

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Return of the Seventy-Two

Luke 10:17-24

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Scripture

After Jesus' ministry in Galilee, which lasted perhaps for as long as two years, "he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Jesus continued to teach while on his journey to Jerusalem. He also sent seventy-two disciples in pairs on a short-term missions trip. We are not told how long they were gone, but it was probably at least a few weeks long.

Today, we will examine Luke's report of the return of the seventy-two disciples from their short-term missions trip.

Let's read about the return of the seventy-two in Luke 10:17-24:

¹⁷The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" ¹⁸And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. ²⁰Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

²¹In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²²All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

²³Then turning to the disciples he said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! ²⁴For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not

hear it.” (Luke 10:17-24)

Introduction

Last time I told you a story about the China Gospel Fellowship, also known as the Tanghe, in David Aikman’s book titled, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*. The Tanghe is a large network of Chinese house churches.

Early in 1994 the Tanghe began collecting money for a special missions trip. They commissioned seventy young people to go in pairs to each of China’s thirty provinces to proclaim the good news of the gospel and to plant churches. The Tanghe modeled their missions trip on the mission of the seventy-two disciples who were sent out by Jesus in Luke 10:1-16.

Six months later all seventy missionaries returned overflowing with joy and with the wonderful news that through their ministry new churches were established in twenty-two of China’s thirty provinces! Here is how one leader described the joyous celebration upon the return of the seventy missionaries:

It was a testimony meeting. We had given the missionaries one-way tickets. We told them, “You can’t fail. If you are not successful in planting churches, nobody will give you money to come back.” When we heard their testimonies, everybody was crying. They lived in ditches and in forests. Some of them lived with pigs. In the meeting, God showed his love to us. We were joyful because they all came back alive.¹

God had blessed the ministry of the seventy missionaries. They had gone out with a one-way ticket and very little else. But they did have the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹ Xing Liaoyuan, quoted in David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003), 84.

They proclaimed this good news and, by God's grace, they established house churches in twenty-two of China's thirty provinces. According to commentator Phil Ryken, some of these congregations now number in the hundreds of thousands! The young missionaries saw God working through the message of the gospel, and they returned with great joy.²

Jesus sent seventy-two disciples on a short-term missions trip, and they also returned with great joy.

Lesson

The analysis of the seventy-two disciples returning from their short-term missions trip in Luke 10:17-24 shows us the reasons for their joy.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Joy of God's Victory Over Satan (10:17-19)
2. The Joy of God's Gift of Eternal Life (10:20)
3. The Joy of God's Revelation to the Elect (10:21-24)

I. The Joy of God's Victory Over Satan (10:17-19)

First, let's look at the joy of God's victory over Satan.

Happiness is different than joy. Dr. Ryken says, "We can be happy with ourselves, but true joy comes only when we get outside of ourselves to glorify God. Happiness may be self-centered, but joy is always God-centered."³ So, while happiness is often the result of circumstances, joy is a deep-seated delight and satisfaction in God, regardless of circumstances.

Jesus sent the seventy to heal the sick and to proclaim, "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9). He warned them that they would encounter danger as he sent

² Story told in Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1: Chapters 1-12, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 522-523.

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 524.

them “as lambs in the midst of wolves” (10:3). He told them that some people might reject them and they might not have a place to stay or food to eat.

Whatever difficulties the disciples encountered on their missions trip, **the seventy-two returned with joy**, some time later, **saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”** (10:17). Their missions trip had been a fantastic success. They had healed the sick, proclaimed the good news, and, to their astonishment, even cast out demons.

Notice that the seventy-two were very clear that they did not have the power in themselves to cast out demons. As commentator Dennis E. Johnson says, “Satan-crushing power resided neither in their persons nor in their office, but in Jesus.”⁴ They were able to cast out demons *in Jesus’ name*.

After the seventy-two disciples told Jesus about their victory over demons, **he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you”** (10:18-19). With these words, Jesus confirmed that he had given his disciples authority over Satan and his demons.

Commentators differ over the meaning of Jesus’ statement in these verses. First, commentators differ about when Jesus saw **Satan fall like lightning from heaven**. Some suggest that Jesus was referring to Satan’s original fall from heaven. Others suggest that Jesus was referring to his victory over Satan in the wilderness. And yet others suggest that Jesus was referring to his defeat of Satan at the cross, or even his future sentencing to the lake of fire. I think that John MacArthur has the best suggestion for when Jesus saw **Satan fall like lightning from heaven**. He says:

⁴ Dennis E. Johnson, “The Joys of the Coming Kingdom,” *Evangelium* 5.2 (April 2007), 10.

