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The Challenge of Following

Matthew 9:18-32

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As we journey with the Lord, we are often challenged to follow Him. I frequently reflect on the disciples—they followed the Lord, and as we learn in our study today during worship, Jesus did not have a permanent place for His ministry. Abraham had a tent, Isaac had a tent, and Jacob had a tent. I appreciate the depiction in “The Chosen” of Jesus having a makeshift tent to shield Him from the weather. He would use a stick approximately the same height, and then bring that cloth over to His sleeping area. It was very simply constructed. In fact, He likely made the pole wherever they traveled, so He did not even carry it. Subsequently, He would add His outer garment to sleep under.

He is asking His disciples to follow Him, and we will observe today that when we follow the Lord, He will lead us into a place where life happens. Because it unfolds, we may become involved in something that consumes all our attention. And then, it all goes awry. He will teach us in that moment. You see, life continues and does not adhere to a script because it is so adaptable. Life is now lived under the fall. None of us knows what tomorrow holds. And we must have some flexibility with the Lord to navigate through that.

Follow the Lord

Matthew 8:18-22

18And when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side.

19Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, “Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.”

20And 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.”

21Then another of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”

22But Jesus said to him, “Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

So, you know, there is a conflict between belief and unbelief that is occurring, and yet He is asking His disciples to follow Him. Therefore, if you would, please turn to Matthew 8:18 in your Bible. We will be examining the demands of discipleship. The demands of Lordship. And just because you make Jesus your Lord does not mean that tomorrow will be a pleasant, sunny day, and everything will proceed according to the plan. In fact, He may lead you to a challenges that arise within yourself, within your environment, whatever you

find yourself and you may find yourself powerless to control. You may discover that whatever strategy you are employing is not yielding the desired results. It is important to recognize that, while we may have a deep understanding of the Lord as our Lord and Savior, this does not guarantee immunity from failure. In fact, it is more likely that we will encounter challenges and stumble.¹

However, the Lord will guide us through these experiences and provide us with valuable lessons. In verse 18 it is evident in the passage there are large crowds and He instructs His to move to the other side of Galilee. As they depart, in verse 19 a scribe approaches and expresses his willingness to follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus responds by stating in verse 20, “Foxes have their dens, and birds of the air have their nests. But the Son of Man has no place to rest His head.” While the word “rest” may evoke a sense of tranquility, Jesus’s statement conveys a deeper understanding of the challenges and responsibilities that come with following Him.

Reflecting on this passage, I am reminded of a time when I could have followed Jesus in my own life similar to the disciples here. However, I acknowledge that I would have faced challenges, missteps, and imperfections. Yet, just as the passage illustrates, Jesus would continue to guide, challenge, and correct me, ultimately leading me to serve Him. I would like to suggest to you that Lordship does not mean perfection. Sometimes we get that idea when we hear preachers talk about it.

No I would suggest something completely different. We live in the fall and things go different in the way that we expect. There are so many challenges that we are going to face where we will have to learn from our mistakes. We will have sins to deal with. We are far from perfect ourselves. This is where living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ becomes quite interesting and dynamic. We will learn, we will be changed, probably in ways that we never expected. As we mature, we will never be perfect. We have a goal to be like Christ, for example, having that goal, we will accomplish a lot more than what we would've had

¹ Examine the life of the followers of Jesus Christ in the Bible. Even look at those to whom the Holy Spirit used to write the letters that we find in the New Testament. Following the Lord was only the beginning of their spiritual journey to become who they became. If they had problems, why should we be any different?

without it.² But the challenges will bring some failures, new things to learn and master, and many trials and tribulations.

Now, let us consider a specific example. I recall a camping trip with Pastor Rains many years ago. I discovered that sleeping on the ground was uncomfortable, as I found it difficult to sleep on my side without staying awake all night. To address this issue, I purchased a Ted Williams air mattress from Sears and inflated it. This mattress provided me with an unparalleled sleeping experience during my camping trip. While I have tried other options, the Ted Williams mattress remains my preferred choice. It is constructed from a rubberized fabric, ensuring a comfortable, restful sleep. Some individuals, including myself were helped by air mattresses.

In the context of the disciples following Jesus in their 30s, I admit today I could not do as they did. I could not follow in the same way; in fact, I feel like one of the dead they are waiting to bury.³

However, I am not saying I am unwilling to try. You all know that if I tried, Jesus would have to do something for me to be able to do it. (I am now 74 with many aging issues) He would probably just tell me, Reeves, we have to keep going. God loves you. Catch me next time I come around. And I would love to wait. In other words, while I might struggle with the physical demands, my willingness remains.

