

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John (SB_JN4A_The Woman at the Well)

Introduction

The story of the woman at the well is probably one of the most well known and often preached sections from the Gospel of John. It is powerful in its simplicity – its portrayal of Jesus' uncompromising position as the Son of God, yet gracious and compassionate treatment of a frail, sinful, and confused person. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman stands in sharp contrast to His conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3.

- ❑ Nicodemus was a respected elder of Israel. The Samaritan woman was from a group of people despised by the Jews.
- ❑ Nicodemus was "righteous" in the eyes of man. The Samaritan woman was of ill repute.
- ❑ Nicodemus came to Jesus with some prior understanding of who He claimed to be and of the works he had performed. The Samaritan woman knew nothing of Jesus, except that he was a Jew and just another man.
- ❑ Nicodemus was an unbeliever, yet questioned Jesus for further insight, even if from improper motives perhaps. The Samaritan woman was consumed by the things of the world and she lived a non-spiritually oriented life.
- ❑ Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus was straight to the point and brief. The conversation with the Samaritan woman was extended and very compassionate in nature.
- ❑ Nicodemus departed from the conversation in thoughtful awe and silence. He did not become a believer until sometime later. The Samaritan woman immediately confessed Jesus to her neighbors and her testimony resulted in many who came to see Jesus (Jn 4:30-32).

In spite of the difference in approach, Jesus' message to both was the same – He came to provide eternal life.

Jesus Leaves Judea – John 4:1-4

After Jesus' initial influential ministry in Judea, Jesus withdrew to begin an extensive ministry in Galilee. There were perhaps two reasons for the change in the place of ministry by Jesus. First, the Pharisees were creating controversy between John's disciples and Jesus and His disciples (see Jn 3:22-26). However, Jesus and John were part of the same program and preached the same gospel – i.e. the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In order to counter the Pharisees efforts at creating a division, Jesus withdrew to Galilee, an area where John had not ministered. Second, John had been imprisoned (Jn 4:1 cf. Mk 1:14; Matt 4:12). This was tantamount to a rejection of Jesus since they both preached the same message – that the kingdom (with its Messiah) was near. Therefore, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit (Jn 4:1 cf. Lu 4:14) to depart to Galilee. It is possible that the Pharisees, who were disturbed by Jesus' success in uniting the people behind Him, may have made public their intention to get rid of Him.

Jesus "needed" to go through Samaria if He wanted to travel by a direct route to Galilee. The Jews despised Samaria so much that they avoided it if possible by going around it along the Jordan River on the east side. Samaria was the central region between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north. When the northern kingdom was exiled to Assyria in 722 B.C., Samaria was repopulated with captives from other Gentile nations (2 Ki 17:24-34). The Jews who had been left behind in the land intermarried with these Gentiles. The result was a half-breed race that remained and became despised by the Jews of the captivity who later returned in the days of Ezra. These Jews even refused to allow the Samaritans to participate in the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem (Ezra 4). This resulted in the Samaritans' development of a syncretistic mixture of worship of heathen gods, Yahweh, and the Law of Moses (2 Ki 17:41). The Samaritans even established an alternative to Jerusalem in their land. They used Mt. Gerizim, which they claimed was where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac and where he later met

Melchizedek. When the blessings and cursings were read to the Exodus generation of Jews, the blessings were read from the green slopes of Mt. Gerizim and the cursings from the barren slopes of Mt. Ebal (see Deut 11:29; 27:12). The ancient city of Shechem lay between the two mountains. The Lord instructed that an altar of white stones with the Law of Moses written on them be erected on Mt. Ebal (Deut 27:1-8) as a reminder of God's special covenant with them. The Samaritans changed the text to suite their purposes to read "Mt. Gerizim" so that they might glorify that mountain in lieu of Jerusalem to the south.¹

Jesus at the Well – John 4:5-42

It is most probable that the city of Sychar (Jn 4:5) was really the ancient city of Shechem. It was near Shechem that Jacob had given Joseph a piece of land for an inheritance (Jn 4:5 cf. Ge 33:18-19; 48:22). The Hebrew word for "portion" in Genesis 48:22 is literally translated "shoulder" and is the proper noun "Shechem." After Joseph's death in Egypt, his body was taken to Shechem and buried (Josh 24:32). Thus, the well would be of special interest to Jesus since Jesus was Jacob's greater son.

