

8. Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

John 4:1-26

The Gospel According to John

In the third chapter of John, we saw the Lord Jesus reaching the heart of a thirsty religious man, Nicodemus. In chapter four, we see Christ reaching the heart of a thirsty woman of different ethnicity, the Samaritans:

¹The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, ²although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. ³When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. ⁴Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour (John 4:1-6).

Understanding the Enmity of the Samaritans and the Jews

To understand the reason for the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, one needs to consider the origin of the religious culture of the Samaritans. About seven hundred years before this conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman occurred (723 BC), the northern ten tribes of Israel had been deported to Assyria. From that time the whole region was called Samaria. The king of Assyria resettled the land with people from five different nations who all worshiped different false gods (2 Kings 17:24). Because of their worship of false gods on His land, the Scripture says that the Lord sent lions among them, and they killed some of the people (2 Kings 17:25). The king of Assyria sent a priest from the Israelites to teach the people how to worship the Lord, but what came about was a mixed false religion in which they worshiped the Lord, but they also served their own gods from the lands of their origin (2 Kings 17:33). Their false worship was centered on Mount Gerizim where the Samaritans built a temple; quite close to Jacob's well, where Jesus now sat resting.

In the year 129 B.C., the Jewish general, John Hyrcanus, led an attack against Samaria and destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. The Jews regarded the Samaritans as worse than Gentiles (non-Jews) because of their corruption of authentic Judaism. After any of the three feasts of Israel that the Jews attended, if a Jewish person were traveling from Jerusalem back to northern Israel, i.e., the Galilee and Nazareth area, they would typically descend into the Jordan River valley and altogether avoid Samaritan territory. This route meant that it would take two or three days longer to walk the distance. In the passage we are studying today, Jesus was not taking the long way around but walking the direct seventy-five-mile route back to Galilee and traveling over the hills directly through the Samaritan territory. Sychar was up in the mountains and approximately twenty miles from Jerusalem. Click below if you would like to see a map of the terrain:

http://bibleatlas.org/full/road_to_jerusalem.htm

Jewish people were often not welcome to stay (Luke 9:53); such was the hatred of Samaritans for Jews and Jews for Samaritans. When Jesus sat down at the well, the hostility between Samaritans

and Jews was more than four hundred years old. The Greek word translated as "had to" means to be of necessity. It was necessary for Jesus to go through Samaria, rather than the long way around by the direction of the Jordan valley. □

Question 1) What do you think the Apostle John meant when he wrote that Jesus had to go through Samaria? What do you think may have been His reasons for choosing this route? (Verse 4).

Some would say that Jesus was trying to maximize time by going that route, but it is evident that some other previous engagement was not on His mind because, when the Samaritan lady went into the village and told the people, He stayed an extra two days with them (verse 40). The reason He had to go through Samaria was to meet the need of this Samaritan woman as well as those she also led to the Savior. Jesus always had time for people, no matter what sin they had committed, no matter what their lifestyle was, He would reach out to them. Jesus attracted those who were spiritually thirsty. He was always available to reveal the Father's heart to them. "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5:19).

Jesus the Evangelist

Scholars have identified Sychar (the town mentioned here where Jesus and His disciples stayed) with both Shechem and the hamlet now called Askar on the southeastern slope of Mount Ebal. The sites of Shechem, the village of Askar, and the well where Jesus reached out to the Samaritan woman form a triangle with each side measuring about a half mile. John writes that the disciples went into the town together to get food while Jesus rested at the well. One wonders why some of the disciples did not stay with Jesus; surely, it would have provided an excellent opportunity for some quality time for Peter, James, or John to get some private time with Him? It's almost as if Jesus knew that the Samaritan woman was on her way to the well, probably passing the disciples as they walked the half mile into town. Did He send all of them to town so that He could talk with the woman without distraction?

