

Life's Most Important Questions

Luke 9:18-26

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In Luke 9:18-26, it says, "And it happened, as He was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them, saying, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' So they answered and said, 'John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered and said, 'The Christ of God.'"

This answers our first question, "Who is Jesus?" He is the Messiah, "the Christ of God," the Son of the living God.

Verse 21, "And He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one..." He didn't want them to tell others who He was. "...saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.'"

"Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?'" He is speaking about a man's soul. "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels."

The Galilean ministry of Jesus has now come to a close in Luke's Gospel. Jesus is now living in the shadow of the Cross. Verse 51 says that "He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" where He would be rejected, crucified and raised from the dead. Notice in verse 22 it says that He soon "must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and..." praise God "be raised the third day." And from this point on in Jesus' ministry, it is in the shadow of the Cross. So for the first time in Luke's Gospel in our text, Jesus prophesies of His coming death by crucifixion in Jerusalem.

In light of this, Jesus wanted His disciples to understand three important truths. And I've already mentioned them. First, "Who is Jesus?" Second, "Why did Jesus come?" And third, "What does it mean to follow Jesus?" All through this text, we answer those questions.

The most important question that anyone could ever ask is, "Who is Jesus?" Let me tell you why that is. It's because it determines your relationship to God. If you're wrong about Jesus, you're wrong about God. If you don't have Jesus, you don't have God, you don't know God. Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). The only way to God is through Jesus Christ, who is God.

It also determines your place in eternity or where you go after you die. You either go to heaven

or you go to hell. So your relationship to Jesus Christ is the most important question that anyone could ask.

Matthew 16 and Mark 8 are the other two, synoptic Gospels that record our text and add more color, light and information.

Let's look at the first question, "Who is Jesus?" Go to verses 18-20. "And it happened...." Luke uses this term a lot. It simply means that there was a time gap, and nothing was recorded for us of what transpired in that time gap. It may have been a period of days, weeks or months, but not years. It was some time period.

Verse 18, "...as He was alone praying." Jesus was with His disciples. About 120 miles northeast of Jerusalem, in the area of Caesarea-Philippi, at the base of a large mountain, Mount Hermon, is an isolated, secluded place in Gentile territory. He had gone there with them.

Notice that He was praying. That is significant because the theme of Luke's Gospel is the Son of Man, Jesus' humanity. As a man, Jesus prayed to God the Father. That sometimes confuses people. "How could He be God and yet He prayed?" He's praying as God the Son in His incarnated state to God the Father, who was in heaven. So if Jesus prayed, we should pray as well. Jesus spent this time in prayer.

Continuing with verse 18, "...that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them, saying, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?'"

If you want to know who Jesus is, I don't recommend you learn that from Time magazine when they do an article on who Jesus is every Christmas. Every Christmas year after year they still don't know who Jesus is. They get it wrong. If you want to know who Jesus is, read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Get your information from the Word of God, from Jesus Christ's own lips of who He really is.

Verse 19, "So they answered and said, 'John the Baptist.'" Again the crowds were wrong. "But some say Elijah." They're still wrong. "And others say that one of the old prophets has risen again." It says in Matthew 16:14 that some said He was Jeremiah. So people had all these theories and ideas of who Jesus was.

There are all kinds of ideas about who Jesus is. Our doctrine of who Jesus is must be found in the Bible. It must be Biblical doctrine on the Person and work of Christ.

Verse 20, "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" We know what Time magazine says, we know what the world says, "But who do you say that I am?" That's the important question. "Who do you personally believe Jesus Christ is?"

Then "Peter answered and said, 'The Christ of God.'" Peter is always the spokesperson of the group. Peter's confession is very short and abbreviated. In Matthew 16:16, Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." The word "Christ" means "Messiah." In the Old

Testament, the word is “Mashiach.” So it is Messiah or Mashiach, which means “the Anointed One.” Jesus was the promised Messiah. In the New Testament, the word is “Christ.” It’s the same word; one’s from the Hebrew and one’s from the Greek. It just means He’s the Anointed One, the Messiah.

