This is part two of a three-part series on the apostle James. Click here to read part one. –GTY Staff

You’re probably familiar with the concept of a “no-go zone”—that part of town one would be wise to avoid, especially at night. Often they are areas dominated by gang activity, racial and religious tensions, and crime syndicates. Ancient Israel had its own no-go zone—Samaria.

It’s in the context of that zone that we get our best glimpse of why James and John were known as the Sons of Thunder. In spite of popular wisdom, Jesus planned to pass through Samaria on His way to Jerusalem for the final Passover, which He knew would culminate in His death, burial, and resurrection. Luke writes,

When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51-53)

It was significant that Jesus chose to travel through Samaria. Even though the shortest route from Galilee to Jerusalem went right through Samaria, most Jews traveling between those two places deliberately took a route that required them to travel many miles out of the way through the barren desert of Perea—requiring them to cross the Jordan twice—just so that they could avoid Samaria.

The Samaritans were the mixed-race offspring of Israelites from the Northern Kingdom. When Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, the most prominent and influential people in their tribes were taken into captivity, and the land was resettled with pagans and foreigners who were loyal to the Assyrian king (2 Kings 17:24–34). Poor Israelites who remained in the land intermarried with those pagans.

In turn, they developed a religion that blended elements of truth and paganism. “They feared the Lord and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile” (2 Kings 17:33). In other words, they still claimed to worship Jehovah as God (and ostensibly they accepted the Pentateuch as Scripture), but they founded their own priesthood, built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, and devised a sacrificial system of their own making. In short, they made a new religion based in large part on pagan traditions.

Of course, the Jews regarded the Samaritans as a mongrel race and their religion as a mongrel religion. That is why, during the time of Christ, such pains were taken to avoid all travel through Samaria. The entire region was deemed unclean.

But in this instance, Jesus’ face was set for Jerusalem, and as He had done before (John 4:4), He chose the more direct route through Samaria. Along the way, He and His followers would need places to eat and spend the night. Since the party traveling with Jesus was fairly large, He sent
messengers ahead to arrange accommodations.

Because it was obvious that Jesus was headed for Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and the Samaritans were of the opinion that all such feasts and ceremonies ought to be observed on Mount Gerizim, Jesus’ messengers were refused all accommodations. The Samaritans not only hated the Jews, but they also hated the worship that took place in Jerusalem. They therefore had no interest in Christ’s agenda at all. He represented everything Jewish that they despised. So they summarily rejected the request. The problem was not that there was no room for them in the inn; the problem was that the Samaritans were being deliberately inhospitable. If Jesus intended to pass through their city on His way to Jerusalem to worship, they were going to make it as hard as possible for Him.

James and John, the Sons of Thunder, were instantly filled with passionate outrage. They already had in mind a remedy for this situation. They said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?” (Luke 9:54 NKJV).

The reference to Elijah was full of significance. The incident to which James and John were referring had taken place in this very region. They were familiar with the Old Testament account, and they knew its historical relevance to Samaria.

Second Kings 1:1-17 recounts the story of Elijah’s confrontation with the idolatrous King Ahaziah. Elijah had prophesied God’s condemnation against the king for attempting to consult with false gods and soothsayers (vv. 1-8). In return, the king sent fifty soldiers after Elijah (v. 9). Scripture records the brief confrontation between the captain of the soldiers and the prophet:

“O man of God, the king says, ‘Come down.’” Elijah replied to the captain of fifty, “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.” Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty. (2 Kings 1:9-10)

The Hebrew expression suggests that the entire company was utterly consumed, reduced to ashes in an instant. The stubborn king quickly sent another troop of fifty men, and they met the same swift judgment (vv. 11-12). Only after the first two squads had been incinerated did Ahaziah’s soldiers learn humility before the power of the one, true God. The third captain pleaded for the lives of his men, and they were spared. Elijah returned with them to face the king and deliver the message of doom to Ahaziah personally (vv.13-16). And Ahaziah died “according to the word of the Lord which Elijah had spoken” (v. 17).

All of that had taken place in the very region through which Jesus proposed to travel to Jerusalem. The story of Elijah’s fiery triumph was well known to the disciples. It was one of the classic Old Testament episodes they would have been reminded of merely by traveling through that district.

So when James and John suggested fire from heaven as a fitting response to the Samaritans’ inhospitality, they probably thought they were standing on solid precedent. After all, Elijah was not condemned for his actions. On the contrary, at that time and under those circumstances, it was the appropriate response from Elijah.

But it was not a proper response for James and John. In the first place, their motives were wrong. A tone of arrogance is evident in the way they asked the question: “Lord, do You want us to command
fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Of course, they did not have the power to call down fire from heaven. Christ was the only one in their company who had such power. If that were an appropriate response, He could well have done it Himself. James and John were brazenly suggesting that He should give them power to call down fire. Christ Himself had been challenged many times by His adversaries to produce such cosmic miracles, and He had always declined (cf. Matthew 12:39). James and John were in effect asking Jesus to enable them to do what they knew He would not do.

Furthermore, Jesus’ mission was very different from Elijah’s. Christ had come to save, not to destroy. Therefore He responded to the Boanerges Brothers with a firm reproof: “But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them’” (Luke 9:55–56).

After all this time with Jesus, how could they have missed the spirit of so much He had taught? Christ was on a mission of rescue, not judgment: “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17). Of course, a time is coming when He will judge the world. But this was not the time or the place for that.

Perhaps, however, there is a touch of nobility in their indignation against the Samaritans. Their zeal to defend Christ’s honor is surely a great virtue. It is far better to get fired up with righteous wrath than to sit passively and endure insults against Christ. So their resentment over seeing Christ deliberately slighted is admirable in some measure, even though their reaction was tainted with arrogance and their proposed remedy to the problem was completely out of line.

Note also that Jesus was not by any means condemning what Elijah had done in his day. Nor was our Lord advocating a purely pacifist approach to every conflict. What Elijah did he did for the sake of God’s glory and with God’s express approval. That fire from heaven was a public display of God’s wrath (not Elijah’s), and it was a deservedly severe judgment against an unthinkably evil regime that had sat on Israel’s throne for generations. Such extreme wickedness called for extreme measures of judgment.

Of course, such instant destruction would be fitting every time anyone sinned, if that were how God chose to deal with us. But, thankfully, it ordinarily is not. He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Exodus 34:6). He has “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezekiel 33:11).

Jesus’ example taught James that lovingkindness and mercy are virtues to be cultivated as much as (and sometimes more than) righteous indignation and fiery zeal. Notice what happened. Instead of calling down fire from heaven, “They went on to another village” (Luke 9:56). They simply found accommodations elsewhere. It was a little inconvenient, perhaps, but far better and far more appropriate in those circumstances than James and John’s proposed remedy for the Samaritans’ inhospitality.

A few years after this, as the early church began to grow and the gospel message spread beyond Judea, Philip the deacon “went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them” (Acts 8:5). A marvelous thing happened.
The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was much rejoicing in that city. (Act 8:6–8)

Undoubtedly, many who were saved under Philip’s preaching were some of the same people whom Jesus spared when James had wanted to incinerate them. And we can be certain that even James himself rejoiced greatly in the salvation of so many who once had dishonored Christ so flagrantly.

(Adapted from Twelve Ordinary Men.)

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