

John 4:1–30, 39–42

I. John 4:1–4 — Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And it was necessary for him to pass through Samaria. [MAP p. 9]

In order to fully appreciate this account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman we need to understand who the Samaritans were. After King Solomon died, Israel split into two separate kingdoms – north and south. The sixth king of the northern kingdom was Omri and he's the one who purchased a hill and then built a fortified city on that hill and named the city "Samaria," after the name of its original owner ([MAP p. 9]; 1 Kings 16:23-24). As the new capital city of the northern kingdom, "Samaria" could also be a shorthand reference to the entire northern kingdom. "[When] the Assyrians captured Samaria... they deported all the Israelites of substance and settled the land with foreigners, who intermarried with the [remaining] Israelites." (Carson) The Assyrians then divided the land into two separate provinces [MAP p. 10]: Samaria and Megiddo, which would later be known as Galilee. Of course, later on the southern kingdom was also defeated and the Jewish people taken into exile to Babylon. When the Jews finally returned to their homeland, there was no longer any distinction between "north" and "south" (it was really just the Judeans who returned) and so they all returned together to the ruins of Jerusalem in the south and the surrounding villages [MAP p. 10]. But while they had remained ethnically and religiously "pure" in exile by refusing intermarriage with Gentiles and refusing to worship foreign gods, their neighbors to the north were now a mixed bag of Jews and Gentile foreigners and "half-breeds" who had mixed the worship of Israel's God (the "native god" of that land) with the "gods" of the Gentiles who had settled there (2 Kings 17-18). It was this people now living in the land of Samaria who would centuries later become known as "Samaritans." It was the "Samaritans" (before they were called "Samaritans") who were the first enemies of the Jews returning from exile. They pretended to be sympathetic to their cause by offering to help with the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4:1-2). But the leaders of the Jews responded with these words:

- Ezra 4:3 — "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel."

In response to this response we read:

- Ezra 4:4–5 — Then the people of the land [the ancestors of the Samaritans] discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose.

Eventually, it would seem that the Samaritans abandoned their idols and worshiped only the God of their *Jewish* ancestors who had originally lived in the land. But did they join together with their Jewish neighbors to the south? In the first place, the Jews would never have "mixed" with the "half-breed" Samaritans. And in the second place, the Samaritans were convinced that it was the Jews who had everything wrong. They believed that the Scriptures included *only* the five books of Moses. Therefore, the *next* prophet to arise after Moses would be "*the* prophet" (cf. Deut. 18:15-19; 34:10-12) – the one who would restore all things. In the meantime, there could

be no other prophet in the tradition of Moses. It was this truncated canon of Scripture that also legitimized the building of their own separate temple on Mount Gerizim. The first five books of Moses say basically nothing at all about Jerusalem (cf. Gen. 14:18). But it was at Shechem [MAP p. 10], situated at the base of Mt. Gerizim where the Lord appeared to Abraham and where both Abraham and Jacob built an altar to the Lord [MAP p. 10 / PICTURE p. 11; (Gen. 12:6-7; 33:18-20; cf. Judg. 9:7)]. 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). Taking their cue from these things, the Samaritans believed that the temple in Jerusalem represented a “false cult” while the temple that they built on Mount Gerazim in 400 BC actually represented the true “religion” of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of the Israelites before they “apostatized.” Almost three hundred years after it was built, the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim was destroyed by a Jewish high priest who ruled in Judea. It doesn’t take much to imagine how this must have fueled the hatred and animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews. After the Maccabean revolt in 164 BC, Galilee began to be settled again by Jews, eventually resulting in the two Jewish population centers of Galilee in the north and Judea in the south, with the Samaritans still living in the middle. This explains, then, what we read here in John: “[Jesus] left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And it was necessary for him to pass through Samaria.” Technically speaking, of course, it wasn’t absolutely necessary to pass through Samaria. Jesus could have crossed over the Jordan and travelled through Perea and Decapolis on the east bank of the Jordan River and then crossed again to the west bank in the territory of Galilee [MAP p. 11]. That’s exactly what the really “strict” Jews did. But the vast majority of the Jews always travelled through Samaria as the fastest way to get from “here to there.” Practically speaking, then, it *was* “necessary” for Jesus to pass through Samaria, and yet that seems so obvious already that we wonder why John sees the need to point it out. The word for “it was necessary” (*dei*) is a word that throughout the Gospels and Acts often refers not to a *practical* necessity (such as geography), but rather to a redemptive, divine necessity (Mat. 16:21; 26:54; Mk. 8:31; Lk. 2:49; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 24:7, 26, 44; Jn. 4:20, 24; 9:4; 12:34; 20:9; Acts 3:21; 4:12; 17:3). It’s already appeared in John three times.

