

## John 4:21–24

### Introduction

Last week, we saw that it was necessary for Jesus to pass through Samaria where He met and conversed with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. When Jesus revealed the special knowledge He had of this woman's past and present life, she admitted that she could see Jesus was a prophet (in at least some generic sense). She could see this not just because of the privileged knowledge Jesus had, but because of the way in which He revealed that knowledge. Jesus reveals His knowledge not "sensationally," but rather by exposing the sin and misery that she had spent all her life trying to mask. It's also in the light of this privileged knowledge and the way Jesus reveals it that the woman must also take into account Jesus' claim to be the one who gives living water – water that becomes in the one who drinks it a fountain of water springing up to eternal life.

Since the Samaritans believed that the next prophet to arise in the tradition of Moses would be "the prophet" (the one who would restore all things), perhaps the question of whether Jesus could be that prophet had already crossed the woman's mind. And yet this man was a Jew. The Jews acknowledged the authority of many prophets who had arisen since Moses, and therefore they acknowledged as a part of their Scriptures not only the Law of Moses, but also the "prophets" (Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.) and the "writings" (the Psalms, Proverbs, etc.) This meant for the Jews that the temple Solomon had built in Jerusalem was the place that God Himself had chosen for His people to worship Him.

- Deuteronomy 12:5–7, 10–11, 13–14 (cf. 12:18, 21, 26; 14:23; 15:20; 16:2, 6-7, 11, 15-16; 17:8, 10; 18:6; 23:16; 26:2; 31:11) — You shall seek the **place** that the LORD your God will **choose** out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation **there**. **There** you shall go, and **there** you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices... When you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit... then to the **place** that the LORD your God will **choose**, to make his name dwell **there**, **there** you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices... Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at **any place** that you see, but at the **place** that the LORD will **choose** in one of your tribes, **there** you shall offer your burnt offerings, and **there** you shall do all that I am commanding you.

Both the Jews and the Samaritans acknowledged that God's people were to worship at the place that God had chosen; they just disagreed about where this place was. The Samaritans acknowledged as Scripture only the five books of Moses and these books said nothing about Jerusalem. It was at Shechem, situated at the base of Mount Gerizim where the Lord appeared to Abraham and where both Abraham and Jacob built altars to the Lord.

- Genesis 12:6–7 — Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh... Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built **there** an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

- Genesis 33:18–20 — Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem... And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem’s father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent. **There** he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.

Mount Gerizim was also the mountain from which the blessings were to be pronounced (the curses being pronounced from Mount Ebal) after Israel had come into the promised land (Deut. 11:29; 27:12; cf. Josh. 8:33). According to the Samaritan Pentateuch, it was on Mount Gerizim that God had commanded his people to build to Him an altar (cf. the SP text of the Ten Commandments):

- Deuteronomy 27:4–7 — When you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Gerizim [Masoretic text: Mount Ebal], and you shall plaster them with plaster. And **there** you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; you shall build an altar to the LORD your God of uncut stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat **there**, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God.

In Deuteronomy twelve where Moses says, “You shall seek the place that the LORD your God *will choose* [the temple in Jerusalem],” the Samaritan Pentateuch reads instead: “You shall seek the place that the LORD your God *has chosen* [Mount Gerizim].” The Samaritans believed that the temple in Jerusalem represented a “false cult” while the temple that they had built on Mount Gerizim in 400 BC actually represented the true “religion” of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of the Israelites before they “apostatized.”

Coming back, now, to the Samaritan woman, she had to be asking herself how this Jew, whose entire religion and worship is centered around Jerusalem, can be who He claims to be when she’s been taught all her life that Mount Gerizim is the place where the true people of God ought to worship. Can you see how insurmountable this obstacle would seem to be?

- John 4:19–20 — The woman said to [Jesus], “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”

This isn’t an attempt to change the subject. At this moment, this really is the most pressing question on this woman’s mind. And it’s in response to this question that Jesus gives what must have been to the woman the most amazing and the most unexpected answer ever.

**I. John 4:21** — Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain [Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.”

On the lips of any “normal” man those words would have been nothing less than blasphemous. According to the Samaritans it was God Himself who had chosen Mount Gerizim as the place where His people ought to worship Him. According to the Jews it was God Himself who had chosen Mount Zion in Jerusalem as the place where His people ought to worship Him. According to the Pentateuch itself (which both the Samaritans and the Jews accepted) God had,

in fact, chosen a particular place where His people ought to worship Him. Who is this man, then, to speak such things as these, and to speak with such authority? “Jesus said to her, “Woman, *believe me*, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain [Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.”

