

God Beyond Religion

Series: Conversations with Jesus

March 11, 2018 – Brad Bailey

John 4:1-30, 39-42

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the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." ²⁵ The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

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 Christ?" ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

...³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers. ⁴² They said to the woman, "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."

John 4:21-23

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When is God engaging? - John 4:1-6

Who does God seek? - John 4:7-8

What does God provide the human soul? John 4:10-14

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Intro

We are **continuing our series**... “Conversations with Jesus”...

As described in previous weeks... many conversations are just polite exchanges. Some are practical exchanges. But there are **some that can be life altering**. They can **change our understanding of life...and ourselves**. Some have an expansive effect as what they posit is shared with others.

Arguably...no conversations have changed more people than those with Jesus.

Today we engage one such conversation.

The exchange is a bit longer than usual... but I think you’ll find that it’s not hard for the mind to engage.

John 4:1-30, 39-42 (NIV)

¹ The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, ² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. ³ When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. ⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. ⁷ When 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.) ⁹ The 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.) ¹⁰ Jesus 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?" ¹² Are 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?" ¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but 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." ¹⁵ The 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." ¹⁶ He 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. ¹⁸ The 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." ¹⁹ "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from

the Jews.²³ Yet 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.²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."²⁵ The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

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You probably can sense a lot is happening in this exchange. One central aspect is that everyone carries expectations... which Jesus brings a new reality to. They all have a paradigm that I believe is related to religion.

When we think about that word...that subject..."religion"...there are different ways we think about it.

Positive – one may correlate it with actual spiritual truth that is drawn from an eternal source

Neutral – man's ways of reaching God... and generally leads to something spiritual or at least helpful

Negative – tends to focus on purely the human element...which may be deemed ignorant...or corrupting and controlling ... associated religion with what is institutional...and the source of what is used to divide and justify evil.

So what does Jesus reveal about the nature of religion? What does he say about the role which the Jewish religion played?

I think this whole exchange unpacks this...but before we capture the specifics...I think the central point is made when he says to this Samaritan woman...

John 4:21-23

²¹ Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ Yet 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.

She is a Samaritan... a people formed when some of the Israelites had become immersed in the culture they had moved to...inter-married...and become looked upon as half-breeds...not simply because they gave up their ethnicity...but they became very syncretistic in their beliefs...having adopted many of the pagan practices that were a part of the culture.

It was the depository of revelation... a source of what is to be known. Spiritual truth is not just a matter of human knowledge...some DIY... custom project. The Creator of all...the father of all life... has revealed some truth.

BUT... but it has become bound in the human development of religious formation.

This exchange reflects how God uses religious revelation, but we must not make him small and self-serving.

Anyone who reads the Gospel accounts of Jesus...knows that there is a constant conflict between he and the religious leaders. There is a tendency when it speaks of these leaders to see them specifically as Jewish religious leaders...and that has led to anti-semitic sentiments. The irony is that Jesus was not only Jewish... everything he fulfilled was rooted in the very history and revelation of the Jewish people. He never spoke of starting a new religion...but of fulfilling what had always been at hand through the Jewish people.

> So he affirms... what God makes known is essential to knowing Him. The Jewish people and their temple have been the rightful people and place... BUT what has developed also reflects that which is quite human... corrupted. The issue is not that the religious leaders are Jewish...but that they are human...and forming that which tries to conform and contain God to serve their own self-righteousness and superiority.

Jesus brings to bear God transcending these human boundaries.

Let's see how God is beyond the false religious boundaries of when, who, what, and how God is at work.

When is God engaging?

At the time of Jesus...they may have thought of Saturday at Temple? Today many may think about Sunday mornings? Maybe Christmas... Easter?

There is a dangerous paradox that the more we honor the special times and places...the more we can unconsciously try to keep God from the rest of life.

Or the more we assume He is not present at other times.

John 4:1-6 (NIV)

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

The disciples had walked on... the women was just doing the drudgery of getting water.

> They all had developed cultural paradigms that saw this time as having no real religious significance.

But Jesus carried no such paradigm. It was not a religious context.

But Jesus had no such religious paradigm. When was God at work? Right there is the everyday circumstances... Jesus was just "on his way"...and weary.

When you have to travel a certain way...and you get weary and need water... God is always working.

John Wimber would often say: "The meat is in the street." By that he was referring to the idea of "meaty" spirituality. When people suggest that they want that which is the real meat...the real substance... John implied... it's not bound within meetings... it's out there where God is at work.

Some may think... this just means that they are free to create their own "chapel"... perhaps when you enjoy a spot near the ocean... or some activity like hiking or running. But what is at hand here reveals that God will not be bound by any compartment... to any time and space we want to contain him in.

He is the God of oceans... vastness...but also weary roads...and to this woman...the God who is there when you are just fetching some water alone.

In answer to the asking "When is God at work?"

God is not bound to religious occasions... but is loose and present in all times and places.

Who does God seek?

Our religious framework can presume God has a special thing for religious people. Religious people can feel that God is more into them. And...in the same way... if one simply decides to not identify with being religious...they can presume, if there is a God... God is not engaging them...or seeking them. But here we see the reality of God.

John 4:7-8

When 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.)⁹ The 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.)

Everyone has categories... the disciples had categories....which is why they went on... this wasn't Jewish country.

But she had categories too. "Why are you talking to me...a Samaritan...a woman?" She was an outsider. A religious failure.

But Jesus had no such religious paradigm. God is not bound by religious identification.

God does not engage according to religious identification but according to one's grasp of need.

The primary issue is understanding her need. She has formed a way of seeking her deepest need...and hiding in the shame of failure. But at least she could hide. What if someone saw all she had done? And of course that is what Jesus would help her understand.

