

# WHEN ANGELS GASP

## Understanding the Samaritan | The Jericho Road (Part 4)

Text: Luke 10:25-34

Some years ago, my friend Nicole found herself stranded along a lonely road in Northern California with a flat tire. A teenager at the time, she had not yet been instructed in how to change a flat. Remarkably, she did not have a phone with her. So she just got out of her car, stood next to it, and probably expressed with body language what she was feeling inside -- helpless.

In time, a car came over the hill and her heart surged. But the car whizzed by as if she did not exist. A little while later, another motorist zoomed up, slowed, gawked at her, and then kept on going. She stood there for a long time, as car after car passed by. And, then, sometime after she'd given up hope, one car pulled over onto the shoulder of the road behind her. A man in blue jeans and a white t-shirt got out, slammed his door, and began walking toward her. As he got closer, Nicole saw that he was unshaven and had arms rippling with muscles. And that's when her hopelessness turned into panic. "Oh, no, what if he hurts me?" She was a young girl. He was a strong man. There was no one else around. Her condition could easily go from bad to worse.

But it didn't. The man was polite. He got out the jack and the spare and changed the flat tire. At the end, he wiped his greasy hands on his trousers, stuck out his right hand and said, "Is there anything else I can do for you?" The girl said, "No, but thank you so much for stopping and helping me. My name is Nicole Amend." The man grinned and said, "My pleasure, Nicole. I'm Bruce Springsteen."

I gasped when I first heard that story – and for several reasons. I gasped with relief that my young friend had been rescued, because she matters to me. I gasped with gratitude at this story because it made me think of times when I've been in pinches where had it not been for the actions of some kind stranger, I'd have been sunk. But, most of all, I gasped with awe because of WHO that stranger was who stopped and stooped to help Nicole – a Grammy award-winning Rockstar worth half a billion dollars.

On the surface, this week's episode of Jericho Road, seems to be a story a bit like this... only MORE so. There's this person stranded alongside of a road, but his problem is much worse than a flat tire. **A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. He's been robbed and beaten and left half-dead. (Luke 10:30).** Then two separate people come motoring up, each of whom you might expect to pull over because they are religious, morally-inclined people. **A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. (Luke 10:31-32)**

It looks a lot worse for this guy than for my friend, Nicole. He is literally naked and bleeding to death in a ditch. When all of a sudden, someone else shows up, pulls over, gets out of his late model Donkeymobile, and begins to walk toward the stranded person. But "Oh, no... He's a SAMARITAN." As many of you know, Jews and Samaritans did not get along. Jews were in the majority and Samaritans were a minority and centuries of ethnic, religious and cultural disagreements separated them. Jews looked down on Samaritans for many reasons. They were the product of mixed marriages with the Babylonians. They chose to worship God on Mount Gerazim instead of on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Samaritans dressed differently, listened to different music, hung out in different neighborhoods. Jews generally avoided Samaritans and when interacting with them often treated them badly. Pick your most polarized groups of people today (we've got a lot of them) and you've got some sense of the gulf between Jews and Samaritans. They'd long since stopped even trying to understand each other or work together.

So, when you read, **But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was... (Luke 10:33)** do you think that's good or bad news for the Jewish guy? Bad news. If there was a High School Yearbook category for "Least Likely to Pull Over and Help a Jewish Guy," this person would have to be the winner. It's really important that we get this part. Jesus is trying to make it very clear that the person in this third car does not have to pull over. He does not have to do anything nice. In fact, given the ways Jews have typically behaved toward Samaritans, there's good reason for this Samaritan to walk over and do this Jew further harm.

And, yet -- as in so many of Jesus' stories -- the least likely thing actually happens and it is so outrageous that it had to have make the Jews in Jesus' original audience gasp. Jesus goes on to say that the Samaritan, **when he saw him...** Think how many problems and conflicts in our families, workplaces, and country today arise because we are driving so fast and hard or are so well-sealed in our perceptual cars that it's hard for us to truly "see" other people... to "see" the wounds each of us bears... to "see" the fears and hopes behind behaviors... to "see" that what we have in common with those we're fighting is greater than what separates us. How transforming could it be if all of stopped and truly "saw" each person God sees along the Jericho Road?

