

20. Peter's Confession of Christ

Luke 9:18-27

Luke: A Walk Through 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 the feeding of the five thousand on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Luke takes us to a time several weeks later to Jesus' praying alone, but yet not far from the twelve disciples. He was totally 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 record for us the place where this question arose. It is Matthew who tells us that it was the region of Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13). The city lay twenty-five miles in a northeasterly direction from the Sea of Galilee. Caesarea Phillipi was outside of the domain and authority of Herod Antipas, and Luke had already told us that Herod wanted to see Jesus. Herod was worried that, maybe, John the Baptist was back in the form of Jesus but even more powerful (Luke 9:7-9). It was possible that there was a reason for Jesus' bringing them to this city before posing this question that is a spiritual test for all men.

At the time of Christ, the area of Caesarea Philippi was scattered with a number of temples to false gods, Baal's being one of them, along with Pan, the god of nature. Over the last several hundred years up to the time of Jesus, the Israelites had a number of clashes with pagan worshippers. Both Elijah (1 Kings 18) and also Jehu (2 Kings 10:18-28), had spiritual showdowns with the false gods who actually were demons posing as gods (1 Corinthians 10:20). Thomson in his book, *The Land and the Book*,¹ tells us that no fewer than fourteen temples were in the near neighborhood. This, indeed, was a place of many gods. Close to Caesarea Philippi was Mount Hermon with a deep cavern, which was said to be the birthplace of the god Pan. In fact, the name of the town was called Panias, before Herod the Great's grandson, Philip, changed the name to Caesarea Philippi, in honor to himself and Caesar. It is said that this is the source of the river Jordan. The name of the town is now called Banias, and most tours of Israel will take you to the site. Herod the Great built a great temple here, too, built to the godhead of Caesar. It was a temple of white marble close to the source of the Jordan River.

Question 1) What are the two questions Jesus posed to his disciples? Why do you think Jesus took this opportunity alone with his disciples in this particular place to ask them these questions?

¹ As quoted by William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, Matthew 2, Published by Saint Andrew Press, Page 134.

I find it 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 his 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 they yet perceived and recognized Him.

The Creator of the Universe longs for us to receive revelation of Who He is and what He is like. When we come to grips with Who He is and the depths of His love for us, the revelation will transform our hearts and minds. He is yearning for each of us to have this revelation. First of all, He asked them what was the consensus of opinion about Him on the street, “**Who do the crowds say that I am?**” (v. 18). The crowds had witnessed His power and authority in so many ways that it was rumored that John the Baptist or Elijah had come back 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, for He was asking the question of all of the disciples. He would also ask it of us, “Whom do you say that I am?”

Luke has taken up much room on the scroll that he is writing, answering this very question with the testimonies of numerous people. The disciples themselves had asked this very question when Jesus calmed the waves of the Sea when they were with Him in the boat. He rebuked the wind and the waves, and they both were stilled. The disciples said, “**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 the womb, and the two in the temple, Anna and Simeon. Then, there were testimonies of demons that were 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 the town of Nain spoke their testimony, “**God has visited His people**” (Luke 7:16). Do we have need of any more witnesses? I hope by now, in reading this, you have already come to the same conclusion that Luke is putting forward: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

It was Peter that responded to His question, but I wonder if the other disciples had really grasped the truth. This was more than a mere man in front of them, Jesus was the Christ of God. The word *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, Meshiach, transliterated as Messiah. Both words mean “Anointed One.” When a person was set apart for a special purpose, an amount of olive oil was poured over his head. It was an honor given for courage displayed in battle or for a job of special choosing, such as the anointing of David by the prophet Samuel when God chose him in place of King Saul. Over time, the word began to be used to describe a special One of God, the Anointed One, who would come and receive the Kingship passed down from David. He would be the Son of David, the Anointed One, the Messiah, or the Christ. When Peter says his confession of who Jesus is, the Messiah of God, Matthew in his Gospel gives us 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 look back to what Christ accomplished on the cross, but when the twelve heard the response of Jesus, acknowledging that He was, indeed, *the* Messiah of God, in their mind, they had a different image 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 had grown up, i.e. the descriptions of what He would do. Zechariah the prophet had told them that 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 some marvelous way, this superhuman anointed King would also be the Son of God and free the nation from the shackles of Gentile control. By the time of Christ, they had been under the dominion of the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and were now under the dominion of the Romans. However, in their minds, that would all change when the Messiah, the conquering King would come:

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. . . .¹²Kiss 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 knew that they had begun to see just who He was and is, He began to warn them not to speak to others about what they understood as to 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).

Question 2) Why were they strictly warned not to tell anyone about their revelation of Jesus' true identity?

The Way of the Cross

Some had already talked about forcibly making Him king (John 6:15), so He strictly warned them about sharing the information that they had received. This was not the time for fighting. 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 intimation is that the message of the cross and of the sacrifice that had to be made was not given to them until they had received the revelation that this Person with them really was God incarnate, 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 very root of our problem is that of our default sin nature. Because of the Fall, rooted in our very being is the problem of sin and disobedience to God. We are separated from God and dead in our spiritual nature (Ephesians 2:1 and 5) until we receive the gift of life in Christ. When we repent of sin and invite the Lord Jesus to forgive us, the Spirit of God comes in us and makes us truly alive to God. We are "born again" or born from above (John 3:3). We are made right with God and given peace and assurance of our salvation. With the Spirit of God living within us, we now have power to say "no" to sin and disobedience. Even though the child of God is now alive in a spiritual sense, he still has a sin nature that seeks to rule over him. This sin nature must be put to death. Overthrowing the Roman government was not on His agenda. The revolution that Jesus was bringing at this time was a revolution of the heart where the root of the problem was.

The disciples did not realize that there were two comings. The first would be to redeem a people to Himself. He would come as a Lamb that would lay down His life for His friends in an act of supreme sacrifice that would deliver those who placed their trust in Him. Without the Spirit revealing the truth of Who He is, the disciples were locked in to the strong warrior Messiah. He had to wait until the Spirit had really made it plain to the disciples before He told them of the cross.

Question 3) 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 to the disciples to be told that the great Warrior Messiah Whom they had come to know was not going to beat up all the Romans, kick them out of the land of Israel, and bring all the saints to reign in Jerusalem. The worst part of all would be that He then told them that they, too, needed to pick up their cross daily. Remember that the model of teaching in that day was for disciples to do what their master did, a show-and-tell style of teaching. When he said to them the words, "Follow me," He was not just asking them to be with

Him. To follow was to do what He did. What a shock it must have been for Him to tell them that they, too, must be ready to take up their cross. A cross was an instrument of death; we have made it into a religious icon, but it was a terrible form of death reserved for the worst of 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 in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. ²⁷I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:23-27).

In 771, Charlemagne became king of the Franks, a Germanic tribe in present-day Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and western Germany. He had gained an empire, but yet in his dying days, he had found out the truth that to live for oneself and to gain an empire without Christ seated on the throne of one's life was to die a miserable death. One hundred and eighty years after the death of Charlemagne, about the year 1000, officials of the Emperor Otho opened the great king's tomb where, in addition to incredible treasures, they saw an amazing sight: the skeletal remains of King Charlemagne seated on a throne, his crown still on his skull, and a copy of the Gospels lying in his lap with his bony finger resting on the text, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"²

Too many people rush about seeking for fame and fortune, desperately putting all their time, energy, and money into climbing the ladder of success, only to find at the end of their lives that their ladder has been against the wrong wall. Life is too short to have regrets about how you have spent your years in frivolous things. He tells them, and us, that if we really want to follow Him, to be His disciple, there are three things we must do: deny self, take up a life of cross-bearing, and do it daily.

