

Guide to St. Luke Part 3:

Luke 9:51-19:27

The Journey to Jerusalem

Introduction

In this portion of the Gospel, Jesus travels with his disciples to Jerusalem. The journey serves as an opportunity for St. Luke to present the teachings of Jesus that he has gathered from his sources as a loosely connected package. Rather than comment on each episode, I will point out the major themes and also those stories and sayings that the Gospel of Luke alone has preserved.

But first, a little background about Samaria and the Samaritans. Samaria is an area that lies between Galilee and Judea (see map PO1: The Holy Land). It was land taken over by the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt was part of the Kingdom of David. After King Solomon the Kingdom split into Northern (Israel) and Southern (Judea) portions and remained that way until the North was conquered by Assyria and the South by Babylon. In both cases the conquerors removed part of the population. The exiled Judeans were allowed to return and to re-establish their religious practices. Those deported from the North were not allowed to return and were replaced by outsiders. This changed the religious practice in the North, which became known as Samaria, and put the Samaritans at odds with their southern neighbors in Judea. They did not get along. Nearby Galilee was rural enough not to be affected and retained a close relationship with Judea. Galileans often traveled to Jerusalem during festivals to worship at the Temple and the easiest way was through Samaria. But if the Samaritans found out the travelers were Jews going to Jerusalem, they would not let them travel through their land. This is what happened to Jesus. He had to travel around Samaria which was a longer route and more difficult. (See map P05: The Journey to Jerusalem)

Major Themes

The Challenge of Following Jesus

Jesus is aware of his fate and the journey to Jerusalem is an opportunity to prepare his disciples for the challenge of the Passion. While Jesus warns them on several occasions (Luke 9:22, 9:44, 13:33 and 18:31) the disciples do not understand or accept the meaning of his words. Connected with these warnings are the difficulties in store for the disciples themselves: following Jesus requires an unreserved commitment (Luke 9:57-62), courage under persecution (Luke 12:2-9), vigilance and faithfulness (Luke 12:35-53) and sacrifice (Luke 14:25-33). The disciples must share what they have learned (Luke 10:1-24; 19:11-27)

The Kingdom of God

The disciples also learn about the Kingdom of God, a way of life Jesus initiates with his ministry. The Kingdom welcomes all who repent and follow its teaching: Jews, gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, the sick, the oppressed, and the marginalized. In fact God seeks out the “lost” (Luke 15:1-32). The Kingdom offers the healing and forgiveness of God. The miracles of Jesus are a sign that God acts in and through Jesus (Luke 11:14-23). Followers of Jesus are to put their trust in God rather than worldly goods (Luke 12:13-34). Jesus encourages us to approach God with our needs in prayer and teaches us how to pray (Luke 11:1-13). One who listens to Jesus’s teaching needs to recognize that “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20), to recognize the “signs of the times” (Luke 12:54-56).

Religious Controversy

Jesus has strong words for religious authorities who stress the ritual details of the Law over its deeper meaning of mercy and love of neighbor (Luke 11:37-12:1). These authorities in turn challenge Jesus’s authority (Luke 11:14-23), his knowledge of the Law (Luke 10:25-37), and his healing on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6). Jesus recognizes that both religious and political authorities see him as a threat and plan to do away with him (Luke 13:31-35).

Teaching in Parables

Jesus teaches his disciples and followers by telling stories taken from everyday life that illustrate how the Kingdom of God is different than the kingdom of this world. As a result, some of these stories shock or surprise us. They are meant to get our attention and to point out that God’s ways are not the same as our ways. In the same way, the sayings of Jesus are equally strong and sometimes shocking. Both the stories and sayings are meant to emphasize that the Kingdom of God requires us to “repent,” to turn away from our current, comfortable, sinful way of living.

We are fortunate that St. Luke has preserved for us parables and stories of Jesus that are found in no other Gospel. They are well worth a second reading. I provide some notes below to help you recognize the shocking or surprising aspect of these stories.

The Good Samaritan: Luke 10:29-37.

Think about this story in the light of the background information about Samaritans, above.

The Parable of the Rich Fool: Luke 12:13-21.

The average person, then and now, would normally think of the rich man as being prudent.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son and His Brother: Luke 15:11-32.

Most people would sympathize with the reaction of the older brother.

The Unjust Steward (or Manager): Luke 16:1-13.

Some background is needed here. The steward was entitled to collect a commission for selling his master's produce. For the buyer to get 80 bushels of wheat he would pay for 100 and the steward would get the value of the extra 20 bushels as his commission. What the steward is doing in the story is forgoing his commission in hopes of getting future favors from the buyer. The steward was not cheating his master which is why his actions are commended by the master.

The Rich Man and Lazarus: Luke 16:19-31.

The rich man had his chance to help Lazarus and did not, in spite of the teaching of Moses and the Prophets. The warning about not believing someone who comes back from the dead foreshadows those who will reject the teaching of Jesus, even after his Resurrection.

The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge: Luke 18:1-8.

Some of the stories, like this one, contain a little humor at the same time a serious point is made about faith and persistence.

Questions for reflection

1. The question that Jesus was asked in the Good Samaritan story was, "And who is my neighbor?" What was the question Jesus answered?
2. How comfortable would I be living in the Kingdom of God?
3. What do I give up to follow Jesus?
4. Think about the story of the Prodigal Son from the point of view of the older brother, from the point of view of the prodigal son, and from the point of view of the Father. In the spiritual sense that Jesus wants us to think about this story, who do these characters represent?
5. What does Jesus's teaching tell us about the proper attitude toward money and possessions?