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Luke 12:49-59

45th Message

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# TELLING THE TIME

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

In her book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, Rosaria Butterfield describes her journey to faith. Several times she calls her conversion a train wreck:

I share what happened in my private world through what Christians politely call conversion. This word—conversion—is simply too tame and too refined to capture the train wreck that I experienced in coming face-to-face with the Living God. I know of only one word to describe this time-released encounter: impact...

Although grateful, I did not perceive conversion to be “a blessing.” It was a train wreck... Conversion didn’t ‘fit’ my life... Conversion put me in a complicated and comprehensive chaos.<sup>1</sup>

But isn’t that the wrong way around? Wasn’t it her life before conversion that was the train wreck, and finding Christ that put her life back together again? That is the way we usually think. God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life, once you admit you are a sinner and pray the sinner’s prayer. Doesn’t Jesus make it all better again? “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). There are Precious Moments™ like this in the gospels. But there are also some pretty troubling statements by Jesus about his ministry and its impact. Encountering Jesus in these moments seems more like a train wreck than a soft landing. We encounter some such statements today.

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus has been instructing his disciples about life in God’s kingdom. He has just told them two parables about a master and his household slaves, pronouncing blessing on the watchful slaves and the faithful steward. The disciples must have been reassured by these blessings. But the second parable has progressed in a troubling direction: warnings to the servants who are self-seeking and who abuse others, especially if they know the master’s will. The unfaithful steward will be cut in two. The servant who knew his master’s will but didn’t act accordingly will be beaten severely. This isn’t the kind and gentle Jesus of the famous picture that hangs on so many walls. This parable carries ominous warnings of judgment. Jesus continues the theme of judgment with some more troubling statements in today’s text.

## I. Division not Peace (12:49-53)

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:49-53 ESV)

This looks like a train wreck for all concerned: for the earth which Jesus has come to set on fire; for Jesus himself, headed for a baptism

that is causing distress; for every household, whose members will be divided against one another; and for any preacher who attempts to tackle this passage. This is not a comfortable text!

Some try to make the text kinder and gentler by proposing that the fire is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit whom Jesus will send. But that doesn’t fit the context. Fire is a frequent metaphor for judgment, which is what it must mean here. “I have come to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already burning!” (NLT), says Jesus. Some of the disciples would have agreed with him. They wanted the world to be ablaze, but they were selective in whom they wanted to be burned. Top of the list were the Romans; they wanted God to come in judgment on them. Next were the half-breed Samaritans. James and John had already suggested this course of action to Jesus: “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (9:54). But Jesus had rebuked them. The fire that he is talking about is a fire that will begin with Israel, with God’s people.

Jesus has been acting as a prophet, proclaiming the word of the Lord. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, he has been rebuking the people for their sin, warning of impending judgment, and urging repentance. The ministry of Jesus kindles the flames that will bring judgment.

Jesus himself will be engulfed, though here he switches metaphors from fire to baptism. He has already been baptized in water, which formed part of his commissioning to service. He faces another baptism, one more akin to being overwhelmed in the flood, than dipping oneself in gently running water at the hands of John the Baptist. In Mark’s gospel he equates this baptism to the cup he must drink, when he replies to the request by James and John to sit either side of him in glory:

**“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38)**

This equation of baptism with the cup makes it clear that both are metaphors for the suffering and death he must endure as he takes the cup of God’s wrath in place of Israel.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, knowing that Jerusalem is the place where the Lord’s prophets are killed. He has already rebuked the Pharisees for their complicity in the deeds of their forefathers who killed the prophets from A to Z:

**“[T]he Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah.” (Luke 11:49-51)**

Jesus knows that the same fate awaits him. He is headed for a train wreck: the train wreck of death at the hands of his own people.

This impending ordeal weighs on his mind. Most English versions understand this as pressure which induces distress; for example, “How great is my distress until it is accomplished!” (ESV). But there is another way of understanding this mental or psychological pressure: it gives Jesus focus. So, “how it consumes Me” (HCSB). I think this better fits the wider context. Jesus is focused on his journey to Jerusalem. He knows he must go to Jerusalem and he knows what awaits him there, as he plainly states in the next chapter:

**“Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” (Luke 13:33-34)**

Luke understands this: he has devoted forty percent of his gospel to Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Jesus tries to explain this to the disciples, but they don’t understand:

**“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (Luke 18:31-34)**

This journey to Jerusalem consumes Jesus “until it is accomplished.” The word “accomplish” (*teléo*) is a significant one. It means to bring something to its intended purpose or goal. I like to think of it as a large forward-pointing arrow, at the end of which lies the goal. Things are moving forward along the arrow to that goal. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. How much does he know about what will happen? He knows the history; he can read the signs. He knows that he will suffer and die as yet another rejected prophet. The end of the journey is reached when Jesus cries out on the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). It is accomplished! The journey ends in rejection, betrayal, suffering and death. This is the baptism with which Jesus knows he must be baptized. This is what focuses his attention on the way to Jerusalem: rejection and death at the hands of those he came to save. At the end of the arrow hangs a rejected, dead Messiah!

