

John 4:1–54 - The Word at the well

ICEBREAKER: Have your family or friends ever been shocked when you changed your mind about something or took an unexpected new direction in life?

Read v.1-6

“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 he had to pass through Samaria.

- Why did Jesus leave Judea when he learned this? Perhaps to avoid drawing the scrutiny of the Pharisees that John had attracted, especially since his time had not yet come.

- Why the emphasis on Jesus not actually baptizing? This may be a good point to emphasize, given the propensity in the early church (and that in every age) to divisiveness and one-upmanship, it is probably a good thing that no one could lay claim to having been baptized by Jesus himself. However, it appears that he carried forward the baptizing ministry of John when John's disciples began following him.

- What the significance of having to pass through Samaria? Conservative Jews would have actually avoided going through Samaria by taking a longer route around it. The people in this area were despised by most Jews. The Samaritans were the "half-breeds," so to speak. They were the result of intermarriages between Israelites remaining in the land and pagan people imported into Israel during the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom. So you had a combination of corrupt Northern Israel religion mixing with paganism, and then slowly transforming back to a form of monotheistic Judaism. However, they did not accept as legitimate the Jerusalem worship at the temple and only received the first five books of Moses as their Scriptures. So they were heretics and racial half-breeds, not true sons of Abraham. The religious disposition of first century Jews towards Samaritans could be comparable to many Christians today in their attitudes towards Mormons or homosexuals, with a fervent nationalistic hate added on top of it. Yet Jesus will have none of the avoidance - he is on a mission that brought him into the darkness of the world, and he is bringing the light. He is not going to avoid the awkward encounter or the likely opposition by going around the other side.

>> **In what ways do we avoid the uncomfortable?**

So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well.

- Jesus was wearied. These little comments are critical not to miss, especially in a book like John which contains grand theological statements about Christ's divinity, but John was no Gnostic and the Jesus he portrays is no Spirit-in-a-costume. He was every bit as human as you or me, which means that when he travelled, he got tired. He would hunger and thirst and sweat just like us. This was no sham, no appearance in a body - Jesus was fully human.

- The setup to this story is interesting, because **if you're reading with the Old Testament in mind, what do you think of? What do we see happening at wells?** Abraham's servant found Rebekah, Isaac's future wife, at a well; Jacob found Rachel at a well; Moses met Zipporah at a well. The typical pattern is:

1. A man of the covenant goes to a foreign land.
2. He meets a young woman at a well.
3. One of them draws water.
4. The young woman rushes home to announce the stranger's arrival.
5. A marriage betrothal is made, usually after a meal.
6. The marriage yields great fruit.¹

You can see that thematic pattern at work in this story, following right on the heels of John's announcement of Jesus as the bridegroom. Except in this case, Jesus has come to make a bride out of the Church, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, including reconciling those of the Northern kingdom who had abandoned YHWH their husband.

Read v7-15

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.)

- Note again the contrast with the previous encounter with Nicodemus - he comes at night under darkness, she comes during the day in bright light.

- At noon, in the heat of the day, a woman comes to draw water. It's worth noting that in this culture women would be the one's who got the water from the well, and they would typically do it in the morning or evenings when it

was cooler. Women would often use this as an opportunity to meet and talk, and men were typically not around (unless they were looking to meet a woman). **Why would she be coming now at this time, by herself?**

- Jesus disregards protocol and asks her for a drink.

>>**Is there an example for us in Jesus' breach of protocol, or do we watch in awe as the savior works but remember that we are not him? Is there a way that we allow customs or traditions to get in the way of introducing people to Jesus?**

One thing should be clear - there is no cultural barrier for Christ. He is able to reach every person in every situation, though it may or may not be appropriate for us to do exactly that.

The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

- She cuts right to the chase - You're not even supposed to be talking to me. What kind of encounter is this?

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." 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." 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 of water welling up to eternal life." 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."

- Just like the last conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus immediately takes the conversation to a deeper level, and just like Nicodemus, the woman doesn't follow initially but brings it back to the superficial. The expression "living water" was used to refer to a flowing water source, such as a stream or river - it was moving. This water was good for ritual washing and purifications. This is how the woman understands Jesus.

- She knows there aren't any such water sources around there, hence the reason Jacob had to dig this well. Are you greater than our father Jacob? If she only knew. Jesus is the greater Jacob, the true and faithful Israel.

- Jesus says, I am coming to provide a different type of water - a living water that brings eternal life. Jesus speaks of the spiritual renewal that comes from life in him, a life lived with the Holy Spirit. The prophet Jeremiah used this same analogy when speaking of the people of Israel abandoning the Lord, who calls himself the fountain of living waters: *“For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”* (Jeremiah 2:13, ESV)

- Notice what this water does, it becomes in us a spring of water. Jesus gives us this living water, which then becomes a spring of water flowing out of us. **What does this mean?**

>> **Why is water an apt description of what Jesus brings? Why is it an apt description of what our deepest need is?**

- The woman's response is interesting. Unlike Nicodemus who stays on the defense and ridicules Jesus' statement, she does what he tells her - she asks for the water that he provides, even though she still doesn't really get what he's talking about. She asks for but doesn't understand the gift, and she doesn't know who it is that's speaking to her.

