

Approaching God's Word: In Spirit & Truth

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John 4:1-42 Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in Sychar

While John's account of this event is not *about* Bible study, there are several aspects that are useful in thinking about Bible study. (Extra space is provided for you to add notes and visuals you find helpful.)

About Samaria: The Samaritans came about during Israel's exile when the king of Assyria brought in pagans from other lands to settle the land that lay west of the Jordan River and (in Jesus's day) between Jerusalem in the south and Nazareth in the north. When those pagans arrived, they did not fear the God of Israel, so He sent lions among them, resulting in settlers being killed. The king wanted to appease God, so he dispatched an exiled Jewish priest to go back there to live and teach the pagans how to worship God. They did so, but they mixed their worship of God with worship of their idols as well, during which some even sacrificed their children. As they intermarried with Jews there who had not been taken away into exile, they developed their own identity as Samaritans, with this highly-corrupted version of Judaism. Thus, true Jews thoroughly despised Samaritans, and if they needed to travel to a point beyond Samaria, they would go east, well out of the way, and travel all the way around Samaria: they avoided contact with Samaritans at all costs. See 2 Kings 17:24-41.

Verse 4: "...He had to pass through Samaria."

Jesus had a "divine appointment" in Samaria--and Jesus never avoided rubbing elbows with people other Jews looked down on. As believers, we too must "pass through Samaria" in the sense of moving through our own lives in a world that is filled with conflict and is frequently hostile to Christians, which brings both challenges and opportunities. There are people and situations we ourselves would often rather avoid altogether, yet we are called to engage and let our Light shine in the world (Matthew 5:14-16), but we can't do that if we always go around "Samaria." We need God's help to navigate through the seasons and events of our lives in a way that pleases and reflects Christ Jesus. To do that, we need God's guidance, and the primary way we get that is through His Word (the Bible), so we need to study it carefully to know God's ways and will.

Verse 6: "Jacob's well was there..."

Jacob's well was on land he purchased (Genesis 33:18-20) that ultimately was a part of Samaria in Jesus's day. Remembering that Jacob is called "Israel" by God (Gen. 32:28), his name often is used in the Bible to refer to the whole nation of Israel. In John 4, Jacob's well then becomes a symbol of hope and salvation for all of Israel, namely in the person of Christ Jesus. While it is Jesus who has asked for a drink of water, He is about to bring salvation and mercy to a woman, and an entire community, who otherwise would not have had it. Christ Himself is the "well" who offers living water to all who thirst for hope and grace. And because Jesus is the *living* Word of God (John 1:1-18), the *written* Word that He has provided to us in all the Scriptures (the Bible) becomes a well of wisdom and truth for us to draw "water" from, as much and as often as we need it, without cost (Isaiah 55:1; Revelation 22:17).

Verse 11: "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep."

While Jesus did not have a cup or vessel with which to draw water up from the depths of the well, He was concerned with *being* the well of living water to this woman. As thirsty as Jesus undoubtedly was, *she* was the one in need. Likewise, we stand in tremendous need of our Savior's help, yet we have no natural means of "drawing water" from the well of Scripture. In the book of Acts, as the Ethiopian eunuch was reading aloud from Isaiah, Philip overhears and asks the eunuch if he understands what he's reading. The eunuch says, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" So Philip explains the passage, shares the Gospel, and baptizes a joyful, grateful new believer (Acts 8:26-39). And just like Philip did for the Ethiopian, so the Holy Spirit does for us: "...the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My [Jesus's] name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26; see also John 16:13 & 1 John 2:27). Because the Holy Spirit lives within every true Christian, He helps us understand the Word of God not just in our minds but in our hearts. The Bible is deeper than anything except the Lord Himself, and if we were to live thousands of years, we would never run it dry. Yet the Helper, God's precious Spirit, is always at the ready to help us understand and apply the Scriptures--if we will take the time to read and prayerfully think about God's Word.

