

Following Jesus

⁵¹ When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem, ⁵² and he sent messengers ahead of him. On the way they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his reception there, ⁵³ but they would not welcome him because the destination of his journey was Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ 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 Jesus turned and rebuked them, ⁵⁶ and they journeyed to another village. ⁵⁷ As they were proceeding on their journey someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸ Jesus answered him, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.” ⁵⁹ And to another he said, “Follow me.” But he replied, “(Lord,) let me go first and bury my father.” ⁶⁰ But he answered him, “Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹ And another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home.” ⁶² (To him) Jesus said, “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:51-62)



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Context

Luke 9:51 reports that Jesus is now heading from Galilee to Jerusalem. This simple statement begins a long section (9:51-17:27) that highlights Jesus' exodus (v.31). Jesus is on the way, on the journey to the cross and resurrection. At the same time, Luke departs from the Markan sequence of events, introducing a large collection of parables, sayings, meal scenes, controversies, and more. The section is made up of materials shared with Matthew (often referred to as *Q*) and materials unique to Luke.

There are aspects of the section that are peculiar, e.g., Luke strongly introduces a travel motif but then makes very few references to Jesus' traveling. Why does he give such vague references to Jesus' progress toward Jerusalem: “a village of the Samaritans” (9:52), “a certain village” (10:38), “one town and village after another” (13:22), “the region between Samaria and Galilee” (17:11), “Jericho” (18:35; 19:1), “near

Jerusalem” (19:11)? The real difficulty, in addition to the general sparsity of such references, is 17:11, which still locates Jesus—after eight chapters of travel — “between Samaria and Galilee.” [Culpepper, 214]

Scholars have also worked to propose a cohesive structure to the travel narrative. There is no consensus in this arena. But there are some key themes which appear: following, the Kingdom, and discipleship.

With the departure for Jerusalem, Luke makes it clear that “following” Jesus is related to joining him in the journey and in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. “Following” not only refers to the journey, but also is evangelical in nature. After our gospel scene, Jesus will send the seventy-two for the purpose of preparing the way for Jesus and engaging in a style of ministry that signifies the advent of the kingdom of God. What was previously shared by Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration (9:28-36) is now available to the large group of followers. It is the same idea that laces the encounter with the scholar of the Law in 10:25 – the one who will share life in the kingdom are those who hear Jesus’ message and change their lives.

Throughout this narrative section Luke introduces language that points to the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God (9:60, 62; 10:9, 11) – using words such as “*peace*” (10:5, 6), “*names ... written in heaven*” (10:20), *revelation* (10:21–24), “*eternal life*” (10:25, 28)—but the conditions for sharing in this salvation remain constant. As Jesus puts it to the legal scholar, “*Go and do likewise*” (10:37).

Amid this “kingdom” language is the noticeable theme of “welcoming” Jesus and his message. On this matter Luke presents good and bad examples. The folk of a Samaritan village do not receive him, nor do some Galilean villages. This is counterbalanced in an interesting way by the hospitality and care shown by a Samaritan traveler (10:33–36). Jesus prepares his missionaries for both eventualities. Finally, though welcomed into a home by Martha, the form of receptiveness he commends is that of her sister, Mary. Clearly, what Jesus seeks is not (only) conventional hospitality but a welcome that embraces fully the message of peace.

Also present in surprising degrees is the way in which Luke is redefining “Israel” to be less geographical boundaries or lineage, but rather the portrayal of discipleship as embodying membership in the Kingdom. It is more than the Samaritan being the hero of the parable, or Jesus’ visit to Samaritan territory, it is also the sending of the seventy-two, a number representing a concern with the peoples of the world – especially seen in the privilege given to the Gentile cities Tyre and Sidon, at the expense of their Galilean counterparts, at the coming of the kingdom of God.

The Origins of the Samaritans. Throughout this commentary there are many references to the “Samaritans”. We often think first of the expressions “good Samaritan,” the person unknown to us who stops to help. The expression takes its name from the Lukan parable, popularly known by the same name. In history, who are the Samaritans?

King David united the 12 tribes of Israel under his monarchy centered in Jerusalem. This historical and political entity was known as the Kingdom of Israel. The kingdom remained united through the reign of David’s son Solomon. At his death the problems began. 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chronicles 10 describe the events that followed. Solomon’s son Rehoboam became king. When he refused to ease the heavy burdens Solomon had placed on the people, ten northern tribes rebelled under Jeroboam, forming a separate kingdom. The breakaway Northern Kingdom became known as Israel (or sometimes Ephraim in the prophets) with its initial capital in Shechem and a temple in Bethel. The remaining two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) formed the Southern Kingdom called Judah, ruled by the Davidic line with Jerusalem as the capitol.

