

## Series Gospel of Luke

### This Message What About You? Who Do You Say Jesus Is?

#### Scripture Luke 9:18-36

There are two general themes which run through the early chapters of the Gospel of Luke. First, Jesus' revelation of Himself as the Messiah, and second, His training of the Twelve Apostles. We have alternated between these two themes since chapter 4. Let me review quickly.

In chapter 4, Jesus introduced Himself as the fulfillment of God's promises. His mission was to teach about the kingdom of God. When the people of Capernaum tried to get Jesus to remain in their city, He said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (*Luke 4:43*). His miracles attracted the attention of a lot of people and authenticated who He was. "All the people were amazed and said to one another, 'What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!'" (*Luke 4:36*). Jesus was engaged in public ministry for more than three years, and during that time He drew more and more attention to Himself. After seeing Jesus and listening to His teaching people were either favorably drawn to Him or they became more and more opposed to Him.

Now let me review the second theme, the education of His followers. Jesus looked for individuals who were willing to abandon their activities and possessions in order to be with Him. After He had selected the Twelve Apostles, Jesus began to explain the characteristics of the kingdom — the characteristics under which He expected His disciples to live. His teaching was quite radical. His disciples would have to "love their enemies," "to do to others as they would want others to do to them," "to be merciful," "to be generous," "to forgive" and "not condemn."

Over a period of months, the Twelve listened to Jesus and watched Him interact with people and heal diseases. They were sent out on their own in order to gain ministry experience. We have previously thought about their debriefing session and the object lesson of feeding the five thousand men. Sometime after that event, we come to the passage of Scripture for today.

## **Read Luke 9:18-27**

The statement that “Jesus was praying in private” did not mean that Jesus was alone. It meant that He had separated Himself from the crowds of people who followed Him. Verse 18 indicates that some of His disciples were with Him, probably the Twelve.

In response to His question, the disciples reported what the people of Galilee believed about Jesus. There was agreement that Jesus was some kind of prophet, but there were several opinions about which one. Some said that He was John the Baptist raised from the dead after his beheading by Herod the king. Others thought He was one of the Old Testament prophets.

The people who made up the crowds recognized that Jesus was an exceptional person because He taught with authority and was able to perform supernatural actions. However, very few individuals among the crowds were willing to acknowledge Him as the Messiah. There was a specific reason for this. According to the prevalent understanding of the time, the Messiah would be a political and military deliverer. Israel had chafed under the rule of foreign authorities for several centuries, and this situation had led to a narrow and earthly understanding of what the Messiah would accomplish after His appearance. Even when Jesus taught about the kingdom of God, most people thought only about an earthly kingdom. The spiritual teaching of Jesus did not line up with the people’s concept of a political Messiah, and therefore the identity of Jesus was perplexing.

When Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” He was trying to determine if the disciples were of the same or different mind than the general population. The disciples had been with Jesus in many situations. Had they gained any unique perspective on His true identity from their activities? Jesus had been training the disciples. Had this training program changed the understanding and attitudes of the disciples? Did the disciples have a higher and grander and more authentic opinion than that held by the crowd? Was Jesus just another prophet? Jesus wanted to know what the disciples thought.

Peter's answer seemed to affirm the true nature of Jesus. His statement, "You are the Christ of God," was the first time that a disciple had openly acknowledged Jesus as Messiah. (The word "Christ" is the Greek form of the word "Messiah.") There was no doubt in Peter's mind that Jesus was the Messiah. He did not have the kind of uncertainty and perplexity that existed in the minds of the people in the crowds. Peter was firmly convinced that Jesus was more than a prophet, that He was the "Christ, or Messiah, of God."

However, we should not read too much into his words. Peter and the other disciples' understanding about Jesus remained clouded by the notion of Messiah as the reigning King. This idea persisted among them until the Day of Pentecost. Peter thought of Jesus as "the promised Anointed One who would sit on David's throne, ruling the nations with a rod of iron." The disciples were anticipating the immediate overthrow of the Roman occupation and the establishment of the kingdom of God.

