

JOHN 4:1-42

The Samaritan Woman: The One Who Knows Everything and Loves Anyway

It is noon. The hottest hour of the day in the Judean hill country. The other women of the village came to the well in the cool of morning, walking together, sharing the news and the laughter. She comes alone, at noon, with the sun on her shoulders and a water jar on her head, because she has run out of friends. Five husbands have not stayed. The man she lives with now is not her own. The town has stopped inviting her. She comes to the well at noon because the well at noon is empty.

But on this particular day the well is not empty. A Jewish man is sitting there. He should not be talking to her. She is Samaritan, a woman, alone, of dubious reputation. Jews do not talk to Samaritans. Rabbis do not talk to women in public. Holy men do not talk to her at all. But this Jewish man, tired and thirsty, starts a conversation. Within twenty minutes He has offered her water she has never heard of, named the secret of her shameful life out loud, and revealed, to her of all people, the most guarded truth in the Gospel of John: "I who speak to you am he."

She runs back into the village, leaves the water jar she came for, and starts telling everyone she had been hiding from about a man who told her everything she ever did. By the end of the chapter, many in the village have believed in Jesus because of her testimony. The woman who came alone at noon goes back leading a revival. Read John 4:1 to 42 carefully this week, and watch what Jesus does with a woman the world had already given up on.

First impressions

John tells the Samaritan woman's story right after he tells the story of Nicodemus (John 3). The two are deliberately set against each other. Nicodemus: a Jewish man, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, powerful, religious, who comes to Jesus at night with a careful theological question. The Samaritan woman: a despised woman, a half-breed, a moral failure, who meets Jesus at noon with no agenda at all. By the end of chapter 4 it is the Samaritan, not the Pharisee, who is going back to her village proclaiming Jesus. John is showing us what kinds of people Jesus actually came for.

1.
 - a. Read John 4:1 to 42 in one sitting. What is your first impression of the Samaritan woman?
 - b. Of Jesus?

- c. What in the passage moves you most?

A conversation that should never have happened (4:1–9)

The Samaritans were descendants of the northern kingdom of Israelites mixed with the foreign peoples settled there by the Assyrians after 722 B.C. (see 2 Kings 17:24 to 41). By Jesus' day they worshiped at Mount Gerizim, accepted only the first five books of Moses as Scripture, and were regarded by Jews as racially impure and theologically defective. The hatred ran both ways, and many Jews would walk the long way around Samaria rather than set foot in it.

2. Read 4:1 to 4. Verse 4 says, "And he had to pass through Samaria." Most Jews of Jesus' day went around Samaria, even though it took longer. Why might John say Jesus "had to" go through?
3.
 - a. Read 4:6 to 7. What time of day is it? What does that detail suggest about the woman?
 - b. What does it say about Jesus that He is tired, thirsty, sitting alone at a well in the heat?
4. Jesus opens the conversation with a request: "Give me a drink" (4:7). Why might He have started with a request rather than an offer?

For Thought and Discussion: Asking for help often opens a heart faster than offering it. Where in your relationships might receiving from someone, rather than offering to them, be the better starting point?

5. Read 4:9. How does she respond? What barriers does she name?

Living water (4:10–15)

"Living water" in everyday speech meant running water as opposed to still water from a well. But the prophets had used the phrase symbolically for the Holy Spirit and the cleansing He brings (Jeremiah 2:13; Isaiah 12:3; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:25 to 27). Jesus is making a claim larger than the woman yet understands. He is offering what only the Messiah could give. Later, in John 7:37 to 39, Jesus will speak

again of living water, and the apostle John tells us plainly that He was speaking of the Spirit whom believers would receive. Acts 2:38 names the same gift, and the same way to receive it.

Study Skill, Tracing a Theme Through a Book: Many of the great themes in the Gospel of John (water, bread, light, life, truth, the I AM sayings) are introduced early and then woven through the rest of the book. As you study the Samaritan woman, follow the theme of water: from Cana (John 2), to Nicodemus and "water and the Spirit" (John 3:5), to this conversation in John 4, to the feast in John 7:37 to 39, to the cleansing of the disciples' feet in John 13, to the water that flows from Jesus' side in John 19:34. What is John quietly teaching us about Christ, His Spirit, and His church?

6.
 - a. Read 4:10. Jesus shifts the conversation from a drink of water to "the gift of God" and "living water." What is He offering?
 - b. How does the woman misunderstand Him at first (4:11 to 12)?
7.
 - a. Read 4:13 to 14. What is the difference between the water in Jacob's well and the water Jesus offers?
 - b. Have you ever tried to satisfy a thirst that only Jesus can satisfy with something else (a relationship, a career, food, approval, comfort, achievement)? What was the result?

