

I Met Jesus: the Woman at the Well John 4:1-42

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Last week our series *I Met Jesus* introduced us to the very religious and politically powerful aristocrat Nicodemus. He had the finest pedigree available at the time. He was a Pharisee; a member of the Sanhedrin; a mover and shaker if there was one in Jerusalem. Jesus meets with him in the night and says to him, *Nicodemus, you must be born again*. Jesus knew Nicodemus' need. He needed to shred his resume of religious accomplishment because it was the very thing he was trusting in for his salvation. Salvation comes from God and to be saved, our faith must rest in what God has done in Christ and not in what we have done.

Today we are introduced to a woman who couldn't be more different from Nicodemus. He was powerful. This woman was not. He had a sterling reputation. This woman had a reputation for all the wrong reasons. He was the finest the Jewish religion had to offer. This woman was an embarrassment to those who knew her. The one thing they both had in common was that they both had great need.

Her story is a very long section of John 4. It's 45 verses, which will we not read in its entirety. Our goal here is to put our feet in the sandals of this woman and understand what it was about her encounter with Jesus that so radically changed her. Like Nicodemus, this moment is one of those seemingly random moments in life. Yet we see that any day might be a day that God does something transformational in our lives. Maybe today is your day.

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. (Verses 1-4)



It was a three day walk from Jerusalem to Galilee. There were two routes to choose from. One was to go along the Jordan River valley. It was longer and it put you in contact with Gentiles, which was undesirable for a Jew. It was flat, but hot and dry. The other was the more direct route, which led through a region known as Samaria. Its residents were known as the Samaritans.

Why the Jews Hated the Samaritans and the Feelings were Mutual

This history of this goes back to the rivalry within Israel between the ten northern tribes which split away under King Solomon's son, Rehoboam and the two southern tribes who remained loyal to the throne of David. Because of the idolatry and rebellion of these ten northern tribes, God sent the Assyrians in 722 BC who conquered the 10 tribes (2 Kings 15:29).

The Assyrians had a cruel deportation and resettlement policy in their conquered lands. They would take away a significant portion of the resident population and resettle them somewhere else in the kingdom. They would bring into the region people from other nations. The result was that through intermarrying, the old ethnic, cultural, and religious identities would be lost, thereby making it very difficult for the nation to reconstitute and revolt against them. It was brilliant, but cruel.

That's what they did to the 10 northern tribes. Most of the population was deported. In came people who from who knows where. The Jews that remained intermarried with them. The result was a population of part Jewish and part something else. To us in America, that seems normal as we have been an ethnic melting pot from our inception. *I'm 20% this, 30% that, 50% this...* But in Israel where their whole identity as a nation was as descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this was an abomination.

The Jews considered the Samaritans half-breeds. The hostility was more than ethnic. It was also religious. In 400 BC the Samaritans built a rival to the Jerusalem temple in Samaria. The Jews destroyed it, but you get the idea. They weren't sending each other Christmas cards. Within a generation of Jesus, Jewish leaders would make it unlawful to talk to a Samaritan woman because they said they were "menstruants from the cradle;" spiritually unclean from birth. The feelings were mutual. The Samaritans didn't take kindly to the Jewish sense of superiority and had little good to say about a Jew.

Do you see why Jesus' parable about a Jew beat up along the road where the hero of the story was a Samaritan was so shocking? A *good* Samaritan? To a Jew there was no such thing. They were like cats and the only good cat is a...well, you know.

When we think about our own community and the racial and religious tensions that simmer just under the surface, we see that the story of the woman at the well has a lot to say today. While it speaks to prejudice and racism and sexism and elitism, it really is about a woman in need meeting the Savior of the world.

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. It was about the sixth hour. (Verses 5-6)

This is the famous Jacob's well. It was dug by Jacob centuries before. It is about noon – the heat of the day. Jesus has walked for hours already. We see His humanity here. He is "weary" and he is "thirsty." All of us can relate. Now for the scandalous moment.

