

The Woman at the Well

John 4: 1 – 28

** 4 Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John —² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.³ So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.^[a])

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?"

¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶ He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

¹⁹ "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹ "Woman,"^[b] Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

²⁵ The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

²⁷ Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

** A guy named Chuck Broughton wrote in Discipleship Journal about an experience that he had on a crowded subway in New York City:

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Every 10 to 15 seconds or so, someone behind me shouted unintelligible words. The first time, I ignored them. After several outbursts, however, I turned around to see that they were coming from a disheveled man behind me.

Sitting fairly close to him was a woman reading a newspaper. As I watched, he reached out, touched her knee, and quickly brought his hand back. Not getting any response, he did it again a few seconds later. It seemed like a game a small child might play; each time, his face showed that he was pretending not to have touched her. No one said anything, but those sitting near him exchanged nervous glances and began to inch away.

I was caught off guard by what happened next. The woman put down her paper and looked at the man. I expected her to rebuke him. Instead, she politely engaged the man in conversation. "Do you know where your stop is?"

He nodded that he did.

"Do you need any help getting to where you need to go?"

He shook his head no.

I don't know what motivated this woman to treat a stranger on the subway with such kindness. But the way she asked these questions showed that she was genuinely concerned for his welfare. She chose to respond to him as a real person with real needs, not just as an annoyance on her commute.

The incident reminded me of how the Apostle Paul saw people: "We regard no one from a worldly point of view" (2 Cor. 5:16). Many people on that subway car — including me — had looked at the man from a human point of view. In contrast, the woman who spoke to him reflected the perspective Paul described. She addressed him as a person who had inherent worth.¹

I read that illustration and decided that it would make a good introduction to this message, on the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. "What a powerful lesson on how we tend to 'categorize people' and not see them as real, or valuable". And, it is. But, then, it occurred to me a couple days after I found this story, that I really didn't 'get it' at all.

So, Wednesday, I'm sitting with my friend Chris Miller. Chris is a pastor and a reserve Air Force Chaplain. We meet every Wednesday morning to encourage each other, call each other to be accountable, and complain. So Chris shared with me an incident that happened when he was on a training exercise in Norfolk, VA. He had visited a church there on Sunday morning, and

¹ Chuck Broughton, "Reflecting God's Nature," *Discipleship Journal* (Jan/Feb 2003), pp. 35-36

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was only there a short time, waiting for the service to begin when he noticed a woman standing in the aisle next to him.

** “Excuse me”, she said... “but you are in my seat.” I have heard of these things happening, and I couldn’t believe that someone would actually do that. “What did you do?” I asked. And I started thinking of what I might have done.

“You didn’t move, did you?” I asked? Chris said, “I moved.” And before he could say any more, I said to him, “I would have walked right out the door, and stomped the dust off my feet on the way out!”

Then Chris said, “And we talked. We had a conversation.”

Turns out, the woman shared with him that her husband had passed away just a short time before, and this was there they had always sat. It brought her some comfort to sit in that same spot during worship.

I said, “... Oh.” You see, I didn’t ‘get’ that Subway illustration after all.

One person who surely ‘got it’ (besides Chris on that morning!) was Jesus! This story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman is one that we’ve heard about so many times that we can easily ‘fast forward’ to the ‘good parts’ – you know, to the discussion of what worship really is, or to the supernatural knowledge of every person that Jesus has – even to the offer of Living Water that he makes to her. (Which is where we’re going to go, eventually... hopefully.)

But, you know, it doesn’t shock us – it doesn’t even *phase* us – that Jesus stopped to talk to this woman. “Of course he did”, this is Jesus! But, remember last week, when we talked about the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine, I brought up the concept that John’s Gospel is ‘more theological’ than the other three. John isn’t simply writing a chronological narrative giving the ‘facts’ about what Jesus said and did. He is deliberately picking, choosing, and arranging ‘facts’ to build a case. He wants us, the readers, “to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.” (John 20:31)

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That means that every detail is there for a reason. None of the other Gospel writers report this conversation with the Samaritan woman (which isn't surprising, as over 90% of John's material is 'unique to his Gospel'). John wants to tell us something about who Jesus is, about how he represents God the Father to us, by *every detail* of this encounter. Not the least of which, I would think, is the fact that Jesus was in Samaria *at all*.

** We have no way to identify with this culturally. Israel is roughly the size of the State of New Jersey. And in Jesus' day, it was divided into three sections – Judah in the south, Galilee in the North, and what would be roughly central Jersey was Samaria.

The problem (to the devout Jews of Jesus' day) was that Samaria was inhabited by *the Samaritans!* You can look up the reasons for this enmity, but let's just say that even though they were very much related – by blood and history – this was a mutual hatred that spanned over 600 years! A devout Jew who was traveling from Judea to Galilee would literally, *leave the country*, and go East to avoid even stepping on the Samaritan dirt. (To the West was the Mediterranean Sea – which they probably would have swam if need be!)

If they wouldn't have touched the soil, how much less would they have engaged a Samaritan in conversation? How much – even less than that – would a Jewish man have engaged a *Samaritan woman* in conversation! Jewish men didn't even talk to *jewish* women! Even less likely – a Jewish man talking to a Samaritan Woman who had a *shaky moral pedigree*, and then drinking from *her* bucket, after *asking her* to give *him* a drink!

