

Luke 9:18-24

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Context

The entire section of Luke’s gospel (9:18-27) consists of a conversation in three parts. The first two parts (vv. 18-20) contain questions about Jesus’ identity: who do the crowds say that I am and then who do you disciples say that I am. The final part of the conversation (vv.23-27) concerns Jesus’ teaching on the meaning of discipleship. All of this has followed Luke’s indirect revelation about Jesus as the one who fulfills the prophetic tradition of Isaiah, Elijah, Elisha, and Moses in the exodus.

After the “Infancy Narratives,” Luke has followed the outline of Mark – until this point. Luke has moved directly from the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30–44) to Peter’s confession (Mark 8:27–30). Various explanations for this omission of Markan material have been suggested (avoiding doublets or omitting accounts of Jesus’ work outside of Galilee), but the omitted material is not sufficiently homogeneous to confirm any of these conjectures. The effect of the omission, as was noted in the commentary on the feeding of the five thousand, is to bring the feeding and Peter’s confession into direct relation to each other—a fact that may prove significant for defining the meaning of the confession “the Messiah of God.” [Culpepper, 199]

There are three other distinctive Lukan modifications of the confession scene. First, Luke has omitted Mark’s designation of the geographical location (Caesarea Philippi) and substitutes instead a designation of the spiritual context of the confession. Rather than locate the confession of Jesus as the Christ at a place named for the Roman emperor and his tetrarch, the confession occurs where Jesus is at prayer to God with his disciples. Prayer is an important theme in Luke because it serves as another way of emphasizing that all Jesus does is a part of God’s redemptive plan (see 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 11:1; 22:40–41, 44, 46; 23:46). Luke also omits Mark’s reference to being “on the way,” reserving the introduction of the passion motif until after Peter’s confession.

Second, Luke changes Mark’s allusion to “people” in Mark 8:27 to “the crowds.” The crowds have been a recurring fixture of Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry since the end of Luke 4. The crowds press around Jesus. On one occasion Jesus challenged the crowds with the question of John the Baptist’s identity: “What did you go out to the desert to see?” (7:24). The crowds are also mentioned three times in the feeding of the five thousand (9:11, 12, 16), so under Luke’s editing of the material Jesus’ question “Who do the crowds say that I am?” must be understood in direct relation to the previous scene. If the feeding has a revelatory function (at least for Christian readers), have the crowds understood what Jesus has done?

The third Lukan modification that serves an important function in the narrative is the change of “one of the prophets” (Mark 8:28) to “*one of the ancient prophets has arisen*” (Luke 9:19). The difference between the two phrases is not great, but in Luke the phrase is a verbatim repetition of Luke’s earlier summary of Herod’s words (9:8). By means of this repetition, the confession scene is tied directly to Herod’s question. Peter will give the answer that Herod never finds.

Commentary

Matthew and Mark locate this incident in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi, near the foot of Mount Hermon. This was gentile territory, away from Herod’s dominion and from the crowds that had been thronging him. Here he could talk quietly with the disciples and have opportunity for undistracted prayer. Luke does not mention the location specifically, perhaps wanting to link it to the feeding of the 5,000. Or perhaps, rather than locate Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah in the place named for a Roman emperor, Luke locates the confession in the place where Jesus meets his heavenly Father – in prayer.

Who is this?

Jesus’ absorption in prayer signals the approach of a decisive moment (see 3:21; 6:12). He is ready to confront his followers with the question that has been tantalizing audiences since the beginning of his ministry: “*Who is this?*” (8:25). Jesus’ enquiry seeks to draw out the disciples’ understanding of his person. The crowds have their opinions, but what do the disciples believe?

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The apostles give the standard response about public opinion: John, Elijah, a prophet (vv. 7–8) - their answer is much the same as the reports that reached Herod. With that response in the clear, Jesus emphatically turns to the apostles and asks them “*But who do you say that I am?*” In all three Synoptic gospels Jesus’ “*you*” is quite emphatic. Apart from others, Jesus is asking, what do you think? It is a question of personal discovery.

