

Water to the Thirsty Soul (Samaritan woman, Preliminary "I am" statement)

John 4:1-42¹

Before the lesson – Prepare AV equipment to show the 5-minute video, “Water of Life,” from The Bible Project: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/water-of-life/>

Fellowship Question: (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

When was the last time you were really, really thirsty?

Was there ever a clique you wished you could be a part of? Did you ever become an insider?

Information

We have several stories in the gospels that relate to Samaritans. We will look at one of those today. It turns out that she was as worthy of the label “the Good Samaritan” as was the man in the parable (Luke 10:29-37).

“The Samaritans are the descendants of two groups: (a) the remnant of the native Israelites who were not deported at the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC; (b) foreign colonists brought in from Babylonia and Media by the Assyrian conquerors of Samaria (2 Kings 17:24ff). There was theological opposition between these northerners and the Jews of the South because of the Samaritan's refusal to worship at Jerusalem. This was aggravated by the fact that after the Babylonian exile the Samaritans had put obstacles in the way of the Jewish restoration of Jerusalem, and that in the 2nd century BC the Samaritans had helped the Syrian monarchs in their wars against the Jews. In 128 BC the Jewish high priest burned the Samaritan temple of Gerizim.”²

- Have a class member read John 4:4-15.

“When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, he meets someone who provides a striking contrast to all that has preceded. When he speaks with Nicodemus in John 3, he speaks with a male member of the Jewish religious establishment. In John 4 he speaks with a female member of an enemy people. Nicodemus has a name, but the woman is unnamed; she is only known by what she is - a foreign woman.”³

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² Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 170.

³ Gail R. O'Day, “John”, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Woman's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 295.

As much as Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are different, there is something that they have in common. They are both confused by Jesus' statements.

“Jesus' initial response makes use of a double meaning of the term *living water*. It was the usual term for running water, water that flowed from streams or springs and was valued more than water from cisterns or wells. Jewish purification baths (the *miqvah*) were deemed more effective if they contained living water rather than standing water... The misunderstanding of the term *living water*, then, is comparable to Nicodemus's misunderstanding of the term *born from above/afew*.”⁴

The idea of “water of life” was an ancient one in the Jewish faith. The early Christians picked up on that theme. We have water of life images from the Gospels to the book of Revelation.

Show the “Water of Life” 5-minute video from The Bible Project:

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/water-of-life/>

What is something you learned about this image throughout the Bible of the water of life?

In verse 12, the Samaritan challenges Jesus with a question, “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob? She thinks he should say, “No.” After all, no one would make that claim. But this is part of the fun in reading John's gospel. John loves to use the technique of irony. “ This is a perfect example of Johannine irony, for the woman is unconsciously stating truth.”⁵

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman begins with the woman's concern that this public discourse is inappropriate. The conversation shifts to a metaphoric discussion about the water for the soul that Jesus offers. Now, the conversation takes another twist.

- Have a class member read John 4:16-26.

Why do you think Jesus made this shift in the conversation?

If you heard that a person had been married five times, what would you think of them?

Traditionally, the Samaritan woman has been perceived as a wicked woman - so many marriages! But when we look into the historic and social realities of that day, we can have a different perspective. We may even come to admire her.

“First, the story never says she is immoral...Second, there are no ancient texts that suggest a woman appearing at a well alone at noon meant anything other than someone needing water. Third, her previous five marriages were likely ended by a combination of widowhood and divorce... Women often married in their early to late teens, allowing for lots of young

⁴ Mark A. Matson, *John*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 31.

⁵ Brown, 170.

widows...Fourth, we import our modern situations. A story today of a woman divorced five times has moral overtones. Yet, divorce was more commonly initiated by the husband. If she is the victim of multiple divorces, she is not to blame. Barrenness was a common reason for divorce.”⁶

If we assume that this woman has been widowed at least once and divorced by multiple men for reasons that were not her fault, how does that change our perspective about her?