- John 3:7 — Do not marvel that I said to you, “You **must** be born again.”
- John 3:14 — And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so **must** the Son of Man be lifted up.
- John 3:30 — He **must** increase, but I must decrease.

So when we see this word again at the beginning of chapter four, it’s the sign not just of a geographical necessity, but also of a divine necessity. It was necessary in the redemptive plan and purpose of God that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, should pass through Samaria on His way from Judea to Galilee (cf. Lk. 19:5; Mk. 13:10; Lk. 4:43; Jn. 10:16; Acts 27:26).

II. John 4:5 — So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

[MAPS p. 12] Sychar was a village just to the north of Shechem located in the shadow of both *Mount Gerizim* and Mount Ebal [PICTURE p. 13]. John tells us that the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph (and therefore also the place where Joseph himself was buried; Josh. 24:32) was nearby (Gen. 48:22; cf. 33:19). In fact, we’ll read in the very next verse that Jesus

was sitting beside a well that Jacob had dug. So Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, has come now to the religious epicenter of the rival and despised Samaritans who, in turn, equally despised the Jews. After five hundred years of mutual scorn and hostility, the stage is set for this seemingly random encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman.

III. John 4:6–8 — 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. A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)

Over the centuries, various churches have been built over the site of Jacob’s well, so it’s not possible for us to see it today as it would have been when Jesus and the Samaritan woman met there. But we can see the surroundings from pictures taken in the early 1900’s before the current Greek Orthodox church was built on the site [PICTURE p. 13]. In verses 10 and 11 the word for well is the word that refers to a pit or a shaft (*phrear*), and the shaft of this well is over 100 feet deep (later on, the woman will point out to Jesus that “the well is deep” (4:11). But here in verse 6 the word for “well” is different and actually refers to a spring or a fountain – a flowing source of water (*pege*), and the well at this site is, in fact, fed by an underground spring.

John sets the scene for us. It was the sixth hour (12:00), so the hot, middle-eastern sun would have been directly overhead. Jesus and His disciples had probably been walking since early morning and Jesus is now “wearied from His journey,” so He sits down to wait beside the well while His disciples go into the city to buy food. While He’s sitting there a Samaritan woman comes out from the city to draw water. Usually a group of women would come together, and in the cooler evening hours. So why does this woman come alone in the heat of the day? Is she trying to avoid the company of other women at the well? Only, today, when she arrives at the well, she finds a man sitting there—a Jew—wearied from His journey – and thirsty, because when she arrived, He said to her, “Give me a drink.”

IV. John 4:9 — The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, who are a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.)

There’s a cynical bite to the woman’s words and even the signs of her *own* ethnic prejudice: “How is it that *you, who are a Jew*, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” The background for this statement seems to be that the Jews considered Samaritans to be ritually unclean. The “daughters of the Samaritans” in particular would later be said to be unclean even from their cradle (see Morris). So why, indeed, would this Jewish man ask this Samaritan woman for a drink from her drinking vessel – no matter how thirsty he might be?

V. John 4:10 — 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.”

Jesus isn’t saying that the woman *should* have known. How could she possibly have known? It was Jesus, *tired out* and *thirsty*, who first asked *her* for a drink. Who Jesus is, is completely veiled for the moment behind the weakness of His true humanity. How, then, can the one *asking* for water be at the same time the one who *gives* living water?

In the common vernacular “living water” was just an expression for “running water” or for pure water that came from a flowing stream or spring (cf. Lev. 14:5-6; Num. 5:17). So “living water” *could* refer to the water from *this* spring-fed well – from Jacob’s well. But then why did Jesus ask her for water in the first place? And why does He say, “If you knew the *gift of God*, and *who* it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’...”?

We who have already read the first three chapters of John understand that Jesus isn’t speaking of literal, running water, but of something else – something deeper and richer and fuller. Though the Samaritan woman wouldn’t have understood this at the time, Jesus is drawing from the language of the Jewish Old Testament prophets. The Lord spoke through the prophet Jeremiah:

- Jeremiah 2:13 (cf. 17:13) — My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, **the fountain of living waters** [LXX: *pegen hydatos zoes*], and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

God Himself is pictured here as a spring or a fountain that is the source of running, flowing, life-giving water. And yet, of course, if God is the source, then the “water” that flows from Him must impart to those who drink it more than just physical life and existence. We see this same imagery in Zechariah and Ezekiel.

- Zechariah 14:8 (cf. Joel 3:18) — On that day **living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem** [the place of God’s dwelling with man], half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea.
- Ezekiel 47:1, 9 — Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, **water** was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east... And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will **live**... so everything will **live** where the river goes.

