isaiah 50:7, “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.”

So, Jesus resolutely sets out for Jerusalem. And he won’t begin by bypassing the Samaritan villages. Instead, he will pass through them, sending messengers ahead to prepare the way. But the Samaritan villagers want nothing to do with Jesus. This is not surprising, but the disciple’s reaction shows how little they’ve learned. Perhaps thinking of Elijah, they want to call down fire from heaven upon the village. But Jesus’ way is not that of vengeance and violence. If the Samaritans refuse him, he will simply go on – resolutely.

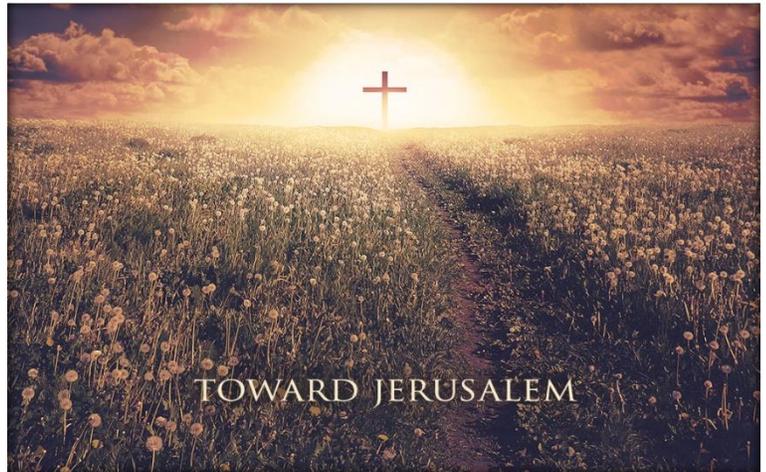
Committed? Really?

As Jesus and the disciples travel along the road toward Jerusalem, they attract some would-be followers who seem most enthusiastic about joining the movement. But each of them is not quite so ready to join up as they thought.

The key to understanding Jesus’ encounter with these three men is to see that all three have perfectly fine reasons for taking care of some things before they head out on the disciple’s journey. One man merely wants to bury his father. What could be wrong with that? Another wants to say goodbye to his family. Who wouldn’t? But Jesus won’t have any of it. If these three men want to follow Jesus, they must be prepared to drop everything, that minute, and go. There can be no other loyalties. There can be no other priorities. Elijah had at least let Elisha kill his livestock and throw a barbecue before heading out (1 Kings 19:19-21). But then again, Elijah wasn’t Lord. Jesus is.

If you’ve known Jesus only as Jesus-meek-and-mild or Jesus-of-the-nice-hug, then this passage is jarring. Can’t even bury his father!?!? But hard teachings demand hard techniques. Jesus knows well that his followers simply don’t get it. They don’t understand where his vocation will lead. They haven’t counted the cost for Jesus, much less for themselves. They may consider themselves to be fully ready to be Jesus’ followers, in the strongest sense of that word, but they are not. Alan Culpepper writes:

The final scene [of Luke 9], which depicts the errors of would-be disciples who do not understand that Jesus is on the road leading to the cross in Jerusalem, challenges us with the radical demands of discipleship. Because



faithfulness would require Jesus to lay down his life, the call to discipleship to Jesus inevitably means unconditional commitment to the redemptive work of God for which Jesus gave his life. The disciple will be like the Lord. Therefore, one should not rush into discipleship with glib promises. On the contrary, the radical demands of discipleship require that every potential disciple consider the cost, give Jesus the highest priority in one's life, and, having committed oneself to discipleship, move ahead without looking back.¹

Are we ready? Am I? This is a question I keep asking myself. Do I really understand the shape of a Christ-centered life? It can't always be the easy way forward. But can I see the hard way and, if I do see it, do I trust God enough to press on? As Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, he knows the difficult path ahead for his disciples even if they do not. But he will do all he can to teach them about commitment and submission, even if the lessons seem harsh. I guess that is what we might mean by tough love.

Even as we ask ourselves these questions, we know that God has given us this genuinely astounding gift of prayer. On this journey to Jerusalem in Luke, Jesus gives his disciples the Lord's prayer. A somewhat different version than is in Matthew, but the same prayer.

What really is prayer?

We pray when we plead to God for help in times of need. We pray when we thank God for all we have and enjoy. We pray when we praise God. We pray when we reveal to God our concerns for others. We pray when we pause to reflect upon the deep love that God has for us all. We pray when we offer our own love to God. In his well-known book, *Prayer*, Richard Foster writes about 21 forms of prayer. But even Foster does not exhaust prayer's meaning. Prayer is all this and more.

It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that prayer consists only of the words spoken to God. But Paul can urge the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" because he knows that prayer is not a paragraph but a life. When we live with God at the center of all we do, when we live in oneness with Jesus Christ, we are living a life of prayer, a life of constant conversation with God.