There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) 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.) (Verses 7-9)

All the Reasons Jesus Shouldn't Talk to Her

Her ethnicity

Jesus is a Jew and an increasingly influential rabbi. She is a Samaritan.

Her gender

This is important to understand as well. In this culture, men and women did not interact like we do today. Jewish men would avoid talking even to their wives in public. It's been my observation that when I walk around the mall, I see many apparently Jewish husbands.

His weariness

His hunger

He is alone

How do you get towards people when you are tired, hungry, thirsty, and no one you know is there to see how you treat people? It is easier to be selfish when no one is watching.

Her lifestyle

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 forever. 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." 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. (Verses 10-19)

Now we are introduced to the real character of this woman. Five husbands, five failures. In a culture where divorce was much less common than our own, to have five husbands and five divorces was beyond belief. On top of that, Jesus says, *The [man] you now have is not your husband*. In other words, this woman has abandoned marriage altogether and is sexually involved with a man not her husband. Further, it seems likely this man was not her husband, but likely someone else's. Are you beginning to get the picture of the kind of woman she was?

The woman's response is, *Only a prophet could know that*. Jesus was from out of town. She quickly changes the subject to the doctrinal arguments between the Jews and the Samaritans (Verses 20-26). *Well, enough about my failures...let's talk doctrine* (Verses 20-24). Jesus winsomely turns her red herring back to her personal point of need.

*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 (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.” (Verses 24-26, emphasis added)*

Remember Nicodemus? What did he need? He needed to see that salvation didn't come from his effort or performance, but from God. *You must be born again*. Here Jesus doesn't say that to her because her need and perspective are different. She had no delusions of self-righteousness. Her issue was love and worship. The god of her life to this point was a search for love and acceptance, but the result was a life filled with deception and internal contradictions.

She was a woman with secrets. People who have secrets can't live authentically. She needed to realize that what God is looking for is a woman who lives her life authentically (worship in spirit) and obediently (worship in truth). Now before you think Jesus is suggesting she must earn her salvation, what this actually did was speak to her inward desire for that very thing; a life of authenticity and truth.

Yet what God required she couldn't provide. *I can't meet this requirement*. Look at what her next comment is. Her thought goes to the Old Testament promise of a Messiah. She knew just enough of Scripture to know of the hope of a Messiah who alone could restore all things. *Worship in Spirit and Truth? On my own, no way. I know that Messiah is coming. I've heard about a Messiah who will set all things right*. Now Jesus has her right where she needs to be. Longing for freedom from a lifetime of guilt. Thirsty for truth on the inside. Guess what? She wasn't the only one at the well that day with a secret. Jesus shares His secret with her. *Messiah? I who speak to you am he*. (Verse 26)

Her response is dramatic: *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*. (Verses 28-30)

This must have been quite a scene. Into the town square she goes shouting, *Everyone! Everyone! Listen!* There were smirks on faces. *Look! It's the home-wrecker. The sleazy one has something to say*. The woman now begins telling everyone there was a man at the well who told her everything she had ever done. *Could this be the Christ?* A man who told her everything she had done was impressive because this was a woman famous for doing quite a lot. A chance to hear all this woman had done was well worth the walk. "I'd like to hear everything you've done too." They went out in mass to the well.

No doubt there is curiosity, but certainly there is a spiritual dimension here. This was the last woman in town who you'd expect to hear talking about the Christ. She was famous for looking for men, but certainly not the Messiah. Now she's jabbering on and on about some guy sitting at the well. Can you hear them? *What has gotten into her? Why's she talkin' religion all of a sudden? I need to see what this is all about*. Come on. Out they went.

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." (Verses 39-42)

The town of Sychar had a mass revival. Many believed. This is an important statement in John, "we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world." John's purpose statement for writing was, *These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20:31). The Samaritan woman became a missionary and a Samaritan town (who would have thought it?) believed.