The Northern Kingdom had many capitals. From the time of King Omri (1 Kings 16:24) onward the city of Samaria was the capital, from which comes the name of the people: Samaritan. The Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC whose occupation policy was to exile some portion of the conquered

people (2 Kings 17:24) and relocate other conquered people into the land. These historical events gave rise to the legend of the “lost tribes of Israel.”

Samaritan Version. The Samaritans have insisted that they are direct descendants of the Northern Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who survived the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The inscription of Sargon II records the deportation of a relatively small proportion of the Israelites (27,290, according to the annals [ANET, 284–85]), so it is quite possible that a sizable population remained that could identify themselves as Israelites, the term that the Samaritans prefer for themselves. Samaritan theology of history would place the basic schism at the time Eli moved the sanctuary from Shechem to Shiloh, establishing both an illegitimate priesthood and place of worship. From the time of Moses until that move was the Era of Divine Favor. With that move began the Era of Disfavor, which would exist until the coming of the Taheb or savior.

Old Testament Version. Jewish accounts, characterized by 2 Kings 17 and Josephus (Ant 9.277–91) claim that the Samaritans are descendants of colonists brought into the region of Samaria by the Assyrians from other lands they had conquered, including Cuthah, and thus the Jewish designation of Samaritans as Cutheans (Ant 9.290). The Jews have argued that the veneer of Israelite religion displayed by the Samaritans is the result of instruction by an Israelite priest repatriated from Assyria after the colonists had been attacked by lions sent by God (2 Kings 17:25–26).

The history between the two kingdoms was not one of trust or cooperation. There were points in time with the Northern Kingdom (Israel) conspired with other nations and attacked the Southern Kingdom (Judah) giving rise to enmity between the two kingdoms, all descendants of Abraham and Jacob. Add to that rival temples and by the time of Jesus, there was no love lost between the two peoples.

Commentary

⁵¹ *When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem,* ⁵² *and he sent messengers ahead of him. On the way they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his reception there,* ⁵³ *but they would not welcome him because the destination of his journey was Jerusalem.*

Jesus now makes the decisive turn toward Jerusalem and the accomplishment of his exodus (v. 31 - *a reference to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus that will take place in Jerusalem, the city of destiny*). The theme of the final journey is already in Mark (Mark 10:1, 32), but Luke has developed it to show Jesus' commitment to the Father's plan (9:62; 13:33). Luke keeps the reader alert to the journey theme (13:22; 17:11) and uses it to begin to assemble materials from Jesus on the nature of Christian discipleship.

Elijah. ⁵¹ *When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled...*

Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer [827] points out that the rejection at the beginning of the travel section corresponds to the rejection at Nazareth at the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry (4:16–30). The rejection at the beginning of each of these major sections of the Gospel foreshadows the rejection that lies ahead in Jerusalem. But also, there is a prelude to the coming rejection: “*when the days for his being taken up were fulfilled.*” Just as Elijah set out for Gilgal, so also Jesus sets his face for Jerusalem. At the beginning of the account of Elijah's death: “*Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind*” (2 Kgs 2:1), the same language is used to now speak of Jesus. The Elijah motif serves both to prepare for Jesus' death and ascension and to clarify the nature of Jesus' mission. The term for the fulfilling of the days of Jesus' ministry in v. 51 is repeated in Acts 2:1, and the reference to Jesus' being taken up echoes not only Acts 1:2, “until the day when he was taken up to heaven,” but the Elijah motif. The term used in v. 51 for Jesus' being “taken up” (*analēmpsis*) is also the noun form of the verb used of Jesus' ascension in Acts 1:11, 22 (*analambanō*), suggesting not only Jesus' coming death and resurrection but also the culmination of the story in Jesus' ascension.

Why the Elijah motif? Isn't this something we associate with John the Baptist? Malachi 3:1 declares that the Lord will send a messenger to prepare the way (see also Elijah in Mal 4:5). Immediately in this scene when we are told that Jesus sent messengers to prepare his way (v. 52). The first reference to Samaria occurs in this scene (cf. 10:33; 17:11, 16), but it foreshadows Philip's work in Samaria in Acts, which results in Peter and John laying hands on the Samaritans. These incorporate other than the Elijah-as-herald motif and rather point to Jesus' death will result in his being "taken up."

