

# **To Seek and To Save the Lost**

## **The Mission to Samaria**

*Luke 9:51-56*

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# The Mission to Samaria

## Scripture

Luke has come to a major turning point in *The Gospel of Luke*. Up until this point we have been introduced to Jesus, the Son of Man (1:1-4:13), and we have examined the ministry of Jesus (4:14-9:50), which has taken place largely in Galilee. Now, Luke shows us the rejection of Jesus (9:51-19:27), which begins with the mission to Samaria (9:51-56).

Let's read about the mission to Samaria in Luke 9:51-56:

**<sup>51</sup>When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. <sup>52</sup>And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. <sup>53</sup>But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup>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?" <sup>55</sup>But he turned and rebuked them. <sup>56</sup>And they went on to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)**

## Introduction

There are times in our lives when life-altering decisions need to be made. We make decisions about which college to attend, what career to pursue, what employment opportunity to accept, where to live, whom to marry, and so on.

Sometimes we agonize over a decision because so much is at stake. We know that choosing one option closes off other options, and we will have to live with the consequences of our decision for the rest of our lives.

Jesus, of course, constantly faced decisions as well. But he never wavered from his mission to seek and to save the lost.

So, after about two and a half years of ministry, mostly in Galilee, he knew that it was time for the next phase of his mission. It was time to go to Jerusalem.

His journey to Jerusalem would culminate in rejection. Interestingly, it began with rejection as well. Unfortunately, Jesus' disciples responded improperly to rejection. And in that rejection of Jesus, there is an important lesson.

## Lesson

The account of the mission to Samaria in Luke 9:51-56 shows us an improper response to rejection.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Resolve of Jesus (9:51)
2. The Rejection of Jesus (9:52-53)
3. The Request to Jesus (9:54)
4. The Rebuke by Jesus (9:55-56)

### I. The Resolve of Jesus (9:51)

First, note the resolve of Jesus.

Luke said in verse 51 that **when the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem.**

This verse is a turning point in *The Gospel of Luke*. Up to this point, Luke has focused his attention on introducing Jesus (1:1-4:13) and giving important details about the ministry of Jesus (4:14-9:50). Luke gave examples of Jesus' preaching and miracles so that we would understand his identity: Jesus is fully God and fully man who has come to seek and to save the lost.

"But," as John MacArthur says, "at this point, the whole tenor of Luke's gospel changes. The focus is no longer on Jesus' coming, but on His going."<sup>1</sup> Although Jesus would still make a

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Luke 6-10* in *The New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), 309.

few brief trips back to Galilee, his focus was now on going to Jerusalem. That is why Luke said that Jesus **set his face to go to Jerusalem**. Commentator Darrell Bock noted, “The Hebrew idiom ‘to set one’s face to go somewhere’ indicates a determination to accomplish a task (Genesis 31:21; Isaiah 50:7; Jeremiah 21:10; 44:12; Ezekiel 6:2; 13:17; 14:8; 15:7).”<sup>2</sup>

So, what was the task that Jesus wanted to accomplish? What was the resolve of Jesus? Luke expressed it in the first part of verse 51, “**When the days drew near for him to be taken up.**” Commentators are divided about the meaning of “**to be taken up.**” Some commentators say that it refers to Jesus’ death on the cross, connecting it with Jesus’ comment in John 3:14, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

But other commentators suggest that although this is the only time that the Greek word for “**to be taken up**” is used in the New Testament, it is related closely to another word that is used of Jesus’ ascension in Acts 1:2, 11, 22 and 1 Timothy 3:16. Therefore, as MacArthur says, “It seems that Luke’s use of the term here encompasses the entire sequence of events from the cross, through the resurrection, to the actual ascension into glory (Acts 1:9-11).”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus resolved to accomplish his mission. His mission was to seek and to save the lost. He had come on a mission of mercy to “suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Luke 9:22). He had come to be “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He had come to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah said of him in Isaiah 53:5, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 968.

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *Luke 6-10*, 310.

peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”

That was the resolve of Jesus.

## II. The Rejection of Jesus (9:52-53)

Second, notice the rejection of Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples left Galilee, which was in the northern part of Palestine, and headed south toward Jerusalem. In order to reach Jerusalem, they had to pass through the region of Samaria. Travel from Galilee to Jerusalem was at least a three-day journey.

Since he was traveling with a large group of disciples, Jesus **sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him** (9:52). The term “**to make preparations**” could refer either to preparations for mass preaching or preparations for food and lodging. Since no preaching is mentioned in this pericope, it is more likely that the **messengers** were simply going ahead of Jesus and his large group of accompanying disciples in order to make preparations for food and lodging.

