

John 4:4-26 New International Version

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 livestock?"

¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks 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," 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."

The story of the woman at the well is important to the gospel of John because John describes who Jesus is and what He wants for us. It is a story of acceptance and redemption as a result of love and truth. This encounter with Jesus is one of the longest with any other individual in the gospel of John. Here Jesus has shown us how the barriers of ethnicity, gender and morality can be crossed in order for people to receive eternal salvation. Chapter 4 in the Book of Signs records the story around Samaria which is located between Judea and Galilee. Accordingly, the Samaritans are descendants of the remnant who were not deported when the Northern Kingdom fell in 722 B.C.E., and foreign colonists from Babylon and Media brought by the Assyrian conquerors of Samaria (2 Kings 17:24-41). The tension between the Jews and Samaritans were partially created at the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 4:6-24). The Jews believed that the correct place for the temple was Jerusalem and the Samaritans thought that it was Mount Gerizim. However, the route to avoid Samaria, was the shortest distance required going through

the non-Jewish territory east of the Jordan River. Going that route took twice as long, so Jesus had to go through Samaria if he wanted to take the shortest route to Galilee (v.4). Even taking the shortest route Jesus became tired. William Barclay, author of *The Gospel of John, Volume 1*, said that “Palestine is only 120 miles long from north to south. But within those 120 miles there were in the time of Jesus, three definite divisions of territory. In the extreme north lay Galilee, in the extreme south lay Judaea, and in between lay Samaria.” Verse 4 of the referenced scripture said “had to go” but was not geographically necessary although the main route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria” according to Raymond E. Brown author of *The Anchor Bible The Gospel According to John (i-xii)* (Josephus, Antiquities 20.118). Craig S. Keener, author of *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, suggested that the “necessity” of the Samaritan route may have been spiritual rather than geographical. If Jesus were near the Judean countryside (John 3:22) and then later in the Jordan valley (3:23), Samaria might have been a geographical detour, since Jesus could have traveled north near Bethshan. Scripture reports that Jesus ended up staying awhile (John 4:40) indicating that was the Father’s plan rather than Jesus hastily passing-through Samaria. The Jews and Samaritans worshipped the same God, but the conflict was the place of worship.

In verses 5 thru 6, Jesus is in the town of Sychar, which means “falsehood.” Sychar is identified with modern-day Askar which is located about one mile north of Jacob’s well. It is only mentioned in the Bible in John 4:6. Some say that identifying Sychar with Askar is probably wrong because a) the site is a medieval settlement, b) the dubious similarity of the name is useless since the Arabic name ‘Askar’ does not reflect an ancient designation of the site but serves as a military campsite and c) Askar has a well of its own which makes the woman’s long journey to Jacob’s well inexplicable. This is a village in Samaria where Jacob purchased the

land and gave it to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was about 100 feet deep and the site is still within view of Mount Gerizim which the Samaritans consider holy. Jesus had been traveling for around six hours which was now about noon, the hottest part of the day. Being fatigued he decided to rest at the fork of the road by the well. In verse 7, the woman came to the well at the unusual noon day hour to draw water. Josephus attested to the practice of drawing water at the end of the day as referenced in Genesis 24:11. Brown gives an opinion that there is little likelihood in the suggestion (Lightfoot, p.122) that the scene is deliberately being related to the crucifixion, where noon is the hour that Jesus expressed his state of being thirsty. Barclay argued that it is a mystery why she came to that well since it was half a mile from her home in Sychar because there was water there. Keener said that the local women would not come in the midday heat to draw water unless there was no other alternative. This woman had to do so according to Keener because the women of Sychar did not like her because of her marital history. In verses 7 thru 8 the woman came alone to draw water and Jesus asked her for a drink of water. Was he asking her because of her uncleanness, and he did not want to touch her hands? He spoke to her first which was not normal for the culture unless it was a family member that spoke to a woman. The ancient practices looked down on men speaking at any length with non-related females. This was not just any woman but an unclean and unnamed Samaritan woman. This could be seen as flirting especially since she came alone and at an unusual time according to Keener. Verse 8 informs that Jesus was alone because his disciples had gone to town to get food, despite the strict laws which considered Samaritan foods unclean. This was often a common practice for disciples to be sent by the Rabbi to get food. Verse 9 opens with the woman wanting to know why a Jew was asking her, a Samaritan, for a drink of water. How did she know that He was a Jew? According to D.A. Carson, author of *The Gospel According to*

John, the Samaritan woman's surprise was understandable because Jesus was a Jew, and she was a Samaritan woman which violated an existing age-old animosity between the two cultures.

