

Living Water

John 4:1-15

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⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

– John 4:1-15, ESV

Introduction: What is our Deepest Need?

We Americans like to use the word “need” a lot, probably too much – okay, definitely too much. We say we need a day off, we need a vacation, we need a new car, we need more sleep and we need the Orioles to make the playoffs. On top of our inability to distinguish between needs and wants, we also have a hard time understanding which of our needs is most important.

So, what is your most important need? Food? Clothing? Money? Shelter? Sleep? We tend to pay most attention to those needs which are most immediate and obvious. Among our legitimate needs, we’re probably most often aware of our need for food and sleep, because we regularly feel hungry and tired. But we have other needs, even some that are also regularly felt, that we can tend to ignore or mis-understand. For example, are you a stress eater? Or do you ever eat when you’re bored? Or do we sometimes confuse loneliness with boredom, think that what we need is entertainment, when what we really need is love?

In today’s passage, we find Jesus in a moment of need. He was thirsty. His need was real and immediate, but the needs of the woman he meets at Jacob’s well are far deeper and more serious. He begins their conversation by asking her to meet His need, but His intention all along is to meet her needs in a way she doesn’t expect and doesn’t even seem to desire, at least at first. We’ll be looking at this episode in the life of Jesus for four weeks, and as we do, we’ll find

that Jesus exposes and addresses all of our deepest needs in a powerful and gracious way.

A. A Significant Setting (vv. 1-6)

John opens his narrative by setting the scene:

“Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), ³ he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. ⁴ And he had to pass through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.”

In the last section of his Gospel, John told us that Jesus was beginning to attract larger crowds than John the Baptist. Here, we find out that John the Baptist's disciples were not the only ones to notice Jesus' popularity. Jesus learned that word of the crowds coming out to hear Him had reached the ears of the Pharisees. The Pharisees had heard the same thing that we learned two weeks ago, that Jesus was baptizing more people than John the Baptist.

John clarifies for us that it was not Jesus Himself but His disciples who were doing the actual baptizing. You can imagine the reasons why Jesus Himself would not be baptizing people. Can you imagine how divisive it would have been in the life of the early church for a number of disciples to be able to claim that they had been baptized by the Lord Himself? As several of Jesus' disciples had originally been disciples of John the Baptist, it's also not surprising that they thought it was important to baptize people as a sign of repentance in expectation of the coming of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is gracious and does not want to stir up division by giving the Pharisees material for sowing discord between Him and His disciples and John the Baptist and his disciples. Jesus also knows that it is not yet time for Him to face the cross, that He has much more work to do in the Father's will before going to Calvary. So, rather than risk the anger and plotting of the Judean Pharisees, Jesus leaves the area and heads back to Galilee. He had already been in Galilee earlier, for the wedding at Cana, where He turned the water into wine.

This time, as Jesus is heading for Galilee, He and His disciples stop at a Samaritan village named Sychar. The main road from Jerusalem up to Galilee ran right through the heart of Samaria, so the line that *“he had to pass through Samaria”* could either refer to geographical necessity or to divine appointment. Probably John means both: this was the most practical route and it was the Father's will for the Son to minister in Samaria.

Outside of the village of Sychar, Jesus stops to rest at Jacob's well, while His disciples go into town to get food. We don't know exactly where Sychar was, but we do know exactly where Jacob's well was, because it's still there today. The Greek uses the word for “spring” to identify this well initially and then later uses the word well, so this is evidently a well fed by an

underground spring. When Jacob dug this well, he hit a very reliable spring, indeed. The well still gives water, almost 4,000 years after it was first dug. Today, it is underneath a Greek Orthodox monastery, where it is still in use.

Jesus arrives at Jacob's well weary from His journey and thirsty. It was the sixth hour, which could either mean Noon or even 6 p.m., depending on which time system John has in mind. Most commentators favor Noon, since this is obviously a hot part of the day and would be an unusual time for a woman to be coming to draw water, as that was usually done in the morning or the evening, to avoid the heat of the day.

B. A Scandalous Samaritan (vv. 7-9)

As Jesus sits down, He is hot, tired and thirsty. This is a display of the full humanity of Jesus. John has already made it clear that Jesus is fully God, and now he's emphasizing His full humanity, as He is weary and thirsty. But Jesus did not just sit down at this well to get water. He's here to meet someone:

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

The last conversation we saw Jesus have in this Gospel was with Nicodemus. This woman could not be more different:

- Nicodemus was a Jew, and she is a Samaritan.
- Nicodemus was held in honor by all as "the teacher of Israel," and she is a woman of low reputation.
- Nicodemus was deeply religious, a member of the Sanhedrin, but she was scandalous, having had five husbands and now living with a man who was not her husband.
- Nicodemus was named and his name is well-known, but we are not told this woman's name.

So Jesus enters into conversation with this unnamed, scandalous Samaritan woman. Jesus begins the conversation by asking her to meet His need. One of the best ways to bridge the gap and enter into conversation with someone you don't know who is very different than you is to either seek to meet a need of theirs, or, better yet, ask them to meet your need. Asking them to meet your need is humbling, and it puts them in a position of strength as the one who can meet your need.

