

## **LIFE'S GREATEST DISCOVERY**

**Luke 9:18–27**

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“Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say I am?’ 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.’ ‘But what about you?’ He asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Peter answered, ‘The Christ of God.’ Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.’ Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:18-27, NIV).

It’s hard to realize, as you’re traveling through the Gospel of Luke, that here we’re only in the ninth chapter, but already three years of Jesus’ public ministry have gone by. Now He’s at the critical moment of ending His great Galilean ministry of teaching and healing. Within weeks, He will set His face to go to Jerusalem, where He will be killed and, after three days, rise. It is time. It is a hinge moment, a critical juncture; a time when His disciples must make up their minds on their evaluation of Him.

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John 1 tells us that three years before, when they first began to follow Him, they felt that they had found the Messiah. But their idea of who Messiah was, was that He would be a political ruler and leader. After being with Jesus three years, they knew that was no longer the case. Jesus is asking them to reevaluate their concepts of Him. It may well be with the same for us, when we start to follow Jesus, we think He is one thing. Then, as we follow Him and learn of Him, we discover that our initial impressions need to be more fully formed by the depth of our walk with Him.

So Jesus, at this moment—when He is going to ask His disciples who they say that He is—is found praying. Luke is the only Gospel writer to note that before Jesus asks them that question, He is in a place praying. Seven times in Jesus' ministry, Luke notes that Jesus was praying. Nearly all of those times, Jesus is at some critical moment in His life. He is teaching us, by example, that when we face great decisions, we need to saturate those decisions in prayer. Before us, in this Scripture, are the three great discoveries in life. The three greatest discoveries of life. The first discovery is knowing who Jesus is. The second discovery is knowing what Jesus came to do. The third discovery is understanding what our responsibility is, in light of who He is and what He came to do.

#### **I. The identity of the Lord.**

He puts the question, “Who do the crowds say I am?” (Luke 9:18). It's not that Jesus doesn't know who people are saying He is. He knew what was in man. What is interesting is that He doesn't ask them, “Who do the leaders think I am? Who do the Sanhedrin think I am?”

Obviously, He knows who they think He is, because in a few moments, He uses the phrase that, when He goes to Jerusalem, He will be rejected. The word there for “rejected” is a word used in

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that day in a legal sense, of someone who had fully examined a case, a legal brief, and had come to the conclusion to reject it, based upon the evidence presented.

So Jesus knew that the leadership of the nation had rejected Him. But He wants the disciples, for a moment, to focus on what the crowds are saying of Him. The crowds have sort of a middle-ground view of Jesus; after hearing Him and seeing Him work for three years, their opinion of Him is, on the one hand, that He is not of the devil (contrary to the Pharisees) and, on the other hand, He is not the Messiah (contrary to many others). So they have latched on to the middle-ground. He's a great man. He's a prophet. He's like John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets.

People do this today regarding Jesus. They don't accept Him as the Lord, as the Son of God.

They say, "He was a great teacher, a great worker, a wonderful man." That's what the crowds are saying of Jesus. But that's not sufficient for Jesus. He turns to the disciples and, using the pronoun "you" in the emphatic sense—underlining it for emphasis—He said, "Who do you say that I am?" That's not only a question for them, it's a question for you and me. Who do you say that I am?

Peter says, "You are the Christ." It's interesting how words have become so familiar to us, many of them lose their meaning. The word "Christ" in English comes directly as a transliteration out of the Greek—*Christos*—which means "anointed one." The word derives from the understanding of the Old Testament that there were three principal offices in the Old Testament. The office of a prophet, the office of a priest or a high priest, and the office of a king. Before a person entered into the responsibilities of their office, they were anointed.

A prophet would be anointed, signified—by the pouring of oil upon Him—that God's Spirit was upon him, authenticating his message, that when he spoke, he truly spoke on God's behalf.

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When a high priest began his term of service for life as a high priest, before he could assume his duties, he was anointed, signifying that the Spirit of God was upon him as he entered into his work as a mediator between God and man and offered sacrifice.

Before a king took on the administrative responsibilities of the realm of Judah, he was anointed with oil, signifying the fact that God's Spirit was upon him to equip him and authorize him to rule.

