

Prayers

To God

Look on us, Lord God, with Your love and compassion. For You alone can make sense of what happens to us, especially when everything seems to be bleak or uninspiring. Speak from Your dwelling place, Lord God, and reveal Your perfect will for us again, so that we may follow in Your pathway and be the people You would want us to be. Praise You, Lord God, for the wonders of Your wisdom, grace and guidance. AMEN

For myself

Thank God for your sleep. If you sleep well, ask the Lord to give you dreams and vision that will reveal His will for you. If you do not sleep well, ask the Lord to bless You with His presence and healing, and listen for His Word.

For others

Pray for Syria, for terrible things are happening there and we do not know the details. Pray especially for Christians who live there. Christian communities in Arab countries have suffered appallingly in recent years.

Meditation

The blessing of God is for you,
And especially those who are poor;
For their inheritance of life is found in His Kingdom.

The wisdom of God is for you,
And especially those who must teach;
For they must hand the faith on to future generations.

The guidance of God is for you,
And especially those who have lost their way;
For they must decide to leave all wider paths behind.

The grace of God is for you,
And especially those who feel downhearted;
For the riches of God's Kingdom are there to be found.

The mercy of God is for you,
And especially those who know their wrongdoing;
For when repentance is forthcoming life eternal is found.

Our God will never stop giving,
His unmerited love is always seeking us out,
And no one is outside the remit of His extravagant care.

Bible Passage

Luke 9:51-62

⁵¹ As the time came closer for Jesus' departure from this life, He was determined to set out for Jerusalem.

⁵² Jesus sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for Him. ⁵³ They did not welcome Him, however, because He was on His way to Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ Now when the disciples James and John saw this, they asked,

"Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?"

⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and warned them not to do this.

⁵⁶ Then they went to another village, ⁵⁷ and as they were travelling down the road, a man said to him,

"I will follow you wherever you go."

⁵⁸ Jesus replied,

"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere He may rest his head."

⁵⁹ He said to someone else,

"Follow me."

The man replied,

"Lord, let me go and bury my father first."

⁶⁰ So Jesus said to him,

"Let the dead bury their own dead, but you, get going, and proclaim the Kingdom of God."

⁶¹ Yet another said,

"I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family."

⁶² Jesus replied,

"No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks behind is useful in the kingdom of God."

Review

A shift is taking place in Luke's Gospel. Up to now, Jesus has ministered around Lake Galilee, and His followers had seen Him perform healing and deliverance miracles and heard His teaching of the crowds. Every believer would have loved to be there. But now, towards the end of Luke 9, a chapter that has included Peter's declaration of faith and God's blessing of Jesus at His transfiguration (9:18-36), we read that Jesus was set on leaving Galilee and going to Jerusalem (9:51). So far, the disciples only had to watch Jesus, and perhaps more taxingly, copy what he had done (9:1f.). But now, with a journey to Jerusalem before them,

to the place Jesus said plainly He was going to die (9:22f., 44f.), a different order of discipleship was required. Those who followed Jesus on this far more dangerous pathway would have to be completely and selflessly committed to Him; there would be no turning back. This, undoubtedly, is the key message within today's reading.

The most direct pathway from Galilee to Jerusalem ran down the western side of the Jordan, but it took the traveller through dangerous Samaritan territory. Those who took this path expected some hostility, for the Samaritans did not like Jewish people using their lands as a route for religious pilgrimage. The Samaritans themselves were people of mixed race who had been settled in central Israel centuries before, but most Jews regarded them as 'half-caste' and their religious practices as an insult to the true worship of God in Jerusalem.

Jesus' attitudes were not so bigoted, however. He seems to have treated the Samaritans just like everyone else, as people loved by God. John famously records His conversations with a Samaritan woman about deep spiritual things including the worship of God (John 4). John's report may have come from around the same time as the events in Luke 9, but for Luke, the Samaritans were a distraction. His theme here is Jesus' determination to go to Jerusalem, and the commitment required by the disciples if they were to come with Him.

