

The Woman at the Well: John 4:1-15
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
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In our study through the Gospel of John, we come this morning to the well-known story of the woman at the well. Jesus meets this Samaritan woman and speaks to her about living water. It's a message that each one of us needs to hear. And we need to hear it again and again. We are thirsty people. And we'll spend our lives going from well to well searching for anything that will quench our thirst, even if it's just for a moment. Then we're thirsty again. But Jesus speaks to this woman about living water that He gives, living water that will satisfy forever.

There's a lot to this story. We're just going to look at the first part of it today, in verses 1-15 of John 4. I'd encourage you to read through the whole thing sometime this week, verses 1-45. This morning we'll begin by looking into the context of this conversation, and then we'll focus on 3 things about Jesus: Jesus the Man, Jesus the Seeker, and Jesus the Giver of Living Water.

Last Sunday we considered the happy humility of John the Baptist. Jesus' ministry is on the rise. John's ministry is fading. And that turns out to be somewhat troubling to some of John's disciples, but John himself isn't bothered by it in the least. As he sums up in 3:30, "He must increase, but I must decrease." The jealousy / rivalry factor became an issue for some of John's disciples at a time when both John and Jesus were ministering and baptizing in the same region.

But now in chapter 4 Jesus is going to exit that region of Judea and head back north toward Galilee. I want to show you this map to give us a geographical context for what's happening here. **MAP** – This map is telling us that three-fourths of John's Gospel tells us of Jesus in Judea, with Jerusalem as its center. Less than one-fourth of John's Gospel tells of Jesus in Galilee, with Capernaum as its center. The remainder tells us of Jesus in generally non-Jewish territory, like Samaria.

To give you a brief geographical summary, Jesus had gone to Galilee in 1:43, which is where He called Philip and Nathanael. In chapter 2 Jesus turned water to wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Then He traveled south to Jerusalem for the Passover, which is when He cleared the temple, the second half of chapter 2. Then He had the conversation with Nicodemus under the cover of darkness one night. And then He and His disciples went into the Judean countryside and were baptizing (3:22). But now He decides to head back north to Galilee (4:3). And on His way He stops in the Samaritan town of Sychar.

Verse 4 tells us that Jesus “had to pass through Samaria.” There were other ways to get from Judea to Galilee without passing through Samaria. If the disciples put this into their GPS it probably would have given them at least 3 possible routes. You could go over toward the coast and up that way. Or you could cross the Jordan and travel north on the east side of the Jordan. And if you were a strict Jew who wanted to avoid the Samaritans you could opt for one of those longer routes that had the advantage of not having to go through Samaria. Going through Samaria was the shortest trip.

But verse 4 seems to be saying more than that. It’s more than just ease of travel that took Him through Samaria. It seems to be saying that Jesus’ mission compelled Him to go through Samaria. He had a divine appointment that had to be kept. There was an immoral, Samaritan woman who would be showing up at a well at noon, and Jesus was planning to be there to speak to her words of life.

Now, why would Jews avoid Samaria? This goes way back to Old Testament history. In fact, it goes back to the time in biblical history that we’ve been studying in our SS classes—the time of the prophets and kings. You remember there was the southern kingdom of Judah which had Jerusalem as its capitol. Then there was the northern kingdom of Israel which had the city of Samaria as its capitol. In 2 Kings 17 we read of the fall of Israel, the northern kingdom. The king of Assyria captured Samaria, the capitol city of the northern kingdom. And he carried the Israelites away to Assyria. Later in that chapter (2 Kings 17) we find out that the king of Assyria, after exiling the Israelites, brought other peoples to come and live in Samaria—people from Babylon and other places. And these people brought their own gods with them and continued to worship those gods. They also began to fear the Lord, but they didn’t give up their other gods. So there was this syncretism going on, a mixture of serving the Lord as well as their idols. Apparently the syncretism diminished over time and they worshiped only the Lord, but there were some unique things about their religion. For instance, they only recognized the Pentateuch as Scripture—the first 5 books of the Old Testament. And they wouldn’t worship in Jerusalem, but had their own place of worship on Mount Gerizim.¹

You can understand, then, why there was a lot of tension between Jews and Samaritans. The Jews saw Samaritans as severely “tarnished” by the foreign peoples who had come to live there so long ago. The intermingling of Yahweh worship and idol worship had defiled the place.

