



HOW TO ENTER THE EXCITING MISSION FIELD OF “SAMARIA”

THE GREAT

One of my early mentors in ministry was an elderly African-American man named Theodore Roosevelt Adams, better known to our family and congregation as Teddy. Teddy courageously entered our racist Boston neighborhood to be a part of our lives and church community. Every Wednesday for nearly 10 years he shared supper with us in our home before midweek Bible study. He was present for the birth of our firstborn child . . . and then the second. Our children adopted him as their grandfather.

Almost every week, Teddy joined our family on an excursion out of the city. During those trips, Teddy frequently offered wise advice on raising our young family. But mostly Teddy mentored me around the supper table. He challenged me to consider racial problems in our society, problems that I—as a part of the predominant race in the United States—had the luxury of brushing aside. In those informal sessions, Teddy gave me an invaluable perspective that I would have never known if he hadn't journeyed into our world.

It took courage and intentionality for Teddy to enter our community. Growing up working in the cotton fields of Louisiana, he often encountered racism. He told us of the time he attended church with a white friend and had to sit in a closet because he was black. No wonder

OMISSION

BY GREGG DETWILER

SAMARIA MINISTRY REQUIRES US TO TAKE INTENTIONAL STEPS OUT OF OUR CULTURAL COMFORT ZONES.



he developed an intense hatred toward white people. Mercifully, God changed his heart. And so it was that he came to us, hobbling on crippled feet down the main street of our neighborhood, receiving racist slurs, glares, and on one occasion a physical assault from a neighborhood youth. Teddy was reaching out to his “Samaria.” To explain what I mean by that, I need to take you to the beginning of the church.

MISSION: SAMARIA

In Acts 1:8, Jesus gives His final instructions to His disciples—and by extension to us—just before He ascends into heaven:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Note the four spheres of ministry Jesus commissions His disciples to engage in as His witnesses: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of earth. These spheres correspond to areas of our ministry today. *Jerusalem* ministry reaches those in our towns or neighborhoods who are culturally like us. *Judea* ministry applies to people who are culturally like us but who live in the communities surrounding our Jerusalem. Ministry to *the ends of the earth* involves going or sending others to distant parts of the globe as cross-cultural witnesses of Christ.

But what is *Samaria* ministry? In Jesus’ day, Samaria was the region just north of Jerusalem that the Jews intentionally bypassed because those who lived there were culturally, ethnically, and religiously different from the Jews. Our Samaritans, if we are Caucasian suburbanites, might be the inner city or other communities that we rarely visit. Our Samaritans might be those who live around us but who are racially or culturally different from us—perhaps they dress in foreign attire, eat unfamiliar foods, speak in thick accents, or practice Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, or another religion. Their neighborhoods may not be comfortable for us, but they are places to which we are called.

Yet in taking the gospel to the world, we often try to leapfrog over Samaria. Many churches have ministries to their Jerusalems, Judeas, and the ends of the earth, but far fewer have a ministry to the racially or ethnically different neighborhoods nearby. Samaria ministry has become *the great omission*.

How do we recover the practice of Samaria ministry? Jesus’ visit to Samaria recorded in John 4 points to principles that will help us begin.

BE INTENTIONAL.

First, Samaria ministry requires intentionality. In Jn. 4:4, we read, “Now [Jesus] had to go through Samaria.” This “had to” visit was not a geographical necessity. True, the shortest route from Jerusalem to Galilee cut straight through Samaritan territory, but many Jews

would not travel that way because they regarded any contact with Samaritans as defiling. Jesus’ mission, however, required an intentional break from common Jewish practice. He “had to go” through Samaria because it was an integral part of His kingdom work.

Samaria ministry still requires us to take intentional steps out of our cultural comfort zones. There are three ways we can do this: We can go to our Samaria, we can bring folks from our Samaria into our world, or we can do both.

Sometimes it only takes a small effort to initiate relationships with people in our Samaritans. Of the 300 students who attend our daughter’s preschool, more than 100 are from Asian-Indian immigrant families. Most are high-caste Hindus. On several occasions we have invited one of Cherise’s Indian classmates to our home. Each time the child’s parents have responded with astonishment and gratitude. Our invitations are nearly always reciprocated, opening opportunities for us to witness in our Samaria.

CROSS BARRIERS.

On His way through Samaria, Jesus stopped at a well and asked an openly immoral woman to draw Him a drink (v. 7). When Jesus, a *holy Jewish man*, entered an in-depth exchange with a *sinful Samaritan woman*, He crossed at least four barriers: a geographic barrier, a cultural barrier, a gender barrier, and a sin barrier.

If we want to minister to our Samaritans, we also must be willing to cross barriers. Sometimes these barriers are small. For example, when our family invites our Hindu friends over for a meal, we avoid serving meat because they are vegetarians. Other times crossing barriers is more life altering. When my wife and I moved from the Midwest to Boston, everything was different. We went from the wide-open spaces of Kansas



IDEAS FOR SAMARIA MINISTRY

Engaging with those who are culturally and ethnically different from us reflects the multicultural nature of God's kingdom. But how do we get started? Here are some suggestions.