Why Jesus Did Talk to the Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)

Right now I want to ask you, how are you looking at this woman? If you are appalled and critical towards her, it's understandable from one perspective. She deserves it. However, that is not the perspective Jesus had, is it?

He didn't see her as the town tramp; He looked into her heart. You know what He saw there? The same thing He saw in the highly refined and educated Nicodemus. He saw a person in need. He knew her weight that day was not her water pot, but her conscience and her heart.

Think of the inner life of this woman. What do five divorces do to a woman? What does sexual involvement without a commitment from a man do to a woman? Think of the years she has lived in this town where everywhere she went, she wore the scarlet letter. Think of how important it is for a woman to have the friendship of other women. Is it just a coincidence that she went to the well alone, or was this the reality of rejection in her relationships? No husband. No friend. The only apparent person in her life is in her life for all the wrong reasons.

What did Jesus see when this Samaritan woman arrived at the well? He didn't see her for her failures. He didn't see her for her reputation. He saw her as a real person with real need.

The language here is about water and living water that if you drink it, you'll never thirst again. What is Jesus doing? Jesus is simply doing with her what He did with Nicodemus, to whom He picked a metaphor of need and said, *You must be born again.* He knew the Samaritan woman's heart. He knew that she was thirsty and it wasn't water that her soul longed for. It was truth found in a Savior she could believe in.

Jesus Treated This Woman as a Person

Every person we come across is an image bearer of God Himself. They have a soul that will spend eternity somewhere. They are an intricate and complex being with spiritual longings and searchings. How Jesus treated the woman at the well ought to challenge each of us to see even the outcasts and the marginalized of society, even those in totally different categories than us, as worthy of our loving attention.

There are profound implications for us in the multiethnic, multiracial, multi-religious community we find ourselves in. Can we look at people this way too, at the gathering places of our community where we rub shoulders with people different than us? People like this woman and Nicodemus have one thing in common – they are thirsty and they need Jesus. They expect the same old treatment. If we can simply see them a little more like Jesus and see past the brokenness and hardness; see them as simply people in need...whose heart can't be filled with compassion toward them?

The "I Met Jesus" Effect

As this woman walked to the well, she was her old self, carrying the burden of five husbands and one uncommitted lover. She had lived a basically selfish life. She was on the fringes of her world. She snuck around. She walked alone. Her life was curved in on herself.

This is why verse 28 is so surprising. *The woman left her water jar and went away into town.* When a woman leaves her dishes, something big is going on. Suddenly, this selfish woman has a heart for her town; a town of people who had dismissed her years ago. Now she has a concern for them. *Come and hear...He told me everything...Might he be the Christ?* (Verse 29, paraphrased) She is no longer primarily thinking of who? Herself.

Jesus speaks through the ages into this room today the very same word to real people with real thirst. *I who speak to you am he.* (Verse 26) What it takes for that to be a transformational reality is thirst. Soulsh thirst for something true and real in a world full of lies. Something inward in a superficial world.

Are you thirsty? You might have been intimidated by Nicodemus. So polished. So refined. So not like me. But here today we may have someone on the other end of the spectrum. A woman with secrets. A woman with heartache. A woman feeling very alone. Perhaps someone like you.

Jesus guided her on a path of faith into His divine call as Messiah. She couldn't worship in Spirit and Truth. If that's what God requires, this woman of all women couldn't meet the standard. She needed the Messiah. She needed Christ. She needed a Savior. The story ends with her and many others giving testimony to this man sitting at the well, *We know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.*

That is the bottom line. Is Jesus your Messiah? Does their testimony resonate with your own? *We know that he is the Savior of the world!* The Jesus at the well is the same Jesus on the Cross who died for our sins, our secrets, our shame. Believing in Him as Savior of the world begins a new life. We see it in the woman. We see it around here too. New life. Fresh starts. Authenticity. Transformation. No more lies. No need for secrets. Rather, in Christ a life of worship, in spirit and in truth.

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