Are you beginning to understand the import of those words? This can only mean an eschatological shift in the whole order of revelation and redemption. That’s the only way for this woman to hear what Jesus says. In the context of John’s Gospel, even the language Jesus uses has “redemptive-eschatological” overtones (“the *hour* is coming”). In chapter two, Jesus said to His mother, “My hour has not yet come” (2:4). In chapters seven and eight, John twice refers to the fact that “his hour had not yet come” (7:30; 8:20). Beginning in chapter twelve, Jesus’ language changes from “My hour has not yet come” to “the hour has come” (12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1). The “hour” in John refers to that eschatological moment when the Son ushers in the consummation of redemptive history (cf. 5:25, 28).

So on the one hand, Jesus speaks of the *future* and the ushering in of an entirely new eschatological age when the question of the proper place for worship will be irrelevant. But almost equally as shocking is the way Jesus speaks of the *past*. He doesn’t initially come down on the side of either Gerizim *or* Jerusalem as the place that had *been* the proper place for worship. “Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when *neither on this mountain [Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem* will you worship the Father.” That’s not going to please either the Samaritans *or* the Jews. And yet what does this Samaritan woman hear in these words of Jesus? She hears the words of a man—a Jew—who isn’t captive to the religious self-righteousness and arrogance of either the Jews or the Samaritans, but stands above both. But she hears something more. If a *future* hour is coming when the place where God’s people worship will be wholly irrelevant, what should this tell us about the importance of the “place” even in the *past* and the *present*? Jesus isn’t saying that the geographical place has never been important, but if the place is about to become irrelevant, then what really was the importance of that place to begin with? Jesus goes on, now, to answer this question. But first, are you beginning to see *how* this Samaritan woman must have been *hearing* these words of Jesus? Jesus continues:

**II. John 4:22** — “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.”

Right after dismissing the importance of any “place” in the future and relativizing the importance of any “place” in the past, Jesus shows exactly what the real importance of the “place” had always been. In order to do this, He takes now the “side” of the Jews, but only after having set everything in this radically different eschatological perspective.

“You [Samaritans] worship what you do not know.” Jesus doesn’t compromise the truth in order to avoid offending the Samaritans. The worship of the Samaritans is an “ignorant” worship. They’re worship isn’t according to the true knowledge of God, but according to their own ideas. Even though they accepted the Law of Moses, their rejection of the rest of God’s revelation that came after Moses necessarily meant that they must be hearing and interpreting Moses wrongly. Notice that Jesus doesn’t explicitly say that the Samaritans had the wrong place. They did have

the wrong place, but that wasn't the main problem. The main problem was their ignorance of the true *God* and His promised *salvation*. It's in this light that Jesus goes on to say:

“We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” Jesus isn't speaking here in subjective or experiential categories (He's not saying that all of the Jews were saved), but in salvation-historical categories. The “worship of the Jews” wasn't an ignorant worship because it was according to the completed revelation of God as of that moment in redemptive history. But is this good enough? Notice Jesus doesn't explicitly say that the Jews had the right place. They did have the right place, but that's not the main point. The main point was the revelation of *God* and of His promised *salvation* that was mediated *through* that place.

When Jesus says that “salvation is *from* the Jews,” He's not saying that the Jews are better than the Samaritans or that the Jews are all saved, but “only” that God had chosen them to be the *vehicle* for His redemptive revelation and even the people from whom the Savior of the whole world would come. When Jesus says that “salvation is *from* the Jews” His emphasis isn't on any intrinsic worth of the Jews, but rather on the fact that the Jews (**as a covenant people**) and the entire Jewish system of worship finds its worth “only” in being the *vehicle* for the revelation of God and of His promised salvation in the Messiah. But if this is so, can we see what this must mean? Once the promised Messiah and His salvation have come, the vehicle by which that salvation had been promised, and prepared for, and even ultimately brought into the world must suddenly become wholly irrelevant, and even obsolete — *as the vehicle*. When the “hour” of which Jesus speaks has come, the Jewish people will no longer be a “covenant people” because their role as the vehicle of God's redemptive revelation will then be fulfilled – because God's salvation will then have come into the world. That's not to say that God would no longer have any saving purposes for the Jews when the Messiah came (the opposite is true), but it was to say that the Jews would no longer exist or have any relevance *as an ethnically defined covenant people except* in terms of that most important role that they had played in the past as the vehicle through which God brought His salvation into the world (this is what explains the continuing relevance and authority of the Old Testament Scriptures). It's this reality, then, that helps us to understand what Jesus said at the beginning: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain [Gerizim] *nor in Jerusalem* will you worship the Father.” And it's this reality that helps us understand what Jesus goes on to say in verse twenty-three:

**III. John 4:23** — “But the hour is coming, *and is now here*, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”

The “hour” was still to come because it still awaited Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father. But in another sense, the hour had already come and was already present (“is now here”) even in the person of Jesus, who is Himself God's salvation come into the world. In the *person* of Jesus, who is talking with this woman, Jerusalem, as a place of redemptive-historical significance, was already being rendered forever obsolete.

