

Jesus and the Woman at the Well (part 1)

John 4: 1-14

Today we begin the story of the nameless Samaritan woman at the well. Only John records this remarkable encounter of Jesus with this woman. John 4 is a revealing chapter, full of many truths and powerful lessons for us today. This is the second long conversation that Jesus has with an individual in John's Gospel. The first was with Nicodemus in chapter 3, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and the teacher of Israel (John 3:1–21). The contrast between him and the Samaritan woman at the well is unmistakable.

Nicodemus was a man, the Samaritan was a woman. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a strict religious Jew, the woman a half-breed apostate from Judaism. Nicodemus was a prominent, highly-regarded leader and religious teacher. The woman was well-known, too, but her reputation had to do with the number of men she had lived with. Nicodemus sought out his interview with the Messiah, while Jesus surprised the woman by talking to her at the well.

It would seem that all the pluses seem to be in favor of Nicodemus. But the rest of the story will prove differently. Nicodemus did not immediately believe, while the woman's faith is obvious. Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus does not appear to have had an impact on his fellow Pharisees. In fact, chapter 4 begins by telling us that Jesus had to leave Judea because of the Pharisees (John 4:1-3). Quite the opposite, the woman brought back nearly the whole town by her testimony, and they received Jesus and invited Him to stay on (4:39-42). While Jesus spoke of Himself to the Jews in veiled terms (cf. John 2:18-22), He clearly revealed Himself as the Christ to this woman (4:26). The Jews had already begun to reject Him, but the Samaritans received Him as the Savior of the world (4:42).

The story of the woman at the well teaches us that God loves us in spite of our bankrupt lives. God actively seeks us, graciously invites us to a relationship with Him, and to offers us the gift of eternal life.

The Setting: Jacob's well in Samaria (4:1-6)

1 Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John

2 (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples),

3 He left Judea and departed again to Galilee.

4 But He needed to go through Samaria.

5 So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.

6 Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from [His] journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

The occasion for our Lord's encounter is a bit unusual. Our Lord was passing through Samaria, retreating from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north. The

reason for our Lord's departure was His untimely popularity. As we saw from chapter 3, the Jews were attempting to promote a rift between Jesus and John the Baptist because of Jesus' greater popularity. John straightens out the misconception of the Pharisees by saying in verse 2 that it was not actually Jesus who did the baptizing, but His disciples.

Rather than encouraging His popularity, our Lord abandons the influential area of Judea for a time and retreats to Galilee. As we will see in the rest of the Gospel of John, Jesus does everything on the Father's timetable. Jesus does not run back to Galilee because of fear, but from a sense of duty. Jesus was not merely responding. He was acting graciously purposefully ([John Piper](#)). It was not yet time for undue popularity and the necessary opposition that would come with it. Instead, it was time for a divine appointment between Jesus and a Samaritan woman.

I think that is what John is indicating when he writes, **"But He needed to go through Samaria,"** (4:4). Yes, Samaria was between Judea and Galilee and it may have been the shortest route, but it was not the only route. Some strict Jews, who didn't want any contact with the despised Samaritans, would sometimes take a longer route, crossing the Jordan River to the east, traveling north, and then going back west into Galilee. Since Jesus was probably already at the Jordan River, where they were baptizing, He could have taken that route, but He didn't. Instead, He purposefully turned and went up to the hill country of Samaria. The word translated **"needed to"** indicates more than geographic necessity. In fact whenever John uses that word about Jesus it indicates His divine mission. He **"must"** go through Samaria because it is His mission from the Father (3:14; 9:4; 10:16; 12:34; 20:9).

The journey from Judea to Sychar was about 30 miles. It was a hot and dusty trip. By midday on probably the second day of their hike our Lord was tired, thirsty, and hungry. His disciples left Him sitting by a well dug by Jacob many years before while they went on into Sychar for provisions. The well was about 100 feet deep and fed by an underground spring that trickled through the ground.

In verse 7 we meet the Samaritan woman as she comes to the well for water. The next several verses record the conversation between her and Jesus. Today I want to draw three lessons from these verses (I am thankful to [Steven Cole](#) for ideas from his outline).

