

# Set Your Face

**Passage:** Luke 9:51-62 | From the series: Luke

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In 1933, a young professor of theology left his position at the University of Berlin to join the Confessing Church in its struggle against the Nazis, who had co-opted the national church. A fellow professor commented, “It is a great pity that our best hope in the faculty is being wasted on the church struggle.”

Upon leaving his privileged position at the university, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “My calling is now clear to me, and what God will make of it I do not know.” His story and writings, including his classic *The Cost of Discipleship*, have inspired thousands to follow Jesus no matter the cost.

Bonhoeffer reminds us that following Jesus isn’t easy. Indeed, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus promises us that following him won’t be easy. Ah, but is it worth it? Our text today in the gospel of Luke opens us to enormous possibilities.

## The days draw near

Luke 9:51

*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*

The days were drawing near for Jesus to be “taken up,” which is actually one word in the language of the New Testament. It can connote death, but it can also connote ascension. It seems likely that in this case, Luke is loading both meanings into the same word.

As it would play out, of course, Jesus would be crucified, God would raise him from the dead, and he would ascend to heaven, where he now reigns as the Lord of the world (Acts 1:2, 11, 22). Jesus “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross,” but God “highly exalted him” and bestowed on him the name “Lord” (Philippians 2:5-11).

The “taking up” is connected with Jerusalem, and Moses and Elijah spoke literally of Jesus’ “exodus” in Jerusalem, which has to do with an exodus from this life to another kind of life beyond death, as the Israelites departed from Egypt in the exodus to a new kind of life as the people of God (Luke 9:30). Jesus, in fact, would effect a new exodus for Israel and for humanity, not from oppression in Egypt but from the oppression of evil: Satan, sin, and death.

## **Jesus sets his face**

Luke employs an idiom—“set his face”—to convey resolve. That Jesus deemed it necessary to set his face implies that he knew temptations to turn his face away from his path lay ahead. In fact, he had already faced down some of those temptations in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). If being “taken up” involves death, especially the kind of death that awaited Jesus, it’s easy to understand why one would want to turn away from it.

Why Jerusalem? One would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to meet with God, especially for one of the feasts. Indeed, Jesus was journeying to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, but when he met with his disciples in the upper room, he shockingly declared the traditional elements of the Passover meal to represent his body and his blood. He was thus symbolizing the new Passover, the new Exodus, that he would effect in his death, resurrection, and ascension.

One would also go to Jerusalem to enthrone a king. In fact, when the pilgrims celebrated Jesus as he approached Jerusalem, they shouted, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 19:38) Indeed, Jesus would be enthroned as the Christ, the king of Israel, though not as anyone expected, for his enthronement, not only as the Christ but also as Lord of the world, would be preceded by a brutal, shameful, God-forsaken death.

Later, before he reached Jerusalem, Jesus would say, “Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:33-34)

Jesus literally set his face to go “into” Jerusalem—into the heart of darkness.

## **Set your face**

When the days drew near for Jesus, he set his face toward Jerusalem. No matter how old you are, you are one day closer to the end than you were yesterday. If our days are drawing near, is there a way that we too can set our faces toward Jerusalem?

I once visited Jerusalem, and before I did so, I guess you could say that I set my face toward Jerusalem. But I wasn’t inclined to consider Luke 9:51 before I went, nor would I be inclined to consider Luke 9:51 if I were to take another trip to Jerusalem. There is, however, another Jerusalem that the Scriptures speak of.

The “new Jerusalem” will one day “come down out of heaven from God” as part of the new creation (Revelation 21:2,10). If you have given your allegiance to Jesus, you are on your way to this city, which will be your eternal home. The Father sent Jesus into the world, and then he sent him to

Jerusalem. Likewise, Jesus sends us in the world, and as he does so, he orients us toward the new Jerusalem.

To follow Jesus, set your face toward the new Jerusalem. The apostle John passes on his vision of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-22:5 to ignite our imaginations—so that the new Jerusalem, and its eternal values, will attract us to it and exert its influence on us even now.

If you're taking a trip to some place that you're looking forward to visiting, doesn't the very prospect of the trip fill you with anticipation? At the end of the month, my brother and I are going to Alaska, a land I have dreamed of but never visited. I've seen photos and watched videos of the awesome landscape—and the awesome rainbow trout. To say the least, I'm a little excited.

Resolve to live by the eternal values of the new Jerusalem, not the temporary values of the cities of this world. If we want to follow Jesus, we will need such resolve.

What happens as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem?

## **Village turns him away**

Luke 9:52-53:

*And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.*

Jesus commissions the messengers to find lodging for him and his followers in the Samaritan village. Jews and Samaritans shunned each other, going all the way back to the north-south split in the kingdom of Israel after the reign of Solomon.