In one way, Peter's understanding of the Messiah as the One who would sit on David's throne ruling over the nations was Biblical. For instance, from Isaiah chapter 11 we understand that the Messiah would be the offspring of Jesse and David, that the Spirit of the LORD would rest on him, that He would judge all people with righteousness, that He would reconcile all living creatures, that all nations would rally to Him, and that He would gather all the scattered people of Judah.

What this and other prophecies describe will take place. However, from our position of hindsight and because we have a New Testament, we understand that these events of Isaiah 11 will take place in the future when Jesus Christ returns to earth. The disciples were not able to discern the timing of these prophecies. They, along with most Jews, assumed that the Messiah would immediately establish His earthly kingdom, and so they were focused on only this one aspect of the Messiah's activities.

What Peter and the Jewish people were overlooking were the Scriptures which described the sufferings and sin-bearing responsibility of the Messiah, passages such as Isaiah 53. Isaiah chapter 53 speaks of the One who would bear the iniquities and transgressions of human sin; Who would be "cut off from the land of the living," Whose life would be a "guilt offering." The understanding of Peter and the disciples was better than that of the typical Jew, but the disciples needed to have a still deeper level of spiritual insight into the person of Jesus. They needed to have a more complete picture of the Messiah.

Jesus tried to round out the picture. He announced that “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” Verse 22 is the first explicit mention of Jesus’ impending suffering, death, and resurrection in this Gospel account. From this point on, these events, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, are a frequent theme in Luke.

The statement must have been shocking to the disciples. It was not a message that they expected to hear. In the parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, we read that Peter “took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ He said. ‘This shall not happen to you!’” At that point, “Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’”

Jesus accurately pinpointed Peter’s problem: he did not have the correct understanding about the plans and purposes of God. His thoughts were human oriented thoughts. Peter found it difficult to accept the sufferings and death of Jesus because, in his way of thinking, Jesus’ death would mean the end of Jewish hopes for political freedom.

Peter did not understand that suffering and death were required of the Messiah. He did not realize that Jesus’ death had been planned before the creation of the world; and that it was the will of the Father that His Son be offered as the substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of humanity; that the experience of death required that Jesus come to earth as a man, and that Jesus had to allow Himself to be nailed to a cross. Jesus called attention to the plan of God when He said that “He must suffer,” “He must be killed,” “He must be raised to life on the third day,” and in verse 23, “He must deny himself.” Jesus had come to earth to follow a predetermined plan.

This episode was a wonderful opportunity for Jesus to talk about the life-style of a disciple. Each step of His journey from heaven to the cross required humility, self-denial, and obedience. In verse 23 He said to the disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

If the disciples wanted to be genuine followers of Jesus, then they would have to follow the example of Jesus. He voluntarily gave up personal rights and privileges in order to serve the purposes of the Father. Jesus had submitted Himself to the will of the Father. He had put His own interests and wishes into the background. And in order to carry out the Father's plan, Jesus had to be disciplined in the way He lived. He had to take up His cross daily.

The disciples understood clearly what Jesus meant by this reference to "the cross". Hundreds of men in Israel had been executed by crucifixion. The cross was not the ordinary human troubles that we all talk about — not pains, poverty, disappointments, and the like. The cross represented the end of personal aspirations and desires. A condemned criminal was forced to carry his cross to the place of execution. The criminal knew that he was on a one-way journey, and that he could not turn back and would not return. To "take up one's cross daily" was to accept voluntarily and wholeheartedly whatever was necessary in one's life to serve God, to move ahead and not want to turn back.

Following Jesus requires self-denial, complete dedication, and willing obedience on the part of the disciple. A disciple can only truly "follow" Jesus when he has made and put into practice the radical decision to "deny" himself. He cannot pursue his own worldly ambitions and desires and follow Christ at the same time. We "deny" ourselves when we choose to not set our desires and will against the authority of Christ over our lives. In other words, self-denial works best when we cooperate with what God wants of us.

