

John 4: 3-7,9-11,13-21,23-30,39-42

[Jesus] left Judea and started back to Galilee.

But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 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 no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 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 have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." 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 truly the Savior of the world."

1 John 2:7-11 (NIV)

Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

Let me tell you a story....

Jesus is travelling back from Jerusalem to Galilee. Maybe things in Jerusalem have gotten a little hot, after his throwing all the animal-sellers and moneychangers out of the Temple. Maybe his association with John the Baptist and his disciples' baptizing people is making the authorities nervous. In any case, the Passover is done, and he heads home with his disciples.

Jesus could have travelled around Samaritan country. Many Jews would have.

The Samaritans are also descended from Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but they mix their own tribal customs with worshipping God, and they worship on Mount Gerizim, rather than in the Temple. The two peoples, Jews and Samaritans, don't like each other. They are worshipping the same God, but so differently that some people question whether it is the same God or two different gods that they worship.

There has been a history of strife between the two peoples for generations and generations. When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, that story was meant to jolt the people who heard it and make them sit up and take notice. You don't see too many American hospitals today called Good Russian Hospital, do you? But that would be the equivalent for us.

Jesus could have travelled around Samaritan country, but he doesn't. He chooses to walk straight through. His disciples look at each other, shrug, maybe shake their heads, and follow. But there may have been some loosening of knives in sheaths before they did. "You know, they're Samaritans, you never know what to expect."

Jesus arrives in a town called Sychar, near Jacob's well. It's noontime, in the desert. The sun is hot, and Jesus and his disciples have been walking since nearly sunrise. Jesus is tired. He sits down beside the well, which is on the outskirts of town, between the town and the fields. His disciples go into town to buy the group some food.

A woman from the town comes out to the well. This woman has been unfortunate in her life. She cannot have children, for some medical reason that no one understands. Three husbands have divorced her for that, and she is not certain that she can entirely blame them. Men do want children, after all. Divorce is quick and easy when all a man has to do is repeat three times the words, "I divorce you."

When you add that to the two wonderful, loving husbands who each died after just a few years, she could be forgiven for believing that she is living her life under a curse. If her late husband's brother were not a generous man, who let her live in his house with his family, she would be on the streets with nothing. And her brother-in-law's wife never lets her forget that he does not have to support her: her brother-in-law is being generous.

This woman is so seemingly unimportant that we don't even know her name.

She has come to the well to get water. Since she is the lowest on the proverbial totem pole among the women of the house, she must do the most unpleasant jobs, like going out in the middle of the day to haul back more water when the household runs out.

One thing you need to understand about wells like this one. They are strictly BYOB. Bring Your Own Bucket. The town does not wish to provide water to hostile soldiers, for example, and no one in the town is willing to leave their bucket at the well to be stolen. The water is thirty feet down in the well. Jesus would have to do a miracle to get water for himself.

So, when he sees the woman, Jesus asks her for a drink.

The woman stops in her tracks and looks this man up and down. There is a motif in the culture of a man and a woman first meeting at a well. You know, how, in a romantic comedy, if two people run into each other early in the film and knock all their stuff on the ground and have to pick it up together, you know something's going to happen between them? This is the same kind of motif. Isaac met his beloved Rebecca at a well.<sup>1</sup> That is where Jacob met Rachel,<sup>2</sup> and where Moses met his wife Zipporah.<sup>3</sup>

But this man – clearly, by the way he's dressed, he's a Jew.

Before she can even think, the words are out of her mouth, “Why on Earth would YOU, a Jewish man, ask ME, a Samaritan woman, for water?”

Jesus smiles, and looks at her, and she can just feel his look, like he's loved her all her life. He says, “If you recognized God's gift when it's offered, you'd be asking me for living water.”

She doesn't know what to say to that. Finally, she stutters out, “Uh, sir, you don't have a bucket. Where are you going to get this living water? Didn't you just ask me for water? Do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well, many generations ago?”

Jesus responds, “Everyone who drinks from this well will get thirsty again. But people who drink from what I give them will never be thirsty again. What I give them will become a spring of water that bubbles up inside them.”

Now she is intrigued.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 24:1-27.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 29:1-12.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 2:15-21.

“Sir, give me some of that! I don’t want to ever be thirsty or have to come back here in the middle of the day!”

Jesus says, “Go get your husband.”

The woman grimaces. “I don’t have a husband.” Now she figures that she’s in for it. This, . . . whatever this is, will be spoiled, when he figures out that she is the cursed woman of the town.

Jesus nods. “I know.” He knows her whole history, and he still looks at her like that!

He must be a prophet. They know things that no one else does. But, a Jewish prophet. Not one for the Samaritans. She reminds him of the differences between their peoples.

But Jesus explains that the time is coming when those differences won’t matter anymore, when everyone will worship God together, wherever they are, in spirit and in truth.

This is beyond anything she can handle. What he’s saying makes sense, kind of, but who is this man, to make pronouncements like this?

She babbles out, “I know the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach us all about all that, I’m sure.”

Jesus smiles again, “I am. I am teaching you about it right now.”

Just then, these other men arrive, who are travelling with Jesus. To her surprise, no one asks him why he is talking with her. Jesus’ disciples know by now that he is socially hopeless: he will talk with anyone.

The woman is in a daze. She runs back into town. She doesn’t even notice that she leaves her valuable water jar behind. She starts telling everyone who will listen, “Come see a man who just looked at me and knew everything about me! Could this man be the Messiah?”

That gets people's attention. They stream out of the town to come listen to this Jew teach them about God. They are so enthusiastic that what the travelers intended to be a lunch break turns into two days of teaching.

Jesus and the woman are not equals in any way, shape, or form. Putting aside the whole thing about that he is God, they don't even appear to be equals.

He is a man. She is a woman. That is a status difference today. It should not be. God's intention is not that it would be a status difference, but some people still see it as one. In their time, it is a profound difference in social and legal status.

He is respected. He is a rabbi. He has disciples, following him wherever he goes. She is perhaps the lowest-status person in the whole town, the woman who is cursed.

He is a Jew, and salvation is supposed to come to the whole world through the Jews. She is a Samaritan, at best a heretic.

But Jesus allows himself to be vulnerable. He asks her for a drink. She could have said, "No" and brushed him off. But, instead, they get into a real conversation. They talk about water, one of those things that all human beings need.

Jesus is superior to the woman in every way, far more superior to her than anyone here is superior in any way to anyone on earth.

Jesus is superior to the woman in every way, but he moves past that. He moves past any feeling of superiority and allows himself to be vulnerable. He talks with her like someone who matters, like someone whom he cares about, like someone who is made in God's image just like he is.

He changes her life. She becomes the first Christian missionary to non-Jewish people.

All because Jesus allows himself to be vulnerable, and treats her like someone whom his Father loves.

For so she is.

If you wish to follow Jesus Christ, go thou, and do likewise with the Samaritans in your life.

AMEN