Traveling through Samaritan territory doesn't seem to be an accidental opportunity, but one that was prearranged by the Father for the woman to come at the same time Jesus sat down beside the well. In the previous chapter, we saw a conversation initiated by Nicodemus, but here we see the Lord Jesus seeking and saving that which was lost, i.e., a woman who was considered an enemy to many in the Jewish nation. It is a beautiful thought that God has intervened in the lives of many who were lost to Him. "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I'" (Isaiah 65:1). Many of us have had the Lord come to us when we have not sought Him. "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). It was the sixth hour by Jewish reckoning, which was noon, and Jesus had already walked twenty-miles from Jerusalem (v. 6), so he sat down at the well. Even though He is fully God, the Lord is also 100% human, too. To fully to take on flesh and be our Mediator, Christ partook of our weaknesses by becoming tired after the twenty-mile walk over the hills. Being fully God and knowing all men and women, He knew that she had five husbands and the man she was now with was not her husband (v. 18).

⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "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." ¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" ¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water" (John 4:7-15).

Question 2) Why do you think this woman would come to get water at the hottest part of the day? Why did Jesus begin a conversation by asking her for a drink? What does Christ's reaching across the divide teach us about the character of Jesus?

Having had four husbands and another who was not her husband was quite a scandalous situation in a small town or village (v. 18). It is likely that the Samaritan woman came at noon to draw water to avoid the whispers and remarks of the other women at the usual time of dawn and dusk. It is helpful for us to understand how women were treated in Middle Eastern culture in those days. In his commentary on the Book of John, William Barclay writes:

The strict Rabbis forbade a Rabbi to greet a woman in public. A Rabbi might not even speak to his own wife or daughter or sister in public. There were even Pharisees who were called "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because they shut their eyes when they saw a woman on the street and so walked into walls and houses! For a Rabbi to be seen speaking to a woman in public was the end of his reputation—and yet Jesus spoke to this woman. Not only was she a woman; she was also a woman of notorious character. No decent man, let alone a Rabbi, would have been seen in her company, or even exchanging a word with her—and yet Jesus spoke to her.¹

Notice how Christ initiated the conversation. He asked her to help Him with something. Jesus asked her for a drink—from her water bottle. This request was shocking for her. She could tell that this man was a Jew simply by His appearance and by the tassels on the hem of His prayer garment. Not only was she a Samaritan, but also a woman, yet He was asking to drink from her water bottle, a thing that was usually disgusting to a Jewish person. However, this was Jesus, and the common cultural barriers did not bother Him. She was a woman in need, and so He reached out to her. Notice as well that Jesus did not say to her "What it is" that she should receive but "Who it is" (v. 10). It is not a "thing" that is sought, i.e., a particular belief system or a mystery to be revealed; instead, the Gospel is all about the person of Christ and the Good News He brings. He *IS* the Living Water for our souls.

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of John*, Published by Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1975, Page 151.

When my wife, Sandy, and I were younger, we used to work with teams of people who would go out on the streets in England to engage people in conversation about spiritual things. We also used other methods of communication, like drama and sketch board preaching, and a whole host of ways to reach people with the Gospel. This ministry is easier to do in England as the towns are designed for pedestrians in the town centers, and cars are often not allowed. People pass their time by walking and shopping in the town center.

One of the ways we would engage people in conversation was through going over a survey with people. We asked them if they had time for a two or three-minute list of questions. Most English people are used to being asked to help in business surveys, so we used a list of questions about spiritual topics that could lead to a conversation about Christ and His claims. □

People are generally much more open when they are asked for their help with something. Jesus knew how to reach people at their point of need. The Lord started by asking for her help. He had a practical need for a drink of water. Jacob's well in Sychar was over a hundred feet deep, and Jesus had no bucket, rope or pitcher. He would not mind drinking from her water bottle, for Christ desired to give her living water, something far more important. His conversation piqued her curiosity and aroused her spiritual hunger. Jesus was using a natural topic of conversation (water) to build a bridge of communication to reveal spiritual truth.

