

## Jesus in Samaria

Samaria. The land north of Judea was once occupied by the northern Kingdom of Israel, that part of the nation that separated from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin following the death of King Solomon. When God punished the northern kingdom's endless rebellion against Him, they were defeated by the Assyrians who resettled the local population in centers from Assyria to Babylon. A few were left and they entered into mixed marriages with others who had been defeated by Assyria from other parts of the Middle East and who had been sent to live in the region known as Samaria -- named after the capital city of the day. This all took place about 700 years before the birth of Christ.

When Judah experienced their own exile in Babylon, the people of Samaria claimed that they were the rightful descendants of Israel -- and they still claim that to this day! And when Judah returned from exile and rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem and reinstated the temple sacrifices, guess where most of the opposition came from -- from the leaders in Samaria. This opposition grew over the years, spurred on by the building of a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria in the 5th century B.C. and became absolute hatred when Samaria gave in to the pressure from Antiochus the Greek to turn their temple on Mount Gerizim into a temple for Zeus and the Greek gods, probably about 167 B.C. The Jews began what turned out to be a successful revolt against Antiochus IV (the name Antiochus means "God revealed" or "God Manifest"), under the Maccabees and during the time they were an independent nation they attacked and destroyed the Samaritan temple, about 128 B.C.

The Samaritans were excluded from the inner courts of the Jerusalem temple and held it to be a false cultic center. When Jesus was about 8 - 10 years old, a group from Samaria got into the temple and threw human bones within the sanctuary during the Passover Feast.

Hostility towards Jews from Galilee travelling to Jerusalem for any of the Feasts was not uncommon and you see several signs of this hatred in the gospels. Marriage between Samaritans and Jews was strictly forbidden and some of the Jewish scribes would not even say the word Samaritan -- for others it was a sort of curse word. About 20 years after Jesus was crucified, a group of Galilean pilgrims were massacred by Samaritans while on their way to Jerusalem. This wasn't just hostile territory; it was dangerous territory for a group of Galilean Jews who had their face set for Jerusalem.

Let's look now at how Jesus handled this "opposition".

Peter, James and John had just been with Jesus on the mountain where they had seen Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah -- the Mount of Transfiguration. It had been an awesome sight, Jesus' face radiant, brilliant with glory as He talked with two of the greatest men in Israel's history. It had been such an amazing experience that they couldn't talk about it for a long, long time.

Now, same chapter, we see three incidents back-to-back that reveal how spiritually immature the disciples are at this point, especially James and John. First, the disciples have an argument between them as to which one of them would be the greatest and Jesus answers that by sitting a little child among them and saying, "Whoever is least among you is the greatest."

The next paragraph: John reports to Jesus that they came across someone using Jesus' name to cast out demons and they tried to stop him. Jesus responded by saying, "Anyone who is not against you is for you."

And now, in v. 51 and following, we see their conflict resolution skills at their finest:

*As the time drew near for His return to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for His arrival. But they were turned away. The people of the village refused to have anything to do with Jesus because He had resolved to go to Jerusalem. When James and John heard about it, they said to Jesus, "Lord, should we order down fire from heaven to burn them up?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. So they went on to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)*

Hatred over hundreds of years -- and how does Jesus respond to it? "Fight fire with fire?" No, Jesus responds in the opposite spirit. He refuses to take offense, to judge those who have judged Him, to get revenge on those who have slighted Him. Instead, He simply tells His disciples to chill a bit and they move on to the next town. How do you end a feud? How do you break a cycle of bitterness? Do you call down fire from heaven to destroy your enemies? No, you respond in the opposite spirit to those who come against you.

I try to imagine the look that Jesus must have given James and John when they asked their question: "Lord, should we order down fire from heaven to burn them up?" I wonder if Jesus said something like, "Who do you guys think you are, offering to order fire from heaven? Do you think I wouldn't or couldn't do that without your help, if it was appropriate?" But we're not told what Jesus said, just that He rebuked them, and so I'll have to be unsatisfied on that point.