Luke said that **the people of Samaria did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem** (9:53). We have frequently seen people not receive Jesus. People rejected Jesus from the very first time that he preached the gospel. Opposition to Jesus and his ministry in Galilee had grown stronger and fiercer. But what did Luke mean when he said that the people of Samaria rejected Jesus “**because his face was set toward Jerusalem**”?

This is where history helps. John MacArthur says that if at all possible, most Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem would avoid Samaria. In Galilee they would cross to the east side of Jordan River, travel south through Perea until they were opposite Jerusalem, then cross the Jordan River again and head west through Judea to Jerusalem.

However, if they were not able to do avoid traveling through Samaria, then those who did so would carry their own food so as not to have to eat food that was defiled by the unclean and despised Samaritans.

The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans dated back several centuries before Jesus. After the Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel, the ten northern tribes of Israel were exiled from their own land to Assyria. At the same time the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon and other cities and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the Jews. These Gentile foreigners took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities. (2 Kings 17:23-24). They also intermarried with the Jews who had not been deported, forming a mixed race known as the Samaritans (the name derives from the region and capital city of the northern part of the divided kingdom, both called Samaria).

The new arrivals brought their idolatrous false religion with them (2 Kings 17:29-31), which became mixed with the worship of the true God (vv. 25-28, 32-33; 41). Eventually the Samaritans abandoned their idols and worshiped God alone, after their own convoluted fashion (for example, they accepted only the Pentateuch as canonical Scripture, and worshiped God on Mt. Gerizim, not at Jerusalem).

When the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah, their first priority was to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans, who claimed to be loyal to Israel's God, offered to help (Ezra 4:1-2). But the Jews bluntly rejected their offer (Ezra 4:3). This rejection enraged the Samaritans, who then became their bitter enemies (Ezra 4:4ff.; Nehemiah 4:1-3, 7ff.). Barred from worshiping at Jerusalem, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim (around 400 BC). The Jews later destroyed that temple during the intertestamental period (in about 128 BC), which further worsened relations between the two groups.

Centuries of mistrust produced a deep animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. The writer of the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus expressed the scorn and contempt the Jews felt for the Samaritans when he derisively referred to them as “the stupid people living at Shechem” (50:25-26). The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day exhibited that same prejudice. The worst insult they could think of to hurl at Jesus was to call him “a Samaritan” (John 8:48). The Samaritans, of course, reciprocated the Jews’ hostility, as in this account we are looking at in *The Gospel of Luke*.<sup>4</sup>

So **the people of Samaria did not receive Jesus, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.** There was simply no way that any Samaritan was going to help him get to Jerusalem. The Samaritans did not reject Jesus personally. Most likely they did not know anything about his miraculous power or of his message of God’s saving grace. So, in ignorance of the person and work of Jesus, and also because of their own ethnic prejudice, they rejected Jesus.

Philip Ryken notes, “The way the Samaritans rejected Jesus foreshadows all the rejection that would follow.”<sup>5</sup> The Jewish people would reject Jesus, even calling for his crucifixion in Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders would reject Jesus, ensuring his crucifixion. And the Gentiles would also reject Jesus, physically carrying out his crucifixion.

The widespread rejection of Jesus leads us to ask ourselves whether we reject Jesus too. Some may think that they are not actually rejecting Jesus; they simply are not receiving him at the present time. Oh, dear friend, not receiving Jesus is in fact rejecting him. There is no neutral ground when it comes to Jesus. We are either for him or we are against him. We either receive him or we reject him.

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<sup>4</sup> John F. MacArthur, *Luke 6-10*, 311-313.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1: Chapters 1-12, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 498.

### III. The Request to Jesus (9:54)

Third, look at the request to Jesus.

**And when his disciples James and John saw that the people of Samaria did not receive Jesus, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (9:54).**

It was not too long before this incident that **James and John**, along with Peter, had been on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. So, with their recent encounter with Elijah, they immediately thought of an incident in Elijah’s ministry as a precedent for their request to Jesus. They thought of 2 Kings 1:1-14, which recorded how wicked King Ahaziah twice sent soldiers to take Elijah and how twice the prophet said, “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty” (vv. 10, 12) – and it did! The problem with the request of **James and John** is that Ahaziah was rejecting God, whereas the Samaritans were not; they were simply trying to prevent Jesus from going to Jerusalem. In other words, the two situations were not the same.

**James and John** had completely forgotten Jesus’ earlier teaching. In Luke 6:27–28 Jesus said, “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Perhaps this could be summarized in Jesus’ teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, where he said in Matthew 5:7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” The disciples had often heard Jesus teach this truth, and they had seen him display it a thousand times in his own life.