The Samaritan woman was utterly shocked that this young thirty-year-old Jewish man was conversing with her and asking her for a drink. She was not used to being addressed by men in public, and certainly not by a Jewish man. She would not even expect to be acknowledged, but Jesus not only asked her for water but also He offered her living water. He made a statement about the gift of God designed to provoke her to ask Him for a drink of this Living Water.

We see Jesus lead a conversation that opened her heart. Not only did the Lord cross cultural boundaries, but also He ventured into topics that were controversial with people. If you have never attempted conversing with strangers about the matter of their souls, it can be an enriching experience. If it is done with the right motives, the love of Christ can shine through.

People do want to converse on such matters as the topic of eternity, even though it can be uncomfortable for some. The Lord wanted to open this woman's eyes to the gift of God and show her that she could be forgiven and have Living water for her soul. Sandy and I would ask people if they had ever been told about the gift of God. It would often open up a person for further discussion concerning the claims of Christ. Here is an example of the kind of questions that we would hope would result in dialogue:

Are you interested in spiritual things?

What would you consider man's greatest need to be today?

Has anyone ever told you about the gift of God?

If someone were to ask you, "What is a true Christian?" what would you answer?

Have you ever personally discovered Jesus Christ, or are you still in the process?

Do you think it is possible to know for sure before you die that you are going to heaven?

Someday when you stand before God, what reason are you going to give him as to why he should let you into His kingdom? □

The hope in engaging people in this type of conversation was that a deeper level of dialogue would be reached. Sometimes, it happened, and sometimes, it did not. Whatever people thought when they walked away, it was worth the time for those who responded. We often had a chance to pray for people at their point of need. For some, it was a divine appointment. Those who were too busy to stop may have even overheard a question or statement that the Holy Spirit would bring to their attention later. It was a seed-planting ministry. Let's look closer at this divine appointment Jesus had with the Samaritan woman. He brought up the subject of God's wanting to give her a gift (v. 10).

Thirsting for God

Jesus was speaking in spiritual terms of thirsting for the presence of God in one's life, but the woman is still thinking that He is talking about literal water. "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" (v. 11). Christ responded by telling her that a person who receives the living water will never thirst. In the Old Testament, many verses speak of thirsting after God as one thirsts for water, i.e., "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:1-2; Isaiah 55:1; Jeremiah 2:13; Zechariah 13:1). Spiritual thirst is indicative of an awareness that something is missing in one's life, i.e., an inner longing, but many cannot quite put their finger on the reason for the emptiness within.

Several years ago, Prince Charles of England spoke of his belief that, for all the advances of science, "there remains deep in the soul (if I dare use that word) a persistent and unconscious anxiety that something is missing, some ingredient that makes life worth living."² The Bible calls that persistent and unconscious anxiety of the soul **thirst**. It is an inner longing for something on which one cannot quite get a handle. God has "hard-wired" us for a relationship with Himself, a God-shaped void, and until we are united with Him by repenting of sin and receiving Christ, we will continue to have this inner longing unfulfilled. We try to fill the emptiness with sex, drugs, work, fashion, cars, houses, jobs, and many other things, but nothing but God Himself quenches our spiritual thirst. Jesus spoke to the woman in terms of the gift of God.

Question 3) With what things have you tried to fill your life but found lacking in fulfillment? What is a gift, and what is meant by the gift of God? Why did the Lord say that she was to ask Him for the gift of God before it could be received? (v. 10).