Then in Matthew 16:17, Jesus said to Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”

The only way for us to know who Jesus is, is by divine revelation. You cannot by searching find God. You can’t understand God by yourself. God is transcendent and infinite; we are limited and finite. So God must reveal Himself to us. The Bible reveals God to us; it is God’s Word about God’s Person. We find God in the Person of Jesus Christ. The central theme of the Bible is Jesus. If you don’t find Jesus or understand Jesus when you read through the Bible, you’ll miss the whole point of Scripture. And Christ must be revealed by the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus said, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, Simon Bar-Jonah...” referring to Peter “...but My Father who is in heaven.” You cannot know this by your own, human understanding. Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Peter’s confession that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” would be blasphemy if it were not true. If it wasn’t true, Jesus should have said, “No, no, no, Peter! I’m not the Messiah. I’m not the Son of God.”

When the Bible calls Jesus “the Son of God,” it is a full affirmation of His divine nature. He is God. He is not a Son of God; He is the Son of God. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” “Begotten” means “unique.” The way to be saved is by putting your faith and trust in the only, unique Son of God. So Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, and Jesus accepted what Peter said about Him.

There are some verses that doctrinally tell us about Jesus. John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In the Greek it says, “And God was the Word.” So Jesus is shown to be three things in this verse: He is the eternal Word, He is the personal Word—face to face with God the Father—and He is the divine Word. So He is eternal, personal and divine.

The next verse is John 1:14, which says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten...” or the only unique Son “...of the Father, full of grace and truth.” This speaks of Jesus taking on humanity in His Incarnation. The text literally says that He “pitched His tent among us.” Jesus was God in flesh, fully God and fully Man in one Person, Jesus Christ.

And John 1:18 says, “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten...” there’s our word again “...Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” In the Greek it’s even stronger: “The only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

“Declared” is the word “exegesis,” which means “to explain, to make known.”

So in John 1:1, Jesus is the eternal, personal, divine Word; in John 1:14, He is the incarnate Word; and in John 1:18, He is the revealing Word, because only God can reveal God. Jesus came to reveal God to us.

Jesus said in John 14:9, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” That doesn’t mean that Jesus is the Father, but He came to reveal the Father to us. So if you’re wrong about Jesus, you’re wrong about God. If you don’t have the Jesus of the Bible, you don’t have God and you don’t have salvation.

We don’t want the Jesus of progressive Christianity, that says Jesus was only a man and not divine. We don’t want the Jesus of Mormonism, which teaches that Jesus was the brother of Lucifer or Satan. We don’t want the Jesus of the Jehovah Witnesses, who teach that Jesus was Michael the Archangel and was created by God the Father. Their Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible. We want the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the Jesus of Paul, Peter, James and all through the New Testament. Jesus is the Word of God.

And we don’t want the Jesus of the Word-faith teachers. They teach that at Jesus’ death, He had to go to hell and be born again. It’s called “the born-again Jesus.” And they believe he conquered the devil and rose from the dead. So we are like “little Jesuses,” and we can conquer the devil and walk in victory in perfect health and perfect wealth. No. Jesus didn’t go to hell to be born again; He didn’t need to be born again. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. So get your doctrine on Jesus from the Bible. Don’t get it from the cults or from popular opinion.

So if I were to ask you, “Who is Jesus?” what would you say? He is Messiah, the Son of God, He is divine, He is eternal and personal, He was incarnate and He died on the Cross for our sins.

The second question is, “Why did Jesus come?” I want to answer that question with verses 21-22. “And He strictly warned and commanded them...” These are very strong terms: “warned” and “commanded.” These are legal terms used by a judge in a courtroom. “...to tell this to no one.”

