

A Path of Pain and Rejection

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our reading for this morning, which is in Luke's Gospel at chapter 9, verse 51, which you'll find on page 868, if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles.

And last couple of weeks we've been looking at the bulk of chapter 9. At chapter 9, verse 51, we have a great turning point in Luke's Gospel between the first and the second half of the Gospel. They're not equal halves, the second part is longer, but this is very much the hinge point where everything changes. And from this point onwards, right to the very end of Luke's Gospel, we are on a journey, a journey with Jesus, a journey to the glory of his heavenly kingdom. And all the way along, he's teaching his disciples then and his disciples today what it means to journey with him on the road to glory. So we're going to read this morning Luke 9, verse 51, through to chapters 10, verse 16.

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

[1 : 19] 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.

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. 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. 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. Yet another said, I will follow you, Lord. But let me first say a farewell to those who are at my home.

[2 : 28] Jesus said to him, No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. After this, the Lord appointed 72 others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.

And he said to them, The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

And go your way. Behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no money bag, no knapsack, no sandals. And greet no one on the road.

Whatever house you enter, first say, Peace be to this house. And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you.

And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide. For the laborer deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what's set before you.

[3 : 33] Heal the sick in it and say to them, The kingdom of God has come near you. But when you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you.

Nevertheless, know this, that the kingdom of God has come near. I tell you it would be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that time.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago sitting in sackcloth and ashes.

But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades, hell.

The one who hears you, hears me. And the one who rejects you, rejects me. And the one who rejects me, rejects him who sent me.

[4 : 48] Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, let's turn, if you would, to Luke chapter 9, page 868 in our visitor's Bibles, if you have one of those.

We've seen very clearly now that Luke is not just a random writer of history. He tells us right at the very start of his gospel he has written us a carefully ordered account.

And when we come to verse 51 of chapter 9, we come to the decisive turning point that begins part 2 of his story. Part 1 has been all about the revelation of the Savior's glory from heaven down to earth to men.

And that climax, as we saw last time, in that preview of his glory in the transfiguration. But part 2 is all about the road to the Savior's glory in heaven.

The road for Jesus, but also the road for everyone who will follow him. And the whole of the rest of the gospel is all one great journey. Not just a journey to Jerusalem, where he reaches in chapter 19, but to the very glory of the moment that we read at the very end of the gospel in chapter 24, verse 51, where we read he was carried up to heaven.

[6 : 15] And it's that journey that is announced here in verse 51. And the day drew near for him to be taken up. That is the road to glory for Jesus.

And it is for everyone who will follow him to the glory of his kingdom. And for Jesus and these disciples, it is, of course, a literal journey to Jerusalem or via Jerusalem.

And there'll be many references to that journey and its progress, as we'll see. It begins at verse 51. You'll see again in quick succession, verse 57, as they were going along the road.

In chapter 10, verse 1, he sent some ahead of him to prepare the way. We're being told about the journey. But, of course, it's also a metaphorical journey. It's typifying the journey from this world to the world to come.

And crucially, it's showing us Jesus' instruction about the nature of that journey and that path for everyone. David Gooding, in his book that I've mentioned to you before, here's a helpful analogy here to a book, say, by an American president called *My Journey from a Log Cabin to the White House*.

[7 : 25] It tells the story of the president's humble beginnings in the Midwest of America and his road to Washington. Now, clearly, that is a literal journey from a log cabin to a state residence.

But, of course, it's symbolic of much, much more than that, isn't it? It's a journey from obscurity to the most powerful office on earth. And, in a sense, it is a literal journey from the Midwest, maybe some thousand miles east to Washington.

But, of course, when you read that book, you don't expect to read a sort of arcane geographical account, step by step, going west to east. Of course not. You expect to read the story of a political journey.

Now, that, of course, there'll be details about specific places that were visited and things that were said there. But it'll be key moments, things that were key in the journey from obscurity to power.

Now, of course, that's rather like what Luke's account of this journey is like. It is a literal journey. It's from Galilee to Jerusalem. But, above all, it is also the road from earth to eternal glory in Christ's kingdom.