Notice that Jesus doesn't just open with, "Hello, sinful woman, coming alone to the well in the heat of the day. How shameful! You need salvation. Repent of your sins and believe in Me and

you will be saved.” Jesus knows that her greatest need is for salvation, but He chooses first to address her need for dignity, her need to be treated as a human being.

She is so shocked by His request that she doesn’t know how to respond: *“How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)* Samaritan women were regarded by Jewish men as unclean from birth. John’s parenthetical remark is probably “Jews do not share vessels with Samaritans” rather than “Jews have no dealing with Samaritans,” which was not really true. Jews could buy from and sell to Samaritans (after all, Jesus’ disciples were in the village buying food), but they would never eat together or share an eating or drinking vessel. Additionally, Jewish men were never supposed to speak to a woman in public, not even to their own wives. Men could talk to men and women could talk to women, but no conversation between men and women ever happened outside the home.

C. A Stimulating Suggestion (v. 10)

So Jesus obviously had this woman’s attention. He decided to use her shocked response as an opening to suggest something that is both confusing and thought-provoking: *Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”*

“If you knew the gift of God” is probably a reference to the Scriptures, to the Torah. The Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, as Scripture, but they did not accept the other 34 books, from Joshua to Malachi. So, Jesus tells her that if she knew the Scriptures well and if she knew who He was, then she would ask for living water.

“Living water” is a clear double-entendre. That is, Jesus intends a double-meaning when He uses this phrase. On the surface, “living water” refers to the fresh water deep in the well, coming directly from the spring, not the still and somewhat stale or stagnant water lying on the surface. But in the Scriptures that this woman did not know, “living water” means so much more:

In Jeremiah, we hear of Living Water as something which only the LORD can give His people, something which they lost when they turned away from Him:

“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.” – Jeremiah 2:13

“O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.” – Jeremiah 17:13

Then, the prophet Zechariah speaks of the Day of the Lord using this language:

On that day there shall be no light, cold, or frost. And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter.

And the LORD will be king over all the earth. (Zech. 14:6-9, ESV)

So, living water is something only God can give, which meets our deepest needs and which nothing else can replace. By comparison, anything we get from the world or from our idols is just a broken cistern that can hold no water. On the Day of the Lord, when the LORD, through His Messiah, establishes His kingdom across the face of the whole earth, living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem to the whole earth. So, living water is an image of God's satisfying salvation, of His rich and everlasting blessing, of eternal life and joy, flowing from Him and Him alone.

D. A Skeptical Sarcasm (vv. 11-12)

The Samaritan woman doesn't get any of this. She's not into metaphors and imagery. She's a practical woman who's tired of coming to the well alone in the heat of the day. She's also skeptical. As a woman who's been divorced five times and who's now on her sixth man, she's been burned by men before, and she replies to Jesus with a skeptical sarcasm:

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."

She looks at this tired and thirsty Jewish man, who has nothing to draw water, and she doesn't believe a word He just said. Who does He think he is anyway? Does He think He's greater than Jacob? This well was given by the father of the whole nation of Israel, by the man who was named Israel by God Himself. The well had served God's people for 2,000 years by the time this woman came to draw water from it. What could Jesus possibly have to offer that could be better than Jacob's well?

E. A Saving Satisfaction (vv. 13-15)

Jesus responds by adding another unbelievable statement to the one He's already made:

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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."

Anything physical that we seek to satisfy our needs provides only temporary satisfaction, at best. We thirst. We drink water. Soon, we thirst again. We are tired. We rest. Soon, we are

tired again. We hunger. We eat. Soon, we hunger again. (If you're a teenage boy, you're hungry again about 10-15 minutes after you finish eating.)

What remains beneath all of our physical needs and their temporary satisfactions is a deep spiritual hunger and thirsting, a profound and powerful longing that nothing in this world can satisfy.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis explains this deep desire of the human soul:

“The Christian says, ‘Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same.’”

Jesus knew that this woman, even more so than most people, knew that nothing in this world could satisfy the deepest longings of her heart. She had experienced more of life than most people and had been disappointed and left wanting more than most. And so He is determined to bring her to real satisfaction, which only He can give.

For her part, the Samaritan woman is starting to respond. She is now interested in the idea of something that might satisfy her thirst, although she's still thinking too literally. In the first positive and hopeful words she speaks to Jesus, she says, “*Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.*”

As we continue looking at Jesus' conversation with this woman, we'll see how she comes to find satisfaction for her thirsty soul. As The Most Interesting Man in the World says, “Stay thirsty, my friends.” But not with a thirst that can be quenched by Dos Equis or anything else in this world. We need to stay thirsty for Jesus and the eternal life found only in Him. If you do not know Him, come and find the fountain of living water in Him today. If you do know Him, make sure you never settle for a cheap substitute or hollow imitation. Keep seeking Jesus for your soul's deepest needs, until that day when we see Him face-to-face.