

Jesus and the Woman at the Well

Our second Scripture reading is John 4:4-26. News of the success of Jesus' ministry was spreading and threatening to hasten the time of his arrest, so Jesus departed Judea for Galilee. Instead of taking the usual "Jewish Route" around Samaria, Jesus departed Judea and headed straight through Samaria toward Galilee. God had a purpose in Jesus' taking this unpopular route through Samaria. Jesus had a divine appointment with a woman of Samaria.

I read John 4:3-26:

(Jesus) left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Our Scripture begins, "But he had to go through Samaria." This may have been true geographically and practically, had Jesus been under a time constraint. It

was certainly the shortest route from Judea to Galilee, to go straight through Samaria. But most Jews would have avoided Samaria at all costs, since Samaritans were despised by Jews. When Samaria, or the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was besieged by the Assyrians in 722 BC, most of the Israelites were carried into captivity. Only the lower caste was allowed to remain in the Northern Kingdom. In the meantime, pagans intermarried with these remaining Israelites, resulting in the Samaritan race, regarded as half-breeds by the Jews to the south in Judea. With the pagan intermarriage, the religion of the Northern Kingdom also was corrupted. Only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, were retained as their Scriptures, and these books were modified to be the Samaritan version (the RSV in those days was The Revised *Samaritan* Version!). The holy place of worship was no longer regarded as the temple in Jerusalem but on Mount Gerizim. So, there were strong racial and religious feelings of disdain by Jews toward the Samaritans. Because of their hatred toward Samaritans, most Jews would have taken a long detour around Samaria by going east across the Jordan, and then northward to Galilee along the east shore of the river.

Jesus had a divinely given purpose in meeting a woman at the well—a specific person, chosen by grace. So he and his disciples came to this well in Sychar. Jacob's Well is there to this day, and is still a reliable source of fresh drinking water. It was noon when Jesus and his disciples arrived. The disciples went into town to get something for Jesus to eat. He was tired from physical exhaustion as well as fatigue from hours of teaching his disciples and no doubt from answering their questions (Imagine Simon Peter's interminable questions!).

When he saw the woman arriving at the well, though tired, he seized this opportunity to speak to her. And also it was socially inappropriate. Jewish men, especially religious leaders and teachers, didn't speak in public to women, not even to their own wives. In fact, some Jewish men prided themselves in being called "the blooded and bruised ones," because they would often close their eyes to avoid looking at women in public and would blindly walk into trees and buildings and batter themselves!

However socially inappropriate, Jesus chose to reveal deep truths about himself to this immoral Samaritan woman rather than to the upright and religious scholars who ostensibly had a capacity to understand spiritual truth. Jesus knew this woman's mind and heart to be more open to him than were the religious. As AW Tozer said, Jesus "cares absolutely nothing about anyone's moral case history." He knows our spiritual potential, forgives, and "starts from there as though the person had been born one minute before." Jesus reveals himself to those who are open to him, including those we might consider the least likely candidates for conversion.

Jesus asked her for a drink of water, which amazed the woman who knew Jewish men didn't talk with Samaritans, and especially Samaritan women. She

also knew Jews didn't use the same eating utensils as Samaritans, much less drink from the same water jar. Jesus convinced this woman that he cared about her enough to cross barriers and to leave his comfort zone in her behalf. She also could see his concern for her most immediate need—water. The unconverted will not care about how much we know until they know how much we care. Jesus related to the woman as a fellow human being who shared her physical thirst and then moved on to talk about the life he could give to her to satisfy her deeper thirst. Jesus turned the conversation toward spiritual truth and to the good news of himself. He spoke of her transcendent and more important need for living water, the life of God—including forgiveness and a new beginning.

Jesus probed into this woman's heart to confront her disillusionment with life. In her previous five marriages and her current illicit relationship with her live-in boyfriend, she had become a part of the "when syndrome." We've all been part of the "when syndrome" at points along life's way. Perhaps as children we said, "when I grow up I'm going to be a football star...." Young adolescents often say, "When I get my driver's license, I will really begin to live." Then, it's "when I get my own car," and "when I go to university." Later, it's "when I get my first real job," and "when I get married." And then it's "when I reach my career goals," and "when I reach financial security," and finally, "when I retire...."

Jesus knew her disappointment and her wasted dreams and hopes that were never satisfied. The living water he offered was the answer she needed. In referring to this supply of abundant life in a relationship with him, Jesus sounds almost wistful in saying to this woman, "*If you only knew the gift of God....*" (*Williams*, 10).