### IV. The Rebuke by Jesus (9:55-56)

And finally, observe the rebuke by Jesus.



Luke said that Jesus **turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village** (9:55-56).

We don't know what Jesus said. There is a footnote in most of your Bibles. It says, "Some manuscripts add *and he said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man came not to destroy people's lives but to save them.'*" This is most likely not in the original text of Luke, but was added by some eager scribe. Nevertheless, it does capture the essence of Jesus' rebuke. As Philip Ryken says, "This was not yet a day for judgment; it was still a time for mercy."<sup>6</sup>

The Samaritans were wrong to be so prejudiced against people. God would hold them accountable. But, they still had time to repent. James and John had a responsibility to share the good news of the gospel with them rather than ask God to punish them.

The request of James and John shows us an improper response to error. They spoke out of concern for the honor of Jesus. They even appealed to a biblical precedent in the story of Elijah. Yet, theirs was an improper response to the error of the Samaritans. Listen to Bishop J. C. Ryle's comment:

It is possible to have much zeal for Christ, and yet to exhibit it in most unholy and unchristian ways. It is possible to mean well and have good intentions, and yet to make most grievous mistakes in our actions. It is possible to fancy that we have Scripture on our side, and to support our conduct by scriptural quotations, and yet to commit serious errors. It is as clear as daylight, from this and other cases related in the Bible, that it is not enough to be zealous and *well-meaning*. Very grave faults are frequently committed with good intentions. From no quarter perhaps has the Church received so much injury as from ignorant but well-meaning men.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 500.

<sup>7</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 333-334.

We need to heed the rebuke of Jesus. There will be a Day of Judgment. And those who are unrepentant will face the Judge on that Day. But that Day is not yet here, and it is not for us to call for God's judgment.

Today is the day of God's mercy. Today is the day of salvation. Our task is to share the good news of God's mercy with all. After all, we have been the recipients of God's mercy. Should we not want others to know the mercy of God too?

Jesus called James and John the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17), perhaps because of their fiery temperament. On another occasion, James and John asked Jesus to allow them to sit on his right and left in heaven (Mark 10:35-45), which drew the irritation of their fellow disciples.

But God did a wonderful, transforming work in their lives. We know about John especially because of all the writing he left us. Isn't it interesting that he has become known as "the apostle of God's love"? He had received the love of God in his own life, and he gave his life to sharing the good news of God's love with others. The love of God in Christ became the grand theme of his own life and ministry. Later John even proved his love toward the Samaritans. Luke tells us in his second book, the book of Acts, that some time after Jesus' ascension that the gospel spread to Samaria through the witness of Philip, the deacon. Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and – guess who? – John! Luke says that they "preached the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans" (Acts 8:25). I would like to think that John went back to that same Samaritan village that he had once sought to destroy with fire and tell them about the mercy of God that is to be found in Jesus Christ.

God transformed John from a fighter into a lover. And by his grace and mercy, God still changes people today too.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the account of the mission to Samaria as set forth in Luke 9:51-56, we should offer the message of God's mercy.

How did Jesus change the world? Historian Rodney Stark argues that there was one huge factor that helped capture the attention of the ancient world – Christianity's revolutionary emphasis on mercy. Stark writes:

In the midst of the squalor, misery, illness, and anonymity of ancient cities, Christianity provided an island of mercy and security. . . . It started with Jesus. . . .

In contrast, in the pagan world, and especially among the philosophers, mercy was regarded as a character defect and pity as a pathological emotion: because mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it is contrary to justice. . . . [Thus] humans must learn "to curb the impulse [to show mercy]"; "the cry of the undeserving for mercy" must go "unanswered." "[Showing mercy] was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and excusable only in those who have not yet grown up."<sup>8</sup>

This was the moral climate of Jesus' day. Jesus taught that Christianity is completely counter-cultural. We do not respond to rejection with revenge. Instead, we who have received mercy from God offer mercy to others who have not yet received it. That is the message of the gospel.

Do you know the mercy of God in your life? He offers you forgiveness and love and hope and eternal life and abundant life. In order to receive it, simply repent of your sin and believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Do not delay.

And, if you have received God's mercy in your life, give yourself to sharing with others how they too can receive God's mercy in their lives. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012), 112.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
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**PRAYER:**

O God, you have extended your mercy to so many of us here today. And we are deeply grateful to you for that mercy.

If there is anyone here today who has not yet embraced your mercy, will you enable that person to receive your mercy and your love and your forgiveness? And will you enable that person also to repent of his sin and put his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And help us who have received your mercy to share it with others.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!