Jesus isn't saying here that up until that time the worship of God's true worshipers was only a formal and external worship. There's an important sense in which the true worshipers had always worshiped the Father in spirit and truth. But now, in the light of the progress of redemptive history, what has always been true is about to become true in a whole new way.

The worship of the Old Covenant was *necessarily* tied to external forms because the substance that these forms pointed to had not yet come into the world. The worship of the Old Covenant was *necessarily* tied to external forms because the salvation that they typified and by which God Himself would be finally and fully revealed had not yet come into the world. The external forms weren't just helpful "aids" to worship, they were an essential part of worship because they were the means by which God was revealing in shadow form the future fullness of revelation that would come in Jesus. Therefore, when Jesus comes into the world, the old external forms are no longer necessary, and the worship of God's true people must in some sense be wholly transformed. Under the Old Covenant the *worship* of God's true worshipers depended upon an incomplete and shadowy *revelation*, and it was to this extent that they worshiped what they knew. But now, Jesus is saying, the *worship* of God's true worshipers will be a response to the fullness and the completeness of God's *revelation* of Himself in Jesus. Can you see now how what had always been true was about to become true in a whole new way? So Jesus concludes in verse twenty-four:

**IV. John 4:24** — "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

We can see right away that this is something that's always been true because God has always been "spirit." And yet there must also be a sense in which the fulfillment of redemptive history has made this "old" reality entirely new.

To say that God is spirit is to say that He is not flesh (cf. Isa. 31:3) and therefore He is not *bound* to any geographical location. Solomon acknowledged this even at the first dedication of the temple in Jerusalem when he prayed with these words:

- 1 Kings 8:27–30 — But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God... that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place... And listen in heaven your dwelling place...

To say that God is spirit is to say that He is not flesh and therefore He is not bound to any particular geographical location. But if Solomon could understand this even under the Old Covenant when the place was so important, how much more can we experientially understand this who no longer offer our prayers toward any place on earth as the focus of God's revelation, but rather toward heaven itself where all the fullness of God's revelation now sits at God's right hand?

To say that God is spirit is to say that true worship must be essentially spiritual (cf. Morris) and therefore not ultimately defined by external forms and rituals. This was understood by God's true worshipers even under the Old Covenant:

- Isaiah 1:12–14 — When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn

assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

- Isaiah 29:13 — This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.

Today, even baptism and the Lord's Supper are not types or shadows pointing to a salvation that's still needed (as were the OT "forms" of circumcision and Passover). Instead, baptism and the Lord's Supper actually partake themselves (in their *form* and therefore in their *meaning*) of the very substance that we all partake of in Christ. Baptism is administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (fullness of revelation) and proclaims to those who receive it in faith that they've been united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, and that their sins are now all forgiven for His name's sake (fullness of salvation). The Lord's Supper is a proclamation to us of our abiding fellowship with Christ as we partake spiritually and by faith of His body and blood (of all the saving benefits that flow from His sacrificial death in our place). To say that God is spirit is to say that true worship must be essentially *spiritual* and therefore not ultimately defined by external forms and rituals. If this could be understood under the Old Covenant, how much more can we experientially understand this whose worship is no longer connected to the Old Covenant types and shadows or even really to any "external" forms at all because we have in the coming of Christ the true substance? How much more can we experientially understand this who "in one Spirit... were all baptized into one body... and all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13)?

To say that God is spirit is to say that He is not flesh and therefore He is invisible and can only be known to us when and where He chooses to reveal Himself. If this could be understood even under the Old Covenant when God revealed Himself at many times and in many ways by the prophets, how much more can we experientially understand this as those to whom God has revealed Himself in these last days by His Son – who is "the radiance of [His] glory and the exact imprint of His nature" (Heb. 1:1-3)?

It's in all of these ways that we see how with the coming of the fullness of *revelation* (of God's salvation in Christ) comes a whole new "meaning"—a whole new dimension, as it were—to worship in *spirit and truth* – to worshipping *what we know*. With the coming of the fullness of revelation comes a fullness of worship in spirit and truth that wasn't possible for those who worshiped in spirit and truth under the Old Covenant. The fullness and newness of this worship is so "full" and so "new" that Jesus can even speak of this worship "in these last days" as a categorically new kind of worship, "worship in spirit and truth" – worship that is *conformed* now to that fullness of God's revelation of Himself and of His salvation that has come to us in Christ. This is the worship—and these are the worshipers—that the Father is seeking, and this is the worship—this is the *only* worship—that is acceptable to God ("must").

## Conclusion

Can we understand, now, why after these words of Jesus the Samaritan woman responds:

- John 4:25 — "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, **he will tell us all things.**"

And can we appreciate even more fully Jesus' simple reply:

➤ John 4:26 — “I—who speak to you—I am.”

How blessed we are to be true worshipers of God who worship the Father in spirit and truth. May our worship of God always be conformed by faith and through His Spirit to that fullness of His revelation of Himself that has come to us in Jesus Christ.