

Jesus & Rejection

Luke 9:51-56

With 9:51, we begin the third part of the Gospel of Luke. The first part comprises a prequel, containing birth and childhood narratives (1:1-2:52), and was the focus of the preaching schedule during the previous quarter. The second part consists of Jesus' initial ministry throughout Galilee (Luke 3:1-9:50), which we covered in the preaching roster in 2006. The third part recounts Jesus' ministry as he travels from Galilee to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross (9:51-19:48). The fourth – and final – part of the gospel contains account of his trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension (20:1-24:53).

Day 1: Luke 9:7-9, 18-22, 28-36 Jesus and Elijah

This week's sermon text further develops the connection between Jesus and Elijah, so we begin by reviewing Luke's previous explorations of this connection.

Malachi had looked forward to a future coming of the Lord in judgment (of the wicked) and in salvation (of the repentant). To help people escape judgment and obtain salvation, God promises first to send an Elijah-figure, to call people to repentance (Mal 4:5). This is the role that John Baptist plays: as the angel tells John's father Zechariah, "He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17).

Simultaneously Luke explores the connections between Elijah and Jesus. Like Elijah, Jesus comes to reach not the entitled but those distant from the gospel (4:25-26). Many erroneously suppose Jesus – instead of John the Baptizer – to be the fulfillment of the promise that Elijah would return one day (Luke 9:7-9,19; cf. Mal 4:5). Instead, Jesus is an independent figure in his own right, the pinnacle of the succession of divinely-appointed men of God, from Moses, through Elijah, and finally to Jesus (9:28-36).

What does all this say to *us*?

First and foremost, it implicitly affirms what Hebrews explicitly declares: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets [including Moses and Elijah] ... but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (Heb 1:1-2). So we worship Jesus for his greatness, and we take pleasure in our good fortune to live in the full light of his coming.

Secondly, the connection between Jesus and Elijah underscores our pressing need to know Scripture well. Luke invokes Elijah to explain who Jesus is. He assumes that his readers will be familiar with the details of the Elijah accounts, so that he

can lightly allude to them, and his readers will immediately catch his point. Few of us can do so today, without the aid of scholars and commentaries. We are largely ignorant of biblical teaching that Luke could take as familiar even to the illiterate people of God in his day. God speaks to us predominately in Scripture; the New Testament riffs off the Old; so our understanding of God is limited by lack of familiarity with Scripture, including Old Testament. There is only one remedy....

Day 2: Luke 9:51 “As the time approached for [Jesus] to be taken up to heaven”

More literally, ‘As the day of Jesus’ lifting up came *toward fulfillment*’. As Luke traces Jesus’ transition from ministry in Galilee to his journey toward crucifixion in Jerusalem, he has the end in view from the beginning, and his readers would, too. So he reminds his readers that this horrific end, with its suffering and violence, was not simply a travesty of justice; it *fulfilled* the plan and intention of God.

God’s sovereignty – his control over all things, including the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus – is an important theme for Luke. He starts his account on this note: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that *have been fulfilled* among us” (1:1). And he returns to the same thought when the early Church faces its first persecution: those who crucified Jesus committed evil, yet at the same time, “they did what [God’s] power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:28).

What does this say to us? First and foremost, it tells us about God and his *plan* of salvation: that he did not stand by powerlessly, that Jesus was not a helpless victim. God was in control, even in the midst of this horrific evil. And while Luke 9:51 does not go further, from the wider context of Scripture we realize that the crucifixion is God’s use of his power not to defend his own son, but to rescue us.

Second, and very much secondarily, it tells us that God is in charge also in our lives, even when things go bad. That is, this lesson subdivides into two: (a) though God is in control, evil will enter our lives; nonetheless, (b) God is in control, even over the evil that enters our lives.

Day 3: Luke 9:51 “for [Jesus] to be taken up to heaven”

This ironic expression (literally, ‘Jesus’ *taking-up* to heaven’; technically, ‘assumption’) captures the grace of God in its sharpest form.

The expression is ironic, because it alludes to the ‘taking-up’ of Elijah to heaven, in 2 Kings 2:1, “When the Lord was about to *take up* Elijah into heaven....” Notably, Elijah’s ‘taking-up’ spared him death; Jesus’ ‘taking-up’ required his death.

