

# The Journey to Samaria

John 4

J. G. Bellett.

Article 38 of 47 **Short Meditations**

(Cavenagh, 1866.)

We are all attracted by the journey which the Prodigal takes from the distant land of his degradation and misery, home to his father's house, in Luke 15. It is a touching picture of the return which a sinner makes under the quickening and conduct of the Spirit, back to God, and then finding in Him a forgiving Father.

There is, however, another and a different journey described in Scripture, the co-relative, as I may call it, of the Prodigal's. I mean the journey of the Father out to the distant land after His prodigal. We read it in John 4.

Jesus who came from the Father in heaven, and represented the Father in this world of sinners, is there seen as making this journey. He goes into defiled Samaria, a figure of this polluted world; for Samaria was as a leper, separated from the place of righteousness, and treated as a thing outside the camp. But there, into that reprobate land, that native land of prodigals, the Lord goes. And He finds a sinner there, one who was still as with the swine in the fields of a stranger, feeding upon husks, unsatisfied.

The journey costs Him sore. He is weary, hungry, thirsty: and in the heat of the day seats Himself where this Prodigal was soon to join Him. And there, in the presence of her need, He at once forgets His own, setting Himself to minister to her, in the patience that love will suffer, and with the skilfulness that love suggests.

He seeks her confidence in the most effectual, gracious manner. He asks her for a cup of cold water, the smallest of all favours known among the children of men. He would make her feel at ease in His presence; and she does so. But attracted by something that more interested her than the thirst of a stranger, *i.e.*, the novelty of the whole circumstance, He at once follows where she, under that attraction, was leading Him.

It is, however, after a Prodigal He has gone, and He can receive her and bless her in no other character. It was the ruined state of lost, revolted sinners He had come from heaven to relieve, and such only He can now have to do with, on the other side of the borders between Judea, the place of the sanctuary, and unclean Samaria.

But this woman of that unclean place, this Prodigal in the distant land, does not as yet know herself. He therefore sets Himself to teach her, to awaken her to her condition. And with what grace He does this. He would do all to spare her feelings, but He cannot spare her sin.

Surely we may say, if the journey which the Prodigal took towards home, in Luke 15, was beautiful, as being in due consistency with his condition as a convicted sinner, beautiful is this journey which the Father takes after the Prodigal in the considerate grace and patient love which give it character from first to last. Blessed is it to see in one of, these journeys, the fruit of the hidden, effectual work of the Spirit in the soul of a sinner, putting him on the road back to God in the only character in which God could receive him — and blessed it is to see in the other of these journeys, that grace which

acts as from itself and in sovereignty, seeking and saving that which was lost, in the exercise of the most patient, skilful love, that was tender as far as faithfulness admitted.

And here let me add, for it is happy and edifying to be able to do so, that these two journeys, the one of the seeking Saviour, the other of the returning sinner, end in the same place, though they were taken as from opposite points, one to, the other from, the distant land. *Both end in the joy of the Father's house* — with, however, this distinguishing excellence in John 4 over Luke 15, that it is rather the joy of the household that is seen in Luke 15, but the joy of *the Father* (of the Lord Jesus, the witness of the Father in this world of sinners, as we noticed before, and as He Himself tells us) that is seen in John 4. "I have meat to eat which ye know not of," are words which bespeak the joy of the Divine bosom over one that was dead but alive again, that was lost but now found; and which, as the Lord Himself intimates, lay quite beyond the measure of either disciples here, or angels in heaven.

But there is one feature which, above all others, gives the journey of the Father distinguishing excellence above that of the Prodigal, and it is this — that He had to prepare the Prodigal for His reception, while on the contrary, the Prodigal finds Him fully prepared for his. — This exceedeth.

The Prodigal, at the end of his journey in Luke 15, finds the Father quite prepared for him. Heart and house had a welcome for him. All his expectations were exceeded. His best thoughts had not measured the love that met him. Because of his return, the house was got ready at once to fill itself with a joy, the like of which it had never tasted or celebrated before.

The Father, however, in John 4, experiences something very different from this. As we have seen, the Lord Jesus has to prepare the poor prodigal Samaritan for His reception. He carried with Him the blessing into the distant land, but there He finds that He must get the heart and the conscience of His elect one ready for it. She was indisposed to admit it. She was not only ignorant of her need of it, but struggled with that conviction that was letting her know she could not do without it; and He has, in the lengthened and unwearying patience of grace, to sit over a rugged, reluctant material, and mould it into a vessel fit for the treasure He was bringing it.

Surely, I may again say, this exceedeth; and if the journey which the sinner takes under the quickening and guidance of the Spirit is beautiful, this journey which the Saviour takes, in the riches of His grace and the services of His love, is still more beautiful — or if we would rather leave them uncomparated, we may let them lie together under our eye and before our heart, more attractive than the journeys which the starry glories of the sky perform in their appointed and mysterious orbits.

But how is grace magnified! All is grace — the house of the Father ready with a welcome for the Prodigal on his return, and the service of the Father (as we know by the Son and Spirit) getting the Prodigal ready for the house!

Do we receive grace in each of these its ways, I ask? Some may say, I know I am debtor to grace for the mind to return to God, and that teaches me to know myself a sinner, enabling me "to come to myself," like the Prodigal. Is it, then, I say, more to be doubted, that His house is ready to give you a welcome, than that He Himself (by His Son, His Word, and His Spirit) was ready to give you a mind to seek it? Surely we may say, the grace that quickened us in the distant land of our willing exile, and made us to "come to ourselves," and learn our need of Him, the grace of that effectual, hidden work of the Spirit, applying truth and Jesus to our conscience, was of richer cost, and deeper, more marvellous character, than the grace that will open the home of glory to us, to receive us for ever. If we have known Him as in the distant land where our sins once brought Him, we may surely trust that He will know us in His own house where His grace is to bring us.

And there is still another thing supplied by the fourth of John to the fifteenth of Luke. I have already noticed, that in Luke, we witness the joy of the *household* after the Prodigal had actually returned home, and the household had been summoned and assembled — in John we read the fuller, deeper joy of the *Father* while He was still all alone, ere He had presented the lost and found one to the household.

But not only so; the joy of the Prodigal in John 4, is of another character from what it is in Luke 15. In the latter, it is the silent satisfaction of the heart, in thankful, believing, simple acceptance of blessing, the returned child sitting at the feast while the household make merry — in the former, it is the active joy of a soul perfectly in freedom, seeking, in somewhat of the grace she had received, to make others as happy as herself. And this, it may be, exceedeth also — or, again I say, if we like not to compare them, let the silent satisfaction of the Prodigal, and the active joy of the Samaritan, together tell us of the completeness of the blessedness which God prepares for us.

All that the Prodigal brought back with him, when he furnished himself for his long journey, was his sin, and the confession of it, and the ruin it had wrought for him; and all that the Samaritan was while Jesus sat with her, was a convicted sinner. But this was enough. The Father was on the neck of his convicted child, though still in rags and misery; and Jesus was revealing His glory, as He still sat in grace on one stone with her, to the woman of Samaria.

How these two precious scriptures combine, and yet complete each other! The two journeys, with the springs of them and the issues of them, let us into the glories and the ways of God in the Gospel of His grace and our salvation. "It is easy enough to us," as one said years ago; "but it cost Him everything." Wondrous, mighty fact! The rich One became poor, that the poor might be rich; the full One emptied Himself, that the empty might be filled; He that was the highest, stooped that we might be exalted; the Eternal Life was under death's dominion, that dead sinners might live for ever!