

20. Peter's Confession of Christ

Luke 9:18-27

Luke: The Life of Jesus

Life's Most Important Question

¹⁸Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" ¹⁹They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." ²⁰"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God" (Luke 9:18-20).

After feeding the five thousand on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Luke takes us to a time several weeks later, showing Jesus praying alone, but not far from the twelve disciples. Christ was dependent on the Father in all that He did, so He was probably asking the Father if it was the right time to share the true mission of why He had come, i.e., to die as a substitutionary sacrifice of redemption for (and as) man. Before He shared what lay before them in Jerusalem, He was to ask them life's most important question: "Who do you say I am?"

Luke does not specify where this question came up. It is Matthew who tells us it was in the region of Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13). The city lay twenty-five miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. There might have been a reason for Jesus' bringing them to this city before posing this question, which is a spiritual test for all men.

At the time of Christ, the area of Caesarea Philippi had several temples dedicated to false gods, including Baal and Pan, the god of nature. Over the centuries leading up to Jesus, the Israelites had numerous clashes with pagan worshippers. Both Elijah (1 Kings 18) and Jehu (2 Kings 10:18-28) confronted false gods who were demons masquerading as deities (1 Corinthians 10:20). Thomson, in his book **The Land and the Book**, states that no fewer than fourteen temples were located nearby. This town was a hub for many gods. Close to Caesarea Philippi was Mount Hermon, which featured a deep cavern believed to be the birthplace of the god Pan. The town's original name was Panias, until Herod the Great's grandson, Philip, renamed it Caesarea Philippi to honor himself and the Roman Emperor Caesar. This area is also the source of the River Jordan. Today, the town is called Banias, and most tours of Israel include a visit to the site. Herod the Great also built a magnificent temple here, dedicated to the divine authority of Caesar. This temple, constructed from white marble, was situated near the source of the Jordan River.

What are the two questions Jesus asked His disciples? Why do you think Jesus chose this specific place to ask these questions?

It is interesting that Jesus would come to this place of false gods and idol-worshipping temples, as well as those dedicated to the worship of a man, Caesar, and ask two questions of the disciples. In the backdrop of all these temples to false gods, Jesus, the King of the Universe, the Creator of all things (John 1:3), was looking to see if the disciples yet perceived and recognized Him.

The Creator of the Universe longs for us to receive a revelation of Who He is. When we understand who He truly is and grasp the depths of His love for us, this revelation will transform our hearts and minds. He desires each of us to have this understanding. First, He asked them about the perception on the street, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” (v. 18). The crowds had seen His power and authority in many ways, leading to rumors that John the Baptist or Elijah had returned from the dead. Then, He made it personal: “But what about you?” he asked, “Who do you say I am?” The phrase in Greek is plural, because He was addressing all the disciples. He would also ask us the same question: “Whom do you say that I am?”

Luke has taken up a lot of space on the scroll he's writing, answering this very question with testimonies from many people. The disciples themselves had asked this same question when Jesus calmed the waves of the Sea while they were with Him in the boat. He rebuked the wind and the waves, and both were stilled. The disciples asked, “Who then is this, that He commands even winds and water?” (Luke 8:25). We have heard the testimony of an angel to Mary, angels at Bethlehem to the shepherds, the angel Gabriel to Zachariah, the angel to Elizabeth when Mary was carrying Jesus in her womb, and the two in the temple, Anna and Simeon. Then, there were testimonies of demons being cast out and, of course, the testimony of Satan at Christ's testing in the wilderness. When Christ raised the widow's son from the dead, the people of Nain shared their testimony, “God has visited His people” (Luke 7:16). Do we need any more witnesses? I hope that, after reading this, you have come to the same conclusion that Luke presents: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

It was Peter who responded to His question, but I wonder if the other disciples understood the truth. Jesus was more than just a man; He is the Christ of God. The word "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Moshiach," transliterated as "Messiah." Both words mean “Anointed One.” When someone was set apart for a special purpose, a little oil was poured over his head. It was an honor given for courage shown in battle or for a task of special importance, such as the anointing of David by the prophet Samuel when God chose him to be King instead of Saul. Over time, the word came to refer to a special One of God, the Anointed One, who would receive the Kingship passed down from David. He would be the Son of David, the Anointed One, the Messiah, or the Christ. When Peter confesses who Jesus is—namely, the Messiah of God—Matthew's Gospel records Jesus' reply: “**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven**” (Matthew 16:17). We have the benefit of hindsight as we reflect on what Christ accomplished on the cross, but when the twelve heard Jesus' response, acknowledging that He was indeed the Messiah of God, they had a different idea of what the Messiah would do.