Sometimes this conversation is spoken aloud (at least on our end!). Sometimes this conversation is spoken in silence. And sometimes this conversation is only felt. Indeed, there are times when God carries us in this conversation. Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome: "In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will." (Romans 8:26-27, CEB).

Be persistent in your prayers

Jesus tells his disciples to be persistent in their prayers, to stay with it. One of the surprising joys of parenthood is how much we can learn from our children. Through them, we see the most everyday activities as new wonders. Through them, we can learn to shed some of our anxieties and enjoy the moment. Through them, we can learn the value of being pushy.

Jesus knows how easy it is for us to simply give up, how easy it is for our prayer lives to get shoved aside. Why do so many of us find it difficult to pray with confident persistence? I believe that for many Christians, God just doesn't seem real enough. Metropolitan² Bloom urges us to ask the right question of ourselves: "Is there in my experience a living God, as concrete, as real as my friends, my relatives, some-one and not some-thing, not a power, but a real person?"

It is a straightforward thing for me to sit down with my brother and seek his help and understanding. I can see him. I can touch him. I can hear him. But coming to God requires a deeper understanding of reality. I must trust in things that are unseen and cannot be touched. For the ancients, this may not have been as difficult as it is for us moderns. Such trust is not what comes naturally to us. We have trouble truly trusting that God is every bit as real as our friends and relatives. Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, he is a person in the present. We don't simply learn about Jesus, we learn from him. It is easy for us to give a quick nod of the head to such claims, but we must learn to embrace them.

¹ Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 9, pp. 217–218). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

² "Metropolitan" is a title used in Orthodox churches to denote an ecclesiastical office similar to that of Bishop. Thus, if we think of Metropolitan Bloom as Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain, we won't be far wrong.

When I come to God, I am coming to someone who loves me, who desires only the best for me, whom I can trust completely, who won't ever tire of listening to me. God is the essence of our lives; how can we not persist in our prayers?

Still we wonder, do our prayers really make any difference? When we doubt that prayers actually change anything, our prayers are robbed of their power. No wonder, we find it hard to persist when we think it doesn't really matter.

Can prayer really change what happens?

I considered for a while the title for this section of the study. I wanted something clear and penetrating. Too often when we talk about prayer, we limit ourselves to the change prayer makes in ourselves and in our relationship with God. But there is this everpresent question as to whether prayer can change the course of events. We pray for a friend's recovery from illness. We pray that we and our home would be spared from a devastating storm. Then, our home is destroyed and a loved one lost. Not surprisingly, we wonder whether our prayers have any real effect at all. Or we begin to think that we prayed poorly, or lacked faith, or, worse, that perhaps there is simply no one on the other end of the line.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes:

God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does and does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course, God doesn't respond to this. You wouldn't either.

Part of the problem is that we fail to comprehend how God has freely chosen to work in this world. God works through us. Going back to the creation story, we were the ones tasked with filling the world and subduing it. It is a mistake to think that when it comes to life, we do part A and God does part B. Or that we "let go and let God," waiting for God to do it all. Or that we try to do it all. Rather, we do it all and God does it all.

If I go back to school so I can get a better job, it will change the course of the future. But when it comes to God, all of a sudden, I believe that what I do (pray) is pointless and has no effect – on God or on the future.

Our prayers not only do us good, but they also do God good, and they can affect the course of events. God works with my hands, my intellect, and my prayers. Indeed, the more fully I embrace a genuine trusting and faithful relationship with God the better instrument I become for God's purposes and my own. Yes, the truth is that our friends die prematurely and storms strike, but as Terence Fretheim writes:³

We confess that in response to prayer (and in other ways) God is at work in these devastating effects to bring about positive results in and through human (and other) agents. But one must also speak a "Who knows?" (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14) or a "Perhaps" (Jonah 3:9 GNT) with regard to the effect of the divine work upon specific persons and particular generations. It is not a question as to whether God wills good in the situation, but whether, given God's own self-limited ways of responding to evil and its effects in the world, what can actually be done and how and when.

So, let us pray for those who sick. Let us sing songs of praise to our maker. Let us pray that those who don't know Christ will come to know him. Let us pray that we will be good ambassadors of Christ, so that others may see his love in us. In all things, pray . . . pray . . . pray.

The demands of loyalty

Jesus gives his disciples the gift of prayer and demands from them loyalty, that they embrace Jesus and his Way. It had to be this way, just as it must be this way for us. The Good News⁴ is our proclamation that Jesus is Lord⁵— no one else,

³ from Fretheim's book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010. p. 146-147

⁴ I've noted this many times, but it simply cannot be overemphasized. In the New Testament, "Good News" and "gospel" both translate an underlying Greek word, *evangelion*. In the Roman empire, the *evangelion* was a proclamation carried out to the provinces with the news that a son had been born to Caesar or that a new Emperor had taken the throne. The NT writers used it in exactly the same way, but with one change. For them, the proclamation, the *evangelion*, is that Jesus is Lord – not Caesar. It is still a proclamation about kingship, but about the true king.