Although they [the suggestions offered above] were truly triumphs of Christ over Satan, the vivid imagery of lightning, which repeatedly flashes brilliantly and then is gone, suggests a different explanation. The picture here is of Jesus rejoicing as He observed Satan's kingdom being destroyed one rescued soul at a time through the seventy's evangelistic ministry. That would continue to be true through all the history of the church as God and the holy angels rejoice every time one lost and damned soul is recovered from Satan's domain.⁵

Second, commentators differ about being able **to tread on serpents and scorpions**. Some suggest that it is meant to be taken literally. Others suggest that it is meant to be taken figuratively. This seems to be Jesus' intent as there is no record of the disciples treading on **serpents and scorpions** without suffering harm. Jesus' point seems to be that he would give his disciples authority over the old serpent, Satan.

The point of these verses is that Jesus is victorious over Satan. He empowers his disciples to resist Satan and his demons. As Ryken says, "The power of God constrains the power of Satan in the life of the believer."⁶ That means that Satan can never overpower the believer. The believer can withstand Satan's temptation. The believer will be kept safe throughout this life until he sees Jesus face to face.

And that is true because of God's victory over Satan.

II. The Joy of God's Gift of Eternal Life (10:20)

Second, notice the joy of God's gift of eternal life.

As great as the joy is of God's victory of Satan, there is a greater joy for the disciple of Jesus. Jesus pointed the seventy-two to a greater joy when he said to them in verse 20, "**Never-**

⁵ John MacArthur, *Luke 6-10* in *The New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), 341.

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 526.

theless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Now, it seems that Jesus was not saying that the seventy-two should not rejoice in God’s victory over Satan. Rather, he was saying that their joy in God’s victory over Satan should pale in comparison to their joy in God’s gift of eternal life. Seeing God’s power over Satan is minuscule in comparison to seeing their names **written in heaven**.

Jesus used an idea that was common in those days regarding a register. We have already encountered this in Luke 2:1 where Luke said, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.” To be registered in a book entitled those so registered to certain privileges. Full privileges for full citizens and partial privileges for resident aliens.

What does it mean to have our names written in heaven? It means that we are registered as full citizens who have full privileges (cf. Philippians 3:20). It means that we have a right to all of the privileges of heaven. We are entitled to God’s love and protection for all eternity. We are promised that there will be no more sin and no more suffering. We are promised that death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for all eternity.

Knowing that we belong to God, that our names are written in heaven, should cause all of us to rejoice with deep joy. Our joy in God’s gift of eternal life will keep us uplifted even during life’s great difficulties.

Sometime in 1980, the Rev. Iain Murray visited the aging Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Rev. Murray had at one time been Dr. Lloyd-Jones’ Assistant Minister. The famous preacher was drawing near to death and could only sit up for an hour or two each day. Dr. Lloyd-Jones had been perhaps the most powerful English preacher in the twentieth century and had preached to countless thousands, seeing many come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones also had a leading role in establishing important evangelical institutions such as Tyndale House, The Westminster Conference, and the Banner of Truth.

Rev. Murray asked Dr. Lloyd-Jones, “How are you coping now that your ministry is so confined?”

Dr. Lloyd-Jones replied, “Do not rejoice that the demons are subject to you in my name, but rejoice that your name is written in heaven.”

And then he added, “I am perfectly content.”⁷

The joy of God’s gift of eternal life is a joy that will keep every believer safe until he sees his Savior face to face.

III. The Joy of God’s Revelation to the Elect (10:21-24)

And third, notice the joy of God’s revelation to the elect.

As great as the joy of the seventy-two was and should be, Jesus’ joy was even greater. Notice how Luke expressed it in verses 21-24:

In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Then turning to the disciples he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”

The word that Luke used for Jesus’ rejoicing is interesting.

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 529-530.

The word for **rejoiced** (*agalliao*) in verse 21 is “a word for exuberant ecstasy, for complete exultation in the fullness of joy.”⁸ While the disciples rejoiced to see God’s victory over Satan, and Jesus encouraged them to rejoice even more over God’s gift of eternal life, Jesus himself rejoiced supremely in God’s revelation to the elect.

