

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
4:31-42

31. In the meantime his disciples prayed him, saying, Master, eat.  
32. But he said to them, I have meat to eat of which ye do not know.  
33. Therefore the disciples said to one another, Has anyone brought him *anything* to eat? 34. Jesus said to them, My meat is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work. 35. Do ye not say, There are still four months and *then* comes the harvest? Behold, I say to you, Lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! 36. And he who reaps receives wages and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. 37. Herein the saying is true: One sows and another reaps. 38. I sent you to reap that for which ye have not labored; other men labored, and ye have entered into their labors. 39. And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in him because of the word of the woman who testified, He told me all that I ever did. 40. So when the Samaritans had come to him, they urged him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. 41. And many more believed because of his own word. 42. Then they said to the woman, Now we believe, not because of your saying, for we ourselves have heard *him* and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.

31.--[*In the meantime.*] This expression means, "during the time when the Samaritans were coming out of the city to the well," between the time when the woman went her way and the time where her fellow-countrymen, aroused by her testimony, appeared at the well. It is highly probable that they were already in sight.

[*Prayed.*] The Greek word so rendered is remarkable. It is frequently used to convey the idea of "asking or making inquiry." It is a curious fact that it is not used in describing any person's address to God in prayer, except in the case of our Lord Jesus Christ. (John xiv.16; xvi.26; xvii.9.15,20.) There is one remarkable instance where it seems to be used in describing a believer's prayer, (1 John v.16.), but this instance stands so entirely alone that it is probable the meaning is not "pray" but "make curious inquiry."

[*Master, eat.*] The difference between our Lord and His disciples appears here in a striking manner. Their weak minds were preoccupied with the idea of food and bodily sustenance. His heart was filled with the great object of His ministry: "doing good to souls." It is a striking illustration of a difference that may frequently be seen between a believer of great grace and a believer of little grace. The latter, with the best possible intentions, will often attach an importance to bodily and temporal things, with which the strong believer will feel no sympathy.

32.--[*I have food, etc.*] The meaning of our Lord's words in this verse must evidently be figurative. He had soul-nourishment and soul-sustenance of which His disciples were ignorant. He found such refreshment in doing good to ignorant souls that for the time present He did not feel bodily hunger.

There is no necessity for supposing that our Lord referred to any miraculous supply of His bodily needs in this place. His words appear to me only to indicate that He found such delight and comfort in doing good to souls that it was as good as meat and drink to Him. Many of His holiest servants in every age, I believe, could testify much the same. The joy and happiness of spiritual success has for the time lifted them above all bodily needs and supplied the place of material meat and drink. I see no reason why this may not have been the case with our Lord. He had a body in all respects constituted like our own.

The idea of some writers that these words show that our Lord's "thirst" was only simulated and pretended, seems to me utterly unworthy of notice.

The application of the words, which every believer ought to endeavor to make to himself, is familiar to every well-instructed Christian. He has supplies of spiritual nourishment and support which are hidden and unknown to the world. These supplies he ought to use at all times, and specially in times of sorrow and trial.

33.--[*Therefore...anything to eat?*] These words seem to have been spoken privately or whispered one to another by the disciples. Their inability to put any but a carnal sense on their Master's words has been already remarked. In slowness to see a spiritual sense in His language, they do not appear at all unlike Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. "What wonder is it," says Augustine, "if the woman could not understand our Lord speaking about living water when the disciples could not understand Him speaking about meat?"

The original Greek of the expression, "Has any man brought him anything to eat," is remarkable. There is a negative left out in our translation. It seems to show that the question of the woman at verse 29, would have been better rendered, "Is this the Christ? Can this be the Christ?"

34.--[*Jesus said, etc.*] The leading idea of this verse is "that doing God's will and finishing God's work was so soul-refreshing and pleasant to our Lord that He found it equivalent to meat and drink."

The Greek expression rendered "to do" and "to finish" would have been more literally rendered "that I should do" and "that I should finish." But there can be little doubt, as Winer remarks, that the language is intended to have an infinitive sense. Precisely the same construction is employed in another remarkable place, John xvii.3. It seems matter of regret that our translators did not render that verse as they have rendered the verse before us. It should have been, "This is life eternal to know thee," etc.