The beginning of the journey.

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is a march toward exaltation ("to be taken up") in fulfillment of God's plan. The earthly journey of Jesus serves also as the framework for the progress of the church in the time after the ascension. We find ourselves on the way toward Jerusalem with the Lord. But the march to glory, as Jesus has already warned, is a path through suffering. The disciples must expect to be treated no better than the Master. The cost of Christian discipleship is clearly stated as the journey gets underway.

The theme of the journey into discipleship is well marked. Brian Stoffregen notes, in the first seven verses of the text, the Greek word *poreuomai* occurs five times. It is a word that means "to move, to go, to journey." A translation of the portions of the verses where the word occurs:

- v. 51 -- he resolutely determined to **journey** into Jerusalem
- v. 52 -- and **journeying** they enter into a Samaritan village
- v. 53 -- because the destination of his **journey** was Jerusalem
- v. 56 -- and they **journeyed** into another village
- v. 57 -- and as they **journeyed** on the way, a certain person said to him...

In addition, the word *aperchomai* meaning "to go, to depart," occurs three times:

- v. 57 -- "I will follow you wherever you **go**."
- v. 59 -- "Let me **go** first and bury my father."
- v. 60 -- "But you **go** and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Our text relates two different scenes on this journey: in the village of the Samaritans (9:51-56) and on the road between villages (9:57-62). The first event is found only in Luke. Matthew (8:18-22) has a version of the second event, but with only the first two "would-be" followers. The third is unique to Luke. As regards the larger narrative (here to the end of Luke 18), the journey narrative will become the form upon which Luke describes what it means to be disciple to Christ.

The Rejection in Samaria

The rejection at the beginning of Jesus' travel narrative corresponds to the rejection in Nazareth at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (4:16-30). Both rejections come soon after the similar events of Jesus' baptism (3:21-22) and his transfiguration (9:28-36). Many scholars suggest that both the people in Nazareth and in Samaritan villages reject Jesus because they cannot accept his understanding and embodiment of the divine purpose. It is clear that he is heading towards Jerusalem. We know (and so did Luke's readers) what will happen to him there.

The hostility of the Samaritans is not the personal hatred Jesus will meet in Jerusalem. It is evidence of the national or racial prejudice between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus' disciples cannot expect to be free from this treatment, but the answer is not retaliation. James and John must learn to avoid useless clashes and to look for new places to spread the kingdom.

Craddock (*Luke*, p.143) writes: "One can almost appreciate the anger of James and John over the refusal of hospitality to Jesus; they are being protective and do not know how to handle rejection. They bring to mind overzealous evangelists of another generation who extended God's grace to the audience and then tossed balls of hellfire at those who refused the offer. Jesus' disciples remember quite well scriptural precedent for calling down heaven's fire (2 Kings 1:9-10), but they have forgotten the recent words of

Jesus: when on a mission, accept the hospitality offered you. If none is extended, shake the dust off your feet and move on (9:1-6). Is it not interesting how the mind can grasp and hold those Scriptures when they seem to bless our worst behavior and yet cannot retain past the sanctuary door those texts which summon to love, forgiveness, and mercy?"

Three People Encountered on the Way

As Jesus journeyed some people announced their readiness to follow him. They were clearly well-intentioned but had not realized the nature of the demands the kingdom makes.

"I will follow you wherever you go..." We know where Jesus is going. Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem. Would the person be as willing to follow if he knew Jesus' journey and the things that will play out in Jerusalem? This first person expresses his readiness to follow Jesus. There is nothing wrong with the way he puts it: he is ready to go anywhere Jesus leads. But the reply shows that he has not reckoned with what this means. Jesus indicates that personal pleasure is not part of his travels: *"Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head."* Jesus' comments imply that the follower will be like the leader. If Jesus has no place to lay his head, his followers shouldn't expect anything better.

"Follow me" With the second person, it is Jesus who asks him to follow (*akoloutheo*). Jesus' statement in v. 59 is exactly the same as he uttered to Levi in 5:27, "Follow me." Levi leaves everything and follows. This man can't. The duty to bury one's father was part of obeying the commandment, "Honor your father and mother." The duty of burial took precedence over the study of the law, the temple service, the killing of the Passover sacrifice, the observance of circumcision and the reading of the *Megillah* (*Megillah* 3b) – which itself discusses the public proclamation and teaching of the Law.