“But...” the disciples must be saying. You can almost hear this between the spaces, as Jesus says to them, “You think I have come to give peace on earth, don’t you.” So do we. At his birth didn’t the angels sing, “Peace on earth, good will to men” (2:14)? Peace was surely part of the Messianic mission: to restore *shalom* to the land and the people. But Jesus counters such an assumption. “No, I tell you, but rather...” The answer is rather surprising: Jesus has come to bring division. So disruptive is this division that it splits even families asunder. The proverb says that blood is thicker than water, but Jesus breaks blood relations apart. He divides the closest relationships within the family: “father against son and son against father,” and so on. This saying is derived from Micah 7, where it depicts the social breakdown in Israel caused by its sin:

**the son treats the father with contempt,  
the daughter rises up against her mother,  
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
a man’s enemies are the men of his own house. (Mic 7:6)**

This we can understand: sin splinters family relationships. This disruption goes on all around us even today. But here in Luke, Jesus says that he himself will be the cause of the social breakdown within families. Jesus is surely warning the disciples that following him will not be a bed of roses. The choice to follow or not follow him will

set a family against itself. In the Old Testament the people of God was primarily an ethnic entity: the nation Israel comprised of twelve tribes, each of multiple clans, and so on down to families. Membership in the people was perpetuated through families. But Jesus implies that this system of family-based identity will soon be split asunder. A little later Jesus expresses it more starkly:

**“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)**

And again:

**“You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.” (Luke 21:16-17)**

Other gospels reinforce this message. Early in Mark’s gospel, the mother and brothers of Jesus come to find him. But Jesus answers,

**“Who are my mother and brothers? ... Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:33-35)**

In God’s providence his mother Mary, and at least two brothers, James and Judas (Jude), did join the Way as followers of Jesus.

The division that Jesus was causing was within Israel, between those who repented and turned to him in faith and those who did not. Jesus continues to cause division, not just in Jewish communities but in Gentile ones as well. If a Jew turns to Jesus as his Messiah, his family will often hold a funeral service and consider him dead. Though modern Israel grants the automatic right of return to all Jews, it often denies this right to Jewish Christians, considering them to be no longer Jewish. In some other cultures it can be extremely dangerous to follow Jesus. Last November I attended a conference of Middle Eastern Christians, some of whom are at great risk. If their family or clan find out that they are Christians, they will be killed for bringing dishonor and shame to the family or clan.

People will have to make a choice about Jesus, a choice that will cut right through families. But the positive side of this is that Jesus is forming a new family. Membership in God’s family is no longer based on ethnicity and family. All who respond to Christ in faith are incorporated into God’s family. We are part of a large family that extends across time, space, ethnicity and culture. Many of us have had the experience of traveling overseas and finding familial bonds in Christ with people of other cultures.

## 2. Interpreting the Signs (12:54-56)

While Jesus has been addressing his disciples, the large crowd has been pressing around him, eager and curious to get close to him. Jesus turns to them:

**He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Luke 12:54-56)**

The crowd is made up mostly of people of the land: they are farmers, fishermen, servants, vinedressers. They understand the weather. They know that rain blows in from the west, that hot winds blow in

from the southern deserts. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus refers to other common wisdom about the weather:

**"When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.'"** (Matt 16:2-3)

From this ancient saying we get our modern one:

Red sky at night, sailor's delight;  
Red sky in morning, sailors take warning.

It was only a few days ago that I found out that the American and British versions of this saying are different. The version I learnt refers to shepherds: shepherd's delight and shepherds take warning.

We've been enjoying some spectacular sunsets recently. The *Mercury News* recently explained how to interpret these signs in the sky. The spectacular colors are caused by the scattering of light by particulates that have accumulated in the atmosphere due to lack of rain. So these sunsets mean drought! We are now officially in a drought and our reservoirs are empty.

Jesus suddenly denounces the crowds: "You hypocrites!" The crowds have intelligence: they know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; they know how to read the signs in the sky. They know that a cloud in the west signifies one thing, and a wind from the south signifies something else. But they don't know how to interpret the present time. The present time doesn't mean the early 21st century. The signs of the time don't mean current geopolitical events. They don't mean the disposition of the armies of the north and the armies of the east, of the Russians and the Chinese. This isn't a call for us to consult *Jane's Defence Weekly*. The setting is Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. The present time is the ministry of Jesus as he proclaims the kingdom of God.