Culpepper [199] offers “The answers that the disciples give to Jesus’ question about the level of the crowd’s understanding underscore Jesus’ identification with the prophetic tradition: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the ancient prophets. The crowds have understood that Jesus’ mighty works are of the same cloth as those performed and predicted by the prophets: announcing good news for the poor, challenging the rich, giving sight to the blind, healing lepers, and raising the dead. Luke 7 and 8 especially have defined Jesus as one greater than the prophets and greater than John the Baptist. The time has now come to articulate the nature of that “greater than.” By means of the succession of two questions regarding Jesus’ identity and the emphatic opening of the second question, literally, ‘But you, who do you say that I am?’ Luke telegraphs the fact that the answers the crowds have proposed are inadequate. The disciples, through Peter, now show that they have moved to a higher level of understanding.”

Peter’s leadership role is highlighted as he answers this crucial question in the name of the other disciples (see Acts 2:14): “*The Christ of God.*” Modern Christians fluidly move from “Jesus” to “Messiah” to “Christ” as though they were synonyms. But in first century Palestine, the meaning of Messiah/Christ was not as clear. At the center was the issue of whether the title is to be

understood in a prophetic context or a royal, Davidic context is relevant to both of these questions. “The reader already knows that Jesus is the Christ from references in Luke 2:11, 26; 3:15; 4:41. Luke has cited the connection between the title “Christ,” or the anointed one, and the prophetic tradition by placing Jesus’ recitation of Isa 61:1 at the beginning of his ministry, in Nazareth (4:18). It is clear from Luke’s repeated description of Jesus as one greater than the prophets that this title cannot signal merely that Jesus was a prophet. He was the eschatological prophet who fulfilled Isa 61:1. The feeding of the five thousand, with its allusions to the exodus, the Moses traditions, V 9, p 200 and Elisha prepares us to understand this title in context as an indication that Jesus is the fulfillment of these traditions, including the expectation of the coming prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15, 18). Peter’s confession also resonates with the predictions of Jesus’ fulfillment of the Davidic tradition (Luke 1:32–33).” [Culpepper, 199-200]

The angelic prediction at Jesus’ birth (2:11,26) foreshadows for the reader God’s intention for Jesus. He will fulfill God’s promises for David and his descendants (2 Sam 7:9–14). The Lukan narrative, therefore, will not allow an easy choice between prophetic and royal contexts for understanding the title “the Messiah of God.” Luke has prepared the reader to understand the importance of both traditions. The readers may understand, but for the apostles and the people in general, such a revelation had the potential to be misunderstood (23:35), so Jesus imposes silence until he has a chance to instruct them in the true meaning of his Messiahship. This instruction is the content of vv.21-50 that follow.

The Fate of the Messiah and Disciples

Peter said in reply, “The Christ of God.”²¹ He rebuked them and directed them not to tell this to anyone.²² He said, “The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.”

Immediately, Peter’s confession of Jesus is qualified in three respects: (1) Jesus orders the disciples not to tell anyone; (2) Jesus tells the disciples that he must be killed; and (3) Jesus teaches the disciples what following him will require.

The Greek verb for “rebuke” or “sternly order” (*epitimaō*) in v. 21 is a strong word that has been used previously for Jesus’ commands to unclean spirits (4:35, 41), fevers (4:39), and the wind and the sea (8:24). These previous occurrences of the term have built the impression that it describes Jesus’ response to impersonal or demonic forces that threaten his work as the agent of the kingdom. The force of its use for Jesus’ response to the disciples at this point cannot be missed. Similarly, the verb for to “command” (*parangellō*) has a peculiar use in Luke, where it is used almost exclusively for Jesus’ commands to those around him that they not tell others what they have seen or heard (5:14, a leper; 8:56, Jairus and his wife; cf. 8:29).

Scholars have offered much speculation about the reason behind the rebuke and the command of silence. Most speculation centers around the state of the Jewish people in subjection to Rome and their desire for deliverance. They were ready to follow almost anyone who claimed to be Messiah and in fact there had been many petty revolts. If Jesus been widely hailed as “Messiah,” people would have understood it as a political and military claim - completely missing Jesus’ proclamation of the true meaning of the Reign of God.

Between the rebuke the coming prediction, we are also prone to miss that Herod’s question is now being answered a third time. First came the answer proposed by the crowds (9:18–19); then the disciples’ answer, voiced by Peter (9:20); and now Jesus’ own answer (9:22). Jesus’ own

answer emphasizes neither fulfillment of the works of the prophets nor his role as a Davidic king but the necessity of his death and resurrection – and thus ties his identity to that of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah – and intones a moniker: *the Son of Man*.

