

# The Gospel of John

Text: John 4:1-42

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 69-84

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## Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (4:1-30)

**Background:** In John 4:1-42, Jesus' ministry enters a new stage. He leaves the confines of traditional Judaism and turns to those whom his Jewish contemporaries considered as outsiders and enemies: the Samaritans.

Most Jews tried to avoid contact with Samaritans, even though passing through Samaria was the shortest route between Judea and Galilee, so this was an unusual journey for Jesus to make. Division and controversy between Jews and Samaritans was long-standing, dating back to the conquest of Israel by the Assyrians (2 Kgs. 17).

Even though Jews and Samaritans shared the Pentateuch as Scripture, they disagreed about how to practice their religious faith. For example, Samaritans claimed that Mount Gerizim was the sacred location for worship, not Jerusalem (4:20). This religious tension is a central theme in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

### A. Living Water (4:7-15)

1. The conversation between Jesus and the woman begins in a way that appears quite ordinary. Jesus, a tired traveler, asks the woman for water, "Give me a drink" (v. 7). The Samaritan woman responds to Jesus' request with amazement because **it violates two societal conventions**.
  - **First**, a Jewish *man* did not initiate conversation with an unknown *woman*. Moreover, a Jewish teacher did not engage in public conversation with a woman.
  - **Second**, Jews did not invite contact with Samaritans. John's aside in v. 9 underscores the seriousness of the breach.

What taboos is Jesus willing to break to offer this woman life-giving water (v. 9)?

How might following Jesus require us to behave in ways our culture finds strange or taboo?

2. Jesus does not see the situation as the woman does, however, and so he disregards the woman's protest of the impropriety of the situation. **Indeed, he offers her a role reversal: if the woman knew to whom she was speaking, she would ask him for living water.** Instead of being one who gives water, she could be one who receives.
  - "**Living water**" can literally refer to **spring water** (moving water as opposed to water found in a well) or, metaphorically, to **life-giving water**. For the reader of John's Gospel, who has already seen Jesus offer Nicodemus the gift of life, the story takes on new dimensions. The Samaritan woman, like Nicodemus, has been offered the gift of life by Jesus.
  - **The woman's first response to Jesus (v. 11) is much like that of Nicodemus.** Just as Nicodemus responded on the literal level to talk of new birth, she thinks Jesus speaks of physical water and asks how he can obtain it without a bucket.

3. **Verse 12 also seems to express her doubt regarding Jesus' identity.** Her question is an excellent example of **irony** in John, since the woman assumes that Jesus is not greater than Jacob, while the reader knows that he is (see also 8:53).
  - Yet it is also possible that the woman's questioning about Jacob shows that she already begins to understand that Jesus speaks of more than literal water than can be drawn from the well. **The metaphor of living water would be known to her from her religious tradition.** The story of God's live-giving gift of water in the desert (Exod. 15:22-27; 17:1-7; Num. 20:1-13) was likely to have been well-known among both Samaritans and Jews.
  - **Read this way, her response is a request for more information about the source of Jesus' life-giving water.** That is, she is open to the idea that Jesus speaks metaphorically. While she does not yet understand Jesus to be the Messiah, the woman already interacts with Jesus on a more profound level than did Nicodemus.
4. Jesus' response in verses 13-14 makes clear that the water he gives is superior to any other water that the woman thinks she knows about, because **his water is a source of eternal life.** Just as eternal life redefined notions of life and birth for Nicodemus, here **eternal life redefines thirst.**
5. How fully the woman grasps Jesus' offer of eternal life remains unclear. When she requests the water (v. 15), she may continue to think that Jesus is talking about miraculous spring water. If this is the case, she makes the correct request, but for the wrong reason. **It is also possible that the woman begins to understand Jesus' water metaphorically and speaks in the same vein of her desire for a water that truly quenches thirst.**

#### **B. True Worship (4:16-26)**

1. The second part of the dialogue (vv. 16-26) begins with another request by Jesus: "Go, call your husband, and come back" (v. 16). Verses 16-19 have been consistently misinterpreted in the history of the church, resulting in the much-repeated presentation of the Samaritan woman as immoral, a sinner, and an unworthy conversation partner for Jesus. Yet nothing in the tone of these verses conveys that Jesus judges the woman and her history.
2. **If the verses are read for what they actually say, they provide another example of Jesus' ability to see and know all things, as in the story of Nathanael (1:48-50).** Just as Jesus' recognition of Nathanael under the fig tree led Nathanael to confess Jesus' identity, the woman responds to Jesus' statement about her with a confession of Jesus' identity as "prophet."
3. The woman continues to grow in her recognition of Jesus and in the seriousness of her engagement with him. Because she knows Jesus to be a prophet, she immediately begins to talk with him about important theological issues. She hopes that Jesus will help her resolve a religious question that is key to her identity as a Samaritan: the proper location to worship God.

**If you had the opportunity to ask Jesus the most important theological question in the world what would it be?**

4. **Jesus' answer once again transforms conventional understandings and expectations,** because he points to a time in which the question of the physical location of worship loses its importance. The answer is "**neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.**" "The hour is coming" (v. 21) refers to the impending time of fulfillment when all present religious categories will be obsolete. Yet Jesus next says that this time of fulfillment "**is now here**" (v. 23); that is, **through Jesus, future expectations are already under way in the present** (see 5:25).