The Gift of God

The Lord spoke to the woman that the gift of God would assuage her thirst for living water. A gift is something that is given utterly devoid of works to earn it. To use an example, think of a family at Christmas time, the usual time of year when gifts are given in the Western world. Gifts are provided based on the grace of the parents, not on whether or not the child has done anything to earn that which they receive. Even if a child was to do something very naughty on Christmas Eve, it is still rare, indeed, for parents to withhold from them a gift on Christmas morning. Two

² <https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speech/speech-hrh-prince-wales-inauguration-prince-wales-institute-architecture-st-james-palace>. Paragraph 6.

different things in the Scriptures are referred to as the gift of God: the gift of eternal life and the gift of the Spirit, they are the same. The gift of God and the entrance of the Spirit into one's life is the gift of eternal life. There are also gifts of the Spirit, but there is *the* gift, the gift of eternal life as Christ is invited into a person's life. You cannot have one without the other. Eternal life is being born-again of the Spirit of God (John 3:3); it is the gift of a merciful, loving God. This gift is given when one believes on and trusts in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, **it is the gift of God**—⁹**not by works**, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

If you could get to heaven by being good, can you imagine the level of boasting that would take place? If God were to reward people based on their good works alone, how many good works would one have to do to attain heaven? Is there a magic number of good deeds? Do they all count the same? What if one person does one less good deed or kind action than another, would there be a point where one would go to heaven and the next person be rejected by the Father? It is clear that this would not make sense. However, we can trust that the Father knows each person by heart and understands the motives of us all. It makes sense that God would judge people by the response of their hearts to His gift of eternal life. In this life, we can never attain perfection, but Jesus is perfect, and He has given His life in our place.

I once spoke to a person about becoming a Christian. He replied by saying that he was quite confident that, when he died, he would go to heaven because he had pulled two men out of a crashed airplane. God would surely look on his ungodly lifestyle as okay because of his bravery in risking his life to save others. I tried to point out to him that salvation was a gift that one received, not some deed that a person has done to earn eternal life in heaven, but he would not see it that way. He was quite confident that his act of bravery would be sufficient to save his soul. This gift of God, i.e., eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, is given as one is confronted with his spiritual bankruptcy before a holy God and repents or turns toward Christ and lives to please God, not self.

Jesus said that this gift is received by asking Him (v. 10). When the Samaritan woman asked Him for the living water (v. 15), many of us would have prayed for her to receive Christ, but Jesus changed the direction He was going in by raising another issue:

¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." ¹⁶He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." ¹⁷"I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true" (John 4:15-18).

Question 4) Why did Jesus ask her to bring her husband? Why didn't He just give her the water about which He had spoken?

Jesus Brought up the Issue of Sin

When the woman replied that she wanted this living water, Jesus said to her “Go, call your husband and come back” (v. 16). The woman wished to drink the life-giving water, but for her to receive, the issue of her sin was brought up by Jesus. The Lord told her to bring her husband, knowing that she had no husband.

John the Apostle only mentions one of the things that the Lord knew about concerning was going on in her life, i.e., the fact of five previous husbands and that the man with whom she was now living was not her husband. John tells us that the woman went to the other townsfolk, saying: “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did” (v. 29). We do not know the whole story; we only get a glimpse written down for us by John the Apostle. There may have been much more to this conversation. We do know that Jesus spoke to her of her past life of sin, but He loved her anyway and gave her the gift of eternal life.

Unless a person faces his or her sin and forsakes it and looks to Christ, he cannot be delivered to experience new life in Christ. Jesus said no man could love two masters (Matthew 6:24); that was the same way that the Samaritan religion had come about. The Scriptures say that they worshiped the Lord, but they also served their own gods from where they were brought (2 Kings 17:33). Each of us must acknowledge our sin and view it the way God does. When you acknowledge and forsake your sin, Christ will forgive you and cleanse you of it:

Then I **acknowledged** my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"— and you forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:5).

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the **gift of the Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:38).

When the gift of God, the Holy Spirit, comes into a person’s life, He brings a newness of life. The Spirit of God living within you is seen as spiritual living water springing up to eternal life (John 4:14). Nicodemus had to see that his self-righteousness would not get him to heaven; he had to be born again. This woman also needed to see that her lifestyle choices and spiritual beliefs about worship would not get her there, either. Their lifestyles and choices could not have been more different, yet the spiritual needs of these two people were the same. The Samaritan woman saw immediately that this Man knew everything about her:

¹⁹"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." ²⁵The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." ²⁶Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he" (John 4:19-26).