So when James and John wanted to call down divine retribution on the Samaritans for their lack of hospitality, Jesus was uninterested. These two were leaders of the disciples along with Peter, but Jesus had nicknamed them 'sons of thunder' (Mark 3:17), and their call (9:54) was true to form. They were not rash, however. James and John knew that when Elijah was near to his end (2 Kings 1) he called down fire on the army of Israel, with catastrophic results. They thought that a sign such as this could not be missed, and would be understood. But Jesus said no. His mission was to be the world's Saviour not its Judge, and He was not going to allow His disciples to think He was Elijah returned. So even if he felt upset by the Samaritans' rejection, He told His disciples to desist.

As Jesus travels on to other villages with His disciples (9:56), Luke records a fascinating series of brief encounters to describe the deeper qualities of discipleship now required. The first two (9:57-58, 9:59-60) are found in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 8:18-22), and the last in Luke alone (9:61-62). Also, the first and third incidents occurred when people declared they would follow Jesus (9:57,61), and the second happened because of Jesus' call. So, some are called, and some come, and each faces a tough choice. Together, these three summons' constitute a call to total discipleship, and the early church probably used them as a verbal 'test' of candidates for baptism, or perhaps for the laying of hands for the offices of leadership (1 Timothy 3:1f.).

In the first incident, Jesus calls the aspiring disciple to do just what He does (9:57,58). Such discipleship does not allow people to continue life as before and tack on faith; there is no discipleship other than radical discipleship, and this is as true today as it ever was. Jesus lived outside the constraints of normal society and was at home with the world His Father had made; He was used to resting in the open air and sleeping rough (9:58)!

The next call of Jesus (9:59-60) may sound heartless to us. Having summoned someone, the potential disciple sought permission to bury his father, and Jesus refused. Instead of looking at this in terms of the emotional consequences of bereavement, we should look more carefully at what happened. The man who made the request was with Jesus on the road and was a long way from his family, so what was this excuse? The dead were usually buried immediately after death, even if relatives were away, and few would wait a day for people to return home. Hence Jesus' words '*let the dead bury their dead*' (9:60); he was not being uncaring but practical.

In the last incident (9:61,62) Jesus responded to someone who intended to follow Jesus but wanted to honour his parents with a farewell. Surely, we think, Jesus was cruel to deny such a request? Elijah granted exactly this permission to Elisha (1 Kings 19:20), just after calling

him to be his apprentice-prophet. Jesus, however, did not want people thinking of him as Elijah, as we have already seen. But more than this, Jesus wanted disciples to be single minded from the point of call, and he knew that looking back generally results in unintended delay, a truth well illustrated in the Bible (the story of Lot – Genesis 19). For Jesus, no delay was acceptable; His call to effect the salvation of the whole world was at stake, as it is to this day. Delayed discipleship is always no discipleship.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V51 ***'as the time came closer for Jesus' departure from this life'***

Other translations:

'as the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven' (NIV)

'when the days drew near for Him to be taken up' (NRSV)

The Greek reads like this; *'in the fulfilment of the days of His departure (or ascension)'*. The expression *'fulfilment of days'* was a way of speaking about the time being ready for something, in this case, the end of His earthly life and all this meant; each translation tries to find as few words as possible to express this. I have used the general expression *'departure from this life'*, because although the Greek word could refer to the ascension, it is best thought of as referring to all the events at the end of Jesus' life. For more, see study.

V54/5 ***'call down fire from heaven to consume them? But Jesus turned and rebuked them'***

Other translations:

'command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, as Elijah did? But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are"' (King James)

You will notice that the King James version says much more in it than modern versions. It reports that disciples wanted to do what Elijah did (2 Kings 1), and adds that when Jesus rebuked them, He gave this stunning comment, *'ye know not what manner of spirit ye are'!* What are we to make of this?