The "will of God," which it was Christ's meat to "do," must mean God's will; that salvation by faith in a Savior should be proclaimed and a door of mercy set wide open to the chief of sinners. "It is my meat," says our Lord, "to do that will, and to proclaim to everyone with whom I speak, that whosoever believes on the Son shall not perish." The view that it simply means, "My meat is to obey God's commandments and do what He has told me to do," appears to me to fall short of the full meaning of the expression. The leading idea seems to me to be specially God's will about proclaiming salvation by Christ. Compare John vi.39,40.

The "work of God," which it was Christ's meat to "finish," must mean that work of complete fulfillment of a Savior's office which Christ came on earth to perform and that obedience to God's law which He came to render. "It is my meat," says our Lord, "to be daily doing that great work which I came into the world to do for man's soul, to be daily preaching peace and daily fulfilling all righteousness." Compare John xvii.4.

The utter unlikeness between Christ and all ministers of the Gospel who perform their duties in a mere perfunctory way, and care more for the world and its pleasures or gains than for saving souls, is strikingly brought out in this and the preceding verse. How many professing teachers of religion know nothing whatever of the spirit and habits of mind which our Lord here displays! It can never be said of hunting, shooting, ball-going, card playing, farming clergymen, that it is their meat and drink to do God's will and finish His work! With what face will they meet Christ in the day of judgment?

Cyril says, on this verse, "We learn from hence how great is the love of God towards men. He calls the conversion of lost people His meat."

35.--[*Do ye not say, etc.*] This saying is interpreted in two different ways.

Some think, as Origen, Rupertus, Brentius, Beza, Jansenius, Cyril, Lightfoot, Lampe, Suicer, and many others, that our Lord really meant that at the time when He spoke there were four literal months to harvest, and as the harvest began about May, He spoke in February. The sense would then be, "Ye say at this time of the year that it will be harvest in four months. But I tell you there is a spiritual harvest already before you if you will only lift up your eyes and see it."

Others think, as DeDieu, Maldonatus, Calovius, Whitby, Schottgen, Pearce, Tittman, Stier, Alford, Barnes, and Tholuck, that our Lord only meant that it was a proverbial saying among the Jews--"four months between seed time and harvest," and that He did not mean the words to be literally taken. The sense would then be, "Ye have a common saying that it is four months from seed time to harvest. But I tell you that in spiritual works the harvest ripens far more quickly. Behold those Samaritans coming out already to hear the word the very day that seed has been sown among them. The fields are already white for harvest."

Either of the above views makes good sense and good divinity. Yet on the whole I prefer the second view: viz., that our Lord quoted a proverb. To suppose that He really meant that there were literally four months to pass away before harvest appears to me to involve serious chronological difficulties. It necessitates the assumption that at least three quarters of a year had passed away since the passover when our Lord purified the temple. (John ii.23.) No doubt this possibly may have been the case. But it does not appear to me probable. In addition, we must remember that our Lord on another occasion referred to a proverbial saying about the weather, beginning much as He does here, "Ye say." (Matt. xvi.3.) Moreover, in this very passage He quotes a proverb about "one sowing and another reaping," within two verses. The expression therefore, "Do ye not say" seems to me to point to a proverbial saying much more than to a fact. The antithesis to it is the "I say," which immediately follows.

Calvin says, "By this expression, *Do ye not say?* Christ intended indirectly to point out how much more attentive the minds of men are to earthly than to heavenly things, for they burn with so intense a desire of harvest that they carefully reckon up months and days, while it is astonishing how drowsy and indolent they are in gathering the heavenly wheat."

Cornelius à Lapede conjectures that the disciples had been talking to one another about the prospects of harvest as they came to the well, and that our Lord, knowing the conversation, referred to it by the words, "Do ye not say?"

[*Lift up your eyes...white for harvest.*] There can be little doubt that this saying must be interpreted figuratively. The sense is, "There is a harvest of souls before you ready to be gathered in." The same figure is used elsewhere. (Matt. ix.37; Luke x.32.)

Some think, as Chrysostom, that when our Lord said, "Behold...lift up your eyes...look," He spoke with especial reference to the crowd of Samaritans whom He saw coming from the city to the well. If this be so, it is hard to suppose that He first began conversation with the woman at six o'clock in the evening.

Others think that our Lord spoke these words with reference to the whole world, and specially the Jewish nation at the time of His ministry. They were so ready and prepared for the preaching of the Gospel, that they were like a field white for harvest. The expression, "lift up your eyes," is used elsewhere in Scripture when mental attention is being called to something remarkable. (See Isa. xlix.18; lx.4; Gen. xiii.14,15.)