1. Jesus seeks sinners.

Most of us know this truth because we have read through the Gospel of John and the other Gospels as well. We have seen how Jesus receives sinners, eats with them, heals them, and loves them. One thing that this story shows us is that Jesus seeks sinners who aren't necessarily even seeking Him. Nicodemus was a religious sinner who sought out Jesus. But a Jewish Rabbi who is actually the Christ, the Son of God, was not what the Samaritan woman was expecting to find at the well outside of Sychar. Listen to the encounter in verse 7,

7 A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink."

8 For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

9 Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

The racial and cultural (not to mention the theological) barriers present at this encounter were insurmountable. When our Lord asked this woman for a drink of water, she was caught completely off guard, for in her own words, "... **Jews have no dealings with Samaritans**" (John 4:9).

That was putting it mildly. There had been bitter feelings between Jews and Samaritans for centuries. The Samaritans find their origin at the time of the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. According to Assyrian figures, nearly 30,000 Israelites were deported, being replaced by heathen captives from all over the Assyrian empire (cf. 2 Kings 17:3f.). It was not long before the purity of the Israelites was defiled, not only racially, but spiritually.

Their religion was a mixture of their foreign gods with Judaism (2 Kings 17:24-41). When the exiles from Judah returned from Babylon, the Samaritans offered to help them rebuild their temple and the walls of Jerusalem, the Jews viewed them as foreign enemies and refused their offer (Ezra 4:1-5; Neh. 4:1-3).

Then, in about 400 B. C., the Samaritans built a rival temple on Mount Gerazim. The Jewish leader John Hyrcanus burned it down in 128 B.C., which deepened the rift between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans only accepted the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses), not all of the Jewish Scriptures. The hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews was often intense.

As we saw in verse 6, it was about the sixth hour, that is, noon. The normal time for women to get water was either early morning or later in the afternoon, when it was cooler. The well was a place where women gathered to talk as they filled their water pots. John doesn't say why this woman came to the well at noon, but it may be that because of her immoral life, she was not liked by the other women of Sychar.

She came at a time when she would most likely be alone. But instead, she encounters this Jewish man, who has the audacity to ask her for a drink of water. In verse 9 when it says, "**For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans,**" it literally means that Jews do not use the same things as Samaritans. In other word, Jews would not drink from a cup that a Samaritan drank from. Add to this that it just wasn't socially acceptable for a Jewish man, much less a rabbi, to speak to any woman in public. For Jesus to ask her for a drink from her cup was shocking enough. But talking with her about spiritual things was unheard of (4:27).

It wasn't like this woman looked at Jesus and said, "Sir, you look like a Jewish rabbi. I'm hungry to know your God. Can you tell me how to do that?" She was

minding her own business. She wasn't asking about the Kingdom of heaven like Nicodemus. The only explanation for their unexpected conversation is that Jesus was seeking a sinner who wasn't even seeking Him.

We cannot always tell from outward appearances or even from internal attitudes who will respond positively to an encounter with Jesus. Jesus seeks those who are not even seeking Him. We should be open to sharing Jesus with anyone at any time. God is seeking people that we might write off. Don't skip anyone.

Maybe you are one has a notoriously sinful past. Jesus said (Luke 19:10) that He came **"to seek and to save that which was lost."** He saved the thief on the cross. He saved the chief of sinners who was persecuting the church. He saved this immoral Samaritan woman. He seeks to save lost sinners even when they are not seeking Him!

2. Jesus offers the gift of living water.

Note two things here:

A. Living water is a gift of God.

Note the emphasis on *gift* or *give* here (my italics): John 4:10: **"Jesus answered and said to her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.'"** John 4:14: **"but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."** It's a *gift*, not a reward!

One of the most common errors of religion is that we get into heaven by our good works. Many think they will be accepted by God that way. They are wrong.

The Bible states (Rom. 4:4-5): **"Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness."** Ephesians 2:8-9: **"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."**

The gospel is not *good* news if it requires that you must do penance, reform your life, keep a bunch of rules, do an unspecified number of good deeds, and hope that someday God might let you into heaven on that basis. But it *is wonderfully good* news if God offers it to you as a free gift, which He does!