¹ See Leon Morris, John, page 226-7.

The famous parable that Jesus told about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) plays on this tension between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus tells of a man going down from Jerusalem who gets beat up by robbers. What Jew would think that someone from Samaria would be the one to have compassion and stop to help, after a priest and a Levite have both passed by and done nothing! Jesus is very aware of the disdain Jews had toward Samaritans, and He alludes to that in order to make a point in that parable about showing mercy to your neighbor.

One more thing to mention about this well where Jesus meets this woman . . . Genesis 33 records Jacob purchasing a piece of land in Shechem, in this area. Apparently he later built a well there—a well that remains even to this day. Today its about 100 feet deep. It may have been even deeper then. This explains why Jesus asked the woman for a drink, because He didn't have a bucket or anything to lower down to the water. And it's astounding to her that Jesus would ask her for a drink because of the tension between Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus the Man

Let's take a moment to observe Jesus the man in this story. We know from Scripture that Jesus is fully God and fully man. We learned in the very first verse of this book that Jesus is fully God. He is the Word who is with God and who IS God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have existed from eternity past as Three-In-One. Three distinct, divine Persons united in one Godhead. Jesus Christ, the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, is fully God.

Here in chapter 4 verses 6-7 we have a glimpse of Jesus' humanity. In a very simple way, we see here that Jesus was tired and He was thirsty. He has a physical body, and the many hours of ministering to others was wearing on Him. He was exhausted. And the miles of walking in the hot sun had made Him very thirsty.

This is a good reminder to us, lest we think of Jesus as kind of floating through this world, His feet barely touching the ground, His divine power solving every problem and letting Him avoid every hardship.

Of course, we know that He did exercise His divine power in many glorious ways. But we also know that He suffered immensely. And part of His day-to-day struggle included the simple struggles of living as a human being in this fallen world.

This is part of the humble ministry of Christ's incarnation. He fully became one of us, except without sin. We shouldn't ever think that because Jesus is God, life on this earth was easy for Him. He felt the same kinds of things we feel. He endured much

pain and suffering. Therefore He can identify with us in our pain and suffering. Don't think that Jesus is far off, that He lived a different sort of life on this earth, that He can't stand beside you and say, "I know what you're going through." He *does* know what you're going through.

He knows the trials of our lives, including even the relatively mundane trials of tiredness and thirst.

Jesus the Seeker

Sometimes we refer to people as seekers if it seems like they're interested in Christianity in one way or another. We might refer to Nicodemus in that way. He came to Jesus at night to ask some questions. He was intrigued by Jesus' ministry and wanted to understand more. But who's the seeker in this story? This Samaritan woman is certainly not seeking Jesus. It's the other way around. Jesus is seeking her.

She doesn't even know who Jesus is. And she doesn't know He's going to be there at the well. The end of verse 6 tells us that it was the sixth hour, which is noon. It's the middle of the day, which means it would have been hot. The sun was straight up in the sky, beating down on everything and everyone. Women would typically go to the well in groups, and they would do so either early in the morning or later in the evening in order to avoid the hot sun. This woman, for reasons we find out later in the story, would have wanted to avoid those gatherings at the well. Jesus knows this about her (He's human and divine, remember). He knows everything about her, even though she's never met Him before. He knows that she has had 5 husbands and is now living with a man who is not her husband. Surely she would have been looked down upon by the other women at the well, which is probably why she shows up there by herself in the hottest part of the day. The discomfort of working in the noonday sun to draw water and carry the heavy buckets back to town was not quite as uncomfortable as being in the company of women who were judging her for her sin.

I love this about Jesus, that He seeks out this downcast woman, this sinful woman, this outcast woman, to speak to her words of life. Luke 19:10 says, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." That is our Savior. He came seeking us. He came seeking lost sinners to rescue. And He seeks all kinds of people. There are the folks like Nicodemus, the religious elite who look like they have it all together. But Jesus tells him, You must be born again! And then there are the folks like the woman at the well who know that they don't have it all together, and Jesus offers her living water.

It's interesting to compare and contrast Nicodemus and the woman at the well. We're told Nicodemus's name. The woman at the well remains nameless. He is highly respected as a prominent religious leader and comes to Jesus at night. She is disrespected and immoral, and Jesus meets her under the noonday sun. One is a man, the other a woman. One is a Jew, the other a Samaritan. But both desperately need Jesus. They both need to be born again. They both need living water.