These changes are due to the fact that the King James version was based on the ancient Latin version of the Bible from the sixth century AD. However, when scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries investigated the Bible text, and scrolls such as the 'Dead Sea' scrolls were found, even earlier versions of the ancient text were uncovered, and these were sometimes different from the Latin version. In this case, the parts about Elijah and Jesus' words of rebuke were found not in copies of Luke dated before the Latin, in fact, from third century AD!

Some people would rather this was not true, but it is, and scholars are always looking for better and more authentic texts of the Bible in the sands of the near Middle East, even though for the most part, modern politics stands in the way. Who knows whether any more texts will be found, and whether they will be exactly the same as the copies we possess? Who knows whether we will ever

get hold of the real 'original' of Luke's Gospel? It is unlikely, but we should always be ready to be surprised!

Further Comments

The division of Luke's Gospel

In the first part of our passage Luke tells us firmly that Jesus now knew what His task was, which was to go to Jerusalem to die. From this point on, everything we read in his Gospel must be read in this light. The Gospel of Luke is best thought of as in three sections, chapters 1-8 about Jesus' Galilean ministry of teaching and healing, chapters 9-19 about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and His teaching in the form of parables, chapters 19-24 about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In this central section of Luke (chapters 9-19), Luke appears to arrange things thematically rather than chronologically, so we cannot 'follow Him on the path'. Rather we must pay attention to what He teaches in this critical part of His ministry, which is coloured by the urgency of Jesus' task. It covers His teaching on mission, on prayer (11:1f.), repentance (13:1f.), forgiveness (17:1f.), discipleship (10:1f. 17:7f.), teaching about God (the parable of the prodigal Son), and especially the Kingdom (e.g. parable of the talents – 19:11f.). So if we want to learn about discipleship, we will have to put the teaching of this passage alongside what is found elsewhere in this section of Luke.

Why was Samaria regarded as a dangerous place by Jews?

At the time of David (1000BC), this central region of Israel had been occupied by the northern tribes, especially the tribe of Ephraim. It was overcome by the Assyrians around 700BC, and the Old Testament records that in order to punish its captives, the Assyrians took the Israelites out of this region into captivity, and replaced them by settlers from other parts of the Assyrian empire (2 Kings 17:24).

More than this, it was thought in those days that when people settled into an unfamiliar land, they should worship the gods who were there before them in order to gain their favour. So these foreign settlers began to copy the worship of God, and set up their own copy of the Temple in Samaria. To a true Jew, such a 'copy' of the things of God was abominable, and they did not regard Samaritans as the true people of God. The feelings were reciprocated!

This is all important for our understanding of the story of Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman (John 4), the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' (10:29f.), and the one leper out of ten who returned to thank Jesus (he was a Samaritan – 17:16)

Having nowhere to lay one's head

In the Bible, many of the Old Testament prophets, including Elijah and Elisha, were people who had no regular life within society. They appear to have lived outside of it and come close to the world of everyday life only to do God's special will. Certainly, the bands of prophets associated with the early stories of prophets in 1 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings reflect the ascetic life of a prophet. We have discovered on more than one occasion that Jesus did not want to be identified with Elijah, but he was unashamed of the prophetic heritage. Indeed, he seems to have wanted His disciples to be inspired by this.

When Jesus said '*the Son of Man has nowhere He may lay His head*', we should not imagine that he was telling people to sleep in the open as he did. We can say this because the evidence of the New Testament is that though He undoubtedly did this, it was not always so. In Jerusalem, for example, He seems to have spent the nights at the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany (Mark 11:1f., John 11:1f.). This is therefore a message of preparedness

and readiness, and one that calls the disciple to be ready to have no permanence on earth. It is the very opposite of home ownership as we think of it in the Western world!

