

## MEETING JESUS: A SAMARITAN

Exodus 17:1-7  
John 4:5-42

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February 24, 2008

TEXT: John 4:40-41 “So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word.”

PURPOSE: To encourage us to share the stories of our meetings with Jesus in ways that evoke faith in others.

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Good morning. Just in case you are wondering, I am not the Samaritan woman at the well. She got plenty of attention in the Bible story, and even though she deserved it, her story isn't the whole story.

I know her, I won't deny it. Her name is Azizeh.<sup>1</sup> And almost as long as I knew her, I didn't think all that well of her. Azizeh was trouble. Sure, she had her way with men, but the ones who fell into her web should have known better, at least after the first few. The women of our town would have nothing to do with her. Why do you think she was drawing water from the well at noon that day? She went there at that time every day, because that was when she could be sure none of the other women would be there. But that was back before. All that doesn't matter anymore. Now what matters is the way Jesus made everything different. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

You have to understand, I am a Samaritan. Jesus was a Jew. I don't know if I can explain the prejudice and the rancor that existed between our two peoples. Like most peoples between whom there is bad blood, we were close. Close like Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Close like Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq. Close like them, and dismissive of each other like them. If it hadn't been for the Romans keeping a tight lid on everything, we probably would have set on each other like dogs. We believed in the same God and everything, but we believed differently in that God. We were cousins, ethnically speaking, but Samaritans were of mixed blood, and Jews took such pride in their ethnic purity. It was a difficult accident of political geography that our land, Samaria, lay between two Jewish territories, Galilee to the north, and Judea to the south. If you wanted to get to one from the other without going through Samaria, you'd have to go way out of your way. Plenty of Jews came through our territory, but they would have nothing to do

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<sup>1</sup>This fictional name is taken from the January 2003 Samaritan News; see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritan>.

with us. And that was just fine with us. We thought they were the ones who had abandoned the true religion.

We Samaritans believed strongly in the coming of the Taheb, the Messiah. Especially with Rome making life even more miserable for us than they did for the Jews, we were sure Messiah would come and set things right. So when Azizeh came running into our village that day shouting that she was sure she'd just met Messiah, well, we were curious enough to check the guy out, even though it was that particular woman making the announcement. I was one who didn't right off just because Azizeh was all excited. Although it was pretty obvious that her encounter at the well was more than just another liaison with an unsuspecting man. She was transformed.

I've always been a bit of a skeptic. But I also am someone who, in my own way, was searching. Unsettled, maybe. I questioned what the big deal was about our mountain versus their mountain. I thought their prophets were insightful, even though they weren't included in our holy writings. I didn't say any of this out loud. That would gotten me treated like Azizeh had been treated. Anyway, her manner—it was more than enthusiasm, it was that she had been changed — was enough to rouse me from my midday rest and get me to join the group that went back to the well to meet him.

I have to tell you, Jesus wasn't all that much to look at. And his disciples, well, it was almost funny. They kept their distance from us, like we were lepers. But it was clear that he didn't care whether we were Samaritans or whatever. Right off, I could feel that he regarded us as children of the same heavenly Father. I was as shocked as everyone else when our priest invited him to come and stay with us. Maybe Jesus was our Taheb, our Messiah, but still, he was a Jew, and he had a dozen Jews traveling with him. Where would they stay? We weren't inclined to have Jews in our homes, and they wouldn't dare sleep with us or even share our food.

But Jesus acted as if the old prejudices simply didn't exist. He accepted our priest's invitation, and walked into town beside him, the two talking like they were old friends. The rest of us, Samaritans and disciples alike, had no choice but to follow their lead.

The two days he stayed with us changed everything for me. It started with me changing my opinion of Azizeh. She was no longer a woman who couldn't get along without a man. She was a person whose transformation was contagious. She was a woman with a past that could not be changed, but could be left behind. She spoke in full awareness of what people had thought of her, but what really mattered was what Jesus thought of her, and that had the power to change what we thought of her.

But beyond that, Jesus among us smashed the silly barriers that divided Samaritan from Jew. I spent some time listening to James, one of his disciples, talk about how Jesus had drawn him into his vision of the coming kingdom, and I was so caught up in the story that I forgot that I was listening to a Jew. We were brothers in spirit and truth, that was all. It was amazing that all the distrust and hostility between our two peoples could be turned off simply by ignoring it. Why hadn't we figured that out before Jesus visited us?

The most important thing that happened was even deeper than getting rid of the prejudice. It's how I came to believe that Jesus was Messiah. Even though I had always been a bit uncomfortable with our insisting that the Samaritans had the real truth and the Jews were wrong, I suppose I still assumed that the Messiah would be a Samaritan. I listened to what Jesus was saying, and felt this strange stirring in my soul, but then I walked away and got back into conversation with my doubts. Until the second night he was with us. The people who were already with him had built a big fire in the town square. He was sitting in the firelight, his disciples behind him, Azizeh and the priest beside him. He called us children of his Father, children of Israel, which is what we call ourselves. But then he pushed out past the division between Samaritan and Jew and spoke of all people, even Romans, as God's children. He presented this vision of the coming kingdom of God as a realm where worldly distinctions didn't matter, where all that mattered was love for God and love for each other.

Something in me snapped. I realized how prejudiced I had been, about people in my own village, not just Azizeh; about Jews, about Romans, about pagans in general. I had thought that God was only our Father, not everyone's Father, and that the only way God could become anyone else's Father was for them to become Samaritan. It wasn't just what Jesus said about the kingdom that undid that attitude; it was that it was Jesus saying it. It was something about him. It was,

I realized, that he was not just our Messiah, he truly was the Savior of the world.  
(John 4:42)

After Jesus left, it wasn't easy for us. Some in our village didn't accept him. Many did. It was almost going to start a new division. But we who believed couldn't let that happen. How could his breaking old divisions permit new ones to separate us from our own kin? So those of us who were believers continued to participate in the Samaritan traditions, and to show great respect to those who hadn't accepted Jesus as Messiah. It wasn't always easy. Some of them accused us of being traitors, "Jew-lovers," religious perverts. And we were far from perfectly practicing Jesus' way of loving, but at least we knew the standard he had set— a standard which had started with him accepting us.

It's still not easy, especially after the Romans killed him and we received news that he'd risen from the dead. Our traditions taught that Messiah would come to raise the dead, but we didn't think he'd need to die to raise the rest of us. Certainly not to die the way he did. But believers from Jerusalem came to us— amazing that they cared about Samaritan believers — and convinced us that his dying and rising was all part of God's plan. The saving Jesus accomplishes is that radical— not just saving from the troubles of this life, but saving us from death, and saving us so we can live the way God meant us to live— the way he showed us how to live.

So now I'm part of a small group of people who believe in Jesus. We're Samaritans and Jews, Greeks and even a few Romans who are pretty careful not to let their faith be known in public. I have to tell you, in our world, as divided as it is, it is beyond amazing just to be in a group like ours. But what we have in common is more important than what is different about us: we all were people who were going back to a well that didn't really quench our thirst— whatever that well was, for each one of us: prestige, security, power, religion, you name it. And then Jesus offered us his living water, and everything was different. That's the life I live now, thanks to Azizeh, and thanks to Jesus.