I want to look at two stories together, one that recounts a healing that Jesus performed and one a story that Jesus told -- both involve Samaritans. (First, Luke 17:11-19)

*As Jesus continued on toward Jerusalem He reached the border between Galilee and Samaria. As He entered a village there, ten lepers stood at a distance crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" He looked at them and said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, their leprosy disappeared. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back to Jesus, shouting, "Praise God, I'm healed!" He fell face down on the ground at Jesus' feet, thanking Him for what He had done. This man was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Does only this foreigner return to give glory to God?" And Jesus said to the man, "Stand up*

*and go. Your faith has made you well."*

There were worse things than being a Samaritan, including being a victim of leprosy. Their common condition allowed these ten men to walk together and to seek Jesus together. It didn't matter to them that one was a Samaritan - they were all lepers and their disease brought them together. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Notice that Jesus doesn't draw attention to Himself, doesn't put on a big show about healing these men. He simply tells them to go and show themselves to the priest, an act which fulfilled the law's requirement for people who had been cured of leprosy. But even though these ten men were bound together in comradeship over their disease, only one thought enough of Jesus to return to Him and say, "Thank you." The others were probably excited about starting life again, being able to sit with old friends and be reunited with family members. They were looking ahead, seemingly unmindful that someone had made that future possible for them. The Samaritan man did not forget and Jesus notices that only the foreigner had returned to give glory to God and then commends him for his faith.

The next story is from the next chapter and comes in response to a question from an expert in Jewish law. The man wants to know what he has to do to receive eternal life. Jesus says, "How do you read the law of Moses? What does it say?" The lawyer replies, "Love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says, "Right. Good answer. Do this and you will live." And the lawyer comes back with, "And who is my neighbor?"

*A Jewish man was traveling on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes and money, beat him up and left him half dead beside the road. By chance a Jewish priest came along; but when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.*

*Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt deep pity. Kneeling beside him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with medicine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day, he handed the innkeeper two pieces of silver and told him to take care of the man. "If his bill runs higher than that," he said, "I'll pay the difference the next time I am here."*

*"Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?"*

*"The one who showed him mercy."*

*"Yes, now go and do the same."*

The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" I think he wanted a short list, maybe including some other experts in Jewish law or some other respected people within his circle. I think he was looking for a limit to the number of people he had to love. "Who is my neighbor?" suggests that there are some people, maybe a lot of people, who aren't neighbors

“Who is my neighbor?” suggests that we can maybe draw up a list or at least name some categories that would qualify someone as being a person we would have to love ... and disregard the rest.

Did you notice that Jesus didn't answer the lawyer's question? He didn't tell him who the neighbor was, just told him to go and be a good neighbor to anyone he came across who needed his help. And the model Jesus used for a person doing good was a Samaritan. And the model Jesus used for a person who had a chance to do good and didn't take it, who passed by on the other side of the road, was the very person that the expert in Jewish law would have wanted on his short list of neighbors -- the kind of respectable person with an official position that he wouldn't mind doing good to -- and would have some hope that he might even receive something in return. Jesus says, “Don't be like the priest who passed by, but be like the Samaritan who knew how to love people.

Last story is from the town of Sychar in Samaria, where Jesus passed one day on His way to Galilee from Judea. Heading in that direction wasn't so antagonistic to the Samaritans and the journey has no hint of danger in it. It was a long, dry, wearying journey of about 70 miles, usually taking 3-4 days. At noon on one of those days, Jesus is worn out and sits down by the well outside Sychar. His disciples head into the town to buy some food and Jesus rests at the well until a woman comes to draw water and Jesus says to her, “Please give me a drink.”

There's an interesting verse in this story that doesn't get much attention and it's verse 9:

*The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, “You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?”*

This verse spells out the animosity between Samaritans and Jews: “Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans.” She points that out, as well as the gender barrier that was much more pronounced in that day than it is today. Men and women didn't have a lot of reason for casual conversation. Marriages were arranged. Once married, a woman was often secluded from many social interactions that would involve men. Her time would be spent at home with children, at the market or going with the other women to draw water for the family. But this woman came alone and she came at mid-day when the other women wouldn't be there. We can presume that she was something of an outcast in her town, but Jesus wasn't at all put off by that -- He wanted to talk to her:

*If you only knew the gift God has for you and who I am, you would ask Me, and I would give you living water.*

The conversation continued for some time and touched her personal life, her religious convictions and her need for living water, for the Spirit life within her that would result in eternal life. And throughout it all, we see Jesus taking her seriously, showing her respect, drawing her towards faith in Him, just as He was drawing Nicodemus in the chapter before that we looked at last week. “If only you knew the gift God has for you”, “The Father is looking for anyone who will worship Him in Spirit and in truth” . . . “I am

the Messiah". He's inviting her to believe, to put her faith in Him and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Amazing! A Samaritan .... woman .... of bad character .... "If only you knew the gift God has for you!"