Both Samaritans, who intermarried with foreigners, and Jews believed that there should be a central place of worship, based on Deuteronomy 12:5. The Samaritans only accepted the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Pentateuch doesn't identify the permanent place. Not until the time of David, as recorded in 2 Samuel, did the Lord identify Jerusalem as the place. So, the Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim, in Samaria, and the Jews worshiped on Mount Zion, in Jerusalem (John 4:1-42).

These Samaritans reject Jesus "because" he was on his way to Jerusalem: not least because he's a Jew.

## **Fire from heaven**

Luke 9:54-56:

*And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.*

The Lord rained fire from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness (Genesis 19:24). Moreover, Elijah called on the Lord, who responded with fire from heaven just before the prophet ordered the slaughter of false prophets (1 Kings 18:36-40). Furthermore, Elijah called down fire against a wicked king's troops (2 Kings 1). James and John believe the Samaritans deserve similar treatment.

All those who reject Jesus for their entire lives not only *deserve* the judgment of God, they will also *face* the judgment of God (Luke 10:13-16, 12:5; Acts 10:42, 17:31). However, instead of condemning the Samaritans, Jesus rebukes his disciples. With the advent of Christ, and until the final day, it's the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:19). The Lord is patient, "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

It is appropriate for disciples to wipe off the dust of a town that rejects them so that people in that town know that they must repent and turn to Jesus, for unless they do so, "it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town" (Luke 10:11-12). Yes, wipe off the dust of the town. No, do not reduce the town to dust.

## **Year of the Lord's favor**

Some will reject us because we have rejected their values. Should we therefore call down fire from heaven? No! It's the year of the Lord's favor. "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4)

After his resurrection, Jesus told James and John, and the rest of his disciples, to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Then Philip, one of Jesus' disciples, instead of calling down fire on Samaria (which had not been reduced to dust!), proclaimed Christ there.

Luke tells us what happened: "And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city." (Acts 8:6-8)

On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus encounters three would-be followers. He tells them—and us—that following him will not be easy.

## No home for the Son of Man

Luke 9:57-58:

*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."*

Although the would-be follower pledges to follow Jesus "wherever" he goes, he doesn't know that he would be following someone who would be crucified once he reaches Jerusalem. Moreover, Jesus warns him that he'd be following an itinerate preacher who has no permanent home. In the previous sequence, Jesus couldn't find a place to stay in a village. The would-be follower would also encounter such difficulties.

If the would-be follower is looking for conventional security and comforts, Jesus is not offering him such. In fact, if he's looking for conventional security and comforts, he'd be better off if he were a fox or a bird. Jesus warns him that it won't be easy following a homeless and often unwelcome preacher so that he won't turn back if he chooses to follow and encounters trials.

## The dead can bury the dead

Luke 9:59-60:

*To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."*

Whereas the first would-be follower approached Jesus, Jesus approaches the second would-be follower. Also, whereas the first man pledged to follow Jesus unconditionally, this man attaches a condition: He wants to bury his father before he starts following Jesus.

A reasonable request, no? Yes, even a familial duty. The apostle Paul says so: "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). However, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, and he's on the road. This is a time-sensitive invitation.

Yes, burying your father is a priority, but following Jesus is a higher priority. Following Jesus and burying your father are usually compatible, but not always. In this particular case, there will be no other opportunity to join Jesus as he journeys toward what awaits him in Jerusalem.

How can the dead bury the dead? They can't, of course. Therefore, Jesus must be speaking of those who are spiritually dead burying the physically dead (Ephesians 2:1-3). Instead, the would-be

follower should join Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and proclaim the kingdom of God—that is, the advent of the rule of God.

## **Don't look back**

Luke 9:61-62:

*Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

Finally, like the first would-be follower, the third man approaches Jesus. Unlike the first man, but like the second man, the third man attaches a condition to his commitment. Like the second man, the third man mentions familial commitment. The verb translated "say farewell to" can also mean "request permission from," which seems to be the meaning here.

Again, a man wants to do something "first," before following Jesus. But following Jesus must come first. Moreover, if the man is seeking permission from his family before following Jesus, he's saying that his family comes first. If that's the case, and if he were to start following Jesus, he'll be like a ploughman who's looking back, not ahead, and therefore making crooked furrows. No, the kingdom of God—following Christ, the king—must come first.

As Jesus says later in Luke, "Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you," and in Matthew, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Luke 12:31, Matthew 6:33).

Whatever the third would-be follower wants to do first, there's no time for it, just as in the case of the man who wanted to bury his father. These are time-sensitive opportunities. The train is leaving the station.

For those of you who have been thinking about following Jesus, don't think too long. The window of opportunity may not be open for long. You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

## **Only one 'but'**

Will we follow Jesus wherever? Will we follow him whenever?