[8 : 38] And that's why the story of this journey has abiding value for Luke's readers. Luke's readers, neither his first readers nor any of us, are not on a physical road to Jerusalem.

That's pretty obvious. But we are all on the road that leads to eternity. And if the Bible is true, every single person who lives in this world is on that road from this world to the world to come.

Every road leads to eternity. But not every road leads to the glory of the kingdom of heaven. And so the key question for every single human being must be the same.

What road can we trust to lead us there, to lead us to glory? And how can we find that road? Well, the answer, and the only answer, according to Luke, is that it lies in following Jesus Christ on his road to glory.

Now, for Jesus' first disciples, of course, that journey did coincide with a literal journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. And that's what we're reading about here. But thereafter, it was the path and the pattern set for them on that journey that became the unchanging pattern of their lives ever afterwards.

[9 : 54] It was the way of the cross that they learned with Jesus in the flesh on that road that became the way of salvation for them. And indeed, the way of salvation to everyone that they

preached to thereafter.

And friends, that path is the only path. And that pattern is the only pattern for anyone who would follow Jesus to the glory of his heavenly kingdom.

And so we need to learn that path. We need to learn its priorities. We need to learn its expectations and its true privileges and its responsibilities.

And it's these things that Jesus is determined to teach his followers about as they travel that road with him. And that Luke is determined to preserve for every would-be follower of Jesus Christ today. And right at the start of the journey, we have here in our passage today some of Jesus' clearest teaching on the nature of the path to his coming glory. And this first section from verse 51 of chapter 9 right up to chapter 10 verse 37, you'll see that there begins a new section marked out again by that sort of marker post as they went on their way.

[11:06] But in this first section, Jesus is showing us clearly there are two sides to that path to glory. As we'll see next time from verse 18, he is clear this is a path of privilege and rejoicing.

We shall share in his crown. But first of all, from chapter 9 verse 51 to 10 verse 17, we must also see that it is a path of pain and rejection.

If anyone would come after me, Jesus had said, let him take up his cross and deny himself and follow me. The road to the crown can be no other road than the road to the cross.

So let's look at this, at the truth of journeying with Jesus, his way to the glory and the path that will be a path of pain and rejection.

First in verses 51 to 56, Jesus wants us to realize that the path to glory with him will involve real hostility from this world.

[12:10] The people of this world did not receive him. They rejected him. And so it will be for all who are his. And often that rejection will be for entirely wrong reasons, through sheer ignorance and prejudice.

Look at verse 51. When Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, that means he determinedly resolved to embrace his coming suffering as God's appointed savior. And we know, and he knew, that that path was one of rejection.

And that is what's pictured for us here very vividly right at the start in Samaria. Up until now, Jesus' mission had been to go everywhere. Chapter 9 verse 6 tells us that the apostles had gone everywhere.

But it was an everywhere within the orbit of Israel. In fact, if you read the parallel account in Matthew chapter 10, we're told he explicitly told his disciples not to go to the region of Samaria. But now Jesus is going to that territory for the very first time. And just as there was no room for him at Bethlehem in the inn when he first came into the world, so we see here there's no room for him among the Samaritans.

[13:25] There's great hostility to the world's savior in Israel, as we've seen and will see, but also among Israel's enemies. Indeed, the whole world will be hostile to him.

Now, the Samaritans were a mixed race, a mixed religious group. They were despised by the Jews. And this is the first mention that we've had of them in Luke's gospel. And therefore, surely it's no accident that this section both begins and ends, actually, with reference to Samaritans.

Here, the Samaritans offer no hospitality, no welcome or help to Christ and his people. But as we'll see in the parable in chapter 10, verse 25 onwards, it's the good Samaritan who's the hero, isn't it? We all know that story. It's him who exemplifies the compassion and the mercy of God himself. And in fact, actually, these verses before us about the hostility of the Samaritans is the only time Luke ever speaks negatively of Samaritans.