V16-26

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” 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.” The woman said to him, “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.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

- Jesus begins to lift the veil of mystery around who he is. Jesus knows this woman. Just as he knows what's in man, and just as he saw Nathaniel under the tree, he knows this Samaritan woman. The light shines on her darkness

and this clearly makes her uncomfortable. Jesus touches right on the point of her deepest shame and sin, which is probably the reason she comes to the well alone at midday. Notice that after exposing her sin, Jesus does not continue to press her on this. He is not seeking to break a bruised reed, but to reveal to her who he is that she might believe and be saved from her sin and her shame. >> **So often, there are hidden sins which are the real barrier for belief for people. When those are brought into the light and exposed, then the door is swung wide open. Has anyone experienced this in their encounters?**

- The woman attempts to change the subject, but in doing so she walks right into the topic of the Messiah. It's important to note that Samaritans didn't believe in the prophets such as Isaiah or Jeremiah, but they did expect *the* Prophet (the one like Moses) as spoken of in Deuteronomy 18. This takes the discussion right where Jesus wants it to go.

- She brings up the religious rivalry between Jews and Samaritans. The Jews worship at Mt. Zion, but the Samaritans believed the proper place of worship was Mt. Gerazim near Shechem. Jesus sides with the Jews as having the true view over the Samaritans, but he says that he is here to destroy that rivalry by making the question obsolete- that salvation comes from the Jews, and that when it comes there will be no place of worship because true worship will happen in spirit and in truth. This is the Father's desire. >> **What kind of religious barriers to people put up when confronted with the Gospel?**

>> **What does it mean to worship in Spirit and in truth?**

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 am he."

- Jesus has just told her things that he should not be able to know, and she senses something here. Likewise, he's telling her about the Father's plans for true worshippers. The Messiah, she knows, will tell all things. Could this be him? She phrases her statement in a way that implies that the he is not. When *he* comes, and you are not him, he will tell us all things. Jesus leaves no doubt, saying "I am he."

- In the context of the conversation, no doubt Jesus provides confirmation that he is this Messiah who will tell all things, but the language he uses is even more suggestive - he literally says, "I am, he who is speaking to you." This language of I AM, which Jesus uses frequently in John, intentionally

alludes to the self-description of YHWH in the Hebrew Scriptures as "I AM" - particularly Exodus 3 and 6, and Isaiah 40-55.

Read v.27-42

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "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?" They went out of the town and were coming to him.

- The woman left the very thing she came to the well to do, in order to go and tell others about Jesus. Her testimony is not necessarily one of confidence - "Can this be the Christ?" - but she recognizes that he has indeed revealed to her all things, just as the Messiah was supposed to do. In essence, she says "come and see" and they all go to see this Jesus for themselves.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

- Meanwhile, in their exchange with Jesus the disciples reveal their own propensity to miss the point and keep things at a surface level when Jesus is speaking spiritually. Just like Nicodemus with the new birth, and the woman with the living water, so now Jesus' disciples with the bread.

- Jesus is on mission, and that mission - the obedience to his Father's will - is what sustains him. He was clearly weary and in need of energy, but he found a source of energy in obeying his Father. Let this be a lesson to us when we are wearied, whether it is physically, emotionally, or spiritually, that we also can be fed on doing the will of Jesus who has sent us.

- The fields are ripe for harvest - many are coming to hear the words of Jesus for themselves.
- One sows, another reaps - this is the way God often works when bringing people into his kingdom. The groundwork would have been laid by one person, whether through evangelism, or a personal encounter, a difficult question, etc., and then they never see the fruit of that labor. Another comes along and drops a well-timed word, a gospel tract, or an example of character that is all it takes to bring the person to belief in Christ. In this case, the people of Samaria have been prepared for the coming of this Messiah and are expecting him. The reaping is claim of Jesus to be him and calling for belief. In our case, we never know what role we'll end up playing - at times we may be tilling the soil, at others we may be sowing or watering the seed, and other times we might be harvesting the fruit. At all times, we should know that it is God who works to bring life.

>> Do you ever consider your encounters with people in these terms?

>> When you look on the harvest waiting to be gathered, how do you feel? Excited? Motivated? Overwhelmed? Scared? Explain.

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."

- Some believed the word of witness of the woman, and some came to Jesus for themselves and believed his word directly. Either way, they believed on the testimony of the word brought by witnesses.

- He is the Savior of the world. This town of Samaritans has concluded what the Jews in Israel were no able to see.

>> Where is our Samaria today? Not just geographically, but what are those social, economic, and political barriers that divide the Church from the world that we must cross?

Read v43-54

After the two days he departed for Galilee. (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.) So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that

he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast. So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee."

- In contrast to the Samaritans, who saw no sign or wonder but only heard his word, when he returns to Galilee the emphasis is on the works they saw him do in Jerusalem and on the miracle of the wine in Cana. There is definitely a negative tone to this belief which is based on signs and wonders, as opposed to the belief from the hearing of Jesus' word.

- Nevertheless, Jesus has compassion and heals the official's son, bringing him and his household to belief.

- How is this propensity to prefer signs and wonders still with us today?

¹ Steps from: <http://totheword.blogspot.com/2005/02/jesus-woman-and-well-in-john-4.html>