In answer to her argument about the proper place to worship, Jesus tells her about true worship. He reveals he's more than a prophet, and is the Messiah himself. He's the new temple, the place superior to Mt. Gerizim for the Samaritans and Mt. Zion for the Jews. He's the place of meeting for sinful people and holy God. When Jesus confronted the woman with her sinful life, she tried to change the subject to an argument about religion. But by the grace of God she became open to faith. Instead of merely making a religious decision, this woman met Jesus in a life-changing way, as evidenced by her genuine excitement that led her to run to Sychar and tell others about him.

Jesus spoke of the Father's mission in the world, to make worshipers out of lost sinners (23f). God's purpose is that he is glorified by all his creation, and he's honored by our worship in spirit and in truth. The witness of Scripture is clear that the highest good for us is not that we escape hell, but that we glorify God. God is not trying to amass statistics for himself by getting people to make decisions and become church members whose lives are generally unchanged. God is interested in changing people from self-centered sinners into Christ-worshipping converts who enjoy him and who will glorify him forever.

We need to worship in the truth of the word that reveals God's holiness and our sinfulness. Worship in truth challenges sins such as the unfaithfulness of even us Christians. And God seeks those who will worship him in spirit with a small s. That means worship that pleases God takes place in the heart and deep within our spirit, the place where we meet God. The woman wanted to argue the proper place to worship. Jesus made it clear that the place was immaterial if the heart is not sincerely engaged. Jesus said the Father is seeking sincere worshipers, not people that simply fill a sanctuary. Jesus told a parable about two people who came to church. One, who was a religious outcast, left church forgiven and changed into a worshiper because he humbly cried out to the God of truth and did so "in spirit" (Luke 18:9-14). Obviously Jesus is saying there is a difference between being in a worship service and being a worshiper.

The woman at the well sought to divert Jesus by arguments about her religion versus his religion. He refused to be detracted and continued to work grace and truth into her heart. She was won to faith by the activity of Sovereign God, who alone can save sinners. We can't win people with our arguments. We're apt to win arguments and lose people. And we can't lead anyone to Christ by our clever salesmanship. We lovingly and prayerfully present the story of Jesus and the Holy Spirit does the convicting and converting. We're simply instruments in the hands of Almighty God, who's drawing people to himself.

Like with this woman, Jesus came to us to make us his being-transformed worshipers, and calls us to go to others and share the good news that will make them become worshipers. As John Piper says, mission exists because worship doesn't. God sends us on mission that others, like the people of Sychar, will become worshipers.

You may be tired and discouraged in your efforts to lead someone to faith. You've prayed and spoken about Christ for years, and it seems to no avail. You need to be reminded that you're involved in God's work, and he can renew your strength. Like DL Moody prayed, you're praying, "Lord, I'm tired, Amen." This should encourage those of you who have long prayed for an unbelieving friend, family member, or even a spouse, with no results. Remember that when Jesus spoke with this woman, he was tired, thirsty and hungry. And he sat down and rested in the Father's strength. And amazingly, when he simply allowed the Father to work through him, he saw a worshiper made out of an immoral, outcast woman. She became an evangelist herself. She excitedly left her water jar and went back to town and told everyone about Jesus, and led them out to meet Jesus for themselves (28-30). Not only had this woman become a worshiper. She became a recruiter of worshipers. She, the evangelized, became an evangelist.

It's God who works through us. We're joining him as he draws people to himself and loves people through us. He uses us as conduits of his grace, as fountains of his living water. Jesus gave of himself to this woman, even though he was

tired and maybe not even “in the mood” to minister when she came to the well. But something happened. After this experience of sharing living water, seeing her excitedly run off to tell her Sychar friends she had found the Messiah, Jesus was renewed. When the disciples returned to give Jesus his lunch, he had lost his hunger, saying he had food they didn’t know anything about (31). One of the most memorable sermons I heard while in seminary was on this text, titled “Riding the Strength of the Ministry” (J Claypool). When we give of ourselves to others and see the effects on them, we’re refreshed. Jesus, who had been tired and hungry, was refreshed by eating heavenly food (32).

God came to rescue us because we were in his sights, long before we knew him. Jesus came to the cross because he loves us. He crossed all barriers and came to us at the point of our need. He wasn’t put off because of our past behavior. He lovingly introduced himself to us, came into our lives and has made us his worshipers, as conduits of his living water. Because of his great love for us, he *had to* come our way. And he’ll give his love to people around us, because he loves them too. Jesus *had to* come to you and me because of his love for us. We’re being fed and transformed, and satisfied by his living water. Now we *have to* give ourselves from the overflow of his abundant blessings in our lives. It’s the most satisfying, refreshing way to live.