Jesus says that, that when the Samaritan saw the Jewish man, **...he took pity (*splanchnizomai*) on him.** The Greek word for "pity" there does not mean: "Awww... too bad for you. I hope you figure out your problem." It describes a feeling of compassionate mercy that starts in your gut and moves you to help with the problem. So, **He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine** – a costly form of salve and disinfectant. **Then he put the man on his own donkey** – thereby exposing himself to even greater risk because he could no longer ride away if further thieves showed up. **And he brought him to an inn** – more on that next week -- **and took care of him. (Luke 10:33-34).**

I hope we can really take this in. We're given a picture of someone who does not HAVE to help... who has good reasons NOT to help... but who sees, feels, and acts in a way that transforms the life of another. [#SLIDE A]It's a picture of Seven-Fold Grace. In the Bible, when God wants to suggest a picture of wholeness and the fulfillment of his good intentions, he describes it in patterns of seven. Just Google "sevens in the Bible" and you'll see what I mean.

So, let me pause here, make one observation, and bring us to a close. It is really easy to read this story and reduce it to a simple moral lesson: *"Look what this guy did. I should try to be more of a Good Samaritan toward other people. Maybe I could do more good deeds."* That's what the term "a Good Samaritan" has come to mean in popular culture, right? It means "a doer of good deeds." It would be great if all of us did more good deeds. It would be especially good if we did more of them toward people in that other tribe, as this parable suggests. But here's what I want to stress before letting you go: Good deeds is not what this stunning story is about. This parable is not a moralistic tale designed to help us dial up our civility or charity a little bit. Jesus tells this story to reach our gut and transform our way of seeing and feeling and acting toward other people. Because this story is an invitation to understand HIM.

In this picture of seven-fold compassion, mercy, and grace Jesus is picturing the extravagance by which God loves. Think about this with me. The people of Israel had treated GOD the way they treated Samaritans. They had either ignored or rejected his ways for centuries. They had murdered his prophets. They had taken his magnificent vision for human flourishing and the commission he'd given them to bring that light to others, and they'd turned it into a little moral checklist they could manage to make themselves feel righteous. And, at this very moment, when the Christ is sitting in their midst, Luke tells us that the pharisees were plotting Jesus' destruction (Luke 20:20). Tell me, should God, should Jesus, have had any compassion on those people?

And yet, even as he sat there with an expert in the law trying to trap him, God was going to extravagant, outrageous lengths, for their salvation. The ultimate Rockstar, a being of infinite talent and wealth, had shown up in bluejeans and a t-shirt along the Jericho Road to help broken humanity. The glorious God of the Universe was in the process of stopping, stooping, and staining his hands for the sake of those who didn't even SEE who He was. Though they treated him like an enemy, Jesus was carrying them on the donkey of his teaching toward the Cross. There he would pay a supreme price to provide them – and any of us who put our trust in him -- with forgiveness and a place of healing at God's inn. It must have made the angels gasp.

Let me say in closing, that I know we're living through a season where a lot of us feel like we're on our last gasp. We've got compassion fatigue. Under normal conditions, just remaining compassionate and merciful to my own family members, co-workers or Packers fans challenges me! Now we've got around-the-clock, explosive struggles over

issues of law and justice, politics and the election, home schooling and COVID response. Months ago, a lot of us felt a spurt of energy to rise to these challenges. But they haven't relented. The shouting and bad behavior and countervailing values to be sorted through and managed have worn me down.

I've found it hard to pull off the road to serve others, instead of passing by on the other side. It's been hard to truly see and feel and act constructively toward those whose convictions or experience are so different from mine. With all that I've got on my plate, I don't have it in myself to do a whole lot more good for people who've suffered, much less toward people who view me as an enemy. I can't be guilted into doing that. I won't be pushed in that direction because it's politically correct. I doubt you will either.

I think there's only one way we are going to find the capacity for compassion and mercy so needed in our time. It will be because JESUS gives it to us. It will be because the GOD Samaritan has in his heart what all of us need. This is the hope around which a worldwide communion of Christian disciples gathers today. Come now to the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ask him for and receive today the grace that all of us need.