Interestingly, as Bishop J. C. Ryle observed, this is the only “instance on record of our Lord Jesus Christ rejoicing. We read, that in ‘that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit.’ Three times we are told in the Gospels that our Lord Jesus Christ wept. Once only we are told that He rejoiced.”⁹

And why did Jesus rejoice? Jesus rejoiced because of the doctrine of election. The Father reveals truth to the elect, and for Jesus that was a reason for “exuberant ecstasy.”

Some people struggle with the doctrine of election. It seems to be such a difficult doctrine, and hardly one that brings great joy. Why does God save some (the **little children**) and not others (**the wise and understanding**)? The Bible never gives us a full answer, except to say that God does it for his own glory. But, instead of this doctrine being a cause for dread and doubt, it is rather a cause of exuberant joy for Jesus.

People sometimes think that salvation is only for **the wise and understanding**. But it is in fact for those who are like **little children**. That is, salvation is for those who are teachable and humble.

A powerful example of this kind of teachable and humble spirit can be seen in the life of Eta Linnemann. Before Eta Linnemann became a Christian, she was an esteemed New Testament scholar and theologian. Her educational credentials were impeccable. She had studied under the masters of form criticism, Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Fuchs, and had become part

⁸ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 530.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 363.

of the elite in the practice of the historical-critical method. Her first book became a best seller. She became professor of theology at Braunschweig Technical University. After writing her *Habilitationschrift*, the equivalent to a second doctoral dissertation, she was awarded the honorary title of Professor of New Testament in Theology at Philips University, Marburg and was then inducted into the Society for New Testament Studies.

But as her star was rising, she began to reflect on her critical methodology and came to the conclusion that her “scientific work on the biblical text” and her lectures were not grasping spiritual truth. She saw that she was serving a theological philosophy rooted in agnosticism.

The brilliant Dr. Eta Linnemann became profoundly disillusioned and drifted into addictions to alcohol and TV to dull her misery. But when she was at her very lowest, she experienced grace. In her own words:

At that point God led me to vibrant Christians who knew Jesus personally as their Lord and Savior. I heard their testimonies as they reported what God had done in their lives. Finally God himself spoke to my heart by means of a Christian brother’s words. By God’s grace and love I entrusted my life to Jesus. He immediately took my life into his saving grasp and began to transform it radically. My destructive addictions were replaced by a hunger and thirst for his Word and for fellowship with Christians. I was able to recognize sin clearly as sin rather than merely make excuses for it as was my previous habit. I can still remember the delicious joy I felt when for the first time black was once more black and white was once more white; the two ceased to pool together as indistinguishable gray.

Dr. Linnemann goes on to conclude her written testimony by saying:

By God’s grace I experienced Jesus as the one whose

name is above all names. I was permitted to realize that Jesus is God's Son, born of a virgin. He is the Messiah and the Son of Man; such titles were not merely conferred on him as the result of human deliberation. I recognized, first mentally, but then in a vital, experiential way, that Holy Scripture is inspired. . . . That is why I say "No!" to historical-critical theology. I regard everything that I taught and wrote before I entrusted my life to Jesus as refuse. I wish to use this opportunity to mention that I have pitched my two books *Gleichnisse Jesu*. . . and *Studien zur Passionsgeschichte*, along with my contributions to journals, anthologies, and Festschriften. Whatever of these writings I had in my possession I threw into the trash with my own hands in 1978. I ask you sincerely to do the same thing with any of them you may have on your own bookshelf.

For the next fifteen years Eta Linnemann served God at a Bible institute in Indonesia.¹⁰ God had revealed himself to her and she became a Christian. And in this Jesus rejoices.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the seventy-two disciples returning from their short-term missions trip in Luke 10:17-24, we should in God's victory over Satan, in the greater joy of God's writing our names in heaven, and in the supreme joy of the Savior in the salvation of sinners. Amen.

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 381-382.

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.*

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PRAYER:

Father, thank you for the mission of the seventy-two, and the report on their return following their mission.

We rejoice in your victory over Satan. That is such an encouragement to us, knowing that greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world.

We also rejoice in the glorious truth that every believer in Jesus Christ has his or her name written in heaven. If there is anyone here today who is not yet a believer, will you grant that person faith in Jesus?

And we also rejoice in the Savior's joy over the election and salvation of teachable and humble sinners. 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!