

Text: Luke 9:51-62 (NIV)

⁵¹As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy the?” ⁵⁵But Jesus turned and rebuked them, ⁵⁶and they went to another village. ⁵⁷As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” ⁵⁹He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.” ⁶²Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Theme: A Journey Full of Pitfalls

In high school many of us read Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. I can’t remember much about the book except that it was about a number of characters on a journey. Such accounts of journeys were a popular style of ancient writing. Many of the Greek tales also describe the journeys of the character.

Luke does the same thing in his Gospel. It can be divided into three parts. The first section about Jesus’ early ministry is very similar to Matthew and Mark’s Gospels. The final section begins with Jesus’ entrance to Jerusalem and describes His passion. This middle section begins with 9:51. It is a description of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Luke begins this section with the words, “*When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem.*” This is not a quick journey. It takes up over 10 chapters, more than a third of the Gospel. Almost all of the stories in this section are unique to Luke’s Gospel. Like Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, we meet a lot of interesting characters in Jesus’ parables, such as the Good Samaritan, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Prodigal Son, and the Pharisee and Tax Collector. Jesus meets some interesting people along the way such as the 10 lepers and Zacchaeus. It is a long, interesting journey as the Lord makes His way to Jerusalem, but as we see this morning, it is a journey that is full of pitfalls.

Our Christian life is often described as a journey in the Bible. We are on our way to the place that the Lord in preparing for us in heaven, just as the Jews journeyed to the promised land and Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem. Our Christian journey is also full of pitfalls.

I. Where is this journey to?

For Jesus it says that He set His face to go to Jerusalem. The time had come. He was now going to Jerusalem to accomplish our salvation. It was the whole reason why He would come to this world. When He finally approached the city, Jesus wept over it. They would reject Him, but He would give His life for their forgiveness and the forgiveness of the whole world. He set out to Jerusalem to give His life on the cross for us. But that is not where the story ends. He rose and said that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in His name to all nations before He ascended to His glory in heaven again.

As Christians we are on a journey to where Jesus now is. In many of the stories of this section Jesus warns us against setting our hearts on the things of this world. He tells the parable of the Rich Fool, who stored treasures for himself in this world, but was not rich toward God and had nothing the day that his life on earth ended. He tells of the rich man, who lived in luxury every day of his life on this earth, but who didn't repent and went to hell when he died. On the other hand, He tells of the wonderful joys that await those who repent of their sins and trust in His forgiveness. He tells us to enter the narrow door that leads to eternal life, which He often compares to a great banquet. (13:29, 14:25ff). It is a place of comfort and eternal peace and joy. Because Jesus gave His life for us and rose as our Savior, we can confidently look forward to being where He is. When the hour of our own death comes, His angels will carry our souls to heaven, and on the last day He will raise our bodies to everlasting life with Him. The goal of our Christian journey is to see our Savior face to face.

II. On the way there are many pitfalls.

Some of them are from other people. Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem through Samaria. This was odd because Jews never traveled to Jerusalem through Samaria. They hated the Samaritans so much that they would take the long way around Samaria, rather than to travel through Samaria. But Jesus travels right through an area, that most Jews would avoid. What happened? The Samaritans would not receive them because they were going to Jerusalem. The Samaritans hated the Jews as much as the Jews hated the Samaritans. They didn't want any of them traveling through their territory. James and John wanted Jesus to destroy the village, but Jesus said that they should just go somewhere else.

There are a lot of people who would like to stop us from completing our Christian journey. They mock our faith. They might even persecute us because of our faith. There are some people who hate us because of our faith. They will try to make it as difficult for us as possible to follow our Savior.

It is tempting for us to be like James and John and want God to punish them. We want God to give it to them. But Jesus gave us the Christian example when He was on the cross. He prayed, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*" He teaches us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He will judge all people on the last day. We simply leave that in His hands and don't take it into our own hands when His Gospel is opposed.

The worst pitfalls are those that come from within. At the beginning of the journey, Jesus came across several people who wanted to follow Him, but they were not ready. They had not counted the cost or they had other things that they wanted to do first. They didn't recognize the urgency of this journey right now or that it was the most important journey that they would ever take. They were simply not ready and willing to go. The time to depart was now, and they wanted to wait. There was also an air of self-confidence in each of these people who wanted to follow Jesus, just as Peter was so self-confident when he said that he would never deny the Lord. But the Lord challenged the self-confidence in every one of the people. He showed them how unprepared they were to follow Him.

The Lord also told the sleeping disciples in Gethsemane, "*The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.*" That is a pitfall for every one of us. We want to do what is right, but sometimes we want to wait and follow Christ on our own terms. Other times we fail and fall into the desires of our sinful nature. Today's epistle lessons describes that struggle. Paul describes the acts of the sinful nature and how they are in conflict with the fruit of the Spirit. The thing that will end our Christian walk is

usually not something on the outside. It is the sinful lusts and desires from within us. We decide that we would rather have the treasures and sinful pleasures of this world rather than Christ. That is why it is so important that we find strength for the journey through our Lord's Word and Supper, so we are reminded of the riches that we have in Christ. We not only have His forgiveness and blessings in this world. We have an inheritance that will last forever.

Christ set His face for Jerusalem. There was nothing that was going to deter Him, not the opposition of those who hated Him or the folly of many who wanted to follow Him on their terms. He set His face toward Jerusalem, and He accomplished our salvation there. He has called you and me to follow Him. Our Christian journey is also full of pitfalls, both from without and within, but with Christ's strength, we will find the journey itself to be a great blessing until we also see the end of our journey in this world when the Lord's angels take us to His glory in heaven.

May Christ give us His strength, His peace, and His hope as we follow Him in this world.

Amen.

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