All three of these anointings come to focus upon the Messiah. For He is God's prophet, He is God's high priest, and He is God's king.

Jesus was not physically anointed with oil but was directly anointed by the Spirit at His baptism, meaning that God designated Him as the one who would speak, authentically and authoritatively, on God's behalf to the whole human race. There is no other we must listen to except Him. He's anointed as the high priest of God, meaning He gives himself for us as a mediator and as a sacrifice for our sins. He is God's anointed ruler, meaning that God has invested Him with the responsibility of ruling over our life. We, on a personal level, ought to make the decision whether we are going to let Him be the Messiah for us, the one who we listen to, the one who intercedes for us, and the one who rules us.

I was in Jerusalem a month ago, in the old city, going through the Jewish quarter. In the Jewish quarter of the old city, there's a building complex that is, in Southern Californian's terminology, a "synagogue condominium." It is four synagogues that join together. You just walk from one right into the other without ever going outside or going through an outside door. The largest of these four synagogues—and by the way, all of them were destroyed and desecrated—is the most beautiful one, in my opinion. As we were in this synagogue, learning about the history, I looked up and there, on the center window was a glass ledge, high up near the ceiling. The tour guide

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said, “If you look closely, you’ll see some objects on that glass ledge.” Sure enough, there was a ram’s horn and also a container which the guide explained was anointing oil. In the tradition of that synagogue—and much of the orthodox community—when Messiah comes, Elijah will appear. He will come to that synagogue and he will climb up to that window and he will take the ram’s horn and sound the trumpet in Jerusalem, announcing to all that the Messiah has come. And when, in response to the ram’s horn, all have gathered, he will take the anointing oil and pour that oil upon the Messiah, symbolizing, of course, that God’s Spirit rests upon Him. Jesus is saying, in the Gospels here, that that event has already occurred. The horn has already been sounded: John the Baptist, Jesus says—if you’ll receive it—was Elijah. He announced My coming and he is God’s anointed one.

Have you anointed Him as the prophet and priest and king of your life? That’s life’s greatest discovery.

### **II. The second discovery that flows out of that is knowing what Jesus came to do. His mission.**

It’s rather interesting that the disciples had been with Jesus three years and He had not yet clearly told them what He was going to do, that the fundamental mission of his life was to go to Jerusalem and lay down His life at the cross and have it raised up again. By veiled illusion, He had made reference to His death by such phrases as in Matthew 9:15, “The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them,” but He had never explicitly taught them or prepared them for His death. But now the time is approaching and, for the first time, He systematically and very explicitly surfaces the fact that He is on His way to the cross. He doesn’t use the word “cross” here. That will come in a few weeks.

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Jesus uses the term of His journey to Jerusalem to die that He “must go there.” It was necessity. And by giving the announcement to His disciples, He’s wanting them to know that what will happen to Him in Jerusalem is not some accident that He carelessly wandered into. Nor is He going as some kind of martyr. He’s going as our Savior, to voluntarily and intentionally lay down His life for us. The reason why He’s doing this is that a death sentence rests upon the whole human race. A death sentence that has two dimensions: a physical death sentence, so that we all know we’re going to die, and a spiritual death sentence, which will eternally separate us from God. There’s only one way to cancel that death sentence; Leviticus 17:11 tells us what it is—that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Sin causes death. Jesus must deal with sin and He does that by giving Himself on the cross, dying for us, thereby ending the death that separates us from God. He must deal with sin.

In the days of the Civil War, in the area of Kansas there was group of outlaws called Quantrill’s Raiders. They caused much mayhem, pillage, and robbing. An edict went out that a militia should be formed and, if any of the Raiders were caught, they should be summarily executed. One of the militia that went out caught a group of Quantrill’s Raiders and lined them up for execution. After having dug a trench, so that their bodies could fall into it and be buried, just before the order to fire was given, an undetected man—who was an observer—rushed out of a thicket of underbrush and said, “Hold fire!” He went to the head of the firing squad and explained that he knew and was a friend of one of the men in the line, who was a husband and father of four children. He said, “I am a single man. If you would allow it, please, I would like to take his place so that he may go home, back to his family.” There was a discussion that went on among the officers and it was agreed that they would accept his offer. So the man who was in line was untied and set free and the other man took his place. After the war, the man who had

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lived returned to the gravesite and unearthed the body of his friend, which he put on a mule and took back to Kansas City and buried. He erected over the place of burial a monument which simply said, “He took my place. He died for me.”