He had announced his ministry in advance, as he read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth:

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."** (Luke 4:18-19)

When John the Baptist sent messengers asking if Jesus were "the one who is to come," Jesus told them,

**"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."** (Luke 7:22-23)

The crowds gathered around Jesus have witnessed these events. They have seen Jesus heal the sick, raise the dead, dine with sinners. But they haven't interpreted these events; they haven't drawn the right conclusions. The present time is a *kairos* moment; it's not just clock time, *chronos* time, but a significant moment of time. This moment of time requires a decision. How should the crowds interpret the present time?

Jesus is surrounded by three groups of people. The closest circle are the disciples. They are following him, even if they don't understand much of what is going on. Jesus addresses them as "my friends" (12:4) and "little flock" (12:32). The outermost circle are the scribes and

Pharisees. They are hostile, seeking to catch him out in something he might say. In between is the crowd. These people are curious about Jesus. They are so interested in him that they are trampling over one another in their eagerness to see him. But they are uncommitted. The disciples are committed positively as friends. The Pharisees are committed negatively as enemies. In between are the crowds who are undecided. Now it is time for them to decide. To help them decide Jesus tells a parable.

### 3. Settle Accounts Before You Meet the Judge (12:57-59)

**"And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."** (12:57-59)

Jesus describes a scene that would be familiar to many of them. A man has fallen into debt and is unable to pay. He has fallen into a nightmare. At the end of a chain of officials lies the debtors' prison, a miserable place to be. There can be no release from this prison unless the whole debt is paid, down to the last *lepton*, the smallest of coins. This scenario would evoke horror in the crowds: they would know people who had fallen afoul of creditors this way. In the parable Jesus advises that the debtor try to negotiate a settlement with the creditor "on the way," while they are on the way to meet the first official. It is the only hope the debtor has for avoiding debtor's prison.

Jesus tells this parable as he is "on the way" to Jerusalem. The implication seems clear. Israel faces imminent judgment, but there is a window for making a decision while the people are still on the way. This window will close once they have finished the journey in the way, once they reach Jerusalem. This is brought out clearly in the next few verses, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (13:3, 5).

It is time to make a decision about Jesus. This decision will divide people against one another, even within families. Luke has given advance warning about this division over Jesus. When Jesus was just forty days old, Simeon had warned Mary:

**"Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."** (Luke 2:34-35)

Simeon recognized the baby Jesus as the fulfillment of his longings, as he had been waiting for the consolation of Israel. But he understood that not all would so recognize Jesus. He saw that this baby had been set in place as one might set a stone. This imagery of setting a stone occurs several places in the Old Testament (Isa 8:14-15; 28:16; Ps 118:22). The Lord has laid a stone in Zion, but response to this stone will be divided. Those who reject the stone will stumble against it and fall; they will experience the stone as a stone of offense, a stone of stumbling. The Greek word for this stumbling is *skandalon*; people will take offense at the scandal of Jesus. But those who rely on the stone God has set in place will find it to be a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation.

The crowds are called to interpret the present time. It is time to decide what sort of stone Jesus is. Is he a stumbling stone over whom they take offense, or is he a cornerstone on whom a new life is built?

And so it has proven to be. This two-sided experience of Jesus the rock is presented most fully by Peter, quoting all three Old Testament texts that refer to this stone (Isa 28:16; Ps 118:22; Isa 8:14):

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”

and

“A stone of stumbling,  
and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. (1 Pet 2:4-8)

Rosaria Butterfield was not looking to be converted. She took offense at Christians. So what happened? God became bigger than herself. She writes, “I learned the first rule of repentance: that repentance requires greater intimacy with God than with our sin. How much greater? About the size of a mustard seed.”<sup>2</sup> When the Lord became bigger than herself, than her sin, than her circumstances, however inconvenient and disruptive it might be to her life, she was converted. The same was true for her recovery from conversion: “How did the Lord heal me? The way that he always heals: the word of God got to be bigger inside me than I.”<sup>3</sup> Out of the train wreck of her conversion the Lord put her life back together again on the cornerstone of Jesus.

We are confronted with Jesus. We read about him in Luke’s gospel. The crowds were confronted with a choice; we are confronted with a choice; people all over the world are confronted with a choice. How do we understand the signs of the times? What do we do with Jesus? May we find him to be a cornerstone not a stumbling stone. This requires dying to self, following Jesus in baptism in which we die to the old self and are raised to new life.

1. Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2012), xi, 25, 34, 27.

2. Butterfield, *Secret Thoughts*, 21-22.

3. Butterfield, *Secret Thoughts*, 25.