

The Young Samaritan

J. Schuyler Sprowles

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A faithless boy encounters Jesus and opens himself up to new ways of being with others in the heartwarming religious novel The Young Samaritan.

In J. Schuyler Sprowles's historical novel *The Young Samaritan*, a boy who's forced to leave his family behind finds a new sense of purpose after joining a traveling group led by a peaceful man.

Joshua leads a quiet life with his mother and three sisters, tending to their small farm. But then his stepfather, in a fit of drunken rage, demands that he leave or die. Joshua's mother gives him a pack with some food and sends him to his Uncle Cyrus in a nearby town. Shy Cyrus lives in poverty, trading his skills as a sandal repairman for goods. Joshua feels lost in his new life—until a group led by Jesus of Nazareth stops at Cyrus's home.

Themes of the importance of faith and community dominate the text's forward movement. Its chapters are short and fast-moving; multiple are centered by scriptural references as well. In this way, the book invites reflections on familiar Christian messages—herein, reframed in terms of Joshua's individual experiences of Jesus's story. Indeed, while biblical events like Jesus's crucifixion and assaults on nonbelievers are included in the tale, the book is less about Jesus himself than how those around him changed because of his influence.

Where it deviates from the biblical record, the book becomes more distinctive: a scene in which a poor elder tends to Joshua is tender, and Joshua's time spent helping his uncle befriend a wild dog is covered in moving terms. Cyrus, in turn, shows Joshua how to survive off the land, vivifying their humble region, and Joshua helps Cyrus overcome his fear of others until Cyrus is able to strike up conversations with travelers.

Endearing and sympathetic, Joshua evolves from a scared, naive child into a capable man because of his momentous experiences alongside Jesus's group. Along the way, he encounters dangerous people who take advantage of him as well as friendly outcasts who are eager to help him out; he is trampled by a crowd chasing after Jesus and has his belongings stolen. His traumatic occurrences are juxtaposed with positive ones, and the novel's overall effect is heartwarming. While Joshua is at first a person without faith, he opens himself up to new ways of experiencing the world, learning to endure hard circumstances and remain steadfast; he becomes a good person to carry Jesus's message forward, too.

In the idealized biblical novel *The Young Samaritan*, an outcast struggles to find his place in a complicated world.

JOHN M. MURRAY (May 1, 2024)

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