I am unsure I could even get up the hill they descend after Jesus teaches, especially now. When I was younger, I could do it easily. Paul expresses this well in Ephesians: “we are to walk as we are called.” I cannot follow as the disciples did, but I can still follow Jesus today as a 74-year-old, challenges and all, because He has given me His word. Having the word of God imprint and online gives us a great freedom to follow the Lord where he finds us today. There are people who are younger that can follow the Lord in the same way the disciples did. I can no longer do that but I am glad that they can. We greatly need to have a rejuvenated youth following the Lord.

² Matt. 5:44 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Read carefully Phil. 3:12-16

Perfect τέλειος - mature. We are never God who's holy. Our holiness in a practical sense is a goal that we are striving for and learning by experience. There is also a spiritual reality that we have been made holy, which we will experience in heaven. One aspect is experiential, and the other is positional. The goal of it is like an athlete who has some goal in mind can achieve more by trying to reach it. A legalistic holiness can be very unreal and put people in a bind that they never can overcome. We need to keep in mind that our spiritual walks have an individual quality about them, where each of us is different. Kindness and grace that's the ticket.

³ Who knows more than the Lord where we are today? He knows our age. He knows what we can do and what we can't do. Of the many preachers that I know, they have passed an age where they could've followed the Lord like the disciples in the gospels. Yet as we get older, I believe it takes more courage than any time of our life. We have our challenges.

How many of you could truly sleep under the stars? For some, it is only with extra comforts like a mattress. Everyone's journey is different; my point is that wherever and however you follow the Lord, expect challenge and reality, as we see in this passage. That's why flexibility is important.

In verse 21, "Another disciple asked to first bury his father, but Jesus replied: Follow Me. Let the dead bury their own dead." This likely means, let those spiritually dead care for such things—you focus on following Me. We all face moments of loss, yet we continue to follow.

There will be tension about making Him Lord. John 6 records disciples turning away and Jesus asking the twelve if they will leave too. Peter responds, "Lord, where would we go? You have the words of life."⁴ Some go deeper; even Peter struggles and resists, but Jesus works with him until he follows fully. Following the Lord is not always easy, even in comfort.

Life Happens

Matthew 8:23-27

23Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. 24And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. 25Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!"

26But He said to them, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. 27So the men marveled, saying, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"

Imagine being on a cruise: the journey seems perfect, but storms still come, and captains must remain vigilant. Massive ships remain at the mercy of the sea's power, and even the safest room cannot protect against true danger. The ocean can turn from calm to threatening in moments.

Now, imagine a scenario where the ocean unexpectedly enters the room through the open door and window. This sudden intrusion presents a dire predicament. In such moments, it is comforting to remember that Jesus has already boarded a boat, accompanied by his disciples. His presence instills a sense of reassurance, as it is believed that wherever Jesus is, he will provide guidance and protection.

There will be time when the ocean wins. Many ships have gone down in storms in the Great Lakes, the oceans, rivers. There are many storms which we

⁴ John 6:60-69

cannot control, and sometimes they are fatal. I emphasize again that we live in a fallen world. Prayers have been answered, and there are times when they are not. This prevents us was probably one of the biggest problems that we find. For those who trust in Christ, even in death, God will take them to heaven. We have the great hope.

Look at verse 24, “Suddenly, a violent tempest engulfs the sea, and the boat is engulfed by towering waves.” Remarkably, Jesus remains asleep amidst the chaos. Rembrandt’s depiction of this scene captures the essence of the storm with vivid detail, bridging art and scripture. He portrayed the wind, the turbulence, and the various phenomena that he had personally experienced.

When I envision a storm, I think of the Midwest. For instance, I have personally witnessed tornadoes, including one in 1990 that passed directly overhead. I could distinctly see it as it traversed my path. Fortunately, it did not pass through me. Nevertheless, I vividly recall the experience. The sky turned an eerie green, and the atmosphere was filled with an overwhelming sense of dread. Drawing on memory helps bring comparison to the storms described in scripture.

But this isn’t the storm described here in the Bible. The passages mention no rain; rather, a strong wind sweeps the Sea of Galilee, creating immense waves. This is exactly what happens during the night in verse 25. By distinguishing my experiences from scripture, we clarify the contrast between life’s storms and those Jesus calmed.

Verse 24 concludes with the image of Jesus asleep, mirroring the situation we may be able to sleep, but more likely we can not sleep and are involved in a desperate struggle to survive. If you are on one of those large ships I mentioned and it begins to get extremely rough, you recall how you did not even feel the storm? Now you are seasick, the storm now rocks the boat. So this large storm comes up. The disciples came and woke him. “Lord, save us. We are perishing.”