Christ did that at Calvary. He took my place. He died for me. His death is a death that no other person could have died for you or for me. For His death alone saves us from everlasting separation from God. Dr. R. G. Lee, the great Baptist preacher of the generation just before this one, was in the Holy Land for the first time. He came to what is called Gordon’s Calvary or Gordon’s Golgotha. As He approached the site, at which it is believed that the Lord died, he started to rush up the hill of Calvary, and he was in such a hurry that he left the guide behind. As he stood at the top, he had a powerful experience of just being there. Finally, the guide caught up with him and saw that Dr. Lee was very, very moved. The guide said to him, “I take it that you have been here before.” And Dr. Lee responded, after he had thought for a few moments, “Yes, I have been here before. I was here about two thousand years ago.”

You and I were in the cross of Christ. We were placed into his death. He died for me. And the benefits of that cross still flow to us today. Jesus said that He must lay down His life. But, thank the Lord, that’s not the end. He took it up again on the third day, He rose. This is the first time He gives that teaching, as well.

So we serve a Savior whose love and whose power are forever measured to us. The death of His only Son is the length that God will go to save us. He goes to the cross. And the length and the power of God is that He raised Christ from the dead.

**III. It is when we know the identity and the mission of Jesus that Jesus talks to us about our role.**

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Being a Christian involves more than simply knowing who Jesus is. It involves more than simply knowing what He came to do. We turn around, and once we discover Him, He's seeking for us to discover His way in our life. Being a Christian involves our daily actions, our thoughts, and our path of life. Once we know Him, the Lord gives us some responsibilities as a disciple. There are five of them.

**A.** The first is that we should deny ourselves. If that doesn't smack cross-grain of all the narcissistic Southern California culture which is me-oriented and based on the question, "How much can I get?" Deny yourself. The kind of denial that Jesus is talking about is not like the denial that some practice during the forty days of Lent, when you give up chocolate bars or something like that. Maybe if you don't like eggs, you give them up for breakfast. The sort of denial that Jesus is talking about has a much richer and deeper dimension.

Perhaps a way to illustrate it is to look in the Gospels themselves and see the way it's used. We have a very clear example. The night the Lord was betrayed, a servant girl came to Peter and said, "This man was with Him." The Scripture says Peter denied Jesus and said, "Woman, I don't know him." What was the denial? The denial was saying, "I don't recognize this life. I don't know this person. I don't recognize who they are." It's denying that other person's existence. When we deny ourselves, we're doing that. When we choose to follow Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that the old us is no more. That that life is gone and we have decided to follow Jesus and, in following Jesus, we have elected to become a new person. In Christ we died. The old life died. The old identity died. We voluntarily, therefore, choose to deny ourselves.

**B.** The follow up to that is secondly, that we take up our cross. That goes with self-denial. Again, the word "cross" is a much used term. It's now an item of jewelry. When you walked into the sanctuary today, if you came through the foyer, you saw a lovely marble cross that hangs in the

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foyer. I think that's one of the prettiest crosses I've ever seen. It was given as gift to the church by a person who didn't even go to the church. And still doesn't.

I'll never forget. We were getting ready to open, and I think we were one day away from opening. We were still trying to get the sanctuary ready and this person comes in with this huge cross—it weighs a ton. I didn't know what they had. I didn't see it at first. They said they had a gift and wanted to hang it somewhere. I thought, “Oh, my!” Here we so carefully color-coordinated everything. Then this beautiful cross!

Wouldn't it have been something if you'd walked in this morning and there had been an electric chair hanging there with the straps and the plugs hanging? What a terrible symbol of a religious faith.

Jesus did something to the cross. He changed the symbol of the cross. When He uses the word “cross” here in Luke 9, it's the first time in the Gospel of Luke that the word “cross” has been used. It's only the second time in Jesus' entire ministry—in three years—that He's used the word “cross.” The other occasion was in Matthew 10, where He talked to the disciples about taking up their cross. The first two times that the word “cross” is on Jesus' lips, both in Matthew 10 and Luke 9, it doesn't have reference to His cross but our cross. And since the disciples had not yet seen Jesus take up His cross, they wouldn't have been thinking in terms of Calvary when He said, “take up your cross,” they would have been thinking in terms of what they knew of taking a cross.