The statements in verses 24 and 25 describe the futility of clinging to our own ambitions and desires. Jesus said that everyone who tries to secure for himself pleasure and happiness in life will in fact doom his life to failure. Living for self results in the loss of the very self that one wants to preserve. One can possess the world but lose one's soul and thus have nothing spiritually. In contrast, the person who invests his life for Christ's sake will find that his life will be preserved. Verse 25 concludes this thought with a rhetorical question: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

The responsibility of the disciple is to please God. The follower who seeks to fit into the world will be an embarrassment to Christ, and such a person will not be honored by Christ "when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father." This verse affirms that there will be a future time when the Son of Man will return to earth as the ruler and king over all.

Now we are ready for the last part of our study.

### **Read Luke 9:27-36**

These verses describe the event called the Transfiguration of Jesus. This account is placed immediately after the confession of Peter because both episodes answer the question, “Who do you say I am?” First we learned the opinions of the crowds, then the opinion of Peter and the disciples. Next Jesus describes Himself as the One who must suffer many things and die. The Transfiguration episode ends with the voice of God announcing who Jesus really is.

While Jesus was praying, His appearance was altered and He began to reflect the divine glory. Moses and Elijah also appeared with Him in similar glorious splendor. Moses was associated with the redemption of God’s people from Egypt and he was the one through whom the Law was given. Elijah represented the Prophets who continually called the attention of the people to their sins and through whom the Messiah was predicted. The Old Testament record was based on the Law and the Prophets. Scripture declares that Jesus, through His life and death, came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.

We are informed that Moses, Elijah, and Jesus discussed the “departure” (literally the “exodus”) of Jesus, a euphemism for death, which would soon occur in Jerusalem. Both Moses and Elijah had unique departures from this world. Moses was buried by the LORD in an unknown location on the eastern side of the Dead Sea (*Deuteronomy 34:6*). Elijah was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind (*II Kings 2:11*). Prior to their departures, they had been given by God some information about the nature of their deaths. They were able to face their departures without fear or pain.

Jesus, on the other hand, had known from eternity about the circumstances of His death. He knew in advance about the expectations of the Father and the benefits to humanity. He knew in advance about the sufferings He would endure. He knew that He would have to deny Himself and experience pain as no one else in history in order to take up His cross. And He knew that He would have to move ahead voluntarily and deliberately and obediently and single-handedly in order to bear the sins of humanity. We can be thankful that He was willing to continue on according to God’s plan.

Peter proposed the construction of the three booths, and Luke immediately comments that Peter did not know what he was saying. I have also been guilty of talking until I think of something to say. That was Peter's impetuous style. Peter really didn't understand the truth about Jesus. Even when he gave his confession earlier, he did not have a complete understanding of Who Jesus was. Neither did Moses and Elijah and the other prophets. The same was true of the crowds as they put forth their opinions about Jesus. There are many opinions about Jesus in the world, and it is only by listening to the voice of God that we will know the truth.

This is the emphasis of verse 35. As Moses and Elijah were leaving, a cloud appeared and enveloped everyone, and a voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." There was no doubt in the minds of the disciples about who spoke. They were being commanded by God the Father to "listen to Jesus" and only Him. They needed to listen so they could understand more completely and accurately who Jesus was. They needed to cast aside their preconceived ideas about the Messiah and accept the words of Jesus, who is revealed in this Scriptural passage as the true Prophet of the multitudes, the Teacher and Guide of disciples, the designated Servant for humanity, and the Son of God.

Jesus knew that His suffering and death would lead to a greater good, and so He endured suffering and death for others. He expected His disciples to have the same attitude about their service. Following Jesus means that disciples must live as He lived. They are expected to be like their teacher. This would require them to "deny themselves," "take up the cross daily," "lose their lives for the sake of others," and "not be ashamed of the Son of Man."