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Luke 9:18-27

The Certain Gospel: Three Life or Death Questions

Jonathan M. Romig
CornerstoneWestford.com

Have you ever had to answer a question like your life depended on it? Maybe some of you have seen Monty Python and the Holy Grail. King Arthur and his men are on a **quest** to find the Holy Grail, and they come up to the **Bridge of Death**, where they “must answer **three questions** from the **bridge-keeper** to pass.”¹ The bridge-keeper, an **old hermit** with a scraggly **beard**, asks the first knight, “What... is your name?” “**Sir Lancelot** of Camelot” he answers (isn’t that a great name?). “What... is your quest?” “To seek the Holy Grail.” “What... is your favorite color?” “Blue” he answers and is allowed to pass.

The next knight, **Sir Robin** thinks that’s easy, so he hurries up to the to answer the questions. First he asks him his name, then his quest, and then he asks him, “What... is the capital of **Assyria**?” He exclaims, “I don’t know that!” and is then **launched** into the chasm. I bet if each of you had to pass the Bridge of Death you would have given the bridge-keeper the right answer because you would have thought of the story of **Jonah**, and how God sends him to **Nineveh** (Jonah 1:2). Nineveh is one of Assyria’s two capitals.

One day we will also come to the bridge of death, and how we answered three questions **in this life** will determine if we cross the bridge into heaven. Now just to be clear, when we die we will not get quizzed by **Saint Peter** at the **pearly gates**. But, there are some **vital** questions that how we answer them now has **implications** for all eternity. The first question is...

1. Who is Jesus? (Luke 9:18-21)

I believe this is the most important question any of us could answer. For some of us it will be **easy**. You grew up being told Jesus is God, and one day you **accepted** that as what you believe. For others it won’t be so easy. People never told you who Jesus is, and you **don’t know** how to answer the question yourself, so maybe your answer is “Jesus was a **great teacher** and a **good man** like Ghandi and Buddha.”

If you’re struggling with this question, you’re not the first. In fact, in the Gospel of Luke, besides the **angel** that announced his birth and the **demons** he casts out, people aren’t sure what to make of Jesus (Luke 1:31-33; 4:34). The people in his **hometown** don’t know what to make of him. The **Pharisees** and **teachers** of the **law** don’t know who he is. His relative **John** the Baptist isn’t sure. People he ate **dinner** with didn’t know. King **Herod** didn’t know. Not even the **disciples** understood (Luke 4:22; 5:21; 7:19; 7:49; 8:25; 9:9). But here in Luke 9, we find Jesus **raising** this question with his disciples.

18 Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”

19 They 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?”

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Monty_Python_and_the_Holy_Grail&oldid=824803294 (accessed February 15, 2018).

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”

21 Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. (NIV®)

Peter answers “**ton Christon tou Theo.**” Most Bibles translate it “the Christ of God” but the NIV says, “God’s Messiah.” Usually the NIV translates Christos as Christ but here it clarifies the point Peter is trying to make—that Jesus is the Messiah. Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew word Messiah. So who is he?

The Messiah

Messiah literally means “anointed one.” **Three types** of people were anointed by God in the Old Testament, the **high priest, prophets, and kings** (Lev 4:3; Psalm 105:15; 2 Sam 22:51). When **Queen Elizabeth** was **coronated** in 1953, the service was televised except for her **anointing**. When the **Archbishop of Canterbury** anointed her with sacred oil, he said these words:

“Be thy head anointed with holy oil; as kings, priests, and prophets were anointed. And as Solomon was anointed king by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, so be you anointed, blessed and consecrated Queen over the Peoples, whom the Lord thy God hath given thee to rule and govern.”²

When Peter says Jesus is the **Messiah**, he’s saying something similar. He’s saying that Jesus is the one chosen by God to **rule and govern** his people and all peoples (Jer 23:5-6). So this is **great news!** Right? Jesus is the Messiah! But here’s **the deal**. The Jewish people are under **Roman occupation**, and they thought God would **defeat** the Romans using the Messiah. Many thought the Messiah would be a **military leader**, a commander of sorts. They were right in that he is a military leader, but he leads the fight against **sin** and death, not against the Roman government. Peter got the right answer, but Jesus **commands** his disciples to **not tell** anyone **because** they don’t see the **complete picture** yet.