Jesus would have had a very vivid experience of cross-bearing when He was eleven years of age. William Barclay reminds us of this. In a little town that doesn't exist now, but in biblical days it was four miles away from Nazareth. When Jesus was eleven years of age, a group of rebels under Judas the Galilean, who is referred to in the New Testament by Jesus, arose and raided the

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Roman armory and sacked it. The Romans, in retaliation, marshaled their forces, came and burned down their city, sold the women and children into slavery and lined up two thousand men and crucified them on crosses, lining the road outside the town on the way to Nazareth. Jesus, as a boy, would have had an experience of witnessing and knowing about people taking up their cross. Until Jesus taught about the cross, no one had ever said anything about anyone voluntarily taking a cross. A cross is not something you voluntarily took. It was imposed upon you. Now Jesus is saying, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross” (Luke 9:23). His disciples have got to be scratching their head. “What does He mean? The cross is a one-way ticket to death.”

For the disciples, it would mean that their loyalty to Jesus would be above all else, so that they would be willing to die for Him rather than sacrifice their identity with Him. Taking the cross is something we choose to do. How do we integrate that into our life and into our culture? How do we apply that to where we are now? We’re not taking crosses down Newport Boulevard. The only one I know that’s carrying one, and God bless him, is Arthur Blessitt. How do we take up our cross?

Some people say, “My cross is rheumatism. Ever since I’ve had rheumatism, it’s been the cross of my life.” Others have said, “If you lived with who I live with...that’s my cross!”

A cross is not something that simply happens to us. It’s not an illness. A cross is something we elect. It’s something we choose. We could decide to forsake the cross, if we chose to be something other than a Christian. But because we are a Christian, there are certain commitments we make, that no matter how painful it is to keep them, we keep them. That’s part of taking the cross.

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For example, in marriage. In our day, we have a quickie divorce in California where we just go down and get an equal distribution of the property settlement. Christians are having great struggles today in marriages. Part of taking the cross is not taking the easy way out. It's not just saying, "I can't make it. We'll chuck this." It's saying, "I must stay in there and, with God's help, bear the pain and see it through to resolution or resurrection."

It is, as a single person, forgoing premarital sex, from the standpoint of denying oneself the gratification out of commitment and loyalty to the Lord and out of a sense that He knows what is best for my life. It's taking the cross and making the painful choice at a personal cost.

It is, as a person who has homosexual feelings, taking the cross by not engaging in homosexual activity and taking up obedience to the Lord and being true.

It is in business, refusing to cut corners, refusing to cheat, refusing to do anything to make a buck. It is voluntarily choosing to be loyal to Jesus no matter what the personal cost may be. It may be a matter of spiritual discipline like tithing.

It is something we choose to do which would not be required of us if we were anything but a Christian. Take your cross daily. Thank the Lord He said that, because I doubt any of us could pick up the obligation of a lifetime all at once. It scares me sometimes to think of more than twelve hours at a time. There are days I don't think I could make it through a lifetime. So the Lord says, "Just take up one day's cross. All you have to do is get through this day. Take your cross. And follow Me."

We're not just sent off to do something on our own. Where is Jesus going? He's going to the cross. He's saying, "Follow Me."

When I was in Israel, the guide giving us the tour took us to the place on the Golan where there had been a fierce engagement, between Israeli and Syrian forces, for control of the Golan

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Heights. There is a monument there to fallen Israeli soldiers, at that position, which looks straight down into Galilee. There are maybe twenty, thirty, forty names of soldiers that are on that monument who fell at that engagement. The guide said, “You can’t tell this because you don’t read Hebrew, but a great proportion of those names are officers.” In the Israeli defense forces, officers are taught to always be out in front of their men. You may have forgotten this, but the only Israeli soldier killed in the Entebbe Raid which rescued the hostages that were in Idi Amin’s control, the only officer killed, was the commanding officer of the Entebbe operation. He was first through the door, leading his men.