A group in the early Church (‘Nestorians’) objected to the notion that God could suffer, and so divided Christ into his two separate and distinct natures, arguing that he suffered as a man, but not as God. Nestorians are thought to have

influenced Mohammed, with the result that Islam teaches that Christ ascended bodily to heaven, like Elijah, and was not crucified, for God would not permit his holy prophet to suffer, but had someone else suffer in his stead.

Luke, however, intentionally alludes to Elijah's assumption to reinforce the contrast with Jesus' assumption: the former spared him death; the latter necessitated a suffering death. This contrast – highlighted also by the teachings of Nestorianism and Islam – drives home the extraordinary grace of God, that he did precisely what many simply cannot conceive of God doing: he gave the life of his beloved and perfect Son for the salvation of sinners. And so we are reminded yet again, to worship God for the depth of his kindness toward us, that he did for us what many people simply cannot conceive of God doing for anyone.

Day 4: Luke 9:51 “Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem”

Literally, Jesus 'set his face' to go to Jerusalem. The phrase serves two functions. First, it captures Jesus' own struggle to move toward the cross. He knew what was coming, and he – along with everyone else in the first-century Roman empire – knew the great suffering it entailed. So this journey required total resolve, and Jesus determined to see it through to the end.

Secondly, 'face' is a catchword that holds the paragraph together. 'Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem' (9:51); he sent his messengers 'before his face' into Samaria (9:52); the Samaritans did not receive him because 'his face was going toward Jerusalem' (9:53).

The literal background is simple enough: the Samaritans were basically half-Jews, descendants of Jews who had intermarried with non-Jews centuries earlier, and also differed theologically from Jews. Repeatedly over the centuries, animosity turned to violence. Jews assumed ill of Samaritans as a matter of course; and Samaritans happily returned the favor.

At the same time, Luke intends a symbolic point in the repetition of 'face': the disciples sought to help him in his task; the Samaritans opposed him for it. Ironically, the disciples' help turned out to be misguided, and the Samaritans opposition, inconsequential (at least, inconsequential for him, if not for them!).

At least this much applies to us: Jesus was not immune to suffering or to preceding anxiety. Yet he resolutely determined to face the consequences of our sin. Not only do we rightly honor him for his death, we rightly emulate his resolution as we serve him in difficult or perilous circumstance.

Day 5: Luke 9:54 “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”

Lest we condescendingly dismiss the disciples as judgmental and ignorant, we should note three points. First, their response has biblical precedent: Elijah called down fire from heaven on Samaritans who opposed him (2 Kings 1). Secondly, they were motivated by respect for Jesus and commitment to his honor; those who dishonor Jesus do an unspeakable thing, worthy of destruction. Thirdly, they are right in supposing that those who reject Jesus are subject to destruction. Their mistakes were two: assuming that they were to be the instrument of destruction, and assuming that now is the time of destruction.

We do well to learn both from what the disciples got right, and from what they got wrong. Sociologist James Hunter noted decades ago that the pluralism of contemporary America is rubbing off on Christians, weakening convictions and breeding relativism: increasing numbers of Christians conclude that God will not condemn all who reject Jesus; perhaps there are other avenues to salvation for the sincere or for the good; and so forth. We do well to capture the disciples’ indignation over the way the Samaritans – and many today – treat Jesus.

At the same time, we do well to note Jesus’ rebuke of the disciples: we are neither the people to execute judgment, nor is this the time. When our culture rejects Jesus or his values and commands, we do not condemn, but simply, with him, move on to others who are open to hearing.

Day 6: Luke 9:55-56 “Jesus turned and rebuked them”

The verb ‘rebuke’ carries powerful and sinister associations: it is the standard term for Jesus’ interaction with demons. While the word is not used exclusively in such a context, the association is nonetheless instructive: Jesus’ disagreement with the disciples is sharp and decisive.

So the question arises in the midst of America’s culture wars: How would Jesus respond to those who seek to remove him from American public life, and who promote anti-biblical lifestyles and ethics, such as sexual immorality and gay marriage (or, other sins which receive less play in contemporary Christian culture, such as greed, anger, and envy)? For the last two or three decades, some prominent Christians have engaged in vigorous rebuke of the broader culture, and occasional threats of divine judgment. In his own day, Jesus did not join the castigation of his opponents; instead, he rebuked for his own followers for their hostility toward the wider world. Move on, he says, to them and to us; there are others who need to hear. So we expend our effort in proclaiming the gospel to those who have never heard, and in promoting holiness among those who own the name of Christ. Condemning those outside the faith is God’s prerogative at the final judgment; not ours, now. We do better to be known for grace and kindness than for clamor and strife.