The Warrior Messiah

The prophets had foretold of a glorious warrior King, a superhuman being who would come and deliver them from all their enemies. They had heard these stories as they grew up, including descriptions of what He would do. Zechariah, the prophet, told them that the Messiah would appear over Jerusalem and fight for them (Zechariah 14:1-5). Isaiah, the prophet, had also written:

²⁷See, the Name of the Lord comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire. ²⁸His breath is like a rushing torrent, rising up to the neck. He shakes the nations in the sieve of destruction; he places in the jaws of the peoples a bit that leads them astray. ²⁹And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people playing pipes go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel. ³⁰The Lord will cause people to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail. ³¹The voice of the Lord will shatter Assyria; with his rod he will strike them down. ³²Every stroke the Lord lays on them with his punishing club will be to the music of timbrels and harps, as he fights them in battle with the blows of his arm. ³³Topheth has long been prepared; it has been made ready for the king. Its fire pit has been made deep and wide, with an abundance of fire and wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of burning sulfur, sets it ablaze (Isaiah 30:27-33).

In a remarkable way, this superhuman, anointed King would also be the Son of God and deliver the nation from the control of the Gentiles. By the time of Christ, they had been under the rule of the Babylonians, Medes, and Persians, as well as the Greeks, and were now under Roman rule. However, in their minds, all of that would change when the Messiah, the conquering King, arrived.

¹Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? ²The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against **his anointed**, saying, ³“Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.” ⁴The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. ⁵He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ⁶“I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.” ⁷I will proclaim the Lord’s decree: He said to me, “**You are my son**; today I have become your father...¹²**Kiss his son**, or he will be angry and your way will lead to your destruction, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Psalm 2:1-7 and 12).

The Lord Jesus knew what they were thinking, and now that He understood they were starting to recognize who He truly was, He began to warn them not to tell others about their understanding of His identity.

²¹Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. ²²And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Luke 9:21-22).

Why were they strictly warned not to tell anyone about their revelation of Jesus’ identity?

The Way of the Cross

Some had already discussed forcing Him to be king (John 6:15), so He carefully warned them not to share the information they had received. This was not the time for conflict. There was a different purpose to His coming. Matthew wrote, “From that time on Jesus began to explain to

his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matthew 16:21). The implication is that the message of the cross and of the sacrifice that had to be made was not given to them until they received the revelation that this Person with them was God in the flesh, the divine Son of God.

²³Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it (Luke 9:23-24).

The root of our problem is our inherent sinful nature. Because of the Fall, sin and disobedience to God are ingrained in our very being. We are separated from God and spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1 and 5) until we receive the gift of new life in Christ. When we repent of our sins and invite Jesus to forgive us, God's Spirit dwells within us, making us truly alive to God. We are “born again” or born from above (John 3:3), made right with God, and given peace and assurance of salvation. With God's Spirit living in us, we have the power to say "no" to sin and disobedience. Although the child of God is now spiritually alive, they still possess a sinful nature that seeks to dominate them. This sinful nature must be put to death. Overthrowing the Roman government was not His goal. The revolution Jesus was leading at this time was a heart revolution, where the root of the problem lies.

The disciples did not realize that there were two comings. The first was to redeem a people to Himself. He would come as a Lamb that would lay down His life for His friends in the act of supreme sacrifice that would save those who trusted in Him. Without the Spirit revealing the truth of Who He is, the disciples were focused on the image of a strong warrior Messiah. He had to wait until the Spirit made it clear to the disciples before He explained the meaning of the cross.

What did Jesus mean by His words, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”? How would you explain this verse to a child?

Imagine how that must have felt for the disciples to be told that the great Warrior Messiah they were expecting and saw before them was not going to defeat all the Romans, drive them out of Israel, and bring all the saints to reign in Jerusalem. The worst part would be when He then told them that they, too, needed to pick up their cross daily. Remember, the teaching model at that time was for disciples to do what their master did—a show-and-tell style of teaching. When He said, “Follow me,” He was not just asking them to be with Him; to follow was to do what He did. It must have been a shock for Him to tell them they, too, must be ready to take up their cross. A cross was an instrument of death; we have turned it into a religious icon, but it was a terrible form of death reserved for the worst criminals.

²⁵What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?

²⁶If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels (Luke 9:25-26).

In 768, Charlemagne became king of the Franks, a Germanic tribe that inhabited present-day Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and western Germany. He had built an empire, yet in his final days, he realized the truth: living for oneself and gaining an empire without Christ sitting on the throne of one's life leads to a miserable death. One hundred and eighty years after Charlemagne's death, around the year 1000, officials of Emperor Otto opened the great king's tomb. Inside, besides incredible treasures, they saw an astonishing sight: the skeletal remains of King Charlemagne seated on a throne, his crown still on his skull, with a copy of the Gospels lying in his lap and his bony finger resting on the text, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"

Too many people rush around chasing fame and wealth, desperately investing all their time, energy, and money into climbing the ladder of success, only to realize at the end of their lives that their ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. Life is too short to have regrets about how you've spent your years on trivial things. He tells them and us that if we want to follow Him, to be His disciple, there are three things we must do: deny ourselves, take up a cross, and do it every day (Luke 9:23).