G.K Chesterton writes, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

If we want to follow Jesus, we must put him first, before all things, including shelter, home, and family. Brian Morgan, a former pastor at PBC Cupertino, puts it this way: "There are no excused absences from the kingdom of God."

Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar, agrees that Jesus was redefining both Israel and the family in Israel. In his book, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Neusner envisions himself in dialogue with Jesus and decides that he would have chosen against following Jesus. Jesus' redefinition of nation and family in relationship to himself troubles Neusner: "This 'Israel' is then something other than, different from, that Israel of home and family that I know. And my argument consists in only one 'but': 'But, sir, the Israel of home and family is where I am.'"<sup>1</sup>

In Neusner's book, Jesus doesn't respond to his objection, but if I were to respond I would say, "Yes, the Israel of home and family is where you are, but if Jesus is calling you to follow him to Jerusalem, it's not where you need to be."

Neusner, who died in 2016, would not have followed Jesus, not least because Jesus places himself above home and family and nation. As far as we know, he never turned to Jesus.

### **'I'll go anywhere'**

After I left my eleven-year career in journalism, I spent three years training for ministry. At the end of those years, I walked out to a hill in Idaho, where I was living; got on my knees; and prayed, "I'll go anywhere." My pledge echoed the pledge of the first would-be follower, who said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go."

I thought "anywhere" might be Bulgaria. I had spent a month the previous summer there, teaching the Scriptures in churches. It was an amazing experience. But I knew that one amazing experience does not a calling make. Therefore, after telling the Lord I'd go anywhere, I returned to Bulgaria for two months.

It was still an amazing experience, but less so. I also got a glimpse of how amazingly hard it would be for me to follow Jesus in that country. After two months in Bulgaria, I hedged a bit. I prayed, "Lord, if you call me here, I'll go, but if you call me here, please make it clear."

Near as I can tell, the Lord didn't make it clear. In fact, what seemed clear to me, through an improbable series of events, is that he was calling me to be a pastor at PBC, in the Santa Clara Valley, where I grew up. I prayed, "I'll go anywhere." Near as I can tell, the Lord answered, "Go home."

Has it been hard? It hasn't been easy, especially in the beginning. Halfway through my first week as a pastor here I woke up in a cold sweat, and for the first two years or so, I wasn't sure I was going to make it. But I suspect it would have been harder in Bulgaria.

Following Jesus will not be easy. Why then should you do it?

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Image Books, 1994), 57.

## God helps the Servant of the Lord

Why did Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Because he understood from the prophet Isaiah that he was called to do so.

Isaiah penned four Servant Songs, which marked out the vocation of the Servant of the Lord. Jesus realized that he was the Servant of the Lord. Listen to this part of the third Servant Song:

*But the Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like a flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.  
He who vindicates me is near.  
Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand up together.  
Who is my adversary?  
Let him come near to me.  
Behold, the Lord God helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?  
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;  
the moth will eat them up. (Isaiah 50:7-9)*

Jesus set his face, resolving to go to Jerusalem. The Servant of the Lord said, “I have set my face like a flint,” in a resolute way, to obey God. Jesus, as the Servant of the Lord, is motivated to set his face to go to Jerusalem because he knows the Lord God helps him by vindicating him.

Jesus told the Jewish council, which was interrogating him in Jerusalem, “But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Luke 22:69). Alluding to Daniel’s vision in Daniel 7:13-14, Jesus was telling the council that they could do whatever they wanted in their courtroom, but in God’s courtroom, the one that mattered, he would be vindicated, and the tables would be turned. When would he be seated at the right hand of the power of God? When he would ascend to heaven. Indeed, the days were drawing near for his ascension. The Lord God helped Jesus by vindicating him.

## God vindicates us

In multiple places, the New Testament applies Isaiah’s Servant Songs to all followers of Jesus. We are not *the* Servant of the Lord, but all of us are servants of the Lord.

When you follow Jesus, God helps you. How so? The same way he helped the Servant of the Lord, Jesus. He vindicates you.



If you believe in Jesus, God justifies you—that is, he declares that you belong to him—in advance of the final day, when he will vindicate you, when it becomes apparent to all that you belong to him.

Western culture has by and large endeavored to remove any concept of guilt before God, but educator and author William M. McClay observes this paradox:

Guilt has not merely lingered. It has grown, even metastasized, into an ever more powerful and pervasive element in the life of the contemporary West, even as the rich language formerly used to define it has withered and faded from discourse, and the means of containing its effects, let alone obtaining relief from it, have become ever more elusive.

