

LUKE 9:51-62

TURNING TOWARD JERUSALEM

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A. Introduction

Today we begin a series on Luke's Gospel. We will focus on a section of Luke known as Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:44). Whereas Mark narrates Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in three chapters (Mark 8:27-10:52) and Matthew has two (Matt 19:1-20:34), Luke expands Mark's account to ten chapters, adding a lot of material related to discipleship.¹

The journey narrative is a literary creation of Luke. The purpose is to give the reader the sense that he or she is journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem where he will experience suffering and death at the hands of the political and religious leaders.

The travel narrative is "A special device used by Luke for the further training of these Galilean witnesses.... The travel account becomes ... a collection of teachings for the young missionary church, in which instruction of disciples alternates with debates with opponents."²

The travel narrative also prepares the reader to endure suffering and death, not so much physical suffering and death, but rather the death of the false self or narcissistic ego in order to experience union with God. Just as Jesus endures suffering and death before he experienced resurrection and ascension, so must the disciples.

B. The Beginning of Jesus' Journey (9:51-62)**1. To Jerusalem (9:51)**

Luke 9:51-56. ⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up [*analēmpsīs*], he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

¹The term *mathētēs* ("disciple") 16 times in the journey narrative; Lk 9:54; 10:23; 11:1 (twice); 12:1, 22; 14:26, 27, 33; 16:1; 17:1, 22; 18:15; 19:29, 37, 39.

² Quoting Fitzmyer by Robert Stein, *Luke*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 297.

a. Taken up

This is the opening episode of Jesus' journey. Verse 51 begins with a cryptic comment by the narrator about the time being near for Jesus "to be taken up." The Greek is *analēmpsis*, which means being taken up, departure, or ascension.

If we were reading Luke for the first time, we wouldn't know what he was referring to. But for those who know the story, it refers to Jesus' return to heaven after his death and resurrection.

Jesus' preparation for *analēmpsis* begins here. Jesus' preparation for "returning to God" takes the form of a long journey.

When we use our faith and imagination as readers, we walk with Jesus and the disciples on the journey. Through our imagination, we can interact with Jesus, decode his teachings, and be transformed. In this way, we prepared for our own *analēmpsis*, our own ascension or return to God.

b. Jesus' resolve

Next the narrator remarks that Jesus "set his face to Jerusalem." The idiom, "to set one's face," is an OT expression meaning "to resolve" to do something.³

Jesus' resolve to go to Jerusalem is remarkable, because in Luke's account he has just predicted that in Jerusalem he would be betrayed, arrested, beaten, and killed by the elders, chief priests, and scribes (Lk 9:21-22, 44). Jesus knows his destiny—suffering and death—yet he goes to Jerusalem nonetheless. Because the path is difficult, he must be resolute.

For Luke, Jesus' return to God is not only for him; Jesus is leading his disciples to union with God. Over the course of ten chapters, the disciples and the readers are given parables, riddles, object lessons, and power encounters⁴ meant to enlighten and transform us so that we might return to God as well.

³ Gen 31:21; Jer 21:10; 44:12.

⁴ An exorcism (11:14p); the healing of a bent woman (13:10-13); the man with dropsy/edema (14:1-6); ten lepers (17:11-19); and a blind man (18:35-43)

2. Rejection by Samaritans (9:52-55)

⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then they went on to another village. (NRSV)

a. Literal-historical level

At the literal-historical level, there came a time when Jesus decided to travel from Galilee through Samaria to Jerusalem for one final time. It was a three day journey.

As he traveled, there was tension with the Samaritans. There was ethnic hatred between the Judeans and the Samaritans. It was based partly on the fact that they each had rival temples. The Samaritans had one at Mt. Gerizim; the Judeans at Mt. Zion. About 128 BCE, the Judeans destroyed the temple at Mt. Gerizim, so you can see why the Samaritans hated the Judeans and why they were hostile toward pilgrims traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem.

When the Samaritans found out that Jesus was headed for Jerusalem and the Temple on Mt. Zion, they refused to show hospitality to him and his band.

So James and John wanted to send fire down on the Samaritans. Clearly, this is an allusion to the story about Elijah asking for fire to come down from heaven to consume men sent to capture him by King Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:10-16). The fire proved that Elijah was a prophet of God. We can assume that James and John wanted to show the Samaritans that Jesus was a prophet of God and the Samaritans deserved a vengeful display of power.

But Jesus rebukes them. Luke depicts the disciples as often failing to understand Jesus (cf. 9:46-50). In Luke 4:19, Jesus taught that it was the "year of the Lord's favor." In Luke 6:27-36, Jesus taught that disciples were to love their enemies and bless those who cursed them. In Luke 9:5, Jesus said that if someone didn't welcome them, they were *at most* "to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against them." The disciples clearly misunderstood Jesus.

b. Spiritual-mythic level

At the spiritual or mythic level, the episode is about you and I here-and-now and not about past history.

The images of the Samaritans and the "fire callers," James and John, come from our psyche and talk to our psyche; their primary reference is to our spirit or the interior plane of existence.

Day in and day out, we play the role of the Samaritans and the "fire callers." One way to understand this is to see that the Samaritans and "fire callers" as subpersonalities within ourselves.