We need to **not just** understand who Jesus is, that he is the **Messiah** or that he is the **Son of God** (both of which are true), we need to understand **why** he came. If you’re struggling with understanding who Jesus is, look at **what he says** he came to **do**. Jesus **links** his **identity** to his **work**. That’s not that foreign to us. Although it’s **not always healthy**, we find a great deal of our identity in what we do, “I’m a **lawyer**. I’m a **Pastor**. I’m a **tuna-fisha**.” How would Jesus answer that? “I’m a Son. I’m a Savior.” So **question two...**

2. What did he come to do? (Luke 9:22)

Luke 9:22 And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” (NIV®)

Do you see anything in this Bible verse about Jesus coming to gain **military, political, social, or economic power**? Do you see anything in this Bible verse about Jesus coming to grant us **riches and wealth** and **neighbors** we like? Do you see anything in this Bible verse about Jesus coming to **make friends**? Do you see anything in this Bible verse about Jesus coming to live a **long healthy life**? Do you see anything in this Bible verse that Jesus came so he could feel **happy** all the time. No. We don’t. What did Jesus come to do?

To suffer, be rejected, die, and rise again

² *Coronation 1953: Magic moments the TV cameras missed* by Mark Easton. BBC News. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-22764987>
Published 4 June 2013. Accessed 15 February 2018.

When Jesus talks about his suffering in Luke, he seems to be talking about **the Passion**, his arrest, trial, flogging, and crucifixion (Luke 22:15). Part of his suffering is being rejected by the **very people** who should have welcomed him with **open arms**. Not only will they reject him, they will demand **Pilate** crucifies him, and he will **die**. But if why Jesus came **stops** there, we should all go home.

To get Monica excited about watching **Olympic figure skating**, I texted her a short video clip **I made** of one of the Russian pairs skating. They started their performance, skated to the back of the rink then to the center gaining speed. Then the man picked up his partner and **tossed** her into the air into a **spinning roll**. I cut it before she landed, which I thought was hilarious. What would happen?! Would she stick it?!

When you think of Jesus, if you think of him **hanging** on a **crucifixion**, you need to finish what Jesus came to do. The story doesn't end with **Jesus' body** on the cross, but with an empty cross and an **empty tomb**. Jesus came to suffer, be rejected, die, and... **rise** again! He rises from the grave. He doesn't stay dead. One of the ways you know if you're a **Christian** is if you believe in Jesus' death and resurrection and that he can save you from death too.

If you **don't believe** but you **want to**, I want to invite you to do one thing. **Pray**. In **v18**, before Jesus said who he was and what he has come to do, he prayed. Pray that God would reveal who Jesus is to you. I think he will. But once he reveals who Jesus is, the story doesn't stop there, because this **information** is supposed to **change us**. Our final **life** and **death** question is this...

3. What does this mean for me? (Luke 9:23-27)

We can learn all this **great information**, but if all we do is **ascent** to some sort of **intellectual truth**, and nothing about our lives changes, then we've missed the whole point. People who are Christians in "name only" (aka. **nominal Christians**) are not Christians at all. Just listen to Jesus' words.

Luke 9:23 Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. (NIV®)

A disciple is a follower of Jesus. If you want to follow Jesus, you have to follow him **into** his suffering, into his rejection, and into his death. Our verse breaks discipleship into **three parts**:

a. Deny yourself (v. 24)

First, we deny ourselves. I think Jesus **explains** what he means by this in the very next verse.

Luke 9:24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. (NIV®)

The Greek word for **life** is "**psychē**"—which means "life, breath, soul" and really "encompasses the **whole person**."³ **Modern psychology** tries to understand what is going on in a person, in their mindset and thoughts. Are you willing to **give up** everything about you? Your life, breath, soul, mindset, thoughts? For Jesus? Are you willing to let Jesus **touch** and **change** everything about you? What you do with your **money**, how you treat your **loved ones**, how authentic and **real** you are with others, your **gender identity**, what you **do** with your life? Jesus promises that if you give him all these things, if you **deny yourself**, you'll find life.