I am disposed to think that both views are correct. Our Lord wished His disciples to notice that both at Samaria and elsewhere the minds of men were everywhere ready to receive the message of the Gospel in an unusual degree. Let them mark how willing the multitude was everywhere to listen to the truth. Let them know that everywhere, as in the apparently hopeless field of Samaria, they would find a harvest of souls ready to be reaped if only they would be reapers.

Chrysostom, on this verse, remarks: "Christ leads His disciples, as His custom is, from low things to high. *Fields* and *harvests* here express the great number of souls which are ready to receive the word. The eyes are both spiritual and bodily ones, for they saw a great multitude of Samaritans now approaching. This expectant crowd He calls, very suitably, white fields. For as the corn when it grows white is ready for harvest, so were those ready for salvation. But why does He not say all this in direct language? Because by making use of the objects around them, He gave great vividness and power to His words, and also caused His discourse to be more pleasant and sink deeper into their memories."

36.--[*He who reaps, etc.*] This verse seems to me to show that our Lord is speaking generally of the field of this world, and of the whole work which His apostles would have to do in it, not only in Samaria but to the ends of the earth. The verse is a general promise for the encouragement of all laborers of Christ. The full meaning of it can hardly be brought out without a paraphrase. "The reaper of the spiritual harvest has a far more honorable and satisfactory office than the reaper of the natural harvest. He receives wages and gathers fruit not for this life only, but for the life to come. The wages that he receives are eternal wages, a crown of glory that fades not away. (1 Pet. vi.4.) The fruit that he gathers is eternal fruit, souls plucked from destruction and saved forevermore." (See Daniel xii.3; John xv.16; and 1 Cor. ix.17.)

Burkitt and several other writers call attention to the fact that the harvestman's wages are much more than the wages of any other laborer, and hence draw the conclusion that no Christian will receive so glorious a reward as the man who labors to win souls to Christ.

[*That both he...rejoice together.*] These words appear to me to refer to the common joy that there will be in heaven among all who have labored for Christ when the whole harvest of saved souls is finally gathered in. The Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist, who *sowed*, will all rejoice together with the apostles, who *reaped*. The results of the spiritual harvest are not temporal like those of the natural harvest but eternal, so that a day will come when all who have labored for it in any way, either by sowing or reaping, will sit down and rejoice together to all eternity. Here in this world the sower sometimes does not live to see the fruit of his labor, and the reaper who gathers in the harvest rejoices alone. But work done in the spiritual harvest is eternal work, and consequently both sowers and reapers are sure at last to "rejoice together" and to see the fruit of their toil.

Let it be noted that in heaven there will at last be no jealousy and envy among Christ's laborers. Some will have been sowers and some will have been reapers. But all will have done that part of the work allotted to them, and all will finally "rejoice together." Envious feelings will be absorbed in common joy.

Let it be noted that in doing work for Christ and laboring for souls, there are sowers as well as reapers. The work of the reaper makes far more show

than the work of the sower, yet it is perfectly clear that if there was no sowing there would be no reaping. It is of great importance to remember this. The Church is often disposed to give an excessive honor to Christ's reapers and to overlook the labors of Christ's sowers.

37.--[*Herein...one sows and another reaps.*] Our Lord here quotes a proverbial saying, which appears to me to confirm the view I have already maintained that the expression of the 35th verse, "Say not ye there are yet four months," etc., refers to a proverb.

The phrase "herein" means literally, "in this," and seems to me to refer to the verse which immediately follows. "That common saying, one sows and another reaps, is made good in this say,--is fulfilled by this circumstance,--is verified in the following manner: viz., "I sent you to reap," etc.

The meaning of the proverb is plain. "It is a common saying among men that it often falls to one to sow the field and to another to reap it. The sower and the reaper are not always the same person."

The frequent use of proverbial sayings in the New Testament deserves notice. It shows the value of proverbs and the importance of teaching them to children and young people. A pointed proverb is often remembered when a long moral lesson is forgotten.

38.--[*I sent you to reap, etc.*] Our Lord here states the manner in which the proverbial saying of the preceding verse is true. He tells the apostles that they were sent to reap a spiritual harvest on which they had bestowed no labor. Other men had labored: viz., the prophets of the Old Testament and John the Baptist. They had broken up the ground; they had sown the seed. The result of their labor was that the minds of men in the apostles' times were prepared to expect the Messiah, and the apostles had only to go forth and proclaim the glad tidings that Messiah was come.