I fell down a side of a mountain. The trail that I was on. The entire trail collapsed, and I went down with it. And I am going down the side of the mountain. And I prayed probably the shortest prayer that I have ever prayed, but the most effective that I have ever prayed. I did not even add the word Lord. Okay? I did not. My prayer was, “save me!” That was it. And I am going down this mountain. I grab a large boulder, and that comes with me. I grab a tree, and that goes with me. Both things that I grabbed might have been part of God’s answer. They might have slowed me down just enough. I landed on a ledge, and like in the Olympics, I stuck it. That ledge was no wider than this table here. And I stuck it.

My three friends came to my aid. Nobody in the groups able to come down to help me. I am being completely honest. They wanted to help me, and I was completely worn out. I did not care about my backpack at all; I was ready to

throw it over the side. But they were more sensible than I was. They said, “No, no, no, no, no, don’t throw the backpack.” And I think Larry, or Bob, carried it up. But those three got me up the mountain after I rested a bit. It was truly something. But when I looked over the edge, the next step was 200 feet down. I would have reached terminal velocity.

God had saved me; He had answered that prayer. This is something we will always remember.

Vers 25 “Lord save us; we are perishing.” And He said to them, “You of little faith. Why are you fearful?”

Now, the fear here was worth examining and comprehending. In Sunday school, I am teaching Bible study techniques. “Fearful” was a suitable word to research. The Bible contains a word that refers to “phobia” or “phobias,” and it is a Greek word for fear. And that could be a positive fear or a negative fear. However, the word here is always fear, which prevents you from taking action; it paralyzes you.⁵

I think the meaning of this word is what Franklin Roosevelt had in mind when he uttered his famous line, “We have nothing to fear, but fear itself.” It is a fear that immobilizes us to any helpful intervention. The fear of the depression affected many people in a very negative way. People when they're facing this type of fear have to be encouraged to have hope.

Yesterday I was in a conversation with my good friend Mark Huber, and we were talking about the need for people to have hope when they are facing behaviors that have made their lives a misery. We were discussing alcoholism and drug use. I was sharing how aging makes people fearful, and they become so afraid that they are unable to take steps to help mitigate the effects of aging.

For instance, someone could have this kind of fear and never trust Christ because of it. It is paralyzing. This kind of fear hinders us from fulfilling God’s will. That is what He is referring to here.

“O, you of little faith. Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea.” Notice again, no rain. And there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, “And we discussed this last week. The most important thing that we can understand is in verse 27 ‘Who can this be that even the winds and the sea obey?’ ‘Who is this that can raise a girl from the dead?’ Who is this?’ They did not know what to expect when they encountered the Lord Jesus. They had to

⁵ Matt, 8:26 δειλός fearful, cowardly. Here the fear draws you back and paralyzes you from doing the right thing or obeying Lord.

Contrast 2 Tim. 1:7 For God has not given us a spirit of fear, (δειλία) but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

1 John 4 There is no fear (φόβος) in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. This fear can be positive (there fear of the Lord) or negative (of tribulation, trials, harm etc.).

learn about Him. They followed Him into a boat, only to end up struggling for their lives. And then He stopped it all.

Now, it feels like we are gaining a sense of, “Remember that idea about fearing the Lord?” It is almost like, “Oh, the storm,” but who is this? That is what they were thinking. No, they are going to learn. They are following the Lord, but they will learn.

All right, verse twenty-eight. This still has the idea of considering following the Lord, okay, and what it means to walk with the Lord. And eventually, they will learn how to make Him Lord of their lives. But even when they do, things happen.

Who is He?

Matthew 8:28-34

28When He had come to the other side, to the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two demon-possessed men, coming out of the tombs, exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way. 29And suddenly they cried out, saying, “What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?”

30Now a good way off from them there was a herd of many swine feeding. 31So the demons begged Him, saying, “If You cast us out, permit us to go away into the herd of swine.”

32And He said to them, “Go.” So when they had come out, they went into the herd of swine. And suddenly the whole herd of swine ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and perished in the water.

33Then those who kept them fled; and they went away into the city and told everything, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. 34And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, they begged Him to depart from their region.

“When He came to the other side, in verse twenty-eight, and there he met two demon-possessed men.” In contrast, the other accounts mention one of the two. Therefore, one is dominant, while the other is not. Upon emerging from the tombs, they were exceedingly fierce, preventing anyone from passing through. Suddenly, they cried out, “What have we to do with you, Jesus? You son of God?” Recall the individuals in the boat who exclaimed, “Who is this that even the winds obey?” The demons recognized Jesus. The disciples were learning

about this and would eventually come to that belief and understanding. However, they were still learning.