We have many subpersonalities. "The more we look at ourselves, the more it seems we are not whole, but composed of lots of different parts all having their own needs and wants.... Each subpersonality has a part to play in our lives ... often with conflicting thoughts and feelings about what is good for us."⁵

Subpersonalities include "the controller." This is the one who tries to control every situation and tries to control which subpersonality will be allowed to speak and when. Other subpersonalities include: "the protector," "the skeptic," "Mr. Fear" and "Ms Anger," "the child," "the damaged self," "the victim," "the parent," and so forth. There might be "the dancer," "the scholar," "the peacemaker," and on and on.

Some subpersonalities gain tremendous power and dominate other subpersonalities. Some collude together and form complexes. Some are known to us. Others operate in the unconscious and disturb us as shadow characters. And some are in conflict with each other. The Samaritan and the two "fire callers" within us are in conflict.

On the one hand, the Samaritan within us rejects Jesus. Why? Because the Samaritan within us rejects Jesus. Jesus is headed for Jerusalem to carry out the will of God and that entails suffering and dying.

It is not just physical suffering and death, but it is yielding to God's will and that means death of the narcissistic ego or the false self. The false self is a complex of subpersonalities that craves power, pleasure, and possessions. The Samaritan in us wants no part of that.

⁵ Will Parfitt, *Psychoanalysis: The Elements and Beyond* (Glastonbury, England: PS Avalon, 2006) 31.

In contrast, the two "fire callers" within us want to punish and destroy the Samaritan within. Jesus says, "Don't do that." It's not the time for judgment, but to overcome the conflicts within ourselves by moving and transforming each subpersonality to align with the will of God.

3. Inviting Disciples (9:56-62)

Next we have three short sayings or aphorisms of Jesus. Each is addressed to potential followers. All three center on the term "follow" (9:57, 59, 61).

Aphorisms are *invitational forms of speech*. That is, through aphorisms, Jesus invited people to see the world differently, beyond conventional wisdom. Aphorisms tease the imagination into activity and suggest more than they say.

a. Strangers and aliens

Luke 9:57-58. 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."

"Following Jesus is like following an itinerant teacher, not part of an established community. It was more like following a prophet."⁶ Anyone who follows Jesus will have an uncertain existence. Unlike foxes and birds, followers of Jesus are aliens for a time in a foreign land.

In the preceding account, Jesus is rejected by the Samaritans. Jesus' followers will suffer the same rejection. His followers will be strangers and exiles on earth.

Note: In the Gospels, only Jesus refers to himself as "the son of man." It is Jesus' favorite self designation. It could be a roundabout way of saying, "I". Or it could be a reference to the messiah-like figure mentioned in Daniel 7:13-14, the "one like a son of man," who functions as God's viceroy in the coming kingdom.

⁶ Darrell Bock, *Luke*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 284.

b. Life through mission

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

This has been called Jesus' most radical saying. For Jews it was a sacred duty to bury one's parents. It even overruled Sabbath laws.⁷ On the surface, it sounds like Jesus is encouraging people to disregard that sacred duty.

However, I don't think so. Jesus is using a pun. A pun is a humorous saying that has two or more meanings. The pun invites us to reject one meaning (the literal) and find another (the figurative). The man's request is just a set up for the pun.

Literally, of course, the dead cannot bury the dead. That's impossible. So we must reject the literal meaning.

If we reject the literal meaning, what does "Let the dead bury the dead" mean? Who is dead? What does it mean to leave the land of the dead?

I think it means, "There is a way of living that amounts to living like the dead." That is, some people live spiritually dead lives.⁸

Then Jesus adds a contrast statement: "But as for you, go and preach the kingdom of God." In this way, Jesus implies that "Some people live spiritually dead lives, but if you want spiritual life, join Jesus and his mission from God." Carrying on Jesus' mission, proclaiming the kingdom of God in word and deed is a sufficient catalyst for spiritual life.

c. Don't look back

Luke 9:61-62. ⁶¹ Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶² Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (NRSV)

⁷ Borg, *Jesus* (2006) 197.

⁸ The metaphor "living as though dead" appears in the parable of the prodigal son. Twice the father describes the prodigal son as being dead: "This son of mine was dead" (Lk 15:24, 32). Of course, the prodigal son was alive, but in exile. He was "dead" even though physically alive.

Again, Jesus issues what sounds like a harsh warning: Those who look back are not fit for the kingdom.

The picture that Jesus is drawing is that of someone plowing a field with oxen in front and then looking back over his shoulder at the rows. What is wrong with that picture? If you look back instead of forward, your row will go crooked.

Jesus is inviting people not to hang onto the old life, even one's family, but to let the kingdom of God take precedence over everything.

C. Reflection

1. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus knows that he must journey to Jerusalem to carry out God's will. He must go to Jerusalem and experience rejection, torture, and death before he can experience resurrection and ascension.
2. Jesus' suffering and death leads to ultimate reunion with God.
3. For Luke, the pattern of suffering and death prior to union with God is not only true for Jesus, but also true for every human being.
4. Thus Luke provides an extended narrative journey whereby readers can imaginatively walk with Jesus and hear him teach the disciples how to preparation for union with God.
5. On the first leg of the journey, the followers of Jesus learn that they will experience suffering in the form of rejection and alienation. They also learn that they must make the kingdom of God their first priority to experience the divine life.