

Helping the Samaritan Woman

Introduction

As John 4 begins, Jesus' ministry in Judea is growing rapidly. Many are being baptized. In order to avoid controversy with the religious establishment, Jesus decides to return to Galilee. Geographically, Judea was in the south and Galilee was in the north. Sandwiched in the middle of these two areas was the region of Samaria . . . a place Jews avoided at all costs.⁶⁰ Most Jews, in order to avoid Samaria, traveled from Jerusalem east out across the Jordan River and then turned north to follow the road that traveled up its east bank through Gentile controlled Perea. This more than doubled the trip length. John 4.4 says Jesus determined to take the most direct route to Galilee which involved going straight through Samaria. Why He made the decision to go that way will bear itself out as we continue to read John 4.

Jesus enters Sychar and stops to rest at Jacob's well. This area was special to many Jews in that it was land that had been owned by Jacob and given to Joseph, Genesis 48.22. During the conquest led by Joshua, Joseph's bones were buried on this land, Joshua 24.32. Jacob's well was just outside of Sychar. Tradition has identified the location of this well. If it is the same one, it is over 100 feet deep and would absolutely something to draw the water. Jesus and the disciples arrive around noon. They are worn out from the journey, 4.6. Jesus sits down by the well while the disciples go into Sychar to buy food, which was about a half mile away. As He waits a woman comes to the well to draw water.

The Woman at the Well

While the text reads in a matter-of-fact manner, it does prompt a few questions:

Why is she coming at the noon hour? Women typically gathered water in the cooler times of day, Genesis 24.11.

Why has she traveled so far outside the village to gather water? There were much easier places to gather water closer to the village. John 4.15 seems to indicate that this well wasn't her first choice in where to draw water.

The answers to these questions will come more into view as we proceed further into the story. But for now, know that she is most likely considered an outcast and would have come to this well at a time she knew the other women wouldn't be present.

When she gets to the well, Jesus asks for a drink. He initiates the conversation, which was unheard of in the social norms of the day. Jewish Rabbis never greeted women in public. In fact, they were not even allowed to speak to women in their own family in public. It is said that when some Pharisees saw a

⁶⁰ The Jews detested the Samaritans because of their intermarriage with Gentiles and their perverted worship practices. The hatred was real. The rabbis said, "Let no man eat the bread of the Cuthites (the Samaritans), for he who eats their bread is as he who eats wine's flesh." A popular prayer of the day said, "And Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection." See Hughes, R. Kent. *John: That You May Believe*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999, p. 101.

woman passing by, they would cover their eyes and bump into walls and houses as they walked. Here, Jesus not only speaks to her, but he asks for a drink from her drinking utensil. Jews didn't use anything that belonged to Samaritans because the entire group of people and everything they touched was considered unclean. As we consider this story, it is very important to pause and picture the scene. Here is Jesus, a prominent religious leader, sitting out in the open talking with a woman who is an outcast, a Samaritan, and an adulteress. The woman is quite simply amazed at the entire situation. She can't believe there's a conversation going on and that Jesus is actually willing to defile himself by using her utensils to drink from.

Living Water

As we read 4.10-14, note how Jesus turns the conversation around. When it began, He was the one who was thirsty and in need. Now He begins to minister to her deepest spiritual need. She is slow to catch on, as she is only thinking physically in 4.11:

"Sir," said the woman, "you don't even have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do you get this 'living water'?"

The *living water* to which Jesus referred was salvation. It had been foretold in the prophets. Isaiah said:

You will joyfully draw water from the springs of salvation,

– Isaiah 12.3

For I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your descendants and my blessing on your offspring.

– Isaiah 44.3

Zechariah looked forward to a time when a cleansing fountain would be opened:

"On that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the residents of Jerusalem, to wash away sin and impurity.

– Zechariah 13.1

The woman, who was very used to defending herself, is skeptical of Jesus' ability to give her "living water." *You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and livestock*, 4.12. Remember, she still doesn't know who Jesus is. To her He is just a stranger at the well. *Who is this guy and what in the world is he talking about?*

Jesus doesn't give up:

Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again. But whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again. In fact, the water I will give him will become a well of water springing up in him for eternal life."

– John 4.13-14

There are blessings with the water He offers. He is trying to get her to see His offer of eternal life. She's still skeptical . . . and still thinking physically: *Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and come here to draw water*, 4.15. She was very interested in this water if it would relieve her of the chore of making the daily trip to this well to draw water. She's speaking in jest.

Reality Check

Jesus' response brings her great need into a sharp focus.

“Go call your husband,” he told her, “and come back here.” “I don't have a husband,” she answered. “You have correctly said, ‘I don't have a husband,’” Jesus said. “For you've had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.”