In the midst of these conversations, each of these individuals has trouble understanding what Jesus is getting at. When Jesus talks to Nicodemus about being born again, Nicodemus questions how he could enter a second time into his mother's womb. He's obviously not tracking with the spiritual significance of what Jesus is communicating. Likewise, when Jesus tells the woman about living water welling up to eternal life, she sees it merely as a way to avoid physical thirst and as a way to eliminate the burdensome trips to the well (verse 15).

What is it, then, that Jesus is really getting at? She'll understand more as the conversation goes on . . . we'll look at more of it next Sunday. But it's obvious, at least to us, that Jesus is talking about much more than water in a bucket. He's talking about a spiritual spring that produces eternal life, a spiritual spring that is the only lasting satisfaction for our intense spiritual thirst.

That's what I want to spend the rest of our time talking about.

Jesus the Giver of Living Water

Blaise Pascal, who lived in the mid-1600s. He said, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end." Pascal is saying that every single one of us is looking for happiness in life. We're like this woman who had been through 5 marriages, was involved with yet another man, and was still unsatisfied. She was spiritually thirsty, relationally thirsty. She had a craving deep in her soul that had never even come close to being fulfilled.

Our situations will all be different. The means of trying to obtain happiness will look different in each individual. But this is the goal we'll all be aiming for. We all want to be happy.

Pascal goes on to recognize the fact that outside of faith in God, no one has found this happiness that they so desperately want. We all complain because we want something more, and we try to find happiness in so many things, but nothing ultimately satisfies. And Pascal says the reason none of us can be satisfied by the things of the world is because we have a God-shaped hole in our hearts. He calls it an "infinite abyss." And we try to fill that hole with all kinds of things, but there will always be an emptiness

there until we turn to God for our satisfaction. He alone can fill that void in our souls.

The imagery Jesus uses here in John 4, the illustration of living water, echoes back to things the prophets wrote in the Old Testament. We heard it in the Scripture reading from Isaiah 12, where verse 3 says, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

Another passage that comes to mind is Isaiah 55 that begins with an amazing invitation. “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

These are the words of God, inviting, indeed, commanding His people to be satisfied. God is pleading with us to accept this amazing gift that He is offering. And what is it He’s offering? Himself!

The Lord is obviously not talking about mere physical food and drink. The water, food, wine, milk are metaphors for the great spiritual peace and delight that the Lord is offering. He is calling us to enjoy a great feast. He is inviting us to join the banquet. He is appealing to us to experience life to the fullest . . . in Him!

A couple verses later He says, “Incline your ear, and come to ME.” “COME TO ME!” In verse 1 He says, “come to the waters,” “come, buy and eat!” “Come, buy wine and milk.” And in verse 3 He says, “Come to ME.” God is the gift being offered. God Himself is the treasure. He is the banquet. He is the water and the wine and the milk and the bread and rich food. He is life. He is the One who satisfies us. The gift that is being offered is the gift of knowing God.

But there’s a problem. A big problem. It’s evident in the woman at the well, in her confusion about what Jesus is talking about, because of her spiritual blindness. And it’s evident in her string of broken relationships. She’s a woman who has been looking for love in all the wrong places. She’s desperate for love, desperate to be loved, truly loved.

And Jesus’ gracious message to her is so similar to the next verse in Isaiah 55. This question identifies the problem. The problem this woman experienced. The problem that is common to all of us. “Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” Spiritually speaking, why do we go looking to satisfy the deepest longings of our souls with things that will not—cannot—ever bring that kind of satisfaction?

Sin is our problem. Sin is what causes us to turn away from God and to think foolishly that we will be alright without Him. Sin is what separates us from God. Sin is what keeps us from enjoying this great gift that is offered. Romans 3:23 says that

“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We sin against God by lying or cheating or gossiping or lusting or acting out of jealousy or hatred or pride. We turn away from Him in so many ways, and this questions in Isaiah 55:2 illustrates the foolishness of our rebellion. This is the insanity of sin, that we would go bankrupt trying to be happy with worldly pleasures, that we would work ourselves into utter exhaustion trying to squeeze something meaningful from an existence that is meaningless apart from God.

The fact is, we are all hungry and thirsty, we have no money, and yet we spend money on things that are not bread and we work for things that will not satisfy. We all want to be happy. We all want joy and peace and meaning in our lives. And the problem is not that we want joy, but that we look for it in all the wrong places.