We'll see later on in chapter 17 of 10 lepers that Jesus cleanses. Only one comes back to give thanks to God, and he was a Samaritan, the foreigner.

[14:31] But here is Jesus determinedly taking the mission and the call of his kingdom to these foreigners, just as he had taken it to Israel. And the point is surely very clear.

All are invited. The gospel shows no partiality. It comes to all people without distinction, without distinction of race or creed or anything else.

But all must respond. All, without exception, must receive the Savior. Now, the Samaritans were despised.

They were looked down upon by the Jews. They were very second-class, inferior citizens in Israel's eyes. And we might feel sorry for them. We might feel they deserve more. They were downtrodden.

But you see, the message of the kingdom comes to all with the same message and on the same terms. There must be humble repentance.

[15 : 30] There must be acceptance of God's Savior. Now, that's so important, isn't it, to be clear about it, because there's no automatic entry for anyone into the glory of God's kingdom.

Not just because you're poor. Not just because you're despised. Not because you're marginalized. Not because you're a victim of some sort, as though being a victim of some sort made you somehow more righteous before God.

No. No. That's true, of course, that very often those who are in very humbled circumstances are more ready to hear the gospel of Christ, because already they've been humbled. Their pride is in the dust.

But it's not automatic, is it? Jesus said, no one comes to the Father but by me. And verse 53 is plain. These people did not receive him.

And the result in verse 56 is equally plain. Jesus turned and went elsewhere. He departed from them, just as he departed from the Gadarenes back in chapter 8.

[16 : 32] They didn't want him there, and so he left them. And friends, you need to understand that when people say to Jesus, we don't want you, Jesus, we don't want your message.

No, Jesus takes you seriously. He's not patronizing. He doesn't play games. He'll depart. And we need to take that very seriously.

You see, Christ and his followers here are facing hostility from every quarter. That's the point. And you might think that the Samaritans would welcome Jesus, not only because of his wonderful words and his wonderful works, but also because they knew that perhaps the Jewish leaders despised this man.

And so, well, our enemy's enemy is our friend. It's often the way in this world, isn't it? But no, they reject him as well. Maybe they didn't really understand that Jesus was despised by the Jewish establishment.

And maybe this was just pure sectarian hatred going on. We know all about that, don't we? There'll be plenty today at Hangden Park, I'm sure. The very fact, verse 53, that he was going to Jerusalem, well, that was enough for them.

[17 : 40] We don't want anything to do with somebody who goes to Jerusalem. Maybe they took Jesus, actually, as a representative of that hated Jewish religion and its establishment.

And, in fact, are rejecting him for something that's quite erroneous. Something that he isn't at all. And that often is the case, isn't it, in our world, that people reject Jesus and the gospel because of their experience of religion or the church or whatever it is.

And they assume that that's what Jesus is like, just that kind of religion. But he's not, of course. And sometimes when they do begin to understand and open their eyes to the real Jesus, they do respond very differently to him.

And perhaps that's what explains verses 54 to 56, because James and John, they want judgment now. Fire from heaven. They want the ISIL approach.

Slaughter and vengeance at dishonoring your name, Jesus. Notice very carefully. Our Savior does not say, yes, smash them with vengeance.

[18 : 48] Now, he rebukes his disciples. Not because there are no consequences for rejecting Jesus. Far from it. We'll see that in a moment. But because I think this day is still a day of grace and of opportunity.

Remember what Peter writes later on in his letter. God is patient. Not desiring that any should perish, but giving ample time and opportunity for people to repent.

And so Jesus is patient. He even bears blaspheming of his own name. That can be forgiven. We'll see that in chapter 12, verse 10. Jesus says, that can be forgiven. Blasphemy against me.

Because at this stage, people are still ignorant. They don't yet see the full truth about Jesus. But Jesus goes on there in chapter 12 and says, When clarity unavoidably does come after my death and resurrection and ascension.

When my spirit comes upon my followers to proclaim the gospel in all its absolute clarity and fullness to the world. Well, Jesus is very clear. In that day, it'll be different. Whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

[20 : 01] Rejection of the gospel that proclaims the certain fact of Christ's triumph and Christ's glory. There cannot be rejection of that without judgment.