Keener went on record saying, "The woman first confronts this encounter in ethnic/cultural terms. Ironically, in *John's* gospel only non-Jews recognize Jesus' Jewishness (here and 18:33-35)." The *NIV Cultural Background Study Bible* footnote states that "Although Jews did not literally reject all dealings with Samaritans, association was limited. According to Jewish tradition, a Samaritan woman was continually unclean and therefore it was impure to drink from her vessel." However, Jesus replied to her question in verse 10 with emphasis on the gift of God and living water. Living water refers to running water according to Jeremiah 17:13. In addition, Keener states "Living water" simply meant "fresh" or "flowing" as opposed to stagnant or well water and that some scholars shared that the "rabbis spoke of the Torah, the law, as God's gift." Yet he believes that it is used by *John* for symbolism in reference to the Spirit (*John* 7:37-39) showing that God is the provider of genuine life (*Isaiah* 12:3; *Jeremiah* 2:13). Brown is quoted as saying "some commentators (Osty, Van den Bussche) understand that the gift is Jesus himself (iii 16); others possibly think that the gift is what Jesus will give men (his revelation, his Spirit). He says asking for a drink "literally meant saying to you, 'Give me a drink.'" Brown explains that the living water. . . flowing water is the same Greek expression as a perfect example of Johannine misunderstanding. Jesus is speaking of the water of life, but the woman is thinking of flowing water. Barclay stated that the woman took Jesus's words in the same way as Nicodemus did about being born again. Jews viewed living water as running water which was better than water of a stagnant cistern or pool. He interprets that as if the woman was saying that Jesus was offering her pure water from a stream. With her interest awakened she replied in verse 11 and 12 to Jesus in a respectful natural response that he has nothing to get the water out of the well with

because it was deep, yet she also wanted to know where she could get this living water. In the Greek, *kyrie* means both “Sir” and “Lord” which is a progression from one to the other where the woman is showing increasing respect in verses 11, 15, and 19 as noted by Brown. He used the p75, Vaticanus, Coptic text type that put Jesus as the subject. Jesus did not have a jar to lower into the well to get water, yet he was offering her living water. Carson expresses that the woman sees Jesus as a weary Jewish traveler and not realizing the “gift of God” which is eternal life that he was offering. This also references that if she “really knew her Torah” and who was speaking, her response would have been different. Jesus’ offering of living water was viewed as water running from springs with metaphorical uses for highly religious values. In this instance it references Old Testament scripture where God stated in Jeremiah, that the two sins committed by them had forsaken Him and was rejecting the fresh supply of God and his faithfulness. But on the other hand, the prophets were looking forward to living waters flowing from Jerusalem according to Zachariah 14:8. The metaphor in this case refers to God and his grace, the knowledge of God, Life, and the transferring power of the Holy Spirit. Water in Isaiah 1:16-18 and Ezekiel 36:25-27 promises cleansing acknowledged Carson, and John used all the themes for water when discussing water or living water in the gospel. Subsequently, because of the double meaning it was easy for the woman to misunderstand and think Jesus was referring to running water. Carson addresses the misunderstanding theme ‘Sir’ which is not Christologically loaded here or in verses 15 or 19, in which she comments, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. She wanted to know where to get this living water.” Even Jacob discovered the need to dig a well to get the water from where they were. So if Jesus were offering fresh water without digging or using the means provided, he would be considered greater than Jacob. According to Carson there are no Old Testament records of Jacob digging the well. As to who Jesus was to

the point that she asked, Jesus answered “whoever drinks the water that he gives will never thirst and it will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Keener said that he carried no jar to lower into the well and even if he had one, he could not get any “living water.” According to *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible* Eastern travelers frequently carried a leather bucket to draw water from public wells. In addition, he referenced that the phrase “our father Jacob” caused outrage or offense to the Jewish teaching that the Jewish people were children of Jacob and that the Samaritan had Gentile blood. In the words of Carson the misunderstanding of living water makes the woman think twice that the water He is speaking about does not come from an ordinary well. Commentators wonder why it was necessary for the well to be there because there were several springs nearby. Jesus’ answer in verses 13 thru 14 reveals that her thirst was not for natural water. *The Life Application Study Bible* footnote states that many spiritual functions parallel physical functions. As our bodies hunger and thirst, so do our souls. But our souls need spiritual food and water. Her confusion of the two types of water could have been because no one had ever talked to her about her spiritual hunger and thirst before. The woman made two requests in verse 15 not realizing that Jesus was talking about living water. However, she desired this water that Jesus was talking about so she would never thirst again and that she would avoid having to return to that well to draw again. Keener notes that the images of water and wells were often used symbolically in antiquity, but she takes Jesus literally when he is figuratively speaking. In response to her statement Jesus instructs her in the next verse to go get her husband and come back. *The Cultural Background Study Bible* stated the possibility of the lack of her having a head covering could have been a signal that she was single. In some places a wife who went in public without her hair covered would be deemed immodest, dishonoring herself in the eyes of others. Jesus was preparing her heart to receive his words by

