

Jesus Talks With a Samaritan Woman

John 4: 1-26

DIG: Why did the Jews and the Samaritans hate each other so much? Why was it so shocking that Yeshua would be talking to her? How would you describe the woman's response? How did Jesus turn the tables on her in verse 10? In the woman's reply, what was she really saying? How was she just like Nicodemus? Why does Messiah change the topic of conversation so abruptly to her personal life in verse 16? What strikes you about the way Christ responds to her claim of not having a husband? Why did she want to argue theology? In the context of this scene, what does Jesus mean by telling her that God desires those who worship Him in Spirit and in truth?

REFLECT: In what ways can you identify with the woman in this story? What does this story reveal about ADONAI's attitude toward sinful people? When have you felt God's concern and love for you? What keeps you from showing His love to others? How does the woman's response to the Savior of sinners inspire you? How do the Good Shepherd's actions in this story encourage you to treat others?

This chapter contains one of the most familiar and beautiful conversations in the Bible. The Samaritan woman is a timeless figure - not only a typical Samaritan but also a typical human being. Here Yeshua offers salvation to an outcast woman as if He were handing her a drink of water. But don't mistake His straightforward offer for a shallow message.

Unlike Nicodemus, she was no theologian, but her heart was ready to acknowledge her sin and believe in the Messiah. All we know about the woman's background is that her life was a tangle of adultery and broken marriages. In her culture, that would have made her a spurned outcast, with no more social status than a common prostitute. She seemed anything but a prime target for conversation. To call her to Himself, Yeshua had to force her to face her indifference, lust, self-centeredness, immorality and religious prejudice.

The Samaritan woman makes a vivid contrast to Nicodemus. They were virtual opposites. He was a Jew; she was a Samaritan. He was a man; she was a woman. He was a religious leader; she was an adulteress. He was learned; she was ignorant. He was a member of the highest class; she of the lowest - lower even than an outcast of Israel, for she was a Samaritan outcast. He was wealthy; she was poor. He recognized Jesus as a teacher from God; she didn't have any idea who He was. Nicodemus sought out Messiah; but here the Savior sought her out. He came to Yeshua by night; however Christ spoke to her about noon.

The two of them could hardly have been more different. But it was **the** same **Son of Man** who revealed **Himself** to **her**. So this is not primarily the tale of a **Samaritan woman**. Rather, this is the account of **Jesus** revealing **Himself** as **the Messiah**. Of all occasions for **the Savior** to disclose who **He** was, **He** first chose to tell this unknown **woman** of **Samaria**.

Samaria was the northern kingdom of Isra'el. In 556 BC **God** allowed the Assyrians to capture it because **Samaria's** great sin. Of the nineteen kings of **Samaria**, there was *never one* righteous king that sat upon the throne of the northern Kingdom. But the Assyrians treated conquered territories differently than, say, the Babylonians. Where the Babylonians would take the best and the brightest back to Babylon, **Daniel** and **Ezekiel** for example, the Assyrians would move into the captured area and intermarry with the conquered people and assimilate them into the Assyrian culture (**Second Kings 17:24**). To resist was futile. So after the fall of the northern Kingdom, they Assyrians moved in and intermarried with them. This diluted their Jewishness, and the southern Kingdom looked on them with disdain. They viewed them as half-breeds and not their equal in any way.

As a result, **the Jews did not regard Samaria as belonging to the Holy Land, but as a strip of foreign country - as the Talmud designates it (Chag. 25a), a "tongue" intervening between Galilee and Judea. From the Gospels we know that the Samaritans were not only ranked with Gentiles and strangers (Mt 10:5; Jn 8:48), but that the very term Samaritan was one of reproach. "There be two manner of nations," says son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus 1.25-26), "which my heart abhors, and the third is no nation at all; they that sit upon the mountain of Samaria, and they that dwell in Shechem.**³⁵³

When **the Jews** returned from the Babylonian captivity and began rebuilding the Temple in **Jerusalem**, **the Samaritans** wanted to help them. But **the Jews** would not accept their help because they were a mixed race ethnically and had brought in idolatry into their worship. After the death of Solomon, the Kingdom split in two. King Jeroboam founded the northern kingdom of Isra'el on idolatry. He changed the object of worship from **God** to golden calves; he changed the priests of worship from Levites to all sorts of people; he changed the date of the Feast of Tabernacles from the seventh month to the eighth month; and he changed the place of worship from **Jerusalem** to Bethel and Dan (**First Kings 12:25-33**). In fact, they only recognized the Pentateuch, and they removed all references to **Yerushalayim** from their bible. Smarting under this repulse, they turned bitterly against **the Jews** of **Jerusalem**. It was about 450 BC when that quarrel took place, and it was as bitter as ever when **Yeshua** came on the scene.