But Luke actually makes the point, doesn't he, in his second book in the Acts of the Apostles, in Acts chapter 8, that later on, when the gospel did come through the apostles to Samaria, many did believe and many received the spirit of Jesus with great joy.

But for now, here, Jesus is patient and judgment is held back, at least for a time. But don't miss the stark reality. What we're being told is that to be on the path to glory with Jesus does mean, and will always mean, hostility from this world.

For all sorts of reasons, from all sorts of people, often through sheer ignorance, sheer prejudice. And for many true gospel-believing people in the world today, they face hostility in equal measure from the religious establishment, from others in the so-called Christian church, particularly in lands where the Orthodox or the Catholic church is very powerful.

At the same time, often they're facing hostility from other religious groups, or even from the secular state authorities, from every quarter, indiscriminately. And Luke doesn't hide that from us, neither does Jesus.

[21 : 32] Right from the start, he warns us that our way will be Jesus' way in this world. And it is a path, very often, of pain and rejection. There will be hostility from this world.

And as verses 57 to 62 make quite plain, it is also a path of homelessness in this world. We'll be rejected in this world, often for the wrong reasons entirely.

But we shall also be misunderstood and marginalized in this world for the right reasons, because we don't really belong here. That's true. We belong, actually, to another world, to the world to come. That is our true home. You'll see the key theme in this paragraph is following Jesus. Verse 57, I will follow you. Verse 59, follow me. Verse 61, I will follow you.

But following Jesus, according to him, means keeping your eye on your true home, so as not to be floored by conflicts of interest and conflict of loyalties between our true home and our first loyalties and even real and proper and right duties of this world, which can, in fact, so easily derail us if they're subordinate or if they're not subordinated to our primary duties as kingdom people.

[22 : 55] And that's spelled out in Jesus' confrontation with these three different would-be followers here. With the first, the area of conflict is the comforts of this world. This man promises total devotion.

I'll follow you wherever you go, he says. But in reality, he had no idea what that meant. Just like Peter later on. I'll follow you, Jesus, even to the death. Within a few hours, he was disowning him. And Jesus says to the man here, be careful what you say. I am an outcast here. I have no home in this world. And so it will be for you if you follow me truly.

And certainly he's talking about material comforts here. And Jesus had no actual home, no fixed abode. And it's like that for many Christians in the world today.

Sometimes it's particularly due to their calling. If they're going to a distant mission field far away from home, very often they will be literally of no fixed abode. But it's true at a much more foundational level and a much more fundamental level for everyone who is truly seeking the coming of the kingdom of Christ.

[24 : 08] We cannot invest permanently in this world as our home. And other people in this world just will never, ever understand that. For most people, their home is their castle.

Their wealth, their status, their career, their achievement, their family, all of these things. These are the most important things. And it's painful often to be different in outlook to everybody else around us.

And it's especially difficult, isn't it, if you're the only believer in your family or if you're a young person and your parents just don't understand your priorities. They want your priorities to be very different from your life.

It's hard, isn't it, to feel isolated at home with your family, with your spouse perhaps, with your friends, and your culture, to just know that we don't belong in the same way in this world.

It's hard at school. It's hard at work. It's hard when you're sneered at because of that sort of thing. It's often harder, isn't it, to be laughed at than it is to be shouted at.

[25 : 16] We feel it. But the fact is, according to Jesus, we don't really belong in this world, and that's why we feel that.

We don't belong with this world's treasures. And we have to accept that, and we have to keep on the road to where we really do belong and not be diverted seeking comfort in this world as our home.

Because we won't find that comfort in this world. Not ever. We can't. And that's a painful truth that Jesus wants us to be clear about right at the start. And likewise, he highlights the conflict that we'll all face over the claims of this world.

Verses 59 and 60, Jesus calls this other person to the active duty of proclaiming the kingdom of God. And this man gives what seems to be a perfectly natural and reasonable response.