Pearce maintains the strange notion that our Lord, in this verse, only means, "I sent you away into the city to buy meat. While you were absent I sowed spiritual seed in the heart of a Samaritan woman. She is now gone to call others. These and many more will be the harvest which you will reap, without having bestowed any labor on it." This interpretation seems to me quite untenable.

The past tense in this verse, "I have sent," is used, as a grammarian would say, proleptically. It means, "I do send you." Such a use of the past tense is common in Scripture, and especially when God speaks of a thing about to be done. With God there is no uncertainty. When He undertakes a thing, it may be regarded as done and finished, because in His counsels it is certain to be finished. Our Lord's meaning is, "I send you throughout Samaria, Galilee, and Judæa to reap the fruit of the labors of the prophets and John the Baptist. They have sowed, and you have now only to reap."

Some think, as Stier and Alford, that when our Lord said, "other man have

labored," He referred rather to Himself than to the prophets. I am unable to see this. It appears to me a forced and unnatural interpretation. I hold decidedly, with Chrysostom, Cyril, Theophylact, Calvin, Zwingle, Melancthon, Brentius, Lampe, and Poole, that it applies principally to the law and prophets. "If the prophets were not the sowers," says Augustine, "whence had that saying come to the woman, 'I know that Messiah comes?'" Origen says, "Did not Moses and Elias, the sowers, rejoice with the reapers, Peter, James and John, when they saw the glory of the Son of God at the transfiguration?"

Theophylact sees in this verse a strong argument against the heretical view of the Marcionites, Manichees, and others, that the New Testament is contrary to the Old. Here the prophets and apostles are spoken of together as laborers under one common Master in one common field.

The idea propounded by Bucer, that our Lord alludes here to the heathen philosophers as well as the prophets, seems to me unwarrantable and unsafe.

39.--[*Many...Samaritans...believed.*] About the exact nature of the belief mentioned here and in the 41st verse, we have no materials for forming an opinion. Whether it was only an intellectual belief that Christ was the Messiah, or whether it was that true faith of the heart which justifies a sinner before God, we are left to conjecture. The more probable opinion appears to be that it was true faith, though very weak and unintelligent, like that of the apostles themselves. It is a strong confirmation of this view that when Philip, after the day of Pentecost, went down to Samaria and preached Christ, his preaching was received with joy and many were baptized, both men and women. (Acts viii.5-12.) The Gospel was received without prejudice and embraced at once as an acknowledged truth.

[*Because of the woman who testified, etc.*] These words show the importance of merely human testimony to Christ's Gospel. The word of one weak woman was made the instrumental means of belief to many souls. There was nothing remarkable in the woman's word. It contained no elaborate reasoning and no striking eloquence. It was only a hearty, earnest testimony of a believing heart. Yet God was pleased to use it to the conversion of souls. We must never despise the use of means. If the woman had not spoken, the Samaritans would not have been converted. Above all, we must never despise means because of their apparent weakness, feebleness, and inaptness to do good. God can make the weakest instruments powerful to pull down the strongholds of sin and Satan, just as He made David's sling and stone prevail over Goliath.

Theophylact points out that the Samaritan woman's past wicked life was well known to her fellow-citizens, and that their attention must have been aroused by her publicly proclaiming that she had found One who knew her former life, although a stranger. They rightly concluded that He must be no common person.

Melancthon remarks that the belief which resulted from the testimony of a woman in this case is a clear proof that it is not absolutely necessary to

have regular ministerial orders in order to do good to souls, and that episcopal orders are not absolutely needful in order to give effect to the word when spoken.

40.--[*So when...urged him to stay, etc.*] The desire of the Samaritans for instruction is shown in this verse, and the willingness of Christ to assist inquirers is strikingly exhibited. He waits to be entreated. If we have Him not abiding with us, it is because we do not ask Him. The two disciples journeying to Emmaus would have missed a great privilege if they had not said, "Abide with us." (Luke xxiv.29.)

Ferus on this verse remarks the wide difference between the Samaritans and the Gergesenes. The Gergesenes prayed our Lord to "depart" from them, the Samaritans to "tarry" with them. (Matt. viii.34.)

[*He stayed two days.*] We can only suppose that these two days were spent in teaching and preaching the Gospel. One would like to know all that was taught and said in those two days. But it is an instance of the occasional "silences" of Scripture, which every attentive Bible-reader must have noticed. The first thirty years of our Lord's life at Nazareth, the way in which St. Paul spent his time in Arabia, and his employment during his two years' imprisonment in Cæsarea, are similar silences. (Gal. i.17; Acts xxiv.27.)