Just like in Jeremiah, this is symbolic language pointing us to that true life-giving water that has its source even in God Himself. This water imparts not just a temporary physical life to those who drink of it, but rather the abundant eternal life that is the free and gracious gift of God and that only God can give. So in the book of Revelation, the Apostle John takes up this Old Testament imagery and sees its ultimate fulfillment in the water that flows not from a physical temple or an earthly Jerusalem but rather from a heavenly Jerusalem in which there is no temple because “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22).

- Revelation 22:1–2 — Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city...

It’s in light of all these things that we now hear Jesus saying to the Samaritan woman: “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.” And so right away, we’re reminded of the verses we looked at last week:

- John 3:35–36 — The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life...

Here in this wearied and thirsty man asking for water from a Samaritan woman is the fountain of living water. And even now, He's *inviting* this Samaritan woman to believe – to come to Him for that living water that He alone can give.

Maybe there was something about Jesus' words that prevented this woman from dismissing Him completely, and yet she could still only see in Jesus a wearied and thirsty man—and a Jewish man at that. If she guessed that Jesus was speaking of something other than literal water, she chooses to ignore it. Indeed, how could Jesus really know what this woman needs? With continued cynicism and maybe even a hint of sarcasm in her voice:

VI. John 4:11–12 — 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? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.”

This woman isn't at all shy of speaking her mind. She “courteously” confronts Jesus with the facts: “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with and the well is deep.” She then asks the question, “Where do you get that ‘living water,’” and follows up immediately with an invitation for Jesus to give the only answer that she deems possible: “Are you greater than our father Jacob?” (cf. Jn. 8:53) The answer she assumes—and even demands—from this Jewish traveler is, “no,” He is not greater than Jacob, and to say that He is would be the height of presumption. Therefore, He ought not to be claiming to be able to give her “living water” when the only source of such water is a well 100 feet deep and He has nothing to draw with.

Did the Samaritan woman really think that Jesus was talking about literal, physical water? And if not, is she also trying to turn the conversation away from her true need? Whatever her thoughts and motives may be, Jesus persists. It was necessary for Him to pass through Samaria that day.

VII. John 4:13–14 — Jesus said to her, “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/fountain [*pege*] of water springing [leaping] up [bursting forth] to eternal life.”

Those are astonishing words coming from a wearied and thirsty Jewish traveler. If, until now, the woman couldn't see that Jesus was talking about a different kind of water, there shouldn't be any more misunderstanding. The water that Jesus gives isn't like the water that comes from Jacob's well. The water that Jesus gives is a water that satisfies once and for all, not in the sense that we come to Him and drink and then leave, but rather in the sense that the water He gives becomes *in us* a spring of water continuously leaping up and bursting forth to eternal life (cf. Isa. 49:10; Rev. 7:16-17). The same word is used in Acts of a lame man after he was healed:

- Acts 3:8 (cf. 14:10; Isa. 35:6; 55:12) — And **leaping up**, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and **leaping** and praising God.

In the book of Judges, the same word is used of the Spirit of God “rushing” upon someone (Judg. 14:6; 15:14). So Jesus is speaking here of a mighty and powerful gift that by its own inherent nature is always abounding and overflowing. He’s speaking of that eternal life that the Holy Spirit works in us when He Himself comes to us and dwells within us (cf. Jn. 7:38-39; cf. *dorea*, Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; Heb. 6:4). Whoever drinks of *this* water will never be thirsty again; because this water that Jesus gives will become in him a fountain of water springing up and bursting forth to eternal life.

Why, then, in our search for happiness and true fulfillment do we hew out cisterns for ourselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water? But that’s exactly what this woman has been doing all her life – because all her life she’s never come to terms with her true need. That’s the only way to explain what she says in verse fifteen:

VIII. John 4:15 — 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.”

Why is she being so stubborn? Why does she respond with such flippant and dismissive sarcasm? Because as wonderful as this “eternal life” may sound—and even if Jesus is able to give it—the obvious implication is that she doesn’t have it yet and therefore the *further* implication is that she has a deeper and more fundamental need that she’s so far tried to mask by looking for “water” in all the wrong places – always hewing for herself broken cisterns.

She tries again to put Jesus off, and yet Jesus persists. It was necessary for Him to pass through Samaria that day.

IX. John 4:16 — Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.”

Why this apparently random and completely unrelated request? Because it’s *not at all* random and it’s *not at all* unrelated. Because if this woman is ever to come to Jesus and drink the water that He gives, she *must* first come to terms with her true need.