Let me just first go and bury my father. The claim of family duty calls upon him. Now, whether this man's father is already dead and it's just going to be a short delay, or whether, in fact, he meant, let me just wait until after my father's died and after I've inherited the family estate, then I'll come and follow you properly, Jesus.

[26 : 33] Whichever of those it is, we can't be sure. But either way, the basic point is clear, isn't it? This man just hadn't grasped either the priority or the urgency of Jesus' call.

And Christ's call has an absolute priority over every claim in this world, however good and worthy and right. Nothing is more important, says Jesus, not even these claims of our closest family affection.

Even our earthly families, he is saying, are just the things of this world and this age only. It's Jesus and his family that is everlasting.

That is a very hard thing, isn't it, for us to grasp sometimes. It can be very painful. And some Christians don't want to see it. And so they insist on putting natural ties and natural duties before the call of Christ and his kingdom upon their lives.

But Jesus is very clear, isn't he? That must not be so. Or else you risk losing that which is eternal. Now, yes, of course, the Bible commands us to honor parents.

[27 : 53] Jesus knows that, and we must do that always. But Jesus is clear that if that puts you into conflict with your prior duty to honor him and his kingdom, then Christ's call must come first.

And that can be very painful, can't it? Christ's call has priority, and it also has urgency. And here the task is very urgent. Chapter 10 shows that, doesn't it?

The harvest is ready, but Jesus says the laborers are few. And Jesus needs all hands on deck. Everyone who knows the kingdom message has to be out proclaiming it and doing what only they can do.

And so others, he says, must be sometimes left to do things of lesser importance. But they can do. Let the dead, that is, the spiritually dead, who can't do kingdom work, let them bury the physically dead.

Well, that is an abiding truth, isn't it? And Jesus is telling us plainly that it is no failure of duty to give priority to the claims of his kingdom over the claims of this world.

[29 : 07] And to give priority to what only believers can possibly do. And let others get on with what they can perfectly well do for the benefit of everyone in this world.

I think that is something that we as Christians really do need to seriously think about. Take just the issue of what we as Christians might give our money to, for example. It can be easy to think, can't it, that general philanthropy and charitable giving is a duty for us all.

Well, in one sense, it is. We must love our neighbors. We must do everything we can in serving and in giving. But we can't expect the spiritually dead, can we, to give money to pay for the spread of the Christian gospel.

And if Christians give all of their money to the same things that secular people and others are giving to, who is going to support the mission of the gospel of Christ? Bill Gates is giving millions of dollars, billions of dollars, most wonderfully, isn't he?

To fight malaria and HIV and all sorts of other things. And that is a wonderful thing, to be commended and praised. But Bill Gates will not finance the proclamation of the Christian gospel.

[30 : 20] And so if we give all our money to the same things that he's giving his money to, who will enable the mission of the kingdom of Christ?

As for you, says Jesus, you proclaim the gospel of kingdom. Leave the dead to bury the dead. Let this world's people attend to this world's concerns.

It's not your home. Don't leave all your money to the cat and dog home. Not that these things are not important.

Of course not. Often they're very worthy things, but it's a matter, says Jesus, of priority and urgency. It's the same with the matter of our careers, isn't it?

Very often a young person whom Jesus is clearly calling, and the church is calling to serve in a particular kingdom mission, very often they're made to feel that this world has a prior claim of duty upon them, and it would be wrong to resist that.

[31 : 22] It would be a terrible waste of your talent for you to give up all those things that you could be doing as a doctor or as a vet or as a teacher, whatever it is, to go into full-time ministry.

I can't remember how many times that thing was said to me, even by Christian people. And how many times young people I've known have been told that very thing, even by their Christian parents.

Well, of course Jesus doesn't command everyone to give up their secular jobs to do full-time paid ministry. But when he does, they need to read verse 60, don't they?

We must not be cowed by the claims of this world. Anyone can be a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher or a musician or a politician or whatever it is.