⁵ I can't resist making another point here. Christians will often say something like, "Jesus is Lord of my life." Well, alright, but I think it misses the mark. The point of the *evangelion* is that Jesus is Lord of everyone, whether they know it or not. It is not my agreement that makes Jesus Lord, it is God who has made Jesus Lord. Jesus is Lord even of those who deny him. Read the great Christ-hymn of

nothing else. And if Jesus is Lord, then, well, Jesus is Lord. *Merriam-Webster's* defines lord as "a ruler by hereditary right or preeminence to whom service and obedience are due." That works for me. There may be many powers in this world that demand service and obedience, but there can be only one Lord, one King of kings, one Lord of lords. For the many millions living within the Roman Empire, the Lord of lords was Caesar. But the Christians proclaimed that the Lord of lords is Jesus, to whom even Caesar would one day bow.

And as the Lord of lords, Jesus demanded undivided loyalty to himself. If that meant a son would be divided from his father, then so be it, Jesus comes first. If it meant that a daughter would be shunned by her mother, then so be it. Jesus comes first. You and I don't live in a world where our loyalties are likely to be tested in so direct a way. But in the lives of the early Christians such tests came far too often.

In those first centuries, the Christians were seen by many in the pagan world as a strange sect who met at night, spoke of a Lord other than Caesar (never a safe thing to do), and engaged in unusual practices, including something about eating the body and drinking the blood of this Lord. Scary stuff, I imagine, to many parents. Rather than being seen as upholders of family values in the empire, Christians were seen by many as destroyers of families, for the Christians insisted upon loyalty to Jesus and to the people of God even if it meant being shunned by your family.

You and I are not likely to be shunned by our families for being Christian, for proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. But our loyalty is tested in other ways; ways that we might even have trouble seeing. And in these tests, in the choices we make, there can be no higher priority than Jesus. Not our families, not our jobs, not our aspirations. Our creator must come first. As Jesus said, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Finding my life

We all want to find ourselves, to find our place in life, our purpose. Vast portions of television are devoted to the search. But here is the great truth that Jesus teaches. We cannot find ourselves by looking inward. No amount of navel-gazing or other me-oriented searching is going to bear fruit. You can look yourself over from top to bottom but you'll never find your true *self*.

To find ourselves, we must look outward, toward God and toward one another. To find your *self*, you must stop looking for it and, instead, look for Jesus, in whom you will discover your *self*. As Jesus said, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39).

Jesus never spoke truer words. We are created by God in God's image. How could we ever hope to find our *selves* unless we begin with God? And what direction does God send us in realizing the full potential of our *selves*? Outward . . . loving God and loving neighbor. Only by staying loyal to Jesus and losing our life will we ever find the life we seek.

Luke wrote the two volumes—Luke and Acts—sometime around 80AD, about 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. It seems that Luke was a traveling companion of Paul's during some of the missionary journeys, as portions of Acts are written as "we" not "they." Luke is a well-educated man who writes in a sophisticated Greek. Luke's immediate audience is Theophilus, who is a follower of Jesus but new to the faith. Theophilus may even have been Luke's patron, commissioning Luke's 2-volume history. Luke is generally believed to be a Gentile-Christian, making him the only non-Jewish writer of the New Testament. However, Luke's books are so Jewish in perspective (just read the first three chapters of the Gospel) that some scholars are rethinking long-standing assumptions about Luke.

Though Luke is explicitly writing a history, he is also a preacher. He has a theological story to tell about Jesus, the Spirit, and God's work to redeem humanity and all creation. Today's passage from Luke is a great example. It marks the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the story of which spans ten chapters. The geography of this journey jumps around in ways that don't seem too realistic if one's focus is only on the itinerary. But Luke is less interested in the geography and timeline of it all, then he is helping us to grasp the growing tension surrounding Jesus' ministry and Jesus' determination to stay faithful to his mission. He uses the journey motif here and also in Acts as a way of helping us to see that God is always active and caring, moving us forward in history toward a goal, namely the full consummation of God's kingdom. Jesus and his disciples are on a pilgrimage in Luke's Gospel. Paul is on pilgrimages as he carries the Good News across the Roman Empire. We are on our own pilgrimages, a people seeking to be evermore holy and evermore a bright light to the world. We can't build God's kingdom, that is God's work, but we can build for the kingdom and in so doing, we can find our heart's desire.

Philippians 2:5-11 on this. To put it another way, the *evangelion*, the Good News, is not a private proclamation; it is a very public proclamation that encompasses all of God's creatures and creation.