

Setting Goals

Luke, the lone gentile gospel writer, displays a heightened sense of excitement as Jesus “set his face to go to



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Jerusalem” (v. 51). The very concept of God sending his Son into this world to die for us was totally foreign to the world of that day. As we will see in the remainder of this gospel, even the Jews could not imagine a “suffering savior” in their longing for a restored national identity and power. The simple words of Jesus foreshadow a goal the world still has trouble understanding.

Jesus’ fame has spread, not only through his miracles of healing and power over demonic forces, but also through his compassion for people from every station of life and his clear teaching of Scripture. Every step of this final journey to Jerusalem will clarify and intensify the meaning of the cross. Once again, unlike usual Jewish practice, Jesus does not go around Samaria but directly through on his way to Jerusalem. The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans went back generations but was accelerated when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon (Ezra 4:1-3). The Samaritans in the north had been left behind in the exile and offered to join in rebuilding the Temple, but the returning exiles rejected them as unworthy half-breeds who had compromised their faith. So, when James and John, described as “sons of thunder” in Mark 3:17, went ahead to arrange lodging for Jesus and were turned away by the Samaritans, they asked Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (v. 54). Jesus rebuked James and John and moved on. This entire progression to the cross will be marked by strong images in contrast to clear ideas of God’s grace and love.

Luke takes ten chapters to get to the cross, using this final journey to show the stark difference between religious traditions and God’s ultimate gift in Christ. In verses 57-62 Jesus comes face to face with three individuals who express interest in following him, but

cannot see beyond their own priorities or give up their comfortable thinking.

The first seeker says to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go” (v. 57). Jesus, understanding that the man has no idea about the sacrifices such a commitment entails, says, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests: but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (v. 58). This is not a call to abandon clear thinking or take a vow of extreme poverty. It is a call to put aside the value systems of the world and live beyond human goals and expectations. Discipleship is not built upon easy times, comfortable expectations or a faith disconnected from reality. Discipleship means trusting God in all of life, even when the safety of “home” is not near.

The second encounter is a bit different because Jesus invites a man to follow him (v. 59). The man declines because he must first bury his father. This sounds reasonable until you start thinking: Is the father ill? Is his death imminent or not expected for many years? Does this man have any say about his life goals? Jesus is on his way to die. When it comes to life, whether now or in the future, now is always the moment of decision. I have known people who voiced a desire to serve God, to know the will of God, but they could never take the first step, risk failure or break from family expectations. Life consists of decisions, made or not made. When the love of God is absent from your choosing you miss both opportunity and joy.

The third seeker voices his desire to follow Jesus, but first he wants to say goodbye to his family (v. 61). Again, this sounds reasonable, but I vividly remember a young man in one of my churches who felt a strong calling to youth ministry. His mother said, “Absolutely not ... I know how people treat ministers!” Four years after I moved from that church, that young man called me from his college campus to tell me he was preparing to be a minister even though his mother did not approve. Jesus response to this reluctant seeker is a simple parable about how a farmer must not only put his hand to the plow, but must also focus his attention on where he is

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going instead of looking back where he has been (v. 62). Everyone has a past, perhaps with regrets or failures, but God calls and equips us by his grace to live now and into the future.

A big piece of God’s blessing when we follow Christ is knowing that God is with us through everything. This text is not just about a call to professional ministry, it is about trusting your life to God. The path of discipleship is not always predictable or easy. Jesus was on his way to the cross, along with disciples who did not always understand his words and actions, yet “his face was set toward Jerusalem” (v. 53). Serving God is not like following a computer-generated travel route or a AAA map. There are challenges, interruptions, surprises, disappointments and blessings, but the end result does not change. Periodically it is good to review the times when God influenced you through events and people, realizing God has been with you every step of the way.

What is your life goal? What are you asking God to help you accomplish today? We learn by doing, not by sitting around waiting for the trumpets of heaven to announce “this is it.” Jesus was on his way to the cross, but every step of that journey brought him in contact with individuals like the three seekers in this text who had the opportunity to choose a life shaped by God’s love and purpose. My own experience has been – from my childhood to years as a pastor, outside this country and across this country – to be shaped by the companionship of God. Some days were confusing, difficult and filled with joy, but all of them helped we grow in faith.

With our reluctance to trust God and our struggle to understand the “why” of situations, the best response is to simply trust the God whose Son gave himself away for us. Our goal should be to trust God and love others (Matthew 22:36-39). That is the way Jesus summarized God’s ultimate law and the way Jesus lived. If you can get that goal clear in your heart and mind, the rest will fall in place.