And don't misunderstand me. We need Christian ones too, and God wants Christian ones, more of them. But the point is very simple. Only a committed Christian who knows the Lord Jesus Christ can proclaim the gospel of his kingdom.

[32 : 29] And we must certainly have more people who do that. And that was this man's mistake.

You see, his sense of prior duty was quite wrong. His priority was not the claim of Christ upon his life, but the claim of the world and its culture and its conventions about funerals and things like that. But friends, however painful it may be, and it will be painful, this example is meant to show us just how painful it can be. Jesus says the claim of my gospel and my kingdom must have absolute priority.

Even the very best of excuses cannot get in the way of wholehearted discipleship for any of my followers. And that's a challenge, isn't it, to every one of us?

Because we're all very good at finding reasonable and good and even very noble-sounding excuses to let that be the case. We cannot be derailed by the pull of this world.

[33 : 38] This world is not our true home. Not by its comforts. Not by its claims. Nor, verse 61, by our connections with this world from our past.

That's the focus of this last encounter, isn't it? The man says to Jesus, I just need one more last farewell to the folks at home, Jesus. One last fling. Just let me hold on a little bit longer before I give it all up and come in fully.

Of course, Jesus knows human nature. Every prolonged goodbye just makes it harder and harder to leave and move on. Now, there can be no looking back, he says, once you've put your hand to the plow with me.

Remember Lot's wife? Looking back with longing at Sodom, yearning just for a little bit of that old way of life to go with her, where God had called her to go.

But it was her undoing and it will be your undoing too. If that relationship from your past life, or that lifestyle that you once had, or those activities that once so consumed you, if they're allowed once again just to get a hold of your heart and hold you back.

[34 : 48] Look back, says Jesus, and you'll lose your way completely. Plowing a straight furrow is something that can only be done looking forward. It can't be done as an adjunct to some sort of other activities.

It has to be your totally focused task. And being a Christian disciple cannot ever be just an add-on to a life that's filled to the brim with all sorts of other concerns of this world, things that belong to this world.

Friends, if you think that you can fit your Christian life and your church life around your social life, whether for yourself or for your family, especially for your children, let me tell you, Jesus says you're wrong.

You'll end up wandering all over the place, plowing a furrow that is utterly useless for anything, certainly useless for bearing fruit for Jesus. Perhaps it's especially important for parents and would-be parents to grasp this.

If you put your children's home in this world first, in terms of school, in terms of social things, achievements, sport, music, whatever it is, all good things in themselves.

[36 : 01] But if you put those connections with this world first and allow their church life and their Christian connections and all these other things to come second and just fit in where they can be fitted in, don't be surprised if the furrow that they learn to plow as youngsters takes them away, way

far away in the rest of their life.

No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back at all at this world's comforts, its claims, its connections, no one who does that is fit for the kingdom of God, says Jesus.

Following Jesus for us and for our families will mean that there are always conflicting loyalties. And it will mean that we all feel like we do not belong in this world because we don't truly belong.

The path to the Savior's glory means recognizing that we are homeless in this world precisely because we have a home in the kingdom of glory that is to come and we're to remain fit for that home and focused on that home.

So following Jesus on the path to glory means facing hostility from this world, homelessness in this world, but also it means we're called to be heralds to this world.

[37 : 29] And that's what verses 1 to 16 of chapter 10 are all about. Our path to glory is not one of silence. It's speaking for Jesus in word and deed, proclaiming his kingdom.

And that too will be painful because that always painfully divides people. Verse 1 makes plain that kingdom witness is not just for the 12 apostles, but it's for others too.

Indeed, it seems it's everybody whom Jesus can enlist. More laborers are needed, he says, verse 2. And again, this particular mission was a special one at a particular time.

And that's why every specific stipulation and expectation is therefore not necessarily universal for us. We'll see in chapter 22 that Jesus changes this specific prohibition for taking knapsacks and provisions and so on that he mentions here in verse 4.

But the basic pattern and principles of this mission surely have not changed. It's the same basic mission today and the same momentous consequences flow from it, flow from rejection or reception of the message.