By the time that Jesus and His disciples reached the well it was noon (Jn 4:6) and they would have been traveling since about 6 a.m. in the morning. Jesus rested and the disciples went to the village to purchase food. The Samaritan woman arrived at the well while Jesus was alone and Jesus made the initial approach to the woman and asked her for a drink of water. The Samaritan woman immediately recognized Jesus as a Jew and expressed her dismay at His request (Jn 4:9). After all, the Jews had rejected the Samaritans for hundreds of years. Jesus placed Himself in a position of need so as to soften the woman's defensive barriers. However, Jesus was not concerned with His physical need so much as He was concerned with the woman's spiritual condition. Jesus had no concerns about being perceived as one in need. It was totally consistent with His role as a servant in His 1st Advent.

Jesus presented Himself as God's gift (Jn 4:10) and the woman naturally was a bit amused by Jesus' statement since He had nothing with which to draw from the well and had even asked her for assistance. Jacob had left the well as a gift. Was this man greater than Jacob so that He could make "living water" available? Her curiosity was peaked.

"Living water" is reminiscent of metaphors used in the Old Testament which contrast the continuously available and refreshing spiritual resources of God with the temporarily satisfying nature of the things of this world.

For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns – broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer 2:13)

And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes. [A description of a river of water flowing from the temple in Jerusalem during the Messianic kingdom.] (Ezek 47:9)

And in that day it shall be that living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them toward the western sea; in both summer and winter it shall occur.

¹ Sources consulted include J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 130-139; Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, 1978), 53-57; Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), footnotes 1765-7.

And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be – “The Lord is one,” and His name one. (Zech 14:8-9)

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” (Jn 7:37-38)

Earthly water only satisfies temporarily. Spiritual water that Jesus offers satisfies eternally. The temporal satisfaction provided by earthly water is analogous to the temporary satisfaction one obtains from the things of this world. Once a person becomes dependent upon the things of this world for happiness, that person is a slave to the emotional stimulation afforded by them. Only the eternal, spiritual living water of Christ can provide a person with a hope and purpose for life that transcends the temporal nature of the things of this life. At first, the woman is only interested in having her temporal needs met (4:15) so that she doesn't have to trek out to the well every day to be satisfied.

Jesus had created the desire in this woman's life for the eternal; however, she needed to recognize the gap that existed between her current spiritual state and the spiritual state that Jesus offered. Therefore, Jesus called her attention to a fact of which He should have had no knowledge. He called attention to the fact that she was living a life that was at variance with the life that Jesus required. Her response in verse 17 focuses upon a technicality in an attempt to distract from the truth, i.e. that she was a sinner in need of a Savior. The woman thought that only a prophet from God could have knowledge of such details. Yet, she still does not comprehend who Jesus is. Note that Jesus does not despise her for her sin. He desires to redeem her.

Again, in verse 19, we see another attempt by the woman to divert Jesus from the real issue in her life. If Jesus had really come from God as a prophet, then He should be able to settle the issue that divided the Jews from the Samaritans for generations. Was God to be worshipped in the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim or in the temple at Jerusalem? Jesus took compassion on the woman's confusion. Jesus knew the blindness that existed in the woman's life due to Satan's effective strategy of using religion to confuse man. She was a sad by-product of this conflict instead of an active participant like Nicodemus.

Jesus did not dilute the Truth in view of this woman's questions. Salvation would in fact come through the Jews (v. 22). However, true worship could occur anywhere as long as it was from the Spirit. In fact, it was a the spiritual dimension that Jesus was evaluating as He surveyed the land and determined whether Israel was ready to enter the kingdom (see Matt 5:1-16).

The woman affirmed her faith in the coming Messiah (Jn 4:25) and Jesus revealed His identity. By this point, the woman was ready to accept Him at His word. Had Jesus stated this fact at the very beginning of His encounter, she would have placed Him on the defensive and He would have had to spend the rest of the conversation defending Himself. Instead, Jesus placed her in a position where her true spiritual condition was revealed and she desired what He had to offer. This is a great example for how we are to witness. Instead of constantly being on the defensive, our witnessing should be structured in such a way that it helps others recognize their spiritual need.

As a result of this one encounter, the circle of Jesus' ministry expanded to embrace many who would believe in Samaria. Jesus was and is the Savior of Jew and Gentile alike. Just because salvation is to come from the Jews did not mean that Gentiles were not to benefit. Only self-righteousness would exclude anyone.