“Have you come here to torment us before the time?” Satan and the demons are aware of the time. Satan roams the earth as a wounded, wounded animal, seeking those whom he might devour and destroy. He is aware of his impending judgement and he will fight it tooth and nail until the very end. The demons were aware of this time and were afraid that Jesus would now send them into the abyss.⁶

A considerable distance away, there was a herd of many swine feeding. The demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, permit us to enter the herd of swine.

I have read an article⁷ where the writer was trying to determine the location of this place.” It is somewhat challenging to pinpoint the exact location, but if you travel to the eastern sides of Galilee, you may find two spots where pigs could actually run as the story indicates. The area where this event took place need not be by the sea, but it may indicate a city near the water, encompassing that entire region. This is where they established a harbor. All these elements are interconnected.

Upon their return, as described in verse 32, they entered the pigs. Suddenly, the entire herd bolted down a steep slope. Therefore, the location must be steep enough for them to encounter this. There, they met their end in the water. It is a terrible decision to enter an animal because an animal lacks the ability to handle a demon. It simply becomes wild. Although you may have a dog, you might think, “Yes, that dog has a demon in him.” The dog does not but, the dog’s behavior may drive you crazy at times. However, these animals ran into the lake. Then, those who were keeping them went into the city and told everyone, including what happened to the demon-possessed man. This man was made whole—a truly amazing miracle. “And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. When they saw him, they begged him to leave their area.”

So, we have the disciples following the Lord, but others are making their own choices, saying, “Lord, you lead.” And they are not going to follow. In fact, they will be like the people last week who mocked the Lord. Belief and unbelief. Now, think about these disciples following Jesus into a boat where chaos breaks loose, and they could die. They follow Jesus, and he confronts a violent man

⁶ 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 20:2, 3; 7-10

⁷ Beitzel Barry J. *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*. Lexham Press, 2016, p.p. 227-229. When I traveled to Israel back in 1976, it introduced me to a lifetime of studying the Bible and the land of the Bible. I really enjoyed reading this book, and I look forward to purchasing the rest of the series. It is like taking your Bible to the lands of the Bible. If you ever get a chance to visit the Holy Lands, this series can be very insightful, and I enthusiastically recommend it for anybody that likes such studies.

whom nobody can control, and Jesus casts the demons out. That wasn't a big public display of words. You know? This isn't Moses or somebody yelling. He had the same control as when he instructed the winds in the waves. It wasn't a loud voice uncontrolled by emotion. No, it was a calm voice, full of reason. Jesus did this matter-of-factly. His power was absolute here, and he cast them into the pigs. Everybody saw it. Totally amazed.

Just so you know, the disciples of Jesus are on the Greek side of the lake. Jesus is meeting people from all walks of life, not just the Jewish community. Some will be led to the Lord, while others won't. But this shows us what Jesus will do with the entire world.

So, today, let's see that following Jesus doesn't mean an easy life. Life isn't always easy, after all. You can follow Jesus when you're seventy-four, even if you can't walk with him as they did in the Bible. You can follow him here and now. And yes, there will be tough times, and you might cry out for help. But following him doesn't mean he won't still teach us, deal with us, and lead us. We might sometimes say, "No, Lord," and he will work with us. "He never compels us to go; He only makes us willing to go." He will work with us, and we will continue to follow him. Will we have to learn to make him our Lord? Indeed, even if we have previously experienced similar situations, today may present challenges that test our faith. In such moments, we must acknowledge our dependence on God and declare, "Lord, today, with the circumstances I face, I submit myself to your authority."

It is encouraging to recognize that we continue to follow Him, even when He places us in difficult situations. While it may not be easy, we can trust in His guidance. Just as He ministers to people, freeing them from sin and demonic control, we can find strength in His presence.

I am delighted that you are still sharing the Gospel in your current circumstances. There are individuals in your life who may still be open to receiving the Lord. Your ability to do so is a testament to your growth and maturity. While there may be aspects of your past that you can no longer do, there are also many areas where you can excel now. You have the potential to achieve greater success and fulfillment in your current life.

God's grace and support are available to you today. By acknowledging your current situation and seeking His guidance, you can navigate any challenges that arise. We may at times, be paralyzed by fear, but God can help us with that fear. We can support each other through these fears.

As we conclude our study, let us express our gratitude for God's word and the lessons it imparts. The path we follow Him on may evolve over time, but He remains the constant source of guidance. We can trust in His plan and follow Him today, regardless of our age or circumstances. At 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, we can continue to trust in God and follow His lead.

Thank you, Lord, for your unwavering support and guidance. Amen.