But first by merely engaging her...he confronts the human religious nature...which categorizes who God seeks.

Is God bound by religious identification? She is a Samaritan.

Is God bound by cultural values? She is a woman.

Is God bound by moral success? God says NO ONE is righteous....all have gone their own way.

And there is no one He will not come to.

God comes to you as he did her.

What does God provide the human soul?

We have developed **religious ideas** that God merely is after **making us more moral**... some obedience merely for the sake of satisfying His due.

But Jesus doesn't see a woman who needs just some external correction...he sees a woman who is more deeply lost.

Her whole life is out of orbit...apart from God at the center she is in the wrong gravitational pull... one in which she can never find herself.

So he speaks of water... that fulfills....and how fitting.

(Now referencing John 4:10-14 on screen but not read: - Jesus 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? ¹² Are 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?" ¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but 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.")

He sees **she has traveled for water**. I would venture to say that it was the **most exhausting** chore of her day...and the **most essential**.

Water is essential to life.

In the search for **life on other planets** ... what is it they look for? Signs of water.

The **human body**... **Up to 60% of the human adult body is water.**

Only 1/5 of world has access to clean water.

Look up any survival guide... and they say: in any crisis... the two things lost first from public resources are power and water... and while power might freak you out if your iPhone runs out of battery... that isn't the crisis... the human body will begin dying in 3 days without water.

"Human beings can only survive without water for three days. Then we shrivel up like raisins and die."

Jesus is offering what is as essential to the soul as water is to the body.what can satisfy your soul as water satisfies your body.

You may think "I am not acutely aware of my soul thirsting"... but we usually don't realize our physical thirst fully until it's too late...or finally get a little taste.

So Jesus identifies that she has a thirst that is never satisfied...

John 4:15-18 (NIV)

¹⁵ The 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." ¹⁶ He 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. ¹⁸

The 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."

A rather **profound moment**...

She has been **hiding so long**...and now she is seen. Not just by someone...but by God.

Jesus not only reveals that **God knows her**...but **he affirms her honesty**. **But her response is rather telling**...

John 4:19-20

¹⁹ "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Just when you expect a transforming moment... she asks a safe religious question.

> **What a fascinating encounter....** fascinating because I think **this conversation is still going on today.**

- We may want to talk about spiritual life but instead we talk about religion....some obscure or far away...or scandalous.
- While one should freely question the Bible... we cannot open ourselves to letting the Bible question us.

It's really helpful to realize that the modern aversion to 'organized religion' is really not that people mistrust organization (we organize our lives in countless ways) but rather we mistrust human authority and control.

However... the limits of just trying to avoid the problems of organized religion by having our own spiritual ideas to follow or following some new author who says they are not religious... really just shifts rather than avoids human authority and power. One simply becomes 'a religion of one' (or 'a church on one', etc) and the concepts really carry all the same vulnerabilities in the long run. The truth is that we can leave what we deem as organized and become our own religion (with more parallels than most would like to admit)... but in the end it implies that everyone else is untrustworthy and flawed but that I am not. It can prove to be a rather foolish and arrogant assumption.

God is not the source for satisfying religious identity ...but for satisfying the thirst of the soul for life.

How is God engaged?**John 4:21-24**

²¹ Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet **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.** ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

The years of developing their religious life were not an end in themselves...but preparing for what the prophets had said long ago...that God would one day send one who would become the final sacrifice...and then pour out His Spirit to transform lives **from the inside out.** To worship

in “spirit and truth” reflects a vast change from the temple in which one could only offer a sacrifice but never engage God directly.

God is not seeking those who merely engage the outward forms of religious structure and rituals, but rather life truly engaged with Him.

What the Temple could only prepare the stage for...Christ now manifest. Religion could **tell people** how to live right... but **now God imparts it.**

Jesus says... a change is now at hand between what God provides for the relationship between Himself and human life. Jesus says “A time is coming...and is now at hand (...or as many translate it....”the hour has come” which always refers to his coming death and resurrection...his atoning for the sins that separates us from God.

He says essentially... that the **atonement** for sins at the temple...**I will become.**

And on that cross he will cry out: “I Thirst.” In the very moment in which he experiences that brief separation from God his Father...he thirsts...so that we would never have to thirst in that way any longer.

This Gospel... the grace of God to come restore us through the sacrificial love...is what changes us from the inside out.

Historically there have been **two directions for changing lives**...one is mind and reason over will power... today...it is opposite ...to express those feelings and realize your dreams. One goes to the will...one to the feelings... but neither to the heart.

Jesus speaks to the heart... when he speaks of her husbands... he is speaking into her heart...saying in essence: you are already trying to satisfy the thirst I am speaking of. find...the deep soul satisfaction...whether it is in relationships...money... thrill... pleasure... you will always need more...and be enslaved to earn it...

You can choose the ancient way – try harder... master your will...or the modern way... follow your **strongest emotions**... but either way the heart will be fixed on what cannot satisfy.

[1]

More than just physical thirst of body... reflected the thirst of soul being separated from God... cut off from life...so we could get the water of life.

God is not seeking those who merely engage the outward forms of religious structure and rituals, but rather life truly engaged with Him.

C.S. Lewis -

Commented [BB1]:

"I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of these things, except perhaps as a joke. Everyone there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes." [2]

Something **began to come alive in her**... she had a taste of grace.
And she discovered she was **standing before the very face of grace**.

John 4:1-25-26 (NIV)

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

Closing:

I want to invite us to transcend the boundaries which we falsely bring upon God...as to when he is at work ...who he is at work with...and what he seeks.

Notes:

1. Drawn from Tim Keller's thoughts in message "Changed Lives"
2. Lewis, C.S., Mere Christianity. pg. 130