It had further been embittered when the renegade **Jew**, Manasseh, married a daughter of the **Samaritan** Sanballat (**Nehemiah 13:28**) and proceeded to found a rival temple on Mount Gerizim that was in the center of the **Samaritan** territory. Still later in the Maccabean days, in 129 BC, John Hyrcanus, the Jewish general and leader, led an attack against **Samaria** and sacked and destroyed the temple on Mount Gerizim. Therefore, **the Jews and the Samaritans** hated each other.³⁵⁴

Because of the corruption of their faith the rabbis demanded limited contact with the Samaritans. One popular saying was, "May I never set my eyes on a Samaritan." The rabbis taught, "Let no Israelite eat one mouthful of anything that is Samaritan, for one who eats a little mouthful is as if one had eaten swine."

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that He was gaining popularity and baptizing more disciples than John - although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but His talmidim (**John 4:1-2**). Jesus, however, prevented a confrontation until the right time. He was in control of every situation, even the time and the place of His own death.

There are four general principles that stand out as critical truths to be emphasized in presenting the way of salvation. First, there is the lesson of the well: **For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost** (**Luke 19:10**).

So Jesus left Judea and went back once more to Galilee (**John 4:3**). John's word for left is a somewhat unusual when used in the sense of leaving a place. It's often translated *abandoned*, and there may be something of this meaning here. Between **Judea** to the south and **Galilee** to the north, a lost and forsaken people lived in a spiritual no-man's-land called **Samaria** - nevertheless they also needed to hear the Good News.³⁵⁵

Now He *needed to go through Samaria* (**Yochanan 4:4 NKJV**). A look at any map reveals that the most direct route went straight through **Samaria**. But in **Yeshua's** day, any self-respecting **Jew** would always travel a different way. The preferred route went east of the Jordan River, then north through Decapolis before crossing the Jordan again into **Galilee**. That alternate route was out of the way, but it bypassed Samaria, and that was the whole point. But He *needed to go* because He had a purpose to fulfill, and it required Him to stop at this historic well, talk to a troubled woman, and make an unprecedented disclosure.³⁵⁶ So He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph (**John 4:5**). The road to **Samaria** forks just short of Sychar. One branch goes northeast to Scythopolis; the other goes west to Nablus and then north to Engannim. At the fork in the road there sits to this day the famous **Jacob's well**.

This was an area which had many Jewish memories attached to it. There was a piece of land there that had been bought by **Jacob** (see my commentary on **Genesis Hz - Jacob's Disobedience at Shechem**). **Jacob**, on his deathbed, had given it to Joseph (see my commentary on **Genesis Kz - Then Isra'el said to Joseph: I am About to Die, but God Will Be With You**). And, on Joseph's death in Egypt, his body had been taken back to Palestine and buried there (**Joshua 24:32**). So around that plot of ground there gathered many Jewish memories.

The well is very deep (**John 4:11**), accessible only by a very long rope through a hole dug through a slab of soft limestone. Clearly, no one could get **water** from it unless they had something with which to **draw the water**. The reservoir below is spring-fed so its **water** is always fresh, pure and cold. It is the *only well*, and the finest **water**, in a vicinity where salty springs are common. And the existence of such a well on **Jacob's** property was viewed by the Israelites as a sign of the **LORD's** grace and goodness to their patriarch.³⁵⁷

Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as He was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon, or the hottest part of the day (Yochanan 4:6).

Second, there is the lesson of the woman: There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Then, as now, the women draw out the water from wells. Jesus said to her: **Will you give me a drink (John 4:7 NASB)?**

Not coincidentally, **His apostles had gone into the town to buy food (John 4:8).** **Messiah** desired to be alone with that poor soul. **John's Gospel** presents **Christ** as **God** revealed in the flesh, and yet there is no other Gospel in which we so frequently see **Him** alone with sinners. We see **Him** alone with Nicodemus; alone with this **Samaritan woman**; alone with the woman caught in the act of adultery; and alone with the man whose eyes **He** had opened, and who afterwards had been put out of the synagogue. Alone with **the Lord** is where the sinner needs to be - with nothing between or none around. No priest, no intermediary is necessary. Let the sinner get alone with **God** and **His Word**.³⁵⁸

The Samaritan woman said to Him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" For Jews did not generally associate with Samaritans (Yochanan 4:9). The confrontation itself is startling, since a **Jewish** man, particularly a respected rabbi, would never speak with an unknown woman, especially a **Samaritan woman**. Later on we will see that it was equally shocking for **the apostles** to find **Yeshua** speaking to **her**. And it would have been considered unthinkable for **Him** to **drink** from an unclean cup that belonged to an unclean woman. **Her** faith grew as **their** discussion progressed. But at the beginning of **their** conversation, **Jesus** was merely a **Jew** to **her**.

This did not mean they couldn't associate, or have *any* contact with Samaritans. **The rabbis taught that Samaritans should not be placed in a position where Jews owed them anything. Under rabbinic law a Jew was not to accept anything from a Samaritan that would obligate the Jew to them in any way.** It was permissible to buy food from them as the *talmidim* were doing. The problem here was that Jesus was asking this Samaritan woman for water without