McClay further observes, “Indeed, it is impossible to exaggerate how many of the deeds of individual men and women can be traced back to the powerful and inextinguishable need of human beings to feel morally justified, to feel themselves to be ‘right in the world.’” Apart from a forgiving God, they don’t know how to feel right in the world anymore, except, McClay contends, by claiming the status of victim, because if you’re a certifiable victim, then you can’t be held morally responsible.<sup>2</sup>

Paul, on the other hand, thunders, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). There is a God, and we all stand guilty before him, but if we are in Christ Jesus, God does not condemn us.

How about human condemnation? Paul asks, “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect?” (Romans 8:33) Answer: It doesn’t matter. If there is no divine condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and human condemnation is irrelevant, that means there is no room for self-condemnation. If you’re like me, you’re your own harshest critic and worst enemy. Perhaps you want to set off for the new Jerusalem, but feelings of condemnation hold you back.

Many young people in this area feel the pressure. A local student, who was quoted in *San Francisco Magazine*, said, “I feel like I’m never doing enough, not using my time wisely, not working hard enough. It goes deep, this disappointment in ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> We must realize that many of our young people feel this way. The young woman speaks not only for herself but also for many of her classmates, and, let’s face it, for many adults as well.

The gospel says, simply, “You are enough. The pressure’s off.” Now, be on your way.

The psalmist Asaph writes, “But for me it is good to be near God” (Psalm 73:28). Indeed, he who vindicates us is near.

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<sup>2</sup> William M. McClay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt” (Hedgehog Review, Spring 2017, Volume 19, Issue 1).

<sup>3</sup> Diana Kapp, “Why are Palo Alto’s Kids Killing Themselves?” (*San Francisco Magazine*, May 18, 2015).

## God gives us hope

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wondered what God would make of his calling.

In 1943, he was arrested by the Nazis. In 1945, at the age of thirty-nine, he was hanged naked from the gallows of Flossenbürg Concentration camp, thrown into a pile of corpses, and burned—just two days before the allies liberated Flossenbürg. For Bonhoeffer, the cost of discipleship was a martyr's death.

His last known words are these: "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

What is the beginning of life? It is our reason for hope.

If Jesus went to Jerusalem to be enthroned, did you also know that if you follow Jesus to the new Jerusalem, you too will be enthroned? In John's description of the new Jerusalem, his last words concern those who have followed Jesus: "and they will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 22:5).

What makes the new Jerusalem so great? Consider this: When you get there, "all will be well, and all manner of things will be well," in the words of Julian of Norwich. Life has its challenges, even its crushing heartaches, but take them with you on the way to the new Jerusalem. Watch for what God will do with them, first along the way and finally when you arrive, when he will "wipe away every tear" (Revelation 21:4).

The hope of your heart is bigger than this world. If you expect this world to fulfill your hope, this world will break your heart every time. However, hope for the new Jerusalem gives us strength and vision and purpose for the journey. In the end, as fully glorified men and women, everything that we want to be and do and everything that God wants us to be and do will be one and the same. Until then, keep your eyes peeled for glimpses of God's goodness.

It may be dark here at times, but it's light in the new Jerusalem—so light, in fact, that the city doesn't even need the sun or the moon, "for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is that Lamb"—that is, Jesus (Revelation 21:23).

Following Jesus is not easy. However, when you follow, God vindicates you. He also gives you eternal hope.

## Enchanting angels

Isak Dinesen wrote *Babette's Feast*, a quirky short story that was made into an equally quirky film by the same title. In her dying years, barely able to eat and weighing only eighty pounds, she wrote the story to make sense of the suffering in her life. She was looking for hope.

In *Babette's Feast*, an aging opera singer, long past his prime, writes to a woman he had met fifteen years earlier when visiting a small village in Norway. Back then, the woman's voice made his spirits soar. He dreamed of taking her to Paris and singing with her on the stage of the Grand Opera, but it was all too much for the woman, who felt bound to her village, her family, and her rigid Christian sect. Achille Papin, the aging opera singer, writes to Philippa:

What is fame? What is glory? The grave awaits us all. And yet . . . As I write this, I feel that the grave is not the end. In Paradise I shall hear your voice again. There you will sing, without fears or scruples, as God meant you to sing. There you will be the great artist that God meant you to be. Ah! How you will enchant the angels.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, how we will enchant the angels.

### **The question comes to us**

The three men in Luke 9:57-62: Do they follow or do they not follow? We don't know, do we? Luke doesn't answer the question. The question therefore comes to us. Will we follow, or will we not follow? Following will not be easy. But is following worth it?

Oh, yes, he who vindicates us is near! Oh, yes, in the new Jerusalem, we will reign with Jesus forever and ever!

What will following Jesus cost you? I don't know. But I do know this: Whatever the cost, it's worth it. Therefore, resolve to follow Jesus: Set our face toward the new Jerusalem.

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<sup>4</sup> Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 14.