Optional Application: Identify the most persistent unsatisfied longing in your life right now. Sit with it for ten minutes this week and ask the Lord, honestly, what He wants you to know about Himself in that longing. He never wastes a thirst.

"Go call your husband" (4:16–18)

8. Read 4:15. What does the woman ask for, and what does she still misunderstand?
9.
 - a. Read 4:16. Why does Jesus suddenly say, "Go, call your husband"?
 - b. What does this teach us about how the gospel actually changes people? Why can't we receive living water while pretending we are not thirsty?

10. Read 4:17 to 18. Notice how Jesus speaks to her. He tells her the truth about her life without humiliating her. He names what is true, but He does not pile on shame. What is the difference between conviction and condemnation? (Compare Romans 8:1; John 3:17; 2 Corinthians 7:10.)

For Thought and Discussion: Five husbands and a sixth man. We do not know her full story. She may have been widowed. She may have been divorced (and in that culture, almost certainly not by her own choice). She may have been used, abandoned, or some combination of all these. What does it matter to read the passage with that ambiguity in mind? How does Jesus' tone with her square with the way she is sometimes portrayed in sermons?

True worship (4:19–26)

Jesus' words in 4:21 to 24 are some of the most important on the subject of worship in the entire Bible. He says that a day is coming, and now is, when the place of worship will no longer be the issue. The temple in Jerusalem will give way to something larger and deeper: worship "in spirit and truth." The Father is seeking such worshipers, He says (4:23). This is not a vague spirituality. It is the worship of His new covenant people, offered "in spirit" (with our whole inner person) and "in truth" (according to what God has revealed in His word). The pattern is filled out for us in the New Testament: God's church, gathered on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), devoting itself to the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers (Acts 2:42), singing in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), and giving as God has prospered (1 Corinthians 16:2).

11. Read 4:19 to 20. The woman pivots to a religious question, Mount Gerizim versus Jerusalem. Some read this as her dodging the personal subject. Others read it as a sincere question opening up. What do you make of it?

12. a. Read Jesus' answer in 4:21 to 24 carefully. What does He say about the future of worship?
- b. What does He mean by worship "in spirit and truth"?
- c. What does He mean when He says "the Father is seeking such people to worship him"?

For Further Study: Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23 to 26; 1 Corinthians 14:15, 26 to 40; 1 Corinthians 16:1 to 2; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 13:15; and James 5:13 fill out what the early church understood worship "in spirit and truth" to look like in practice. Read each. What elements of worship does the New Testament identify, and how did the apostles instruct the church to engage in each?

13. a. Read 4:25 to 26. What does the woman confess that she is waiting for?
- b. What is the most stunning thing Jesus says in this entire chapter? Why does He say it to her?

For Further Study: In John's Gospel, Jesus is famously cautious about saying openly, "I am the Messiah," until late in His ministry. To this Samaritan woman, in the middle of a private conversation in a despised village, He says it out loud, "I who speak to you am he" (4:26). Why this woman, this place, this moment? What does it tell you about the heart of Jesus?

The first evangelist (4:27–42)

14. Read 4:27. How do the disciples react when they return? What would you have done in their place?
15. a. Read 4:28 to 30. What does the woman leave behind? What does she go and do?
- b. What does it tell you about her transformation that the woman who had been avoiding the village now runs into it?
16. Look at her testimony in 4:29: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" Notice that the evidence she offers is her own life. What does this tell you about how the gospel spreads?

For Thought and Discussion: Evangelism often feels intimidating because we feel we need to have all the answers. The Samaritan woman had only been a believer for about twenty minutes. What is her secret? What does her story say to women in our congregation who feel inadequate to share the gospel?

17. a. Read 4:39 to 42. How does the village respond?
- b. Notice 4:42: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves." What is the goal of any testimony?

Your response

18. a. Jesus knew everything about this woman and loved her anyway. He knows everything about you and loves you anyway. Where in your life are you most tempted to hide from Him?
- b. What would it look like to bring that into His presence this week, trusting that He will speak to you the way He spoke to her, honestly, but without shame?
19. Whose well are you sitting at this week? Whom has God placed in your daily path who needs to hear, in your own words, "Come, see a man"?
20. Write one sentence summarizing what you most want to take away from this lesson, and one concrete step you will take in light of it.

For the group

Warm-up. Begin by asking each woman to share about the moment she first began to take Jesus seriously. Whose well was she at? What did He say?

Discussion. This story is one of the richest in the Gospels. Don't try to discuss every question. Pick four or five. Pay particular attention to questions 7 (the thirst nothing else satisfies), 10 (conviction without condemnation), 12 (true worship), and 16 (her testimony).

Wrap-up. Close by praying for the women your group hopes to see meet Jesus. Ask the Lord to give each woman in the room one specific person to invite to come and see. Thank Him for finding us at our wells.