Some believe that denying oneself means giving up all pleasurable activities, like never eating chocolate or watching a movie. They argue that denying oneself means abstaining from anything enjoyable. However, Jesus said, **"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"** (John 10:10). If following Jesus means never enjoying life or having fun, it certainly doesn't seem like a life lived to the fullest. So, what does it really mean?

How Can We Deny Ourselves and Carry Our Cross?

1) To deny ourselves. This means that pleasing our Lord should be a higher priority than pleasing ourselves. We must put God's will first in our lives; if we imagine a throne room in the temple of our hearts (1 Corinthians 3:16), Christ needs to sit there, not us. He must rule and reign. The Greek word translated as "deny" means not only to say no to something but also to refuse someone. William Barclay, the Bible commentator, further explains it, saying:

Ordinarily, we use the word self-denial in a restricted sense. We use it to mean doing without something, giving up something. For instance, a week of self-denial is a period when we refrain from certain pleasures or luxuries, typically to contribute to a good cause. But that is only a tiny part of what Jesus meant by self-denial. To deny oneself means, in every moment of life, to say no to self and to say yes to God. To deny oneself means to obliterate self as the dominant principle of life, and to make God the ruling principle, more, the ruling passion, of life. The life of constant self-denial is the life of continuous assent to God.¹

2) You and I, as disciples, need to take up our cross daily. A cross was a symbol of death. When a man was seen carrying a cross, people knew he was headed to his execution. A life of purpose (a life dedicated to Christ), that is, an authentic life, comes to us when we dethrone ourselves and

¹ William Barclay. *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2*. The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1958,) p. 167.

place Christ at the center of our lives. The life we have on Earth is merely a seed to be sown into the lives of others. Selfishness disappears when Christ rules and reigns at the center of your life. Paul, the apostle, was an excellent example for us all in his words: “**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me**” (Galatians 2:20). To be crucified with Christ means to live to do God's will each day, even when our flesh desires the opposite. This is a Spirit-led life.

3) We are to follow Him. Many seem to follow their own way, bowing at the shrine of I, Me, Mine, Myself. To the follower of Christ, his heart should be like Jesus in every way He lived His life. We are to imitate His example. He showed us how we are to live. Christ Jesus bought us, not with silver or gold, but with the most valuable thing He had: His blood, His life in this world. Jim Elliot, one of five missionaries who died seeking to reach the Auca Indians of South America with the message of Christ, said this: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” (Shadow of the Almighty, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Page 15).

We can spend our lives chasing after the things of this world, but at some point, we must reach a place where we ask ourselves, “In this world, is this what life is about? Is there more to life than what I am experiencing?” Some spend their lives chasing the wind. There is no greater disappointment than, at the end of life, discovering that the things into which one has invested time, energy, and money were of no eternal value. Paul, the apostle, describes the investment of time, energy, and money towards the Kingdom of God in this way:

¹²If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

What does the Scripture mean when Paul the apostle says he will suffer loss? What kind of loss is he referring to?

The different building materials reflect our motives, or the reasons behind our actions. Our lives are spent constructing something. It is when we step into eternity that we realize what we have built. Have we contributed to the Kingdom of God, or has our work, time, energy, and money been spent on trivial pursuits—wood, hay, or straw—that will be burned up, leaving us as paupers in eternity? Perhaps just a small shack instead of a mansion? Paul was not writing to those outside of Christ when he issued that warning. He was reminding Christians that, one day, we will see a return on our investment in this life, whether it is small or great. **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19-20).**

²⁶“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and *the glory* of the Father and of the holy angels. (Luke 9:26).

You may wonder, “How am I to pick up the cross daily?” Crucifixion is not something you can do to yourself. We can only present ourselves to God and say with a willing heart, “Here I am.” Do you understand and believe that God loves you and has a purpose for your life? This is crucial if we are to live a life of sacrifice. Jesus was able to lay down His life because of His great love for us and His obedience to the Father. It was for the joy set before Him that He endured the cross and scorned the shame (Hebrews 12:2). For Jesus, it was not just about enduring pain and sacrifice; He looked beyond that and reached forward for the joy set before Him. The Lord was free to make His choice, and He chose to die for us. He could see the victory and knew the outcome!

The disciples indeed followed Jesus on His path of self-sacrifice. Ten of the twelve disciples are believed to have been martyred for their faith. Many others have since followed their example. In fact, more Christians have been killed for their faith in the last century than in the first. How could they do this? How could they make the ultimate sacrifice? I believe it is the same way—they were allowed to experience that all-consuming love which makes sacrifice possible.

My prayer is that we will never be ashamed of Him and His words. When we understand His great love for us, we are empowered to love as He loves.

Prayer: Lord, reveal to us who You are and what You have done for each of us, and help us become vessels of Your great love.

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