Joseph takes a leave from the Pharaoh so that he can bury his father back in Canaan (Gen 50:1-7). Tobit shows his faithfulness by burying the dead (Tob 1:16-20). The importance of a son burying his father and mother is illustrated by Tobias, Tobit's son (Tob 4:3; 6:15). There have been some arguments that the father was not yet dead, that the son wanted to stay at home until he could fulfill this obligation. There are no indications of this in the text. But the burial duties of a Jewish son are not as simple as western culture admits. Green (*The Gospel of Luke*, 408-9) describes the Jewish practice more fully:

The practice of primary burial (in which the corpse is placed in a sealed tomb) followed by secondary burial (following a twelve-month period of decomposition the bones were collected and reburied in an ossuary or "bone box") is well attested, with the additional twelve months between burial and reburial providing for the completion of the work of mourning. According to this reckoning, Jesus' proverbial saying would refer to the physically dead in both instances: "Let those already dead in the family tomb rebury their own dead." In either case, Jesus' disrespect for such a venerable practice rooted in OT law is matched only by the authority he manifests by asserting the priority of the claims of discipleship in the kingdom of God.

The text is clear – the urgency of the gospel supersedes all other claims.

"I will follow you, Lord, but first ..." The third person, like the first says that he will follow Jesus. Like the second person, he asks for permission (*epitrepo* -- "let" in vv. 59 and 61) to do something first. In some ways these two would-be followers want to place conditions on their following. "I will follow you, but first...." This third person is asking no more than what Elisha asked of Elijah (1 K 19:20). Jesus demands more of his followers than Elijah did. Jesus points out that the kingdom has no room for those who look back when they are called to go forward.

In how many testimonies does the convert talk about all the evil things that were left behind in order to follow Jesus. Jesus also demands that we give up the very best things in our lives to follow him. Craddock (Luke, *Interpretation Commentaries*, p.144) says it well:

The radicalism of Jesus' words lies in his claim to priority over the best, not the worst, of human relationships. Jesus never said to choose him over the devil but to choose him over the family. And the remarkable thing is that those who have done so have been freed from possession and worship of family and have found the distance necessary to love them.

These few verses outline many “calls” – Jesus: the call of God to go to Jerusalem vs. the call of the Samaritans (perhaps) to stay and take care of them. James and John: the call for revenge against the Samaritans vs. Jesus' call to leave the unreceptive people and move on to another town. There is the call of self-pleasures vs. the call to follow Jesus. There is the call of family obligations vs. the call to follow Jesus. There is the call of socially accepted actions vs. the call to follow Jesus. There is the call of being good citizens which may conflict with the call to follow Jesus. If burying one's parents was considered obeying the commandment to honor them, then we also have the call of the Law vs. the call to follow Jesus.

Frankly, none of us are going to make the cut to follow Jesus. Our desires for soft pillows and comfortable beds, for fulfilling family and social obligations, our patriotism will frequently have higher priorities than following Jesus – especially following Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and the cross. We might be willing to give up some evils in our lives to follow Jesus, but to give up all these good things – to put them as a lower priority than Jesus? That is radical discipleship, but Paul writes about doing this in Phil 3:4-11. He considers all his past, good, religious deeds as “rubbish”.

Perhaps the image of putting one's hand to the plow and not looking back refers to looking back both at all the very good things in our lives like family and friends, comforts and satisfactions, “successful” programs; but also all the sins in our lives, which have been forgiven by Christ. We can neither wallow in our past sins nor boast of our past successes if we are to be fit for the kingdom of God.

Notes

Luke 9:51 *days for his being taken up*: the phrase *tas hēmeras tēs analēmpseōs autou* (“the days of his being taken up”) may be a reference to his death, but the use of the verbal cognate *analambanō* (“take up”) in Acts 1:11, 22 points to the inclusion of the resurrection/ascension events in this expression. In light of the influence of the Elijah traditions in 9:51–56, an allusion to the translation of Elijah is possible (cf. 2 Kings 2:10–11). ***he resolutely determined*:** *prosōpon estērisen*, literally “he set his face.” Alternatively, rather than determination, it is possible to understand a sense of judgment as this expression is used by the prophets (Isa. 50:7; Jer. 3:12; 21:10) and in Ezekiel in particular (6:2; 13:17; 20:46; 21:2). The text from Ezekiel have a reference to Jerusalem. Moreover, Jesus’ weeping over and words of judgment on Jerusalem (19:41–44) may also bring to mind Ezek. 21:2–6. This theme of judgment fits well with the wider concerns of Luke in this central section.