Jesus is reflecting that when He says, “Follow Me. I’m not asking you to do something that I haven’t done. I’m out in front of you. Just take out after Me.”

Then He tells us to spend our life—not to save it, not to hoard it, but to give it. Not to ask the question in life, “What can I get?” But to ask instead, “What can I give?” A rejection by Jesus of materialism. It’s the putting of a value upon our life—that we’re more valuable than anything we have. So give your life.

Then Jesus talks to us about loyalty and about the fact that loyalty to Him will bring its reward. Disloyalty to Him will bring its punishment, “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.” Here, for the first time in His ministry, Jesus explicitly talks about His return. Again, He gives them new truths. He’s saying, “There’s coming a day when you will be rewarded or punished according to your obedience and loyalty to Me.”

Then He utters this mystical phrase, “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God [“come with power,” as Mark 9:1 adds]” (Luke 9:27). What Jesus is talking about here regarding the kingdom of God is not something future,

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but it's something now. Up to this point of Jesus' ministry, He's defined the kingdom of God as already present, already among us. It is a seed breaking into a field. It is the rule of God being personally received into our lives. When we receive God's rule or reign into our lives, things happen, things change. Jesus here is telling the disciples, "You're going to see this kingdom come. It's going to come with power at the resurrection, at Calvary, at the ascension, at the day of Pentecost, at the birth of the church, in the growing years of the church, the kingdom of God is going to come with power and you're going to live to see that."

What He is saying is, "When you know Me and when you know what I came to do, and when you know what I've put you here for—to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Me and spend your life and be loyal to Me—you're going to see that kingdom come with power in your own life." You will always see God's power come to you when you get a true understanding in your heart, in agreement with who He is and what He has come to do and what He is calling you to do. If you need more power in your life, get a greater view of Jesus and get a hold of the discipleship that He has for you.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer—the German martyr who was a Lutheran pastor during World War II, in a concentration camp—said, just weeks before his death—and he was killed just weeks before the Allies liberated the prison camp where he was, "When Jesus calls a man, He bids him come and die. And it is in that death and in the Lord's death that we find our life. It is in giving up that we gain."

### **Closing Prayer**

Father, we thank You for this day we've had to rejoice in You and to be together in worship. We confess You as Lord, as the Messiah, as God's anointed one. Even as we began our service by saying, "Who is this man?" Lord, each of us in our heart, at this moment, receives You as the

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anointed one of God, our prophet, our priest and our king. If there are friends here today who have not yet come to that determination in their own life, Lord, I pray that in this service their heart will be open to You and that, in silent prayer, they will say to You, “I receive You, Lord Jesus, as did Peter, as the anointed one of God. Be the Lord of my life. Be the priest of my life. Be the prophet in my life.” Thank You, Lord, for the mission which You came to accomplish. None of us could save ourselves and You’ve done it for us. It’s all done. You took our place. You died for me. We thank You for that. Lord, as we face our responsibility as disciples, in an audience this size there are many, many that are struggling with decisions. Lord, perhaps we have not looked at the difficulty of our life in these kinds of terms. There are some things that are laid upon us as Christians that we could walk away from if we were not Christians. Maybe there are friends here who have been struggling with difficulties they have been going through and wanting to be an escapist—they want to walk away from all that difficulty and say, “There’s got to be an easier way than this.” Yet, Lord, You have us in a place that requires us, out of obedience, to be loyal to You. By being loyal to You, we keep the pain. Help us to see that that is part of following You. It’s part of taking our cross up daily. It’s believing, Lord, that when we follow You, Your way will not only lead to that suffering, but Your way ultimately leads to great rejoicing. Help us, Lord, not to think of pain and suffering as though it were something to be avoided at all costs. There are times, Lord, when, in the process of maturing, we need to embrace what is the most difficult. To those who are facing the most difficult decisions of their life, the most painful moments of their life, the hardest thing they have ever faced, give Your special grace and presence today. Help them, Lord, by helping them to take up their cross and be loyal to You and do what is right, rather than what is comfortable and convenient. We give You absolute

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authority and control over our life. We pray that our life may be spent for You. In the Lord's name. Amen.