

Intro Words

Snakes and scorpions! They are fitting examples of the spiritual dangers that we open ourselves to by our disobedience and by our pride.

OSL 109 – Jesus and His 72 Disciples 3

When Jesus sent his 72 disciples on a mission to proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom and to demonstrate its power, were these men afraid? Were they excited? I think we can be sure that it was a combination of these emotions and perhaps others. Jesus, after all, did tell them that he was sending them like lambs among wolves.

Everyone knows that a wolf is a predator, and a sheep is prey. Sheep need to be protected. But Jesus is sending the sheep to live among the wolves! Why would he do that? Because the wolves also need to be saved! And some have been saved. We need think no further than the apostle Paul, who was a persecutor before he met Christ on the Damascus Road. He was a wolf killing the sheep until he was saved and became a lamb who followed the Good Shepherd. But not every wolf will change, and though it is not recorded here, my guess is that Jesus told the 72 what he said to the 12 when he sent them on a similar mission, “Be innocent as doves and as shrewd as serpents.”

Jesus also told them to be intently focused on the mission. In verse 4 he said, “Greet no one on the way!” I don’t think he was telling them to be unfriendly, but not to stop and chat and take their time as if they are on a pleasure hike! He wanted them to get to the villages with the urgent message of the kingdom.

And so, one day, they went. I wish I had an itinerary of the villages they travelled to! Jesus must have sent them out in different directions to different regions to different numbers of villages. With 36 teams of 2, if each team went to 5 villages, they would reach 180 villages, if 10, they would reach 360 villages. Jesus’ message and the power of the kingdom would spread rapidly!

We also don’t know how long they were gone. Was it a week? Two weeks? What was their success rate? How many villages rejected them as Jesus said would happen? How many gladly received their message? We don’t know these things, but what we know is their excited response when they returned. We have looked at Luke 10:1-16. Today I will read Luke 10:17-24 and we hear some important teaching from Jesus as he interacted with them after they returned. For now, let’s read 17-20.

¹⁷ The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”

¹⁸ He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. ²⁰ However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

They must have had a lot of success for the passage tells us they returned with joy! They had seen Jesus perform miracles. Now, they were doing them in his name. When they said, “even the demons submit to us,” this implies that they must have also performed other miracles like healing the sick. For them, the ultimate display of power was to command the spirits to leave people and for those spirits to flee in Jesus’ name. It’s as if they were saying, “Lord we did all these miracles and we even commanded demons and they submitted to us!”

Jesus commented on their power over evil spirits. He said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” When Jesus spoke of Satan’s fall in this verse and in this context, he was not speaking of some prehuman history fall of Satan. I believe he was talking about Satan being defeated in their ministry. It was a fall from heavenly places at that time as they delivered the kingdom message. The evil powers that had built up over the people of Israel through the centuries through their disobedience were now being defeated through the advance of God’s kingdom power – first through Jesus and now through the mission of the 72. And, I might add, each time we go out in the power of Jesus’ name and advance his kingdom through our mission, Satan is defeated. He is bound.

Do you know what Jesus’ statement about watching Satan falling like lightning also implies? It implies that Jesus was watching them and following them in his spirit while they were on their mission. How could he do this? He could do it because he was God in the flesh. He was God in human form. He could heal from a distance. He could see into people’s hearts. He could see what was happening in their ministry as they went out and he watched and waited for their return.

It was not surprising that they had victory over Satan. After all, Jesus had already defeated him in the wilderness temptation and had defeated him numerous times by casting out demons. His name was more powerful by far over the evil spirits. Jesus said, “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.”

Snakes and scorpions! Even though I live in Texas where there is an abundance of scorpions, I have never seen one alive. I have seen poisonous snakes. My wife and I were hiking one day and twice we saw dangerous rattlesnakes. We stayed away from them. Snakes and scorpions with their painful bites can damage people and even kill. They are fitting examples of the spiritual dangers that we open ourselves to by our disobedience and by our pride. But rather than be bitten by such sins, God gives us authority to trample upon such enemies in the name of Jesus.

I wonder if the 72 disciples thought on some of their Scripture passages when Jesus said this. In Deuteronomy 8, Moses was speaking to the people who had just finished their decades of wilderness wandering. He said, “He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions.” There, the danger was literal. We remember the story in Numbers 21 of the snakes biting the people because of Israel’s rebellion against the Lord. By God’s grace they were healed and overcame the serpents. We also think of Psalm 91 and its words of promise. Listen to verses 9-13.

⁹ If you say, “The LORD is my refuge,”
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
¹⁰ no harm will overtake you,

no disaster will come near your tent.

¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;

¹² they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

¹³ You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

These were promises for all God's people. Now they were being fulfilled through the power of the Messiah who came to destroy the works of the evil one, who came to liberate people from the bondage of Satan, and to bring them into the glorious freedom for which they were created. It was the mission of God's people, here, the 72 disciples, to bring about this liberation for people.

Yes, it must have been exciting to be part of that. Their joy in their successful mission was exuberant, but Jesus refocused them on what was most important. He said, "Don't rejoice in this, that the demons are subject to you. Instead, rejoice that your names are written in heaven!" I have thought on this verse many times. I have thought on it especially in seasons of great ministry victory. I believe Jesus wants us to have joy when we have ministry victory. As we dig deeper into this passage, we will see that Jesus himself rejoices greatly. Jesus, on another occasion will encourage his disciples to pray in his name and that when the answer comes, his disciples would have full joy. We find that in John 16:24.

But here, he wants to temper their joy. Victory over Satan, while wonderful, is but the means to the end. The end is to experience the life of the kingdom forever in God's presence. It would be as if you were kidnapped. You were held in bondage and your life was in danger. You would be away from your family and the life that you were intended to live. Then, miraculously, you were freed from your kidnapers. You would be grateful for that, ecstatic about that, but you would be most grateful that you could return home and be restored to your family and the life that you once had. This is what has happened to the human race. Our sin placed us in bondage to the evil one. We lost our life. We lost the destiny that God created us to have. But Jesus has rescued us from the evil one so that we could be restored to the life he created us to have in the first place. The greatest joy is not in the rescue (although we praise him for that). The greatest joy will be when we fully experience all that God created us to experience. And so, Jesus said, "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Is your name written in heaven? If not, or if you are not sure, why not make it sure today. Why not give your life to Jesus. Call upon him. Ask him to forgive your sins. Ask him to be your Lord. Tell him you will follow him. And if you know that your name is written in heaven, then rejoice in that, and continue to live for his purposes in your life and spread his kingdom message to others.