- Invite an international student or immigrant family to your home.
- Accept an invitation to their home.
- Befriend a coworker or fellow student from a different ethnic background.
- Volunteer to help speakers of other languages learn English.
- Eat at authentic ethnic restaurants and interact with the staff.
- Shop at ethnic grocery stores.
- Attend ethnic churches you may not normally visit.
- Build friendships with Christians from a different cultural group.
- Volunteer in a refugee resettlement ministry in your area.
- Teach your international friends about American holidays.
- Ask your international friends to teach you how to cook their food and to speak their language.
- Learn how to say hello in various foreign languages and practice greeting others in their language.
- When appropriate, advocate for multicultural expressions in your local church:
 - Read and provide the Scriptures in different languages
 - Use breads from various cultures during communion
 - Ask international members to pray in their mother tongues
 - Pray for the countries of your members
 - Create signs in various languages
 - Decorate with flags from the countries of your members
 - Offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes
 - Offer foreign-language classes
 - Start a refugee support ministry
 - Provide immigration legal resources

—Gregg Detwiler

and Wisconsin to the hemmed-in, densely populated streets of Boston's oldest neighborhood; from single-family ranch houses with private driveways to multiple-family brick tenements with insufficient street parking; from the homogenous culture of Midwestern towns to the soul-stretching cosmopolitan cultures of a big city.

As we cross barriers in our personal lives, we must also cross them in our churches. Many of the multiethnic congregations our family has participated in have welcomed

people of different cultures by inviting them to pray, read the Scriptures, and offer special music in their mother tongues. Simple barrier-crossing expressions such as these go a long way toward helping people feel at home in our churches.

EXPECT TRANSFORMATION.

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman transformed her. He was unlike any man she had ever known. The other men in her life had used and degraded her, but Jesus came ⇨

to her in purity, not to get but to give. By asking her for a drink, He bestowed on her a dignity she likely had never experienced from a man, let alone a Jewish man. As the bucket descended into the well, Jesus' transformation descended into the depths of her soul.

But the transformation was not meant for her alone. As Jesus was speaking with her, His disciples returned from a nearby town where they had gone to buy food. They "were surprised to find him talking with a woman" (v. 27). Part of the reason Jesus had to go to Samaria, it seems, was to transform His disciples' attitudes about who was worth ministering to.

That's not all. After her conversation with Jesus, the woman left her water jar and returned to town. "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did," she exclaimed to the townspeople. "Could this be the Christ?" (v. 29). The result of her testimony was astounding:

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. . . . So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is *the Savior of the world.*"

—vv. 39-42, emphasis mine

All this occurred because Jesus traveled to Samaria that day. Similarly, when we enter Samaria ministry we may see multiple levels of transformation.

The 10 years Teddy engaged with our family and church changed us in many ways. But it was not until Teddy's funeral that we saw the full beauty of the transformation he had brought. In those days the seniors in our congregation included eight Italian women and Teddy. These women had been raised in Boston's North End, a com-

munity steeped in prejudice against people of color. Yet at Teddy's funeral these women stood with tears in their eyes and praised God with trembling voices for their beloved Teddy. They had been transformed—as were we all—because Teddy was willing to go to his Samaria.

USE GOD'S RESOURCES.

The transformation that occurred in Samaria required supernatural resources. We rely on these same provisions from God to minister in our Samarias.

The first supernatural resource is the living water. Jesus told the Samaritan woman,

If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. —v. 10

Nothing else could transform her. She was both a perpetrator and a victim of sin, and only Jesus—the embodiment of the living water—could cleanse the stain of her sins and heal her wounds. Only He could fully satisfy her soul.

The disciples also needed Jesus' living water. They needed to be cleansed of their attitudes about women and Samaritans so they could follow Jesus in ministry.

Today, we too need the Lord's continual application of His transforming water to our hearts and souls. As Jesus pours out His living water we experience the overflow of His presence that He promised in Jn. 7:38: "He who believes in me . . . from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water" (NAS). Out of this overflow, we are able to respond to the needs of others.

The second supernatural resource we need for Samaria ministry is the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus told His disciples,

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised. . . . You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in

Jerusalem, and in all Judea and *Samaria*, and to the ends of the earth.

—Acts 1:4,8, emphasis mine

The early disciples had to wait for the Holy Spirit to come to them before they could minister in Samaria and elsewhere, but we have access to the already outpoured Holy Spirit. His supernatural power and guidance equip us for a ministry that does not come naturally for us. It was not *natural* for Teddy to come to our racist Boston neighborhood, yet the Holy Spirit gave him the courage to go to his Samaria and offer Jesus' living water to the people he encountered there.

The Samaritans in John 4 came to see that Jesus was indeed the Savior of the world. As we follow Jesus into our modern Samarias we too will witness Him becoming more widely known as the Savior of the world. We cannot leapfrog over Samaria; it is a vital part of our mission. ☺



about the author

GREGG DETWILER is the multicultural ministries coordinator at Emmanuel Gospel Center, an interdenominational organization in Boston that nurtures urban churches and communities.

His passions include the Boston Red Sox and biking the back roads of New England.