– John 4.16-18

The time for polite conversation and intrigue was over. Jesus now forces her to face the reality of her life, which had been a continual chain of broken relationships and immorality. Barclay rightly summarizes what is going on:

There are two revelations in Christianity: the revelation of God and the revelation of ourselves. We never really see ourselves until we see ourselves in the presence of Christ; and then we are appalled at the sight.⁶¹

Now we come to the fullest understanding of why she approached that well in the heat of the day. She is trying to avoid all the other people, *who have their life together*. She is tired. She is a social and religious outcast. Her life was one of dissatisfaction and despair. And deep within, she longingly desires something better.

What do we make of her response after she realizes Jesus is *a prophet*?

Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.”

– John 4.20

Could it be, as Kent Hughes believes, that the woman was now beginning to recognize her sin and realize something needed to be done about it. Where was she to go to bring God an offering for her sin? Was she to go up on Mt. Gerizim to the Samaritan temple or up to Jerusalem? *She was concerned about what God desired from her, and the answer was worship.*⁶² All she wanted to know at this moment is *where can I find God?*⁶³

Jesus' answer is that a time is coming when sacrifices being offered in either place wouldn't matter. All the rituals, traditions, and external ceremonies would become obsolete under the New Covenant. But for now, Jesus wanted her to know too that the Samaritan's worship was inadequate ... they worshipped in ignorance: *you Samaritans worship what you do not know*, 4.22a. The Samaritans only recognized the Pentateuch as Scripture and rejected all the other sacred writings of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus then says *salvation is from the Jews*, and from them the Messiah had come.

What Does God Require?

Now, Jesus points her, *and us*, to true worship:

⁶¹ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 1. Rev. and updated. The New Daily Study Bible. Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001, p. 182.

⁶² Hughes, p. 113.

⁶³ Barclay, p. 183.

But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth.”

– John 4.23-24

Who does the Father want to worship Him? (v. 23b)

A time was coming when worship would no longer consist just of externals and outward conformity to specified duties and procedure. God was done with that:

The Lord said: These people approach me with their speeches to honor me with lip-service, yet their hearts are far from me, and human rules direct their worship of me.

– Isaiah 29.13

Who does *the Father want to worship Him*, v. 23b?

Answer: v. 24: *God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.*

Worship in Truth

When we worship God in *truth*, it means we are doing so in accordance with what God has made known about Himself. What we think about God is of great importance. We must approach God as the mighty, eternal, transcendent Creator who holds the universe in His hands, Hebrews 1.3. We also approach Him with the understanding that He is gracious and merciful, wishing to hold the closest of relationships with those He has created. In other words, worship in truth is worship that thinks . . . i.e., it includes our mental processing of the truth about God. *Worship is not a mindless activity.*⁶⁴

Worship in Spirit

This is where we approach God with hearts moved by love, loyalty, obedience, and devotion. The inner spirit is the highest part of our existence. It is the source of our highest dreams and desires. True worship happens when we, through the spirit of our being, come to discover friendship and intimacy with God. Worship is where we speak with and meet with God.

Genuine worship does not consist in coming to a certain place, nor in going through a certain ritual or liturgy, nor even in bringing certain gifts.⁶⁵

God wants us to approach Him seeking to understand just how wonderful He is. He wants us to be amazed at who He is and adore or reverence Him in His awesome majesty. As the Lord’s day approaches, may we all come to Him in spirit and truth.

This is exactly what the Samaritan woman wanted to do. She wanted to worship the Messiah from the heart in truth. She felt that until He came, she would not have access to all the truth. Jesus responds, *I, the one speaking to you, am He*, 4.26.

⁶⁴ Hughes, p. 117.

⁶⁵ Barclay, p. 187.

Conclusion

So, what happened? Did she believe? It's not specifically said, but there is probably much, much more that happened here than what is recorded.

Now many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of what the woman said when she testified, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. Many more believed because of what he said. And they told the woman, "We no longer believe because of what you said, since we have heard for ourselves and know that this really is the Savior of the world."

– John 4.39-42

I think she believed. Don't you?

There is so much to learn from this story:

- Salvation is freely offered. The way is only through Christ, 4.10.
- Incredible blessings are promised for those who believe, 4.13.
- Never forget from where you have come, 4.16.
- Put your trust in Jesus, the Messiah, 4.26.

For Thought and Reflection

1. Give a brief summary of why the Jews hated Samaritans.
2. What was significant about the history of the area around Sychar?
3. Why do we think the woman approached the well at the noon hour?
4. Why does the woman appear shocked when Jesus initiated a conversation with her?
5. What was the *living water* Jesus referred to?
6. What are the blessings Jesus offers in 4.13-14?

7. What was the Samaritan woman's "history?" (4.16)

8. For what reason does she ask Jesus about a place to worship?

9. What does it mean to worship in *truth*?

10. What does it mean to worship in *spirit*?

11. How does the woman respond? Do you think she believed? Why?

12. What are some of the lessons we can take away from this story?