Verse 14: "...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."

Jesus has stated this very plainly: He satisfies our spiritual thirst, period. And in John 7:38, He again says that those who believe in Him will have "rivers of living water" flowing from their hearts. Another way to think of the word "living" would be "life-giving." Water is critical for maintaining physical life. So also, Jesus's living water is essential to our spiritual life--without it, we die. It is therefore vital that we continually come to Him in prayer and Bible study to draw more and more from His heavenly supply, as much as we need or desire. The Well *never* runs out, but we must turn the crank!

Verse 17: "I have no husband."

Jesus couldn't have chosen a more scandalous person than this woman to reveal Himself to as the long-awaited Messiah--a Samaritan, a woman, and an immoral woman, at that. So also, we are the scandalous ones upon whom the Lord has showered His most excellent mercies and love. While the Samaritan woman may have answered the way she did in order to avoid telling the whole truth, we must come to Jesus and to the written Word honestly, admitting that we are sinners with no merit or resources of our own. We are desolate, empty vessels--but empty vessels are the ones that get filled! Jesus said in Mark 2:17, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." The woman indicates to Jesus that she and the Samaritans are looking for the Messiah, Who "will tell us all things." And so to the lowest Jesus revealed the most: "I Who speak to you am He."

Verse 24: "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth."

The whole reason we study Scripture is to know God--His character, His ways, His will, the things He has done, and the things He wants us to do. And He wants our knowledge of Him to be not just external, but internal as well. This is perhaps the most straightforward way to understand what Jesus means by worshiping Him "in spirit and truth." The truth is vital, and Jesus plainly stated that He *is* the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). The Holy Spirit, also, is "the Spirit of Truth" Who testifies about Jesus (John 15:26). Spirit and truth are inseparable, like two sides of the same coin. But in John 4, Jesus is making clear that it is not enough to simply know what the truth is--we must also know and worship Him *inside*, from the heart and by the Spirit of God. In response to the Samaritan woman's concern about the external matter of *where* people are supposed to worship God, Jesus is pointing ahead to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, at which point all believers would be able to worship God at any time and in any place because of the indwelling Holy Spirit. At that point, the Holy Spirit would break down all of those external, visible barriers dividing Jews and Gentiles, this group from that group. Salvation by the indwelling presence of Christ's Spirit would be available to anyone, anywhere. The Lord desires that we walk in truth not just in outward appearance, but in our "inward parts" (Psalm 51:6), something that constantly tripped up the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus's time, to the point that He described them as "whitewashed tombs"--beautiful on the outside, but filled on the inside with dead men's bones and uncleanness (Matthew 23:27). May this not be said of us! Rather, "Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; His going forth is as sure as the dawn; He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth" (Hosea 6:3). To that end, let your Bible study be complemented by prayer, and your prayer complemented by Bible study. They are the two sides of our conversation with the Lord: prayer is mainly our speaking to God, and Bible study is mainly God speaking to us.

Verse 29: "Come see...."

The Samaritan woman had engaged Jesus in a way that made her tell others about her encounter and invite them to come and see for themselves. Likewise, when we engage in prayer-supported Bible study, we encounter Jesus in ways that we can then share with others. And the more we study, the more we will have to offer. If you learned something cool in your Bible study, multiply it by sharing.

Verse 42: "...we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

Corresponding to the above, meeting Jesus in prayer and Bible study enables us to "taste and see" firsthand "that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8). When others share their experience of the Lord with us, that is good, but discipleship is not a vicarious experience. Our pilgrimage--our life-long walk with the Lord--will take us through not only "Samaria," but through deserts and decadence, grief and gladness, and many other stops and seasons. When we meet with the Lord in study, the Holy Spirit brings the Word to life for us, so that what we read is not a dry, dusty account written by a bunch of long-dead men, but the "living and active" Word of the Living God (Hebrews 4:12).