[38 : 44] And the conditions for mission have also remained unchanged. It'll always, according to Jesus, be one of harvest amid hostility. Verse 2 makes it plain, doesn't it?

It's God's doing. The harvest is certain. It's ready and waiting. How wonderful. And therefore prayer is essential. It's God who sends laborers and so we're to pray for them.

But notice, not just prayer, verse 3, participation. Go your way. Pray for more, he's saying, while you get on with it yourselves. Don't wait for others.

It's urgent. A harvest awaits. But so, verse 3, does hostility. You go as lambs among wolves. There's no sentimentality, is there?

It's a clear warning. It'll be hard and dangerous. And we will be vulnerable. Someone's put it this way. This is where a great part of the cost of discipleship comes in.

[39 : 41] For to go forth as lambs with love and compassion of Christ is to open oneself up to the possibility of being hurt. We cannot do Christ's work in the world without exposing ourselves thus.

And that's true, friends. And Jesus wants us to realize it right at the very start. It's going to be a battle. That's why he says in verse 4, there needs to be urgency and single-mindedness about the task.

There's no time for stopping for great, long, indulgent Middle Eastern greetings along the road.

There's a job to be done. And there must be clarity and a compelling message, verse 5.

Peace is proclaimed. It's offered to all. And it's either received or it's not. Because the message is the power. It confers the peace of God on those who receive it.

Or it removes the peace of God and the possibility of it from those who refuse it. The gospel itself is a double-edged sword. It divides the heart of men.

[40 : 44] And this is a mission about eternal matters with eternal consequences. That's why there's got to be a certain detachment about these things.

And you see that in verse 7. Matters of food and drink, they're quite secondary. Take the support you're giving. Don't go seeking something better. Just take what you're given if that's enough.

That's an important thing, isn't it, for every gospel worker in the world today. If you've got enough, if you're provided for, be content. Don't be seduced to go looking for something more and better. A friend in America just recently told me about a very high-profile pastor there who had been recently disgraced.

But when he told me that before he had to leave his church, he was earning every year just short of a million dollars a year, I wasn't the least bit surprised at what happened. And what a foolish church to help corrupt him in that way.

But on the other hand, look at verse 7. Jesus says, don't feel guilty about being looked after properly because the laborer deserves his wages. And the church, of course, needs to heed that as well.

[41 : 53] The gospel worker can only live by faith and incontentment if the gospel church lives by obedience and proper provision. Both sides are needed. But the point is that natural needs and provisions are not to be a defining issue in mission.

That's why he says in verse 8, wherever you go, just eat what you're given. Don't let diet, don't let culture get in the way of your task. Keep your eye on the kingdom task. And that is making clear, says Jesus in verse 9, in words and deeds that the kingdom of God has come near you.

Now again, of course, these particular manifestations of Christ's earthly presence, these miraculous healings everywhere, that was all part of the unique, once for all, breaking in of the presence of the kingdom of God in Christ.

That's not normal today. Doesn't matter what people might claim. There is simply no ministry like this in the world today with 100% instant success.

There's never a failure in the whole of the gospels of Christ or his apostles in any miracle, except what we read last week where the apostles couldn't cast out the demon and Jesus immediately changes it.

[43 : 07] There is nothing like that in the world today. Don't deny, of course, that God can heal and that he does heal in answer to prayer. I believe he does.

I believe I've seen it, although rarely. But we don't see this. And yet, our gospel ministry is nevertheless with power. It is a divinely authenticated message, just the same, because in the proclamation of the gospel, the kingdom of God comes near right into people's experience.

It confronts them with the glory of heaven itself. And people are inescapably met by God.

And their lives are gloriously changed forever. We know that. But as we see here, the kingdom of God and the gospel of God always divides. Some will receive the message with joy.

And they'll find God's eternal peace. But others, verse 10, will refuse it. And they will reap everlasting ruin and loss. Christ's followers are not to be the ones wreaking vengeance and judgment on earth.