X. John 4:17a — The woman answered him, “I have no husband.”

It’s obvious Jesus has hit upon a very sensitive subject. Until now this woman has been quite free with her words – sarcastic, dismissive, seemingly flippant and careless. Now she answers as shortly as possible: “I have no husband.” That’s obviously Jesus’ cue to back off, now, and leave this alone. He knows that, and yet still He persists:

XI. John 4:17b–18 — Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.”

Is this why the woman seeks to avoid the company of other women at the well? Does she have a “name” and a reputation in town? So why does Jesus do this? Why does He ignore all of the obvious warning signs? Why does He cause pain by exposing this woman’s sinful past and present? Because He would have her come to Him and drink the water that He alone can give –

so that she will never thirst again. Because He would have her come to Him for water that will become in her a fountain of water springing up to eternal life. But before this woman can come to Jesus, she must first come to terms with her true need. So Jesus lays bare her sin, not only in terms of her *guilt* but also in terms of her true *misery* – of all the broken cisterns that she’s gone to for water all her life.

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

Is she changing the subject? Is she completely ignoring what Jesus just said? Not at all. She sees now that Jesus is an “inspired” man – a “prophet” in at least some generic sense. In the first place, there’s the knowledge that this “stranger” has of her own past and present life. But that’s not all. Even more telling is the *manner* in which Jesus reveals this knowledge; not “sensationally,” but rather by exposing the sin and misery that she tries to mask. And then there are the *claims* that Jesus has made – about being the one who gives “living water.” In spite of her prejudice and cynicism and sarcasm, we can almost *see* the barriers and the walls coming down and hope being kindled in her heart. Who is this man *really*?

But He’s a Jew. How can this Jew, whose entire religion and worship is centered around Jerusalem, be who He claims to be when she’s been taught all her life that Mount Gerazim is the place where the true people of God ought to worship? Even if she sees her sin and her misery, and even if she would have the living water that this man says He is able to give— who is He *really*?

XIII. John 4:21–24 — Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father [**the question of place and location is about to become irrelevant. Nevertheless...**]. You worship what you do not know [**you worship apart from the fullness of God’s true revelation**]; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews [**the Jews are the vehicle of God’s redemptive revelation and the people from whom the Messiah comes**]. But [or, ‘nevertheless’] the hour is coming, and is now here [**even in the person of Jesus**], when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth [**when the physical place of worship is wholly irrelevant**], for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him [**regardless of location**] *must [dei]* worship in spirit and truth.”

There’s much in Jesus’ words that this woman couldn’t possibly fully understand. But there was much that she *could* understand. And there was also this: This man spoke *such words* and with *such authority* as she had never heard before and as she had never imagined any man could speak. Except perhaps one.

XIV. John 4:25–26 — The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” Jesus said to her, “I—who speak to you—I am.”

Can you imagine that moment when Jesus declared to this Samaritan woman at the well that *He was* that Messiah who was coming? But, of course, He wasn't just declaring who He was. In declaring *who* He was, He was extending the ultimate invitation to this Samaritan woman to come to Him and drink of living water and worship God in spirit and truth. He was inviting her to leave off her life of sin and all her broken cisterns and drink, rather, of the water that would become in her a fountain of water springing up to eternal life.

So did she come?

XV. John 4:27–30 — Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said [to the woman], “What do you seek?” or [to Jesus], “Why are you talking with her?” So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”

John says not that she left Jesus at the well, but that *she left her water jar* at the well. It wasn't the water from Jacob's well that she was thirsting for now, but the living water that Jesus gives.

John says that she said to the people in town, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.” She sees now that her life is one long story of sinful choices, but now she would leave all that and look not to broken cisterns for water but to this one who gives living water.

Maybe, in the first infancy of her faith, she couldn't fully verbalize all of this. Maybe, in her insecurities, she was still somewhat fearful of what the townspeople might say (“Can this be the Christ?”). But we can be sure that Jesus would never have voluntarily revealed and declared Himself so fully in the face of unbelief. So, skipping for the time being verses 31-38, we go on to read:

XVI. John 4:30, 39–42 — They went out of the town and were coming to him... Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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.”

It was *necessary* for Jesus to pass through Samaria in order that the salvation that is from the Jews might come to the Samaritans. It was *necessary* for Jesus to pass through Samaria in order that this Samaritan woman, who had spent her life in sin looking for water in broken cisterns, might repent and come to Jesus and drink of the true living water. And so even as Jesus invited the Samaritan woman, so He invites and calls to us:

➤ Isaiah 55:1, 3 — Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live...

With joy we can draw water from the springs of salvation (Isa. 12:3), for with Him is the fountain of life (Ps. 36:9).