What is this all about? He just revealed Himself, and now He doesn’t want them to tell others who He is! Why? Because they could not understand the popular crowds. Not the disciples—they needed to understand. But the crowds, if they thought He was the Messiah, John 6:15 tells us that they would “take Him by force to make Him king.” Jesus hadn’t come to wear a crown; He was there to die on the Cross.

I’ll show you what I mean by this in Luke 9:44-45. Jesus said, “Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men.” That’s Jesus’ Cross. “But they did not understand this saying, and it was hidden from them so that they did not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this saying.” They couldn’t grasp it. They didn’t understand it. Especially the popular crowds. And He didn’t want some preemptive

attempt to make Him an earthly king, which is what the Jews were looking for. He needed to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die on the Cross.

Now notice the title for Jesus, in verse 22: "The Son of Man." And it is used again in verse 26. An interesting fact about that is that Jesus' favorite, most frequent title for Himself is "the Son of Man." And He is the only one who used this title for Himself—except for one case: it was Stephen in Acts 7:56 who said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Then in verse 60, he said, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." They stoned Stephen and then he died. But other than that, Jesus is the only one who used this title for Himself.

You ask, "What does this title mean?" It comes from Daniel 9 where it is a title for the Messiah. It denotes His humanity as well as His deity. But I believe it primarily denotes His humanity, that He would be the Son of Man and be the King, the Messiah.

Now notice Jesus give us four verbs that tell us what must happen, in verse 22. "The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes..." which comprise the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court "...and be killed, and be raised the third day." The four verbs are "suffer...rejected...killed...raised."

This is what Jesus came to do, and it must be fulfilled in keeping with the Father's will or divine timetable. Jesus came primarily, purposely to die on the Cross for the sins of the world. He didn't come just to teach us, just to be an example; He came to die. That's the reason He was incarnate; He had a body.

Let's go over these words. First, He would "suffer," in verse 22. In Isaiah 53, it says that He would be the suffering servant. Many Jews today reject Jesus Christ for this very reason. They say, "The Messiah would never have suffered!" Yet He is prophesied to be the suffering servant.

Second, we have the word "rejected." Psalm 118:22 says, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Jesus would be rejected by His own people.

Third, He would be "killed." This is a reference to His Crucifixion, the Cross of Christ. In John 2:19, Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Then John makes it clear that Jesus was speaking about His own, physical body. So Jesus predicted not only His death but also His Resurrection. Verse 22 of our text says, "be killed, and be raised the third day."

So Jesus would "suffer...be rejected...be killed...be raised the third day."

Don't ever go beyond these basic, simple truths. Jesus came to die on the Cross and to rise from the dead for our salvation. That's why Jesus came. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, Paul says, "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the Gospel....that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." So Jesus came to die for our sins according to the Scriptures.

Jesus did not come to make us wealthy. And Jesus didn't come to make us healthy. He might bless you, so don't be high minded, but be fearful of God and walk in reverence. Trust in the Lord. Don't let it go to your head. We are not to "trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17).

So He didn't come to make you rich. And He didn't come to make you healthy. He can heal you. And He will one day. One day we'll all be healed of every infirmity. I'm looking forward to it. We'll get brand new bodies. No more sin, no more sickness, no more suffering, no more sorrow—just brand new bodies for all eternity. But right now we are redeemed but have a body that has not yet been glorified. If you don't believe me, just go home and look in the mirror.

And Jesus didn't come to make us happy. He came to give us joy—the joy of the Lord and the joy of the Spirit—but it's a joy that doesn't depend on happenings or circumstances. Happiness is based on circumstances and is temporal; joy is a fruit of the Spirit.

Jesus didn't come to make us wealthy, healthy or happy. He came to make us holy. And He came to redeem us from sin. The Cross of Christ is the central theme of Jesus Christ in the Bible. If you cut the Bible anywhere, it bleeds with redemptive truth.

Let me give you three statements about the Cross. Number one, Jesus came to save sinners. Number two, He came to reveal God in the Cross. And number three, He came to conquer evil. This is a comprehensive picture of the Cross.

