

Study 7: Turning point

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Please prepare for our meeting by reading **Luke 9:18-10:24** and thinking about the following questions. If you haven't time for everything, just do whatever you can – no one will check up on you. If possible, please bring a Bible with you to the meeting.

Questions marked with an asterisk are about your personal spiritual life, and intended mainly for personal meditation – you should not feel any pressure to talk about personal things unless you wish to.

The disciples, and especially the apostles, have been shown that Our Lord wields the power of God, and they have been taught the basics of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Overwhelming though all of this is, it is nevertheless broadly in line with what they would already have known from their scriptures (the Old Testament) about how God calls and upholds those whom he has chosen to lead and teach his people. The disciples' personal priorities have been challenged, but not their deepest beliefs and hopes.

But now¹ they must be taught that the mission of Israel's ultimate leader, the Christ or Messiah² is not merely to proclaim the kingdom of God according to the *old* covenant, but to pass through death and bitter pain to a mysterious new life, and that they must follow him closely in this too. This so utterly subverts what they expect of the Messiah that they never quite take it in - even right before Our Lord's ascension the disciples were still asking if he was about to restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6).

Luke doesn't specify places much, but Mark (followed by Matthew) says that Our Lord began this teaching when they were in the region of Caesarea Philippi, which is in the Golan Heights in the far north of Palestine. From this point onwards Our Lord is moving southwards to Jerusalem on his last journey.

1. Recognising the Christ (9:18-21)

Notice that (unlike Mark) Luke sets Our Lord's question and Peter's answer in the context of prayer. Luke often sets major events in the context of prayer, e.g. the descent of the Holy Spirit at Our Lord's baptism (3:21) and his choosing of apostles (6:12). Prayer means that the Holy Spirit is present.

- i) Our Lord's contemporaries hoped that God would raise up a Messiah/Christ to vindicate God's glory, to destroy the enemies of Israel, to restore the throne of David, to purify and sanctify the officials, priests, people and temple, to rule, judge and care for the people with wisdom and justice, and to have special care for the helpless poor.
 - To what extent does Our Lord's behaviour up to this point meet these expectations?
 - Is it surprising that Peter is able to recognise Our Lord as the Christ?
- ii) Compare Mark's account (Mark 8:27-36). Why do you think that Luke omitted Our Lord's rebuke to Peter (8:33)?³

¹ Luke omits several incidents which Mark records between the feeding of the five thousand and Peter's act of faith (Mk. 6:45-8:26), perhaps because most of them are very similar to events already recorded, and Luke wants to make room in his scroll for a lot of material which Mark does not record. Scrolls were usually only about 20 sheets long, because otherwise it would be difficult and time-consuming to find particular passages.

² Both names mean 'anointed'; 'Messiah' is the Hebrew or Aramaic term and 'Christ' is the Greek term.

³ Neither Mark nor Luke includes a promise that Our Lord will build his church on St Peter, the 'rock', and give him the keys of the kingdom. That passage occurs only in St Matthew's account, which is probably rather later.

2. The cross (9:22-27)

- i) To whom was Our Lord speaking when he prophesied his death and resurrection? Whom did he tell to 'take up his cross daily and follow me'? Do you think that his hearers could make sense of the latter command?
- ii) *Do you think that you have a cross to bear each day? How do you go about bearing it?
- iii) What if you don't feel that you have a particular cross every day? Should you try to find one?

3. The transfiguration (9:28-36)

- i) Is it important that Our Lord showed his glory to his closest followers right after warning them about suffering and death?
- ii) What is the significance of Moses and Elijah?
- iii) Does Peter's suggestion of building shrines show a good grasp of what was happening and what Our Lord had just been telling the disciples?

4. Bumptious bungling (9:37-end)

No sooner have the disciples been called to heroic and transcendent service than we are presented with a whole catalogue of ways in which they misunderstand their calling.

- i) How many types of misunderstanding and abuse of power can you spot?
- ii) *Are you inclined to slip into any of these misunderstandings and abuses?
- iii) Do you think Our Lord was surprised by how little of his new teaching the disciples had taken in?

5. The last mission in Galilee (10:1-24)

The mission of the twelve (9:1-6) seems to have been mainly a practice run for the apostles, with no specific mission field. But now, as Our Lord sets out on his last teaching journey, he makes a special effort to ensure that no one will miss this last opportunity to hear him, by sending disciples ahead to the places which he intends to visit.

The towns condemned in 10:13-14, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, are all at the north end of the Lake of Galilee, the area which had been the centre of Our Lord's ministry for almost three years and was probably his home, so it seems likely that Galilee was the main mission area of the seventy-two, at least to begin with. (Although the previous chapter includes an episode which took place much further south, in Samaria (9:51-56), that episode may well have been brought forward in order to bunch together the various examples of the disciples' ineptitude.)

- i) It might seem odd to pray for more 'labourers' for the Galilee harvest when it is already too late to train them up as missionaries. But what could even untrained people do to make sure that as many people as possible have the chance to hear Our Lord as he passes through?
- ii) How did Our Lord feel about his home country?
- iii) Why do you think that the demons obeyed Our Lord's seventy-two messengers, although they had not obeyed the disciples just after the transfiguration (9:40)? How did the disciples feel about their success? Was this a good reaction?

Note: 'Son of Man'

Our Lord often refers to himself as 'the Son of Man', especially when he is speaking of his authority, his way of life, and his destiny (including his second coming). For instance:

- "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (5:24).
- "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (6:5).
- "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!" (6:22).
- "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking" (7:34).

The passage we are currently studying is focused on Our Lord's identity and destiny, so the phrase occurs particularly frequently:

- "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (9:21).
- "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (9:26).
- "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men" (9:44).
- "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (9:58).

There is no agreement among scholars about exactly how to understand this phrase. In some Jewish mystical writings of Our Lord's time the phrase seems to refer to the Messiah, but there is only one Old Testament passage where it occurs with possible Messianic overtones, Daniel 7:13-14:

"... and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away."

On the face of it the phrase means no more than "this human person", but it may well suggest something more like "this *special* human person" or "this *quintessential* human person, who represents all humanity" or "this being who is very much a human but may turn out to be also something more". It is perhaps rather like the vague but suggestive English phrase "Man of Destiny".

By using this enigmatic phrase Our Lord avoids claiming publicly to be Son of David or Son of God until the time comes when he must reveal himself and go to his death (22:69-70); but at the same time it may prompt his hearers to wonder what kind of man he is.