Luke 9:52 *messengers*: It is not said who Jesus’ messengers were, but probably they were some of the Twelve who went on ahead to prepare lodgings for the little band. A group of a dozen or so would strain the resources of a small village if they arrived unexpectedly; and, of course, there may have been more. ***Samaritan*:** Samaria was the territory between Judea and Galilee west of the Jordan river. For ethnic and religious reasons, the Samaritans and the Jews were bitterly opposed to one another (see John 4:9). Luke’s interest in the Samaritans is further reflected by their repeated appearances in the narrative (9:52; 10:33; 17:16), which climaxes in the reconciliation between the two groups in Acts 8 when the Jerusalem apostles testify to the fact that “*Samaria had accepted the word of God*” (Acts 8:14). Not only are the Samaritans symbols of the outcast in Luke’s theology, but also they represent Luke’s wider salvation-historical concerns, which point to the restoration of God’s people at the end of times. Jesus’ refusal to follow his disciples in condemning the Samaritans should therefore be understood within this wider perspective.

Luke 9:53 *not welcome him because the destination ... Jerusalem*: Josephus tells us that Samaritans were not averse to ill-treating pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, even to the extent of murdering them on occasion (*Bellum* ii.232; *Antiquities* xx.118; this latter passage tells us that it was the custom of the Galileans to pass through Samaria at festival time).

Luke 9:54 *to call down fire from heaven*: Clear allusions to the Elijah narrative can be detected in this verse. In 2 Kings 1:1–17 fire came down twice at Elijah’s request to kill the messengers of Ahaziah, king of Samaria, who rejected the God of Israel by turning to Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron. The fact that early Christians were fully able to recognize this connection with the Elijah story is evidenced in the scribal insertion of the phrase *hōs kai Ēlias epoiēsen* (“as also Elijah did”) in a number of manuscripts (A C D W Θ Ψ fl.13). Jesus’ rebuke of the disciples’ request to destroy the Samaritans who reject Jesus is therefore unexpected in light of the scriptural precedent. It does, however, point to the arrival of a new era when God will act in a new way. The theme of reversal should not be missed when Jesus travels to Jerusalem to proclaim judgment on God’s people while he apparently refuses to condemn the “foreigners” or “outcasts.”

Luke 9:57 *I will follow you*: In these vv.5-61 many commentators have again detected the presence of Elijah traditions. Verse 59 echoes the story of 1 Kings 19:19–21, where Elijah allowed Elisha to bid farewell to his family before following him. The significance of this passage is further supported by the wording in 9:61–62, where the phrase *akolouthēsō soi* (“I will follow you” in 9:61; cf. 1 Kings 19:20) appears with *arotron* (“plow” in 9:62; cf. *ērotria*, “he was plowing,” in 1 Kings 19:19). The contrast between Jesus and Elijah not only highlights the unique authority of Jesus but also points to the eschatological urgency present in Jesus’ ministry.

Luke 9:57-62: In these sayings Jesus speaks of the severity and the unconditional nature of Christian discipleship. Even family ties and filial obligations, such as burying one’s parents, cannot distract one no matter how briefly from proclaiming the kingdom of God. The first two sayings are paralleled in Matthew 8:19-22; see also the notes there.

Luke 9:60 *Let the dead bury their dead*: i.e., let the spiritually dead (those who do not follow) bury their physically dead. See also the note on Matthew 8:22. Some have suggested that Jesus’ demand not to bury one’s father aims at symbolizing the impending judgment on Israel (cf. Jer. 16:5–9; Ezek. 24:16–24). Nevertheless, the historical practice of secondary burial that requires the dead to be reburied after one year may be sufficient in explaining the urgency of Jesus’ note. The theme of judgment cannot be denied, however, in light of the immediate context of this section (10:1–16) and of the wider emphasis in Luke’s central section.

Luke 9:62 *looks to what was left behind*: The act of looking back in 9:62 may also be an allusion to the story of Lot’s wife, who “looked back” and “became a pillar of salt” (Gen. 19:26). In both texts verbs of looking (*blepōn* in 9:62; *epeblepsen* in Gen. 19:26) appear with the phrase *eis ta opisō* (“to the back” in 9:62; Gen. 19:26). The use of the Sodom story in its Lucan context (10:12) further supports the presence of this allusion in 9:62. Again, one finds the presence of the theme of urgency in the context of divine judgment.

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