There are some that feel that to deny oneself would be not to do anything pleasurable, not to ever eat chocolate, or go see a movie. They say that to deny oneself means to do nothing that would be fun. 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 to follow Jesus means to never enjoy life or never to have fun, it sure doesn't sound like it would be a life of living to the full. So what does it mean?

- 1) To deny ourselves. I believe that this means that pleasing our Lord is to be a higher priority than pleasing self. We must put His will first and foremost in our lives. If we can imagine a throne room in the temple of our hearts (1 Corinthians 3:16), Christ needs to sit there, and not ourselves. He must rule and reign. The Greek word translated as *deny* means not only to say no to something, but also it is used *to refuse someone*. William Barclay, the Bible commentator, further defines 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 week when we do without certain pleasures or luxuries, usually in order to contribute to some good cause. But that is only a very small part of what Jesus

² R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word, Luke Volume One*, Printed by Crossway Books, 1998. Page 342.

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 constant assent to God.³

- 2) You and I, as disciples, need to take up our cross daily. A cross was an implement of death. When a man was seen carrying a cross, people knew he was on his way to death. A life of purpose (a life of dedication to Christ), i.e. real life, has a way of coming to us when we dethrone self and place Christ at the center focus of our lives. This life that we have on Earth is but a seed to be sown into the lives of others. Selfishness is gone when an attitude of heart that is dead to self reigns. Paul the Apostle was a great example for all of us in his words: *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I 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 is to live with the purpose of doing God’s will daily, even when our flesh life craves the opposite. This is a Spirit-controlled life.
- 3) We are to follow Him. Many seem to follow the way of self. They bow at the shrine of I, Me, Mine, Myself. To the follower of Christ, his heart is to be like Jesus in every way that He lived His life. We are to follow His example. He modeled to us how we are to live. Christ Jesus has bought us, not with silver or gold, but with the most valuable thing that 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 live out our lives, running after the things of this world, but at some time, one must come to a place where he or she says, *“In this world, is this what life is about? Is there not more to life than what I am experiencing?”* There are those who spend their lives chasing the wind. There can be no greater disappointment than, at the end of life, to find that the things into which one has invested time, energy, and money was worth nothing of eternal value. Paul the Apostle talks about the investment of time, energy, and money toward 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).

Question 4) What does it mean when Paul the apostle says that he will suffer loss? What type of loss is being referred to here?

³ William Barclay. *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2. The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1958) p. 167.

The different building materials speak of our motives, i.e. the reasons as to why we do what we do. Our lives are spent building something. It is only when we step into eternity that we discover what we have built. Have we added to the Kingdom of God, or has our work, our time, energy, and money been spent on worthless pursuits, i.e. wood, hay or straw, that will be burnt up, and we are left as a pauper in eternity, e.g. just a small shack instead of a mansion? Paul was not writing to those outside of Christ when he made that warning. He was reminding Christians that, one day, we will see a return on our investment in this life, whether by little or by much. **“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. ²⁷“But I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:26-27).

You may think to yourself, “How am I to pick up the cross daily?” Crucifixion is not something that you can do to yourself. We can only present ourselves to God and say with a willing heart “Here I am.” Do you know and believe God’s love for you? This is important 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. We are told that it was for the *joy* which was set before Him, that He endured the cross and scorned the shame (Hebrews 12:2). For Jesus, it was not just about going through the pain and sacrifice, but He could see beyond that and was reaching forward for the joy that was set before Him! The Lord was free to make His choice, and He chose to die for us. He could see the triumph and knew the outcome!

The disciples did, indeed, follow Jesus in His way of self- sacrifice. Ten of the twelve disciples were said to have been martyred for their faith. Many more have followed in their footsteps. In fact, more Christians have been put to death for their faith in the last century than in the first century. How could they do this? How could they make the ultimate sacrifice? I believe in the same way, i.e. they were allowed to partake in that all-consuming love that 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 given the power to love as He loves.

Prayer: Lord, give us a revelation of Who You are and Who You are to us personally, and help us to be vessels of Your great love.

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