touching a very troubled area of her life. By admitting that she had no husband in verse 17, He was forcing her to acknowledge the sin area in her life at which point forgiveness and healing could begin. According to Dake this was how Jesus got to the root of her trouble, so he could legally give her salvation. In response to her admission of not having a husband Keener pointed out that in view of the ambiguity of the situation, her statement could have meant that she was available because wells were a common place to find a spouse. However, Jesus removed the ambiguity, by refusing to observe customs that reflected ethnic and gender prejudice and not from flirtation. He continues in verse 18 by telling her of the five husbands that she previously had and the man that she presently was with was not her husband. The Jews believed that a woman might be divorced twice or at the most three times. If the Samaritans had the same standards her life would have been considered immoral because of her status of living with a man that was not her husband. If she were repeatedly widowed according to Keener, people would have thought that something was wrong with her. Brown said that since early times many have seen a symbolism in the husbands. Origen (In Jo. XIII 8; GCS 10:232) saw a reference to the fact that the Samaritans held only five books of Moses as the canon. Today some think that II Kings 17:24ff, where the foreign colonists brought in by the Assyrians conquerors are said to have come from five cities and to have brought their pagan cults with them. John 17:30-31 mentions seven gods, but Josephus Ant. IXxiv.3; #288 implies a simplification to five gods. The Hebrew word for "husband" (ba'al, master, lord) was also the name for a pagan deity. The passage in John is interpreted as a play on words: the woman representing Samaria has had five b alim (the five gods previously worshiped) and the ba'al (Yahweh) that she now has is not really her ba'al because the Yahwism of the Samaritans was not pure. Brown says that this allegorical intent is possible, yet John did not give evidence that it was intended. He thinks that

in claiming that she had no husband that she was lying to Jesus because she had matrimonial designs on him. The woman replied, “Sir, I see you are a prophet”. Carson shared his view that the woman possibly could have meant that Jesus’ knowledge of her past proved that he was inspired. But based on the Samaritans belief on the Pentateuch they understood the words of Deuteronomy 34:10, that no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom God knew face to face, to be in force until the coming of the prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15-19), the second Moses, the Taheb (they called this the promised messianic figure). Having realized who Jesus was she changed the subject when she discovered that Jesus knew everything about her in order to distract him from the questions that she found embarrassing. She shifted the subject to where her ancestors worshiped. Carson shared that Jews and Samaritans recognized that God had commanded their forefathers to find a place for His dwelling (Deut. 12:5). The Jews chose Jerusalem because David determined that the temple that Solomon built should be there, and the Samaritans chose Mt. Gerizim where Abraham built the altar when he entered the promised land. Subsequently, Jesus responded by saying both places would become obsolete for worship, that salvation come from the Jews and those that worship must do so in Spirit and truth. The oxymoron according to Carson, is that the period of worship is about to come but the period of true worship is already present. In verse 25, the Samaritan woman was referring to the Messiah as a teacher, one who would reveal the truth as the ultimate prophet. To make sure that she completely understood the significance of this encounter he revealed his identity as being the one that is expected.

The same hurt and rejection that the woman experienced is being felt today. People are hungering and thirsting for things that are not satisfying. The woman believed if she drank the water that Jesus offered that she would not have to return to the well. However, accepting the

Living Water allows us to go through a problem with the mind of Jesus. When a conversation is too close to their issues the focus must go back to Jesus. Sometimes people will not understand the message of the Gospel, however we must practice patience and let the word and Spirit of God have his way. This scripture is important to me because it addresses the ethnic, gender and moral issues that confronted the people in Bible days and continue to plague us today. These issues were major concerns when I started in ministry when women were not considered to be used as leaders to share the gospel other than teaching and missionaries. Some of the events that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic disclosed a lot of hidden biases that were revealed in racial injustices all around the country. The eyes of the world came to realize that the deep rooted, quietly kept secret that America as a nation has ingrained in its fabric an attitude of hatred. The attacks on minorities, one in which resulted in the death of a Black man, at the hands of someone entrusted to uphold the law, and the insurrection of 2021 by a violent group that stormed an attack against the U.S. Congress, as they were preparing to uphold the laws that makes this nation a democratic society, are an example of this. The core of both incidents is the same thing that made a women go to a well in the heat of the day seeking water in John 4:4-26. The time for gathering water was generally early in the morning and the cool of the evening. However, because of intermarriage her people were despised and as a result she was forced to go to the well when no one was expected to be there. Not only was she despised but she was broken, dissolute, rude and nameless.

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