[44 : 22] We don't call down instant fire. Nor do we turn our firepower on those who oppose us. But we are, friends, to warn that the judgment Jesus speaks of is real and is terrible.

You see, in verse 11, they don't just slip away. They're to testify what they are doing. And to testify that refusing the gospel of Christ is bringing down the judgment of God upon you forever.

The kingdom of God has come near them also, verse 11, but come near them in judgment. And in case we're in any doubt at all about what Jesus means here in verse 12 by referring to Sodom's fate, fate, it is unmistakable, isn't it, in verses 13 to 15.

Those of Bethsaida, Chorazin, Capernaum, people that had such privileges to hear with their own ears and see with their own eyes, the Son of God on earth and yet rejected Christ, rejected his peace.

Verse 15, their future will not be to rise up to heaven. But Jesus says, you will be brought down to Hades, to hell.

[45 : 41] That is very strong language, isn't it? We don't like that. But all through this teaching of Jesus, have you noticed things are very black and white? It's the world to come as your home or it's this world.

Can't be both. It's peace or it's no peace. You receive him or you reject him. And that will mean, says Jesus, in the end, heaven or hell.

As James Denny, a great Scottish theologian of the former era, put it, the difference between those who obey and those who do not obey the gospel is not the difference of a little better or a little worse.

It is the difference of life and death. If there is any truth in scripture at all, this is true. But those who stubbornly refuse to submit to the gospel and who love to love and obey Jesus Christ, they incur at the last advent an infinite and irreparable loss.

They pass into a night on which no morning dawns. And friends, like it or not, those who are called to be followers of Jesus are called to be heralds to the world of this momentous word of life and death, of heaven and hell.

[47 : 02] James Denny goes on, if the gospel as conceived in the New Testament has any character at all, it has the character of finality.

It is God's last word to men. And therefore that means that we, as heralds of that message, we bear the infinitely joyful or the infinitely painful duty of bringing that last judgment into the present, into people's lives.

In our witness, the kingdom comes near. And as Jesus says, look at verse 16. In the response to our witness of the gospel is the momentous and infinite response to Christ and indeed to God the Father himself.

A response that will confer either everlasting peace or everlasting punishment. So let me leave you with these two thoughts.

Firstly, if you are a follower of Jesus, you need to know that to follow him along the path to glory will mean real pain and real rejection. Personal pain.

[48 : 18] And often a great deal of hurt in this world and from this world. It is a hard road of hostility and homelessness. But that pain is nothing when compared with the pain of everlasting loss and everlasting darkness in the world to come.

For those who by rejecting you are rejecting Christ and his kingdom. And who are determining for themselves a night where no morning dawns.

And doesn't the pain of that thought kindle our compassion and our desire to pray and to participate as true heralds in this world?

Giving ourselves willingly even as lambs among wolves to hold out that message of peace, doesn't it? And second, if you have not yet received with gladness the message of Jesus, if you have not yet set your face to follow him to glory on his path, the only path to heaven, don't leave it too late. Take Jesus seriously. Take his heralds seriously. When they have come to you to offer you his true and everlasting peace. Verse 16 here is true.

[49 : 40] If you reject them and their word, whether it's your friends, your spouse, your brother, a preacher, the church, whoever it is, it's not them you're rejecting.

It's Christ himself. And indeed, it's God the Father in heaven. And make no mistake. Even today, this morning, even in this word that you have just listened to, the kingdom of God has come near you.

It's come right down to touch your life. Follow me, Jesus says. Don't make the Lord Jesus Christ turn with great sadness.

And shake the dust of your life off his feet forever. Don't do that. Jesus is clear. There is no such thing as a return ticket to hell.

Let's pray together. Gracious God, I have any father. How we thank you for your son, our Lord Jesus Christ and for the gospel of his kingdom.

[50 : 58] And the word of that gospel, which brings your kingdom near to every one of us this morning. Grant us, O God, in your grace, that we should be fine sons and daughters of your peace, knowing your peace that remains forever.

And let none of us, by turning back, lose all that you have laid before us in the richness of your son. For we ask it in his name. Amen.