This is truly amazing stuff here! And when we read it in John, we really need to remember to ask ourselves, “what is this telling us about God?”

But, of course, this story is about more than Jesus asking this woman for a drink. We don't even really know if Jesus ever did get a drink – it seems that as the conversation unfolded, she seemed to have forgotten about Jesus' own (human) thirst after he made ** this incredible statement to her:

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¹⁰ ... *“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

Think about what the woman says to Jesus in response to that.

You are offering me something pretty amazing, Jesus... and this is a deep well. You don't even have a bucket! Where are you going to get this 'living water?' Then she asks him – *“are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and flocks and herds?”*

Here again the same statement rises up as the one we talked about last week. The Master of the Banquet tastes the wine that Jesus has made from the vats of water that were there for ceremonial washing... and he announces: **“You have saved the best for last!”** That same theme is revisited here, in the form of a question: “Are you greater than our father Jacob?” Jacob was the patriarch of Israel, in fact he *was* Israel (that was the new name that God himself gave him!)

** The name “Jacob” (Israel) was a word that summed up not just a person, not even just a nation, but a way of life, everything people knew about God! Israel! Are you greater than *that*? Jesus answers that question by revealing to her that he is the Messiah! Wow.

And here's something else... Think about this, too– this was Jacob's very well! That means that not only did Jacob himself drink from it, but *generation after generation of this woman's ancestors drank from it, too*. This woman probably came to this very well, to this very spot, *every day of her life...* she came to this place, to find a drink of water. To quench her thirst. To allow herself to live another day of her difficult life.

A number of scholars have pointed out that the fact that this woman was here at noon – in the hottest part of the day out in this desert climate – was likely because she was not only a person who was hated and rejected by the Jews, but she was also rejected and ostracized by *her own people!* She had been through five husbands... and was at that moment living with someone who was not married to her. (Again, that not news for us today... but it would have caused her to be looked down on in that culture.)

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Day after day... coming to the same place. Hot. Tired. Worn out. Empty. Draw some water. Go back. Until tomorrow, where she does the same thing. And the next day, and the next day... and this same thing has been going on since the time of Jacob himself. But now, today, here is Jesus, waiting for her.

And after more conversation, in which she made it evident that she was at the very least, not a woman of pretense – she was honest with Jesus about who she was... followed by a discussion of what true worship is about (a great passage for another time)... she starts to make the connection between ‘living water’, Jesus’ knowledge of her, Jesus’ authoritative manner of speaking... and she says,

“I’ve heard that a Messiah – called Christ – is coming someday. And when he comes, he will explain everything to us.” What a hope! Someone coming who will make sense of the mess of life... someone who can sort out the hurts and pains, and explain to us why we so frequently make such bad decisions.; why horrible things happen so randomly... Someone who can tell us how to live, and how to die, and what happens next. “Someone who will explain *everything* to us!” A Messiah.

Then Jesus says, in verse 26, to this despised, morally crooked, Samaritan, rejected, woman...

**

“I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

You know, this was the first time that Jesus told *anyone* who he was so plainly. And he said it to her. And *this* day, a day that likely started out with no higher expectations than any of the hundreds that came before it...but from this day onward, *everything was different*.

** I love the C. S. Lewis fantasy series "The Chronicles of Narnia". They teach us a lot, in the form of a series of seven children's stories, a lot about ourselves, about God, about Jesus.

In the book [The Silver Chair](#), C.S. Lewis draws an analogy about conversion, about 'drinking the living water' of Christ, with the story of a young girl named Jill who comes to realize that conversion is hardly safe. After all, it requires approaching the King of the Universe, face to

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face. She's in the land of Narnia, and she's thirsty. At once she sees a magnificent stream . . . and a fearsome lion (Aslan, who represents the Lord Jesus):

"If I run away, it'll be after me in a moment," thought Jill. "And if I go on, I shall run straight into its mouth." Anyway, she couldn't have moved if she had tried, and she couldn't take her eyes off it. How long this lasted, she could not be sure; it seemed like hours. And the thirst became so bad that she almost felt she would not mind being eaten by the Lion if only she could be sure of getting a mouthful of water first. . . .

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion.

"I'm dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

"May I?" "Could I?" "Would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

"Will you promise not to do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. "Do you eat girls?" she said.

"I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

"I daren't come and drink," said Jill.

"Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

"Oh dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream," said the Lion. It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion. No one who had seen his stern face could do that and her mind suddenly made itself up.

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It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went straight to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted. You didn't need to drink much of it, for it quenched your thirst at once. Before she tasted it she had been intending to make a dash away from the Lion the moment she had finished. Now, she realized that this would be on the whole the most dangerous thing of all.²

** This Samaritan woman soon discovered, no doubt, the thing that everyone eventually realizes - everyone who dares to drink from this Living Water, who dares to receive the New Life that Jesus offers us... *it's this: we are never the same afterward.* It changes us, it redefines us. At first that can be a rather frightening proposition. And we may even want to run from it... but sooner or later we realize (as those early disciples did) there is no where else to go. In Christ alone are the words of life.

The prophet Jeremiah anticipated this day... the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, his offer of Living Water to be found in him alone. Jeremiah wrote:

(2:13) My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

What cisterns have you dug? Friends, they will only let you down sooner or later. As "Aslan" said... "There is no other stream!"

Drink deeply from the spring of living water! And know what life really is!

² C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (Collier Books), pp.16-18