This is our problem. Instead of running to this lavish banquet and enjoying the pleasures of knowing God, instead of drinking from the spring of water welling up to eternal life, we turn our back on God and try to be satisfied in other things.

In Jeremiah 2, another Old Testament prophet, the Lord describes this in a similar way. Jeremiah 2:12-13, “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” Can you see the picture? Here is the fountain of living waters, fully satisfying. But what do we do? Instead of running to that fountain, we forsake it. We turn away from it and try to dig our own cisterns to store water for ourselves. But they are broken cisterns and cannot hold water. God is pleading with us, commanding us, to satisfy ourselves in the only thing that can truly and completely satisfy, and yet we turn our backs on Him and search for pleasure in other things. But those other things never make good on their promises.

Jesus is pleading with this woman, revealing Himself to her as the Messiah, the giver of living water. He’s pleading with us, pleading with you, friend . . . Will you go on tiring yourself with the empty, short-lived enjoyments of this world? Or will you turn and let God Almighty give you the food and drink your soul longs for?

As Augustine wrote in a prayer to God, all the way back in the late 300s A.D., in a book called the *Confessions* he wrote about his conversion experience, and he expresses so poignantly the change that happened in his heart. He says to God: “How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose. You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy.”

Do you see what he's saying about God? He is comparing sin, which he calls fruitless joys, to God, whom he calls the sovereign joy. God is the triumphant joy. He is the ultimate, absolute joy. Nothing else compares. And when God saves a person, He reveals Himself as the sovereign joy. Before God changes our hearts, we're blind to the fountain. We're blind to the banquet. We're dead in our sin, and we think the sinful pleasures are the only pleasures. But then God regenerates our hearts, giving us new life and new eyes to see that all these other things are fruitless joys and He is true joy.

Jesus says to the woman at the well, in verses 13-14 . . .

As we go through the Gospel of John, there is some more light shed on this statement in chapter 7:37-39.

What we see there is that Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit when He speaks of the living water. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to be a spring of water within us welling up to eternal life.

And while this permanently quenches our thirsty souls, at the same time it creates a different kind of thirst, a new thirst, a healthy thirst that motivates us toward greater and greater joy.

In the Beatitudes of Matthew 5, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

So the living water which Jesus gives us will quench our spiritual thirst in a way that nothing else can—not Jacob's well, or multiple love affairs, or great riches, or fame or comfort. But at the same time this new life within us stirs up a new hunger and thirst, a hunger and thirst for righteousness. As the Spirit sanctifies us, our appetite increases for this food and drink that we used to find totally unappealing. Now we can't get enough. We have tasted and seen that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). And we want more and more of His goodness. We want more and more refreshment at the banquet table of God's glory.

When Jesus says to the woman at the well, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again," it doesn't mean we will never have another spiritual craving ever again. On the contrary, our spiritual desires will awaken and increase.

John Calvin writes, "Christ's words do not contradict the fact that believers to the very end of their lives ardently desire more abundant grace. For He does not mean that we drink so that we are fully satisfied from the very first day, but only that the Holy Spirit is a constantly flowing well. So there is no danger of those who are renewed by spiritual grace becoming dry."²

You see, those who are born again know where the fountain is. In fact, it's right inside of us. The Holy Spirit

² Quoted in Leon Morris, John, page 232 footnote 36.

indwells us, prompting us to quench our thirst at the spring of water welling up to eternal life. If you're a believer, the encouragement to us is that we have this spring of water within us. We've been given life—abundant, overflowing life, life that will continue to quench our thirsty souls, life that will keep us hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Let this passage remind us how foolish we are when we turn back to the cracked pots of our former lives. Don't go back to those imposter wells that promise to quench your thirst but instead cause you to waste away on the inside. Keep drinking from the fountain of living water. Let our prayer be that of Psalm 42:1-2.

“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” Let that be the cry of our hearts this week. God is glorified as we pray to Him like that. And we get much help and hope.

If you're not yet a believer, Jesus is seeking you, graciously making this offer to you, that whoever receives this living water from Him will be eternally satisfied. As Jesus said to the woman at the well, He says to all who will listen, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Don't you want that!? Come to Jesus today and receive this living water from His hand. Stop seeking after the next worldly pleasure to satisfy you. Look to the only One who can satisfy you forever.