Under "save sinners," which is a work of the Cross, there are four more words. First, is the word "propitiation." That means that He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He is the satisfying sacrifice. The second word is "redemption." That means he bought us at the Cross. The third word is "justification." That means He declares us righteous. And the fourth word is "reconciliation." That means that we were estranged, but God brought us back into relationship with Him through the work of the Cross. And the whole substitutionary work of the Cross was voluntary; Jesus gave Himself for us.

How did Jesus reveal God? At the Cross He revealed the glory of God, the justice of God, the righteousness of God, the holiness of God, the love of God was revealed like nowhere else, the wisdom of God and the power of God.

And Jesus came to conquer evil. Colossians 2:15 says, "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it." He put an end to Satan's power through His death and Resurrection.

Now we move to the third question, "What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ?" Verses 23-26 say, "Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me...' He's talking about discipleship, following Him "...let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily..." don't forget the "daily" part "...and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son

of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory..." referring to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ "...and in His Father's, and of the holy angels."

So what does it mean to follow Jesus? It means that we deny ourselves, we take up our cross daily and we follow Him. These words are not talking about salvation or sonship; they are talking about discipleship. You need to be very careful that you don't put things on salvation that aren't in the Bible.

Some people think you have to believe and trust in Jesus as Lord to be saved. He is the Lord and we do call out on Him and are saved. But the Bible says that all you need to do is believe, and you will be saved. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, Ephesians 2:8-9. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

So these aren't terms that describe what you do in order to be saved; they are words that describe what happens when you are saved. So I don't believe you need to do these things to be saved, but if you're saved, you should do these things. They are the fruit and not the root of salvation. So Jesus is talking about discipleship and not sonship here.

Every follower of Christ should take up their cross and follow Jesus. Jesus moved from His Cross to our crosses here. And if you are truly saved, you should live as Jesus describes here. Verse 23 says, "If anyone desires to come after Me..." he should do these things "...let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me."

What does it mean to "deny himself"? This is not popular today. If I had a marquee in front of the church and on it said, "My sermon today is 'How to Deny Yourself,'" there wouldn't be people flooding into the church to hear it. Or a sermon titled, "How to Die to Yourself" or "How to be Crucified."

Why do we hear so little preaching today about discipleship and self-denial? Number one, we fear legalism and asceticism and a false sense of holiness. We think it's a bunch of rules and regulations, and we think we may become legalistic. And it's because we live in a self-centered culture—love yourself, believe in yourself, put your confidence in yourself; whereas the Bible says, "Deny yourself" (Matthew 16:24). 2 Timothy 3:2-4 says, "For men will be lovers of themselves." We live in that day right now. They love self and don't love God. They are "lovers of money" and "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."

So what does self-denial mean? It doesn't mean giving up something you like. To deny yourself doesn't mean, "Okay, I'm going to be a committed Christian. I love ice cream so I'm going to give up ice cream. Praise God, I'm awesome!" No, that's not what He's talking about. I believe it means a complete submission to the Lordship of Christ, it's taking "self" off the throne and letting Christ take His place as Lord of your life.

If you are a Christian, Jesus is Lord. You surrender and submit your whole life to His authority and His Lordship. It's submission to Christ's agenda for your life. It's not following a set of rules

or regulations or legalistic standards; it's submission to the Person of Jesus Christ.

When I was a boy growing up in church, we used to sing a hymn that had a stanza that went:

"I'll go where You want me to go, dear Lord,

O'er mountain or plain or sea;

I'll say what You want me to say, dear Lord,

I'll be what You want me to be."

What an impression that made on my heart. When I gave my heart to Jesus Christ right out of high school, I went back to the church I had not been to in so many years, and I sang that song. I stood there with tears running down my face and sang, "I'll go where You want me to go. I'll do what You want me to do. I'll be what You want me to be. I'll say whatever You want me to say. I'm Yours." Every Christian should pray that prayer.

