

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Thirty-Fourth Week -- Tuesday

THE SAMARITANS

"Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. But He needed to go through Samaria" (John 4:1-4).

After a long absence in Judea of about eight months, Jesus set out on his return into Galilee. This must have been in the month of November or early in December. Various reasons have been assigned for this movement. Some conjecture that it was from having heard of John's imprisonment. But it does not appear that there could be anything in this to affect his proceedings, seeing for what special cause John was cast into prison. And the prudence which some find in this step would have dictated some other course than a journey into the very heart of Herod's territories. Some more seasonably conjecture that the Pharisees had become decidedly hostile to Jesus when they found that his preaching was attracting even more attention than that of John, and that He now began to speak with severity of the hypocrisies and solemn shams of which they were in that age the chief upholders. Thus He resolved to retire from that part of the country and proceed to Galilee, which not only offered Him a safe abode, since the Pharisees were not numerous in that quarter, but presented a fair field for his labors.

But it seems a sufficient explanation may be found in the approach of winter, unfavorable to the open-air gatherings in town and country to which He had hitherto ministered, and which would naturally induce Him to return to what had previously been his usual abode. And, in fact, we commonly find Him in the winter in Galilee, chiefly at Capernaum where He had a fixed residence, probably a hired house.

There were three routes in use for this journey. One was by crossing the Jordan near Jericho and traveling northward through the eastern region (Perea) and then recrossing the river into Galilee a little below the lake of Tiberias. Another route was along the seacoast and through the plain of Esdraelon. The shortest and most direct road was by way of Shechem through the country of the Samaritans, which was interposed between Judea and Galilee. Very rigid Jews, especially those of the sect of Pharisees, shunned this route due to their abhorrence of the Samaritans--from the fear of pollution by mixing with a people whom they accounted as even viler than the heathen, and in order to avoid the insults and inconveniences with which the Samaritans retaliated the contempt with which they were regarded by them.

Jesus, however, made choice of this last route. Being the nearest, He would not be likely to avoid it for any of the reasons stated above; and the opportunity of sowing the good seed among a people better prepared to receive Him than were the mass of the Jews themselves could not fail, because while the Samaritans, equally with the Jews, expected the speedy advent of the Messiah, their notions of his reign were less perverted by political ideas than among the Jews. But we shall not understand the nature of our Lord's interchange with the Samaritans in this journey unless we pay some attention to their condition and opinions.

They derived their name from their being placed in the region of which Samaria had been the metropolis. Their own chief seat in that district was not, however, at Samaria but at Shechem (in our Lord's time called Sychar), in the beautiful valley between the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim. Originally they were foreigners from beyond the Euphrates, settled here by the kings of Assyria in order to keep the land from utter desolation after they had destroyed the kingdom of Israel and sent the ten tribes into captivity. They were, of course, idolaters; but finding that the beasts of prey increased rapidly in a country now so depopulated, they ascribed this to the wrath of the gods of the country for neglected rites. Thus they petitioned the imperial court to send them an Israelitish priest who might teach them how to worship these gods so as to avert their anger.

Having obtained what they sought, they soon made up a curious religion of their own, combining the worship of their native idols with the worship of Jehovah. The idolatrous taint, however, gradually became diluted and eventually disappeared. The Samaritans became good Jews, professing, in those latter times in which our Lord appeared, a more primitive and better form of Judaism than generally prevailed among the Jews themselves.

The reason for this was that they retained the Judaism which they had been taught in a comparatively early age and adhered with scrupulous exactness to the simple sense of the law of Moses. Among the Jews themselves the plain letter of the law had become encumbered and indeed overwhelmed by a dense heap of traditionary interpretations and applications that were held to be of equal authority with the law itself, and which, in the time of our Savior, constituted a burden too heavy to be borne, as He himself declared.

From all this the Judaism of the Samaritans was free. They rejected, or rather ignored, those traditions; and the dislike and contempt of the Jews toward them was in no small degree enhanced by their lack of and disregard for these traditions that in the Jew's view constituted the perfection of the law, but in the Samaritan's view was learned rubbish. It was no doubt the slighting language with which our Lord spoke of these traditions that gave point to the vituperation on one occasion used against Him: "You are a Samaritan, and have a devil," which was intended to be the severest, the most venomous, the most contemptuous thing that could possibly be said.

The root of the intense hatred between the two lay in the contempt which the Jews, in the pride

of their pure Abrahamic descent, showered upon the Samaritans as an inferior and ignoble people. The Jews withstood the attempt at amalgamation originally made by the Samaritans and vehemently refused to admit them to community of worship and religious privileges. But as the Samaritans became more Jewish, they became ashamed of that foreign and heathen origin which the Jews never forgot and never failed to cast back at them, and in process of time they advanced a claim to be regarded as of Abrahamic origin. This claim was derided by the Jews, but there was nevertheless some foundation for it.

The Samaritans had largely intermarried with the Jews. At first it was with the thin and scattered remnants of the ten tribes that remained in the land of Israel; after that, with the like remnant of the kingdom of Judah; and later with the captives who returned from Babylon. In process of time this threw a strong infusion of Jewish blood into the Samaritan body, and in the mixing there is reason to suppose that the Jewish predominated over the foreign element. Such intermarriages had, however, long since ceased, and nothing could be more abhorrent either to Jew or Samaritan than such intermarriages.

Repelled with vehemence from any participation in the rebuilding of the temple after the captivity, and refused any equal right or interest in the services there celebrated, the Samaritans at length concluded they should have a sacerdotal establishment of their own. They erected a temple upon Mount Gerizim, the mountain from which the blessings of the law were delivered when the Israelites first entered the Promised Land, and upon which Moses had set up an altar. From this they were led to deny that Jerusalem was the proper site of the temple, and that Mount Gerizim, having thus been indicated by the great lawgiver himself, was the place where men ought to worship.

This, as much as any other point of difference, if not more than any other, was a source of keen and bitter antagonism between them. The Jews were subject to so much annoyance and insult from the Samaritans when passing through their country to attend the great festivals at Jerusalem, that those who were able to travel by one of the more circuitous routes did so. At other times traveling through Samaria, especially *from* Jerusalem, was not commonly subject to any other inconvenience than such as arose from the alienation and non-mingling, for no Samaritan would receive a Jew, or a Jew receive a Samaritan, into his house or bid him God speed. They might buy or sell to each other, but beyond the communication which such transactions involved, all intercourse was on both sides considered unbecoming and improper.

It was a strange condition of affairs that the territory of a people like the Samaritans, so disliked and disliking others, should occupy the very heart of the country between the two great territorial sections of the Jewish population. The distance thus interposed between the Jews of the south and north probably contributed in no faint degree to the sort of alienation which existed between them also; for the Jew of the south, or of Judea, despised the inhabitants of Galilee only some degree less than he despised the Samaritans.