Ritual law and the Kingdom of God

In Jesus' comment to the first man who wanted to follow Jesus, He confronts ritual law. In Jesus' day it would have been a priority to bury dead people soon after their death. A corpse was regarded as 'ritually unclean', rendering all who came into contact with it unclean and unable to join the community for worship unless the laws pertaining to burial were carried out. Jesus' response therefore tells the man to abandon the requirements of ritual law because something more important must be done. It is an important point. Even with our Christian practices, we come close to allowing our lives to be dominated by rituals, and this simple saying reminds us that even our rituals cannot be allowed to come between us and the discipleship required of us by our Lord.

Discipleship

Application

Some basic requirements of discipleship

This passage of Scripture sets some important standards for Christian discipleship. Jesus' wonderful response '*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere He may lay His head ...*' (9:58) calls the disciple to be willing to go beyond personal comfort zones. None of us know the full consequences of following Jesus, and if we think we do, then we might well hesitate. There is something glorious in responding to God without thought for personal comfort and security, and God is always ready to use those who are completely at His disposal.

Some feel that they have done just this, but have found as a consequence that life is in fact sheltered and quite comfortable. This may be the case for some, but it is certainly not the case for large numbers of disciples, and those of us who have considerable home comfort should remember this. But the call never leaves the true disciple to be ready for something else, and the future may not be so secure. Readiness to leave present circumstances is perhaps the key, and life is too short for hesitation, especially after hearing God's Word.

Becoming disciples

Our passage suggests that there are two significant ways of becoming disciples. Some offer themselves and await Christ's response, and others respond to His call spontaneously. There is no competition between the two, and those of each type of calling are challenged by Jesus with radical discipleship. Those who offer are told the uncompromising truth, and those who are called are told they have no leeway for response. It is all or nothing.

Have we tried to make being disciples too easy, by looking for people who will fill churches and pay bills? In truth, we have no choice before God but to present the same radical truth to all who would follow Jesus, and when it is presented, we may be surprised at the results. In various centuries, revivals have followed the attempts of some to be radical disciples. The early Methodists sought ways to live radical and all-encompassing faith in the eighteenth century, and a church was born. In more recent days, young people in the USA, the UK as well as many other nations have responded well to the call for this type of discipleship and new churches are being born as a consequence even as we read this.

Those who accept a call to radical and complete discipleship are the true church of God.

Not looking back

The whole of the Bible is forward looking. It has a historical momentum that is unstoppable because it records the saving history of God's grace. This is very clear in the Old Testament because its books give us a progressive history covering thousands of years, and at points, in fair detail. When we come to the New Testament, the entire time-span for the recorded events (apart from Revelation) is around 60 years, or a life-span. Because of this, it can be easy to think of it as a historical snapshot; for example, some think the best way to be church is to get back to the 'time of the early church'. But the history of our world is always going forward to its completion, as the book of Revelation insists. The consistent advice of the Bible is to have faith that is forward looking and does not look back, because God is always driving forward the world in which He has placed us.

We are therefore to build on what has gone before and perhaps understand our heritage, but we are not to live in the past.

Ideas for what to do

- Ask yourself what being a disciple has entailed that is different from what you would have done with your life if you were not. Ask yourself whether your own discipleship is total and think about what this means. There are many consequences to this but if the Lord is indeed with You He will guide you.
- Is your church stuck or are those who attend it travelling on a discipleship journey? Remember that a 'discipleship journey' can mean something quite different to others. If possible, talk to others at church about this and what they perceive of their discipleship journey with Christ.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. If '*the Son of Man has no-where to lay His head*', where should we sleep at nights?
2. If someone said they could not attend their father's funeral because of important work for the kingdom of God, what would you think? What might constitute such work for the Kingdom?
3. How can we maintain good relationships within our families if the demands of the Kingdom of God are as exacting as those found in this passage?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have called us and we have answered Your call. We have followed You insofar as we are able, and we also know that You have sometimes enabled us to go further in our discipleship than we have ever imagined. Yet we know there is more. Rekindle in our hearts a desire to be completely committed to You, and may we always be ready to follow You wherever You may lead. **AMEN**