But, maybe you're thinking, "Because of my many sins, which I'd be embarrassed to make known, I'm not worthy of such a gift." True, you're not worthy. No one is. But ... this woman shows us that it does not depend on your worthiness.

In the eyes of most Jews, including the disciples at this point, this woman was not worthy of Jesus' time. Just being a *Samaritan* excluded her. Being a *woman* was strike two. But being an *immoral* Samaritan woman struck her out. But Jesus took the time and the initiative to talk with this sinful woman about living water.

He didn't exclude her from offering her this gift. And He doesn't exclude you, either!

Actually, it's often good, religious people who exclude themselves from receiving this gift. They're proud of their accomplishments and want some reward for what they've done. They don't want to associate with people like this sinful woman or admit that they need living water from Jesus just as much as she did. But the gift is freely offered to notorious sinners and to self-righteous religious sinners. Both equally need the gift.

B. Living water satisfies the thirsty soul.

Jesus tells this woman (4:14): **"but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."** By "living water," Jesus is referring to the eternal life that the Holy Spirit gives. As Jesus said (John 7:37-39a), **"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke of the Spirit...."** "Living water" is the same thing as the "new birth," but just a different picture of the same thing.

Jews familiar with the Scriptures knew that the Lord Himself is the spiritual fountain of living water. In Jeremiah 2:13, the Lord rebukes His sinning people: **"For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water."** Or (Jer. 17:13), **"O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake You will be put to shame. Those who turn away on earth will be written down, because they have forsaken the fountain of living water, even the Lord."** (See, also, Isa. 12:3; 44:3; 49:10.)

Jesus told this woman that the water that He gives **"will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."** *In him* shows that true Christianity is not primarily a matter of rituals and ceremonies, but rather an inward, personal relationship with the living God. It must be in each person's heart. The picture of this living water springing up points to the continual source of life that the indwelling Holy Spirit supplies to believers. It's active and always flowing.

When Jesus says that **"whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never thirst,"** Jesus does not mean that our thirst is forever quenched in the sense that we cease to long for more and more of Him. We still hunger and thirst after righteousness (Matt. 5:6). Our hearts still pant after God like the thirsty deer for the water brook (Ps. 42:1). We still pray (Ps. 63:1), **"O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."** But Jesus is the perpetual fountain that forever and at every moment satisfies our thirst.

So, how do we get this living water of salvation that Jesus freely offers to all?

3. Jesus invites you to receive this living water.

John 4:10: “**Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, “Give Me a drink,” you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.’**” These words would have cause me to ask three things: (1) What is this gift of God? (2) Who is it who is talking to her? (3) Should I ask Him for this living water?

A. Living water is salvation that the Holy Spirit imparts.

We’ve already seen that the gift of living water is the salvation that the Holy Spirit imparts. It is the Lord Himself, dwelling in believers. Jesus invites this sinful woman to ask Him to give her this living water that will forever quench her spiritual thirst.

B. Living water is received by knowing Jesus Christ.

The woman needed to know something about this one who claimed that He would give her living water.

The fact that Jesus is able to give living water to thirsty sinners shows that He is God. The woman asked (4:11) how Jesus could get this living water out of the well, since it was deep (over 100 feet) and He had nothing to draw with. Then she challenged Him (4:12), “**Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?**” The answer, of course, is, yes, He is much greater than Jacob! And the answer to where He can get the living water is, He has it within His own divine nature to supply it to as many sinners as ask for it. He has an endless supply of grace for all. Finally,

C. Jesus invites us to ask for this living water.

Jesus says (4:10), If “**you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.**” To ask, you have to recognize that you’re thirsty and that you can never satisfy that thirst by yourself. But if you come to Jesus and ask, He will give it. All you have to do is drink and drink of Him until you’re satisfied. But the only condition that Jesus states is, “Ask.” If you ask, He will give you an endless supply of living water.

So, have you asked Jesus for the living water of eternal life? Do you have the evidence of being satisfied with Jesus? One drink from Jesus and you’ll never thirst again. So, why don’t you ask?