The Conversion of the Samaritan Woman

In verse 20, the woman brings up the issue of where should be the correct place of worship, Mount Gerizim in Samaria, or Jerusalem twenty miles to the south in Judah. Two things could be happening here. 1) This raising of an issue could be what's commonly known by evangelists as a "smokescreen," i.e., an effort by the person to distract the conversation to something else because the person is feeling uncomfortable to talk about the issue of her soul. If that was the case, Jesus quickly answered her question before bringing her back to her spiritual need, i.e., her thirst for living water. 2) On the other hand, her talk about where she should be worshiping in the future might have been a valid question. It could be that she now wanted to worship God and was questioning as to where she should go to worship. The Lord answered her that it is no longer about a place, but all can worship right where they are. It is not about a place of worship. □

The Lord then began to show the Samaritan woman Who He was and is, the Messiah of Israel (v. 26). He told her things about her life that only God could know:

***27**Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" **28**Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, **29**"Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" **30**They came out of the town and made their way toward him (John 4:27-30).*

What joy now flooded her soul! She could not contain herself as she completely forgot her water bottle (verse 28) and ran to the town. We see the evidence of a changed heart immediately, for her thought was of others. She did not give one care about how the townsfolk had shunned her for her promiscuity. She had to tell them about Jesus. If there is no care for others, one must question if Christ has become the center of a person's life. She called for them to come to Jesus. Her hardness was gone, her sin was forgiven, and she was free from guilt and shame as she went from one house to another, calling them all to come to the well to meet Christ. This woman was now full of the Spirit! She could not contain herself. Her one encounter with the Son of God and her experience of His love for her instantly changed her life.

Her immediate desire was for others to encounter the "One who told her everything she ever did.... Could this be the Messiah?" she exclaimed. She was so lit up by the Spirit that her passion and new life immediately grabbed the attention of many of the Samaritans of the town, and they came to meet this Jewish Rabbi. Later, they testified that they had initially believed just on the strength of her changed life and testimony, saying, "**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**" (verse 42). Never underestimate the power of your simple story of how Christ came to your soul and changed your life. Many around us are thirsting for a new life, and all that they need is for someone to tell them that they, too, can experience this gift of eternal life through Christ.

What can we learn from Jesus' encounter with this woman to help us reach out to others?

- 1) Be available. Jesus was ready to receive instruction from the Father. Ask God for those opportunities and be prepared to change your plans or go out of your way if necessary.
- 2) Share your story. If you have experienced the grace of God, you have a story to tell. It is your story. If you share honestly and genuinely, people will be drawn to the grace of God in your life.
- 3) Do not avoid difficult topics. People are often convinced that their sin blocks them from the gift of God. Most people think that they need to improve themselves before coming to God, but Jesus came to put the barrier of their sin out of the way of enjoying the gift of grace.□
- 4) Share without judgment. You are a person who has found the Living Water, and you can point people to the source of this Living Water, Christ Himself. What a joy and a relief it is when we realize that this is His work and that it is all about Him. We are merely pointing the way to the Divine Source, Jesus Himself. People who recognize their need will always be drawn to Him!□

For whom can you pray for as to their need for Christ? To whom can you tell your story? Perhaps, you can close your time tonight by praying for individuals in your circle of friends or relatives so that they might be open to your story of how Christ changed your life.

Prayer: “Father God, open my eyes to those around me who are spiritually hungry. Give me the right words to say to them to stir their spiritual hunger. Use me to help draw them to you, Father. Teach me to be sensitive to other people’s needs and show me how to communicate Your love to others. I ask that you would open my eyes to Your divine appointments in my life, and reach out to others through me. Use me as a conduit of Your grace. Amen.”

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