“There could have been a mixture of divorces and bereavements. *Yet, whatever the truth, a life shot through with disappointment, pain, and grief is suggested. The way through the impasse is her recognition of who Jesus is.*”⁷

“The conversation about the woman’s husbands serves two purposes. First, it illustrates Jesus’ ability to see and know all things. This is an important theme in John (e.g., 1:48-50; 2:24). Second, it is a moment of revelation for the woman, a moment when she is able to see Jesus with new eyes... This exchange between the Samaritan woman and Jesus about her husbands thus does not delegitimize the woman because of her supposed immorality but instead shows the woman’s growing faith.”⁸

Although this is the longest conversation we have between Jesus and an individual, there may have been much more involved in this conversation than we have in the text. The woman will tell her fellow citizens that “he told me everything I had ever done.” I imagine that Jesus could have demonstrated that he knew about her life by simply recounting the names of previous husbands and how each marriage ended. But we do not have that in this story. What more did Jesus and the woman talk about? John has given us what he thinks is essential. We have enough to see the woman grow rapidly in her understanding of who Jesus is.

What changes of perspective does the Samaritan woman gain through this conversation? (He went from a strange man breaking social convention to being a strange man talking about water that would quench all thirst forever to being a prophet.)

The insight that Jesus is a prophet leads the woman to continue the conversation, but in a new direction. It is about worship.

“The woman’s recognition of Jesus as a prophet leads her to ask him the most pressing theological question that stands between Jews and Samaritans: Where is the proper place to worship God? ... The text presents the woman as a character who is unafraid to stay in

⁶ E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 56f.

⁷ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 113. (author’s italics)

⁸ O’Day, 296.

conversation with Jesus, who recognizes that a prophet is the perfect person of whom to ask her question.”⁹

But there is more behind the question than orthodoxy.

“When the Samaritan woman meets Jesus, collective honor is at play. She is well aware that the conversation between them is corporate: Jews and Samaritans. She notes Jacob gave *us* this well. It was a thousand years previous, but she still connects herself to Jacob (and thus to Abraham). She feels this honor is shared by all the Samaritan people...She is standing up for her people and their honor to the Jewish man...David gave [the Jews] Jerusalem and the temple. She goes further back in history to Jacob and Abraham. She thinks she and Jesus are fencing over honorable bloodlines, the collective honor of their people.”¹⁰

Jesus says “that both Jewish and Samaritan worship practices are transitory and will be superseded by worship ‘in spirit and truth.’ This understanding of an end-time worship levels the ground between Samaritan and Jew and leaves open the complete reconciliation of the two groups.”¹¹

Jesus responds with the statement that God wants worshipers who worship “in spirit and in truth.” Why do you think Jesus phrased his answer in this way?

“Jesus declares that, before long, debates about which mountain is the best site for valid worship of the divine Father will be entirely moot. Curiously, this statement seems to indicate that both Jews and Samaritans take positions on the matter that are, in a word, irrelevant; if it doesn’t matter where worship takes place, then neither Samaritans nor Jews are barking up the right theological tree.”¹²

Maybe with an eye roll, the woman responds with a “We will understand it better by and by” reply. Once the Messiah comes, then we’ll get the full picture and the true answer. Although she uses the word Messiah, “the Samaritans did not expect a Messiah in the sense of an anointed king of the Davidic house. They expected a Taheb... the Prophet-like-Moses... a teacher of the Law.”¹³

Then Jesus says something that causes her, no doubt, to catch her breath. “I am he.”

“One thing is certain: In light of Jesus’ claims about himself, the woman’s previous query about whether he was greater than the ancestor Jacob (4:12) is no longer rhetorical. It’s as though Jesus

⁹ O’Day, 296.

¹⁰ Richards, 139.

¹¹ Matson, 32.

¹² Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 152.