You say, "Well, if I say that, He'll send me to Africa to the jungle! And I hate bugs!" Not necessarily, but He might. But if He does, get going! Or He may send you to Barstow. You say, "I rebuke that devil; get behind me!"

But as a Christian, you must be willing to go where He wants you to go, to do what He wants you to do, to be what He wants you to be. All your goals, all your ambitions, all your plans should be in ashes at your feet. They should all be submitted to His will. Who you marry, who you don't marry, where you live, what you do, how you live, what you say—everything should be under the authority of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

This is what it means to be a Christian. And this is not for the "supersaints." You say, "You're talking about people who are really given to God." No; I'm talking about the Christian life. The Bible says, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24). And in Romans 12:1, Paul says, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Your all should be on the altar.

The second thing we are to do, in verse 23, is "take up [your] cross daily." What does that mean? It's not accepting the problems and hardships of life. "My bad back. Oh, that's just my cross to bear." That's not what He's talking about. What is it then? It is deliberately choosing to suffer for the cause of Christ.

In the Roman world, when you saw someone carrying a cross, it meant they were going to die. Not only were they going to die, but they were going to die a cruel death of public shame and humiliation.

So if you're going to follow Jesus, you have to be willing to die. Pick up your cross. Paul said, in

Philippians 3:10, "...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." Paul said those words 30 years after his conversion, after he was saved. Yet he said, "I want to know Him. I want to be made like Him."

So taking up your cross daily I would describe as seeking Christ daily, serving Christ daily, being willing to suffer for Christ daily. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."

When we take up our cross, it's universal, it's for all Christians. When we take up our cross it's perpetual, it's daily. It is also to be intentional; we need to be willing to take up our cross. And it needs to be joyful. Hebrews 12:2 says, "...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame" and died on the Cross. And it is to be done in faith. In Galatians 2:20, Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God."

The last thing we need to do is "follow Me," verse 23. It is in the present tense, so it means to continually "follow Me." And the phrase "follow Me" means to "move behind someone in the same direction in order to come after them in their footsteps." It means we should come behind Jesus and follow in His footsteps. And guess where He's going? To the Cross.

You say, "Well, let's not go that way then." He's on His way to the Cross. Are you going to follow Jesus? You say, "I don't think this is a good idea. And I wish I hadn't come here today to hear this sermon."

Let me give you three reasons why you should deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow Him. Look at verses 24-26. The first word in each verse is the word "for." These three verses give us three reasons why we should take up our cross and follow Him. Reason number one: "For whoever desires to save his life..." You try to live for yourself, get all you can, get the gusto, do whatever you want, have a good time, what will happen? You "...will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it." Understand that if you try to live life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give your life to Christ, you will find it.

The second reason is in verse 25. "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself..." or "his soul" "...destroyed or lost?" You can be the richest person in the world, die and go to hell. What does that do for you? For all eternity you are separated from God. Verse 26, "For whoever is ashamed of Me..." In the text that means those who do not deny themselves, those who do not take up their cross daily and those who do not follow Jesus; they're trying to save their own lives. They're trying to gain the world. They're ashamed of Jesus "...and My words, of him the Son of Man..." there's that title "...will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels."

So if I'm a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul says in Philippians 2:5-8, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..." same attitude, same outlook "...who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking

the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross." That same mind should be in me.

For years this has been one of my favorite poems, which summarizes this whole text. Its author is Amy Carmichael, a missionary to India. The title of the poem is No Scar?

"Hast thou no scar?

No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?

I hear Thee sung as mighty in the land,

I hear them hail Thy bright ascendant star,

Hast thou no scar?

Hast thou no wound?

Yet I was wounded by the archers, spent,

Leaned Me against a tree to die, and rent

By ravening beasts that compassed Me, I swooned;

Hast thou no wound?

No wound, no scar?

Yet as the Master shall the servant be,

And, pierced are the feet that follow Me;

can he have followed far

Who has no wound nor scar?"