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Introduction

One of the amazing things about the Bible is that you can be reading a familiar passage and suddenly the words seem to leap off the page and hit you between the eyes. All at once the significance of what you are reading bursts unexpectedly into your consciousness, and you become aware that God is speaking to you in a profound way.

It is rather like one of those grand firework displays. There is a bang, a burst of light, and coloured stars begin shooting in all directions. *Then* another, and another, until the whole sky is lit up. All you can do is stand back and watch in amazement. So it is with these moments of revelation, of spiritual illumination, of knowing something you never knew before. Your eyes are opened to a truth that was previously hidden; that which was obscure becomes plain; and it is not something you are making happen. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, taking the truth of God and making it known to you through the words of scripture. As one truth dawns, another opens up before you in the incredible unfolding process of spiritual awareness.

I enjoyed one such moment some years ago when I was reading through John chapter 4. I came to the passage in the course of a reading scheme I was following at the time, and I arrived there with little expectation, having read the story of the woman at the well many times before. I was not expecting to receive anything new, merely to be reminded of familiar truths. Then I came to verse 6, and the fireworks began: 'Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.'

In a flash I saw the tremendous significance of these simple words and realised something quite staggering in its implications. *Jesus was doing nothing.* He was having a rest, taking a break, giving

himself a breather. Sitting there on the edge of the well, he was pausing and giving himself permission to stop and simply to be.

Then, just as quickly, the thought came to me that *everything that happens in this story happens because Jesus was doing nothing*. The fact that he is resting, taking some time out, is what gives him the opportunity to ‘waste’ time with the Samaritan woman who comes to the well while he is sitting there. Because of that life-giving conversation, not only is her life changed but the whole Samaritan town experiences revival. None of this is premeditated or planned. It is a purely spontaneous event, dependent on the fact that Jesus is doing nothing.

While I was still trying to get my head around this second insight, a third suddenly arrived. *We can learn to work and minister as Jesus did, from a place of rest*. Christian ministry need not be a matter of striving to make things happen or of straining to achieve our goals through the sweat of our brow. We can learn to work together with God just as Jesus did, for this was no idle moment; rather, it was a moment of communion, of sensing what the Father was doing and of responding accordingly. We can learn to co-labour with God, to collaborate with his Spirit and work in a way that is both efficient and effective. The work is not ours; it is his. If we slow down and take time to listen, he will guide us so that we can share in what he is doing. We can learn to live, to work and to minister to others from a place of resting in God.

I continued to ponder this verse over the next few weeks and months, and to develop my thoughts around the five headings you will find in this book. I have road-tested the material many times in seminars and retreats, and there has always been a good response. People seem to recognise this as something they already knew deep down inside but perhaps did not dare articulate. I continue to read around the subject to gain a broader understanding and I am continually reflecting on my own experience in the light of what I am sharing here, to see if it really does work. I think it does. I offer

my thoughts to you with the prayer that they may liberate you into a healthier and more fruitful way of serving God.

The Evangelical Alliance (an umbrella organisation for many churches and organisations in the United Kingdom) met in September 2008 to address what it called a 'crisis in leadership' in the church in Britain. As well as an ageing leadership and a lack of emerging younger leaders, it noted that there is a depletion of leaders, because many drop out through exhaustion and depression.

This certainly concurs with my own observations. It is my privilege to work with church leaders, missionaries and key lay people in different parts of the world. 'Exhaustion' is a common word used, and 'tiredness' a number one problem for many. 'Burn-out' is something we are familiar with as a potential threat and, for some, a personal reality. I do not claim to have all the answers and I still struggle myself in some of these areas, but I believe that learning to work and minister in the way that Jesus did must be part of the answer.

So come and sit by the well for a while. Take some time out to reflect on how you are living and working. Watch Jesus and see how he does it. Listen to what the Spirit may be saying to you deep within, at the centre of your being; and maybe, just maybe, God will give you some insights that will change your life and sustain your ministry over the long haul.