It is an interesting fact, which has been observed by some writers, that at this very day Nablous and its neighborhood--occupying the site of Samaria and Sychar--are in a more flourishing and prosperous condition than almost any place in Palestine. Capernaum and Chorazin and Bethsaida, which rejected Christ, have almost entirely passed away, while Samaria, which believed and received Him, flourishes still.

41.--[*Many more believed...own word.*] This verse shows the sovereignty of God in saving souls. One is called in one way and another in another. Some Samaritans believed when they heard the woman testify. Others did not believe till they heard Christ Himself. We must be careful that we do not bind down the Holy Ghost to one mode of operation. The experience of saved souls often differs widely. If people are brought to repentance and faith in Christ, we must not be stumbled because they are not all brought in the same way.

Olshausen remarks on this verse, "Here is a rare instance in which the ministry of the Lord produced an awakening on a large scale. Ordinarily we find that a few individuals only were aroused by Him, and that these, like grains of seed scattered here and there, became the germs of a new and higher order of things among the people at large."

42.--[*Now we believe...saying.*] The Greek words so rendered would be translated more literally, "Not any longer because of your saying do we believe."

Calvin thinks that the Greek word here rendered "saying," means literally,

"talk, or talkativeness," and that "the Samaritans appear to boast that they have now a stronger foundation than a woman's tongue." In the only other three places where it is used, it is translated "speech." (Matt. xxvi.73; Mark vii.70; John viii.43.)

[*This...Christ, the Savior of the world.*] The Greek words so rendered would be translated more literally, "This is the Savior of the world, the Christ."

The singular fullness of the confession made by these Samaritans deserves special notice. A more full declaration of our Lord's office as "Savior of the world" is nowhere to be found in the Gospels. Whether the Samaritans clearly understood what they meant when they spoke of our Lord as "the Savior" may be reasonably doubted. But that they saw with peculiar clearness a truth which the Jews were specially backward in seeing--that He had come to be a Redeemer for all mankind and not for the "Jews" only--seems evident from the expression "the world." That such a testimony should have been borne to Christ by a mixed race of semi-heathen origin like the Samaritans, and not by the Jews, is a remarkable instance of the grace of God.

The inference drawn by Calvin from this verse, that "within two days the sense of the Gospel was more plainly taught by Christ at Samaria than He had hitherto taught it at Jerusalem," seems both unwarrantable and needless. Ought we not rather to fix our eyes on the difference between the Jews and Samaritans? Christ's teaching was the same, but the hearts of His hearers were widely different. The Jews were hardened. The Samaritans believed.

Chemnitius, on this verse, thinks that an emphasis is meant to be laid on the Greek word rendered "indeed." Literally it is "truly." He thinks it was used of our Lord in contradistinction to the false Christs and Messiahs who had appeared before Him, as well as to the typical Messiahs and Saviors, such as the Judges.

In leaving the passage, we may well wonder that so many "Samaritans" should at once have believed on our Lord when so few "Jews" ever believed. Our wonder may well be increased when we consider that our Lord worked no miracle on this occasion and that the word was the only instrument used to open the Samaritans' hearts. We see, for one thing, the entire sovereignty of the grace of God. The last are often first and the first last; the most ignorant and unenlightened believe and are saved while the most learned and enlightened continue unbelieving and are lost. We see, for another thing, that it is not miracles and privileges, but grace, which converts souls. The Jews saw scores of mighty miracles worked by our Lord and heard Him preach for weeks and months, and yet, with a few rare exceptions, remained impenitent and hardened. The Samaritans saw no miracles worked at all, and only had our Lord among them for two days, and yet many of them believed. If ever there was clear proof that the grace of the Holy Spirit is the chief thing needed in order to procure the conversion of souls, we have it in the verses we are now leaving.

The allegorical and typical meanings which some writers assign to the Samaritan woman and her history, as related in this chapter, are hardly worth recounting. Some regard the woman as a type of the Jewish synagogue, slavishly bound to the five Books of the Law, and drawn finally by Christ to drink the living water of the Gospel. Some regard the woman as a type of the Gentile nations, for five thousand years committing fornication with heathen idols and at length purged by Christ and casting away their empty waterpot in obedience to Christianity. Some go even further and regard the woman as a prophetic type of things yet to come. They consider her as a type of the Greek Church, which is yet to be brought into the true faith of Christ! These views appear to me at best only fanciful speculations and more likely to do harm than good by drawing men away from the plain practical lessons which the passage contains.