The Son of Man [Culpepper, 201]

The first point that Jesus underscores regarding his role as the Son of Man is its necessity. God's redemptive will demands it. The term that denotes the necessity, "must" (*dei*), occurs 18 times in Luke. The necessity that God's plan of salvation be fulfilled guides the course of events in Luke's "orderly narrative." Jesus must be in his Father's house (2:49), just as later he must preach the kingdom of God (4:43). By the end of the Gospel, Jesus' death and resurrection will be wrapped in divine necessity (24:7, 26, 44). Along the way Jesus teaches that other things also are necessary (see e.g. 11:42; 12:12; 15:32), so that the teachings on discipleship (the *Didache*) are linked by the force of God's will to the necessity of Jesus' death and resurrection (the *kerygma*).

The fact that Jesus must "suffer" (*paschō*) does not occur in the second and third passion predictions (9:44b; 18:31–33), but it virtually becomes a shorthand reference for Jesus' redemptive death in 17:25; 24:26, 46. As a result of the deaths of faithful martyrs during the Maccabean revolt, the suffering of the righteous was understood to have redemptive significance for Israel: "[the martyrs] having become, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated" (4 Macc 17:21–22).

Similarly, rejection is not mentioned in the second or third passion predictions, but its occurrence in 17:25 and 20:17 shows that it was a significant element of the passion tradition and that it was related to Ps 118:22. On the other hand, whereas the second and third passion predictions declare that Jesus will be "handed over," that motif is absent from the first prediction. The combined group of elders, chief priests, and scribes appears again in 20:1, where they challenge Jesus in the Temple. A similar group, where the officers of the Temple take the place of the scribes, arrests Jesus on the Mount of Olives. (22:52). The three groups listed in the passion prediction are also absent from the second and third predictions, demonstrating once more that there was no set form for these predictions. The three groups, however, were represented in the Sanhedrin, and they foreshadow the role of that council in Jesus' trial (see 22:66).

The heart of the passion predictions is the declaration that Jesus would be killed (9:22; 18:33; 24:7) and rise or be raised "on the third day" (9:21; 18:33; 24:7, 46). Luke's temporal phrase here is more precise than Mark's "after three days" (Mark 8:31; cf. "on the third day" in Hos 6:2 and 1 Cor 15:4). Jesus' answer to Herod's question effectively explains why Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ cannot be broadcast publicly and charts the course for the rest of Luke's narrative.

The Disciples. ²³ Then he said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

The five sayings on discipleship that follow the first passion prediction also serve as an answer to Herod's question regarding Jesus' identity. Lordship and discipleship are always vitally related. By defining what it means to follow Jesus, one defines the nature of Jesus' lordship. Jesus first

asked the disciples who the crowds said he was. Then he asked them who they said he was. Jesus' response declaring the necessity of his death was directed to the disciples. The five discipleship sayings, however, are now addressed to "all"—both the disciples and the crowd—thereby extending the invitation to discipleship to all people.

His followers must follow in his steps, taking up the cross (the Lukan version adds "daily"). To deny one's very self and to lose one's life does not mean an ego-suppression that would be psychologically harmful; it means giving up control over one's destiny and opening oneself to true self-knowledge by laying aside the image constructed from worldly illusions about the meaning of life. The stakes are high: one's response now will determine the outcome of the great judgment (v. 26). William Barclay well says, "The Christian must realize that he is given life, not to keep it for himself, but to spend it for others; not to husband its flame, but to burn himself out for Christ and for men."

Notes

Luke 9:18 when Jesus was praying in solitude: Luke regularly presents Jesus at prayer at important points in his ministry: at his baptism (3:21); at the choice of the Twelve (6:12); before Peter's confession (9:18); at the transfiguration (9:28); when he teaches his disciples to pray (11:1); at the Last Supper (22:32); on the Mount of Olives (22:41); on the cross (23:46).

Crowds: Luke does not repeat the Markan or Matthean "people" but uses the word for "crowds." Used previously (7:24 and 9:11,12,16) the use seems to indicate people who are not understanding or are motivated by reasons other than salvific.

Luke 9:19 One of the ancient prophets has arisen: The other gospel writers use the phrase "one of the prophets." The change here is slight, but it does match the expression used in Herod's "testimony" in Luke 9:8.