It's helpful to think of life
as a journey



– 1 –

Jesus on a journey

The context of the story we are looking at in John 4:1–43 is found in Jesus’ decision to leave Judea and return to Galilee. It appears that, in this early part of his public ministry, he is being particularly effective and that many new disciples are being baptised. News of this has reached the Pharisees and, aware of a potential backlash from these religious conservatives, Jesus makes a strategic decision to return to his homeland in the north. The time will come when he clashes head-on with these powerful religious figures but this is not the time for confrontation. Rather, he chooses to withdraw to the quieter shores of Galilee, away from the spotlight, to where his fledgling group of disciples can be nurtured without too much negative attention.

So we find Jesus on the road again, as we so often see him in the Gospels. Walking with his disciples, crisscrossing the countryside from place to place, provided him with many natural opportunities for developing friendship with them, for informal teaching and for sharing life together. I’m sure he enjoyed these journeys and the camaraderie that grew between them as they travelled.

This particular journey was problematic for any devout and conscientious Jew, however. The easiest and quickest route was to pass through Samaria, but that might mean having to make contact with people whom they despised. The Samaritans were descended from Jews who had not been deported during the time of the Assyrian exile, but had intermarried with foreigners and adopted a syncretistic form of worship. They were considered by devout Jews to be a mixed race, and religiously impure. The hostility

was mutual and Jewish travellers were not always welcomed in Samaritan villages. Consequently, most Jewish travellers chose to take a longer route, which meant crossing the River Jordan in order to bypass Samaria, and only crossing back when they were safely beyond Samaritan presence.

What is surprising on this journey is that Jesus deliberately chooses to travel through Samaria. 'Now he *had to* go through Samaria,' writes John (4:4, italics mine), using a word that suggests a strong sense of necessity. We shall return to the significance of this later, simply noting at this point that his decision would have caused consternation and apprehension among his disciples, but they trust his judgment and the journey begins. Probably early in the morning, just as the sun rises, they take to the road, hoping to make as much progress as possible while the day is cool. By midday they have reached the Samaritan village of Sychar and stop to rest by the well. After some discussion, the disciples head off into the village to buy food while Jesus remains at the well.

This, then, is the background to the journey that Jesus is making in John 4. However, we know that John is the most intuitive of the Gospel writers, and every word he uses seems to be filled with deeper significance. I think we are justified, therefore, in seeing beyond the physical journey that Jesus was making into the spiritual journey in which he was also engaged—the journey that brought him to earth, would take him to the cross, and would climax eventually in his resurrection and his triumphant return to heaven itself.

Theologian Anselm Grun speaks of Jesus as the 'divine traveller'. 'He comes down from heaven to travel with us human beings and time and again to be our guest,' he writes.¹ It reminds us of the journey of incarnation with which John begins his Gospel. 'The Word became flesh,' he says, 'and made his dwelling among us' (1:14). This theme is a constant backdrop to the events that John records and the mystery that the opponents of Jesus could not

understand—who he was and where he was from. Jesus himself, however, was never in doubt about his origin, his mission and his eventual destination.

He was aware that he had come down from heaven to bring light into the world (John 3:13, 19) and to bear witness to the truth (18:37). He was conscious that he had been sent by God (8:42) to do his will (6:38), and not to condemn the world but to save it (3:17). This would mean laying down his life, which is why he declared himself to be the bread of life. ‘For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven,’ he said, ‘and gives life to the world’ (6:33). Thus the journey would inevitably lead to suffering and to the cross. He had only a short time to accomplish the Father’s will (7:33) before the path of obedience would lead him heavenwards again (13:1, 3). Thus we see him preparing his disciples for his departure with the heartbreaking words, ‘I am going away’ (see 8:21; 14:28).

The bigger journey that Jesus was making is best summed up in his own words to the disciples in the upper room: ‘I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father’ (16:28). This is the journey that Jesus made for our salvation, and it is helpful to ponder its sacrificial nature as we glimpse him sitting by the well, pausing for a brief respite on the way. Henri Nouwen has aptly called it ‘the descending way of Jesus’, a downward direction that he chose over and over again as he followed the Father’s will: ‘God has descended to us human beings to become a human being with us; and once among us, descended to the total dereliction of one condemned to death.’²

Such a journey stands in sharp contrast to the approach of most of us. We desire to be ‘upwardly mobile’, to climb the ladder of success, get on in the world and find recognition and fame. Even Christian ministry can be seen in these terms—moving from a small church to a larger one, working our way to the top of the organisation, creating a name for ourselves, growing in influence

and reputation. Not many want to bury themselves in the hard places of the world where there is little outward success and few know or even care what we do. Yet we are called to have the same attitude of mind that Jesus had, which the apostle Paul so wonderfully describes for us in Philippians 2:5–11.