So, what do we see in Jesus' attitudes towards the people that the Jews had hated for centuries? He respected them and treated them like any others, like people. He didn't say anything to put them down, to show Jewish hostility toward them. He called the Samaritan leper a foreigner -- and that is how they were viewed in Israel. He told the woman at the well that Samaritans know very little about the one they worship, while the Jews know all about their God, but that was just telling her that she needed more information -- and then He opened the door to her to become a true worshiper of God.

You don't see in Jesus any of the prejudice or hostility that was common in the culture of the day. He just treated people like people, no matter where they came from or how others expected Him to treat them. He commended the faith of a healed leper, He used a Samaritan as an example of what it meant to love your neighbor as you love yourself, He spoke about deep spiritual truths with a woman of Samaria and the whole town came out to meet Him and learn from Him. Where some would like to call down fire from heaven to destroy their enemies, the Lord of glory chooses to show mercy, to reach out with truth.

Does this relationship of Jesus the Jew with the people of Samaria have something to say to us today? I think so, but I would expect that there are different responses that are appropriate to this passage.

1. First off, there is a personal response required to the question, "Which people group are you most critical of, most prejudiced against?" Is there one culture among the many that live all around us throughout the Lower Mainland that you have strong feelings against, that you use racist nicknames to describe or that you avoid having dealings with, business or otherwise? John 4 tells us that Jesus "had to go through Samaria" on His way to Galilee. Well, it is the shortest, most direct route, but most Jews chose not to go through Samaria. They would go along the Jordan River or travel out to the coast in order to avoid Samaria. Jesus had to go through because His mission was to reach the Samaritans as well as the Jews. He had to go through because He had an appointment to keep with a despised Samaritan woman who had lived in relational dysfunction for her whole life and He had to tell her about living water, the gift God had for her. And He ended up ministering in Sychar for two whole days and seeing many people put their faith in Him -- will we go the long way round to avoid people who are loved by God?

2. The second personal application is that we see our life as a mission rather than a menu. The world puts before us a whole series of options and says, "Choose -- whatever you want, take your pick, we have easy financing options." Jesus says, "Life comes from the Spirit within. Listen to His voice and follow where He leads -- and you'll experience life as it was created to be." There's a not-so-subtle distinction

between the two options. Option A puts you in charge of choosing from the menu. Option B puts the mission commander in charge and you follow His lead. Jesus was following the lead of His Father in heaven and He gives us the opportunity to do the same -- but it only will happen if we see our life as being on a mission with Jesus on behalf of the Kingdom of Heaven. Otherwise, it's menu, and in the menu there may not even be an option to love on the despised Samaritans, whoever they are, in our day.

3. In Youth With a Mission, one core teaching is this thing we see in Jesus of responding in the opposite spirit. If a person speaks badly of you, you respond by speaking words that build and bless. If they hurt you in some way, you respond with forgiveness and acts of kindness. If they refuse hospitality, instead of calling down fire from heaven to burn them up, you ignore the insult and go on to the next village. If someone comes at you in anger, their action tends to stir up anger in you. But if you choose not to respond with anger, you'll likely throw them off and diffuse whatever sparked their anger in the first place. Responding in the opposite spirit can open doors like nothing else can.

4. Finally, probably a small point in the big context of these stories, but I noticed that Jesus praised gratitude in the Samaritan leper who was healed. He called it 'giving glory to God' and pointed to this man's action as an indication of faith. In the encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus pointed out to her that the time had come when true worshipers would worship the Father in spirit and in truth, not through religious ritual that is confined to just one place and one time, but as a matter of lifestyle. Living gratefully is an important starting point for this -- living with thankful hearts honours God and gives Him glory.