¹³ Brown, 172.

is giving a delayed yet resounding answer to that question: ‘Yes, now that you mention it, I am.’¹⁴

“It is interesting that Jesus, who does not give unqualified acceptance to the title of Messiah when it is offered to him by Jews, accepts it from a Samaritan. Perhaps the answer lies in the royal nationalist connotations the term had in Judaism, while the Samaritan Taheb (although not devoid of nationalistic overtones) had more the aspect of teacher and lawgiver....Samaritans did not expect the Taleb to be a king.”¹⁵

There are seven traditionally labeled “I am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. (“I am the door;” “I am the good shepherd;” etc.) We will cover each of them in this lesson series. Although this statement, “I am he,” is not one of the traditionally labeled “I am” statements, it is nonetheless worth noting that Jesus is using the same phrase, “I am.” At the very least, this statement introduces the idea that the following “I am” statements will further help us understand what it means to be the Messiah as Jesus lived and interpreted it.

- Have a class member read John 4:27-30, 39-42.

What is the significance of the woman leaving her water jar at the well?

“Her leaving her water jar parallels the Synoptic call stories in which disciples leave their nets: it is a decisive act of dedication to a new calling...That a marginalized Samaritan woman, who has suffered much, should respond like this, while the senior male leader Nicodemus is left bewildered, is in line with other paradoxes of the Gospel.”¹⁶

“When the Samaritan villagers hear and see Jesus for themselves, the woman’s witness is superseded. That is the appropriate pattern of discipleship and faith. The witness that leads to Jesus is replaced by one’s own experience of Jesus. The Samaritan woman is thus a witness and disciple like John the Baptist, Andrew, and Philip.”¹⁷

The disciples’ protests “reflect traditional cultural and social conventions and expectations; however, Jesus will not be limited by such conventions and constraints. He breaks open boundaries in his conversation with the Samaritan woman: the boundary between male and female, the boundary between ‘chosen people’ and ‘rejected people.’ Jesus’ journey to Samaria and his conversation with the woman demonstrate that the grace of God that he offers is available to all.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Spina, 153.

¹⁵ Brown, 172f.

¹⁶ Ford, 118.

¹⁷ O’Day, 296.

¹⁸ O’Day, 295.

Transformational Exercise

- Have a class member read John 1:43-50.

What parallels do you see between Jesus' meeting with Nathanael and with the Samaritan woman?

(When Phillip told Nathanael about Jesus, Nathanael was skeptical and condescending of anyone that claimed Nazareth as their hometown. But Philip insisted, "Come and see." When Nathanael met Jesus, Nathanael was not immediately convinced. Then, Jesus said some things that led Nathanael to know that this man knows me inside and out. He became a follower of Jesus. That was the same experience of the woman at the well. She was skeptical and condescending. Jesus told her things about herself that no one else knew. Then, she found her friends in Samaria and insisted, "Come and see!" They did. And they, too, became followers of Jesus.)

There is a mysterious, wonderful feeling that we experience when someone who knows us better than anyone else knows us and loves us with our faults, our sins, and our history. They see our blindspots, they warn us of our weaknesses (then watch us rely on our weaknesses, and fail once more), yet they love us. They remain loyal to us. They continue to be hopeful that we will become the best we can be. And when we turn against them in denial or fear, they forgive us.

There are not many of those people in our circles. But Jesus is one of those, ready to be invited into every single person's inner life, ready to express a fulfilling, hopeful, forgiving love.

Let's enter into a time for silent prayer.

For the next moment, in silent prayer, think about who loves you unconditionally. Who is in your inner circle and knows your inner thoughts and feelings - and loves you, still? Say a silent word of prayer for that person.

Ask in a silent prayer that you can be that kind of loving support for someone else. Are you already that person for someone needing support? Say a prayer for them.

Say a silent prayer thanking God that although God knows your thoughts, motivations, and behaviors, God loves you and accepts you. Thank God for that love.

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *At times, Lord, our lives are dry and our souls are dusty. We grow weary of personal struggles, broken relationships, and deep grief. We come to you who know us and understand us. We ask for that renewing spring water of life. Quench our soul's thirst. Refresh us. Replenish us so we will be whole and so we will have what we need to love and support others. Amen.*