This passage seems to have been an early Christian hymn, perhaps the first Christmas carol, and it vividly portrays the true nature of the journey that brought Jesus to the well at Sychar that day. Whether or not it was composed by Paul himself is unclear, but it sums up accurately his own understanding of the downward way of Jesus. We can see it in verses 6–8 as a journey of seven descending steps.

- Step 1, ‘Who, being in very nature God...’: The journey begins in heaven where, as God the Son, Jesus shares equality with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Here he is worshipped and adored, sharing the glory of heaven and possessing all the attributes of God, such as omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence.
- Step 2, ‘... did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing...’: The journey gets underway as he willingly divests himself of his heavenly glory, choosing to lay aside some of his divine prerogatives and privileges. Theologians are divided as to the extent of the self-emptying that took place, but clearly it involved a significant and costly letting go of what was his by right.
- Step 3, ‘... taking the very nature of a servant...’: Here we see how Jesus steps into the role that the Father has assigned for him as the true Servant of the Lord, predicted by the prophets, such as Isaiah in the Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13—53:12). He willingly adopts the disposition of a servant, choosing the Father’s will before his own and entering our world ‘not... to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45).

- Step 4, ‘... being made in human likeness’: Now we reach the deepest mystery of the incarnation and the virgin birth—how it is that God could become a man. What we do know is that the divine life is ‘contracted to a span’ (to use Charles Wesley’s telling phrase) in the womb of Mary, so that when the child is born he is both fully human and divine, able to bear the name Immanuel, meaning ‘God with us’.
- Step 5, ‘And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself...’: Having become one of us, the Son of God is now subject to all the laws of human growth and development. The omnipotent one becomes a helpless baby, dependent on others for survival. The omniscient one must learn how to talk, how to count, how to write. The omnipresent one must learn to walk and is limited in time and space, travelling on foot from place to place like the rest of humankind. He is a Jew like other Jews, known and recognised by his name (Jesus), his place of birth (of Nazareth), and his father’s occupation (the carpenter’s son). This is the point at which we meet him at Jacob’s well.
- Step 6, ‘... and became obedient to death...’: Hidden away in the backwater that was Nazareth for most of his life, Jesus eventually begins his public ministry, but always with a single aim in mind—to do the Father’s will. Obedience is at the heart of his servanthood and there are no limits to his compliance. He knows that the journey will take him to the cross, so when the time comes he sets his face towards Jerusalem with a steely determination that frightens those around him (Mark 10:32–34). No one will take his life from him; he will lay it down of his own volition, because this is the charge given to him by the Father (John 10:17–18).
- Step 7, ‘...even death on a cross!’: There are many ways to die but the path of obedience takes Jesus to a shameful and agonising death, in which he experiences the rejection, hatred and hostility of his enemies, as well as the wrath of God, as he embraces to himself the just punishment for the sins of the whole world. The

journey will take him to the grave, but this lowest point will be the triumphant turning point. Having faithfully dealt with sin and conquered Satan, he can now return victoriously to heaven, his journey over: 'Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (vv. 9–11).

As we consider the journey Jesus made, we can only respond with love and gratitude that he was willing to go to such lengths to save us. Like the shepherd who goes out over the mountains in the dark of night to find the one sheep that is missing, he gladly set out on this most amazing journey of all, that he might find each one of us and bring us back to the Father.

As we watch him sitting by the well, having a well-deserved rest, we see beyond the immediate strain of the journey from Judea to Galilee. We gaze upon one who has left the glories of heaven and, in a few short years, will be on his way to a despised and lonely death at Calvary. And our hearts are filled with adoration, for we know that he walks this path of obedience for our sakes, so that we may have eternal life.