

Wednesday

The Unlikely Witness

The Samaritan woman

The Man had been walking for many miles with His companions. The sun was high, and it was nearing the time for the midday meal. Dust coated His weary feet, and the hot breeze sucked the moisture from His body. He was thirsty. He sat down next to a well in the middle of a field—Jacob’s well—and waited. His friends went to find food in the Samaritan city of Sychar, but He had an important appointment to keep.

A woman came to the well to draw water. She came alone during the hottest part of the day—perhaps because her current living arrangements were not according to community standards.¹ It was not strange for a man to be there—wells were shared community spaces—and she prepared to lower the vessel into the well. Then the Man spoke: “Give me a drink.”

BREAKING THE NARRATIVE

The narrative in John 4 breaks from many social and literary expectations. First, Jesus, a Jew and the one believed to be the Messiah, traveled into Samaria. The setting is pivotal, so “Samaria” or “Samaritan” is mentioned six times in just six verses (verses 4-9).

Following the exile of Israel, those who remained in the region of Samaria mingled with the non-Israelites who were deported to the region. They intermarried, and their religion became syncretistic. Rejecting all the prophetic and wisdom writings, they followed only the five books of Moses all while worshipping at a temple they built on Mount Gerizim.²

The rift between Jews and Samaritans widened when the returning Jewish exiles refused to allow the Samaritans to participate in rebuilding the temple (Ezra 4:2, 3). Centuries later Samaritans and Jews remained fiercely hostile to each other. Jews did travel through Samaria, when necessary, but strict Jews took a longer route to avoid the region entirely.³

The second break with social convention was that Jesus engaged a Samaritan in conversation—and not just any Samaritan: a woman with a string of husbands and a current lover. Third, Jesus' conversation makes it clear that His interaction is no accident—He anticipated, even sought out, this woman. And He revealed His identity as the Messiah to her, of all people!

The conversation began with a simple request: "Give me a drink" (John 4:7).⁴ That a Jew was speaking to her would have been enough to shock the woman, but this Man was also asking something from her. She responded with blunt astonishment: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (verse 9). Jesus ignored her reference to ethnic division and countered that she should be asking *Him* for a drink! The water He offered as a gift was life-giving. Repeatedly He led her away from issues of ethnic identity and ancient wounds to the present concern of her own soul-thirst and His ability to satisfy it.

Once she grasped the sincerity of His mysterious offer and asked Him for this water, He abruptly told her to call her husband. Her answer was simple: she did not have one. This was an honest statement—she was living with someone who was not her husband, and Jesus revealed that He knew this and her marital history.

Taken aback by His knowledge of her personal life, the woman acknowledged that Jesus must be a prophet, but deflected the conversation away from her personal life back to the topic of Samaritans versus Jews. Jesus used this as an opportunity to declare that a new era had arrived: now all true worshippers, whether Jew or Samaritan, "will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him" (verse 23).

From the beginning of the conversation, Jesus had disrupted her worldview, which was centered on the ethnic and religious conflicts between Jews and Samaritans. She had been identifying herself as someone opposite or against Jews, and therefore this Jewish Man at the well, but He had broken that narrative by engaging her in conversation and treating her with respect. She had held Jacob and her ancestors as grounds for her way of life, religious beliefs, and place of worship. Now Jesus reinterpreted and reformed those, too.

Finally, the woman moved the conversation to the one thing she knew Jews and Samaritans agreed on: "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ).

When he comes, he will tell us all things" (verse 25). His response to her statement of faith and hope was simple and astonishing: "I who speak to you am he" (verse 26).

SOWING AND REAPING

The disciples returned in the moment of stunned silence that, I imagine, followed this revelation. No longer concerned with the water she knew would only temporarily quench her thirst, the Samaritan woman rushed into town and described her encounter with the Jewish Man who claimed to be the Messiah. Hope rang out in her words, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (verse 29).

Back at the well, Jesus responded to the disciples' concern. They had been surprised to find Him talking to a woman, but had said nothing. Now they urged Him to eat, but He refused, claiming food they did not know about. Seeing their confusion, both about the woman and the food, He stated His mission: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (verse 34).

Then He gave them their mission: "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and fathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. . . . I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor" (verses 35-38).

Even as Jesus spoke, people came toward the well from the city, excited by the woman's words. She had no professional theological training, and her understanding of religion had been, until moments ago, guided by the traditions of her people. But her encounter with Jesus made her testimony effective enough to draw the interest of an entire town. Jesus' illustration of the sower and reaper played out right before the disciples' eyes.

The disciples would not have expected Sychar to be a city worthy of their time, except to buy food. Nor would they have anticipated a lone woman to be such an effective missionary. Ellen White wrote, "As soon as she had found the Saviour the Samaritan woman brought others to Him. She proved herself a more effective missionary than His own disciples. The disciples saw nothing in Samaria to indicate that it was an encouraging field. Their thoughts were fixed upon a great work to be done in the future. They did not see that right around

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them was a harvest to be gathered. But through the woman whom they despised, a whole cityful were brought to hear the Saviour. She carried the light at once to her countrymen.”⁵

The Samaritans invited Jesus into their town, and He and the disciples stayed in Sychar for two days. According to John 4:39, many of the townspeople believed in Jesus based on the woman’s testimony, but after His visit even more believed. “They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world’” (verse 42). Jesus could not openly declare His identity as the Messiah among the Jews, but the Samaritans were prepared to recognize His divinity.

WATER TO THE THIRSTY

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman presents us with several important lessons.

First, the gospel can be preached anywhere at any time to anyone willing to listen. Jesus did not wait for a large audience to attend a well-promoted meeting. He struck up a conversation with one sinful woman engaged in the mundane task of drawing water. And when the Samaritan woman shared her encounter with the townspeople, she did not wait for the “perfect moment”—she spoke right away to anyone who would listen. The message she received was too important to wait.

Second, we should never assume to know who is or is not prepared to receive the gospel. Neither can we claim that someone is unworthy to receive the gospel. As Jesus explained in His many parables of sowing and reaping, the seed of the gospel is thrown on good soil and bad. Weeds may grow up alongside

the wheat, but God will sort out the righteous from the unrighteous. Our task is simply to sow and reap. God will take care of the rest.

In the beginning of His conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus described the water He offered as “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (verse 14). When she accepted Christ as Messiah, the woman herself became a spring full of that living water. “He who drinks of the living water becomes a fountain of life. The receiver becomes a giver. The grace of Christ in the soul is like a spring in the desert, welling up to refresh all, and making those who are ready to perish eager to drink of the water of life.”⁶

Let’s accept the gift of living water that Jesus offers to us. And let’s share it with everyone we encounter. Every conversation is an opportunity to share that water. We cannot withhold this gift from those who are so thirsty. ©

¹ Victor H. Matthews, “Conversation and Identity: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 40, no. 4 (2010): 219, 220.

² Gary M. Burge, *NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 140, 141.

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary: John, Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), vol. 2, p. 42.

⁴ Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898, 1940), p. 195.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Questions for Reflection:

1. What ideas are you holding on to that God might be trying to disrupt or transform?
2. Do political or ethnic differences impact whom you engage in conversation?
3. Have you drunk from the Living Water today?