5. In John's Gospel, the "**last things**" are not solely defined by the progression of time; believers do not have to wait until some distant future to experience the "last things," the fullness of God's kingdom. John's Gospel holds present hopes and future expectations together through the incarnate presence of God in Jesus.
6. **That is, in the Word-made-flesh, the "last things" are already under way.** Jesus' words let the woman know that she does not have to think of God's kingdom strictly as something still to come in the future. The hour of its fullness "is coming," but through Jesus, this hour is also "now here" (v. 23).
7. Worship in "the hour" will be worship not defined by a particular place, but will be worship "in spirit and in truth," worship shaped by God's own character (v. 24). True worship is no longer defined by the proper time, place, or forms; rather, true worship is about knowing the God revealed in Christ. With his words in v. 26 (which recall the divine name of Exodus 3:14, "*I AM WHO I AM*"), Jesus identifies himself as the one in whom God is known.

### C. The Samaritan Woman's Witness (4:27-30)

1. The conversation between Jesus and the woman is interrupted by the return of the disciples, and the two of them do not speak to each other again. The disciples' reaction to the presence of the Samaritan woman (v. 27) confirms that Jesus has violated social convention in conversing with her. Even though there is no more conversation between Jesus and the woman, the story does narrate her response to Jesus' self-revelation, "I Am."
2. **First she leaves her water jar at the well (v. 28)**, symbolically confirming that she no longer needs it to draw water because she has received the living water that she requested in verse 15.
3. **She then proceeds to the city, where she tells all the people what she has experienced in her conversation with Jesus**, and most importantly, she invites them to come and see Jesus for themselves (vv. 28-29). On the basis of the woman's word, the townspeople leave the village and go out to meet Jesus (v. 30).
4. The portrait of the woman in this chapter is astonishing. As a result of her conversation with Jesus, the woman has moved from protest (v. 9) and doubt (v. 12) to confession (v. 19) and witness (v. 29).
5. **Like the disciples in chapter 1, her testimony brings others to see him.** Many from her city believe in him first because of her testimony (4:39) and then because they meet Jesus for themselves (4:41-42). **She is the model disciple and witness.**

Why did this woman leave her water jar and become a messenger for God? How was she changed by this experience?

How do you think this woman worshipped differently after talking to Jesus?

## Fields Ripe for Harvesting (4:31-42)

### A. Jesus Talks Agriculture (4:31-38)

1. Jesus' metaphor of the harvest draws a new picture that repeats the heart of what Jesus has told the Samaritan woman, that "an hour is coming and is now here" (v. 23). In conventional farming, there is a delay between the season of sowing and the season of reaping (v. 35), but in God's hour, the expected delay between sowing and reaping has vanished (v. 36). The joy of the harvest is also already available for the one who plants (sows).

### B. Samaritan Villagers Come to Jesus (4:39-42)

1. The "crop" of Samaritan villagers coming to Jesus illustrates that it is indeed time for the harvest. **Verses 39-42 model effective witness:** the woman's witness leads people to Jesus, and their own experience of Jesus then leads to faith. By the end of the story, the Samaritan woman has become less like the character of Nicodemus and more like that of John the Baptist. She witnesses to Jesus' identity, and because of her witness, people believe in him.
2. The confession that concludes this story, "this is truly the Savior of the world" (v. 42) highlights the universal scope of Jesus' mission. Jesus is not the Savior of the Jewish people alone or the Samaritan people alone.
3. The story of Jesus' visit to Samaria is one that transforms conventional expectations. Jesus openly challenges and breaks open two boundaries in this text: the boundary between "chosen people" and "rejected people," and between male and female. The message of this text is still relevant for the church. Jesus crosses the boundaries that society creates and asks his disciples to participate in his work.

The way the passage ends is worth pondering deeply. Here is a woman whom many had likely deemed a social outcast. Now she had become the first evangelist to the Samaritan people. Before any of Jesus' own followers could do it, she has told them that he is the Messiah. As they come to see Jesus for themselves, they are convinced.

**With its outcome in view, what is this story saying to us today? What is it calling us to do?**

## Points for Home

1. **Jesus is the source of living water — eternal life made available to us now.** Jesus invites all who are thirsty to receive this living water anew.
2. **True worship is about knowing the God revealed in Christ.** Worship is not about time, place, or form; worship is about a person — Jesus.
3. **Jesus' encounter with the woman reveals that no one is prohibited from entering the kingdom of God.** Like the disciples in chapter 1, her testimony brings others to see him. Many from her city believe in Jesus first because of her testimony and then because they meet Jesus for themselves.
4. **Likewise, all people need to hear of the coming of the kingdom of God,** and in this story, the Samaritan woman is the model disciple and witness. She witnesses to Jesus' identity, and because of her witness, people believe in him. We are called to do the same.

## Sources:

Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John* | Robert Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel* | N.T. Wright, *The Gospel of John*