Luke 9:20 the Messiah of God: Luke is the only synoptic gospel writer to use the title savior for Jesus (Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23; see also Luke 1:69; 19:9; Acts 4:12). As savior, Jesus is looked upon by Luke as the one who rescues humanity from sin and delivers humanity from the condition of alienation from God. The title *christos*, "Christ," is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *masiah*, "Messiah," "anointed one." Among certain groups in first-century Palestinian Judaism, the title was applied to an expected royal leader from the line of David who would restore the kingdom to Israel (see Acts 1:6). The political overtones of the title are played down in Luke and instead the Messiah of the Lord (Luke 2:26) or the Lord's anointed is the one who now brings salvation to all humanity, Jew and Gentile (Luke 2:29-32). Lord is the most frequently used title for Jesus in Luke and Acts. In the New Testament it is also applied to Yahweh, as it is in the Old Testament. When used of Jesus it points to his transcendence and dominion over humanity.

Luke 9:21 not to tell this to anyone: In Mark's account, Jesus enjoins the apostles to "tell no one about *him*" (emphasis added). Luke's account places the emphasis on "this" (*touto* – this thing) referring to the role of Messiah.

Luke 9:22 Son of Man: The expression *ho huios tou anthrōpou* ("Son of Man") first appears in 5:24. Here it is used to explicate the messianic ministry of Jesus (cf. 17:24–25). This suffering Son of Man serves to qualify the Jewish expectation of a messiah who is defined by political power and might (cf. Pss. Sol. 17). Jesus' rejection has been noted (cf. 4:24; 7:31–35), but this is

the first explicit note that he would suffer death as the Messiah of God (cf. 9:43b–45; 18:31–34). The precise background for this combination of ideas and titles is unclear. The “Son of Man” title, of course, recalls Dan. 7:13–14, but the connection between suffering and this Son of Man is weak in its context. A more likely candidate is Isa. 53, where one finds the combination of the motifs of prophetic necessity and a new exodus towards God.

be rejected: the use of the word *apodokimasthēnai* (“be rejected”) in 9:22 (cf. Mark 8:31) may have been taken from Ps. 118:22 (117:22 LXX): *lithon ho apedokimasan hoi oikodomountes* (“the stone that the builders rejected”).

the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes: the rejection is specifically by these three parties. They make up the Sanhedrin which was the courts of the Jewish people sitting in Jerusalem and enacting religious authority at Rome’s leave. In Luke 24:20 they will actively oppose Jesus and are blamed for his death.

Luke 9:23 deny himself: the verb *arneomai* has a wide range of meanings, all amounting to saying “no” to something, whether a truth (cf. 1 John 2:22) or a person (1 John 2:23). Compare Luke 8:45, 12:9, 22:57; Acts 3:13-14, 4:16 and 7:35

take up his cross: Ted Noffs (an Australian minister) comments in *By What Authority?*: “The tragedy of Christianity has been that Christians have left it all to Jesus. There have been a few exceptions, of course. In the main, however, Christians have never tired of seeing the spectacle of Christ Himself upon the Cross -- in some mysterious way He is our stand-in or proxy representative in every age. We love to sing about the Cross, to pray about the Cross, to preach about the Cross. As long as we are so fascinated and mesmerized, humanity troops on to its doom. ...The Cross of Christ becomes the most important event in the world only when it is the inspiration for a journey every Christian must make. In the sense that He was not spared, so we will not be spared. Thus it is a salutary reminder that the reward of Christian discipleship is not a peaceful mind, freedom from anxiety in personal living, but the very opposite.”

daily: this is a Lucan addition to a saying of Jesus, removing the saying from a context that envisioned the imminent suffering and death of the disciple of Jesus (as does the saying in Mark 8:34-35) to one that focuses on the demands of daily Christian existence by following the Messiah. The way of the disciple continues the path walked by the teacher: first suffering, then glory (19:10). Luke emphasizes this point from here on (9:44; 11:29-32; 12:50; 13:31-35; 17:25; 18:31-33; 20:9-18; 22:19-20, 28; 24:7, 46-47).

Luke 9:24 for my sake: *heneken emou* (“for my sake”) ensures that the focus is not the loss of life or self-denial, but rather, witness.

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