This word "**deny**" is the same word used to describe **Peter** when he denied Jesus **three times** (Luke 22:57). Peter knew who Jesus was, the Messiah, but when his life was put at **risk**, and he might have to **suffer with** Jesus, he denies him. How often do we deny Jesus when the going get's **hard**? Peter denies Jesus **three**

³ *MED*, s.v. "LIFE," 406. https://accordance.bible/link/read/Mounce_Expository#6595 (accessed 2/15/18).

times, but in **John 21**, Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Each time Peter says, “You know I love you.” What Jesus is doing is **walking Peter back through** his denials, but this time in the **right direction**. It hurt Peter and it may also **hurt** us to revisit those places we’ve denied Jesus (John 21:17).

In those places where you deny Jesus, those **conversations** with coworkers when you aren’t honest about your faith, those choices you make to **love money** more than the things of God, those places where you **elevated** self above God and others, Jesus may make you walk back through them. He may ask you to go have **another** conversation with your coworker, give your money away, confess your selfishness to the ones you’ve hurt. Jesus gives us fresh opportunities to deny ourselves. **Church tradition** tells us Peter was nailed **upside-down** to a cross for Jesus. If Peter first denied Jesus to save his own life, then denied his own life for Jesus, there’s **hope** for all of us. *Deny yourself.*

b. Pick up your cross daily (v. 25)

Luke 9:25 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? (NIV®)

When the Romans crucified prisoners, they made them carry the **horizontal beam** (the “**patibulum**”) of the cross to the place of their crucifixion. This walk was a **final reminder** that they had **forfeited** their life. This decision to follow Jesus isn’t a **one-time** prayer, it’s a **daily dying** of myself and embracing of Jesus. This means that every day we have an opportunity to say, “How would you have me carry the cross today, Lord?” “How can I give up myself and trying to gain this world to gain you today?” Jesus may give us a day of easy cross carrying on Tuesday, but Thursday it may be really hard. All he asks, is for us to **keep carrying** the crosses he gives us and **following** after him. Which leads me to...

c. Follow him (v. 26)

Luke 9:26 Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. (NIV®)

To follow Jesus is to obey his words. What we find **contained** in the **Scripture** explains how we can live lives of **obedience** to Jesus everyday. When we **obey** what the Bible says to do, we’re following Jesus. Obedience is hard, and we won’t always get it right. But the question is, are we willing to try? Or, like v. 26 asks us, are we ashamed of Jesus and his words?

Whose words **matter more**? The words of Jesus or the **words of men**? Sometimes I feel afraid to be honest about what I believe with others because I **worry** about what they will **think** if they knew that I believe, especially about the hard topics like **sin**, **hell**, and **judgment**. That shame can **paralyze** us, which is why we should not only focus on the **difficult parts** of our faith, but on Jesus, and the **good news of forgiveness and grace** he offers. *We follow Jesus and his words.*

In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* the next knight to try and cross the Bridge of Death is asked the original three questions. “What... is your name?” “**Sir Galahad** of Camelot.” “What... is your quest?” “I seek the grail.” What... is your favorite color?” And he says, “Blue... no yellow!” And he is launched into the chasm. We need to answer today’s questions with **certainty**, like our lives depended on them.

Who is Jesus? The Messiah! **Why** did he come? To suffer, be rejected, die, and rise again! What does this mean for **me**? I will deny myself, pick up my cross daily, and follow Jesus. And when I’m done following him in this life, I will follow him into his **resurrection**.

The final knight comes up to the bridge to cross. “What... is your name?” asks the bridge-keeper. “It is **Arthur King** of the **Britons**” he says in a commanding voice. “What... is your quest?” “To seek the Holy

Grail.” “What... is the **airspeed velocity** of an **unladen swallow**?” King Arthur says, “What do you mean? An **African** or a **European swallow**?” The bridge-keeper says, “**Hu**?! I don’t know that!” And the bridge-keeper is launched into the chasm. We also have a King who has defeated death itself, **King Jesus**. And now he offers us the **Holy Grail**, eternal life.

King Jesus **defeated** death by doing **long ago** what he asks us to do **today**. He only asks us to carry our crosses because he already carried the **one cross** that matters. Now As we approach the bridge of death, we no longer need fear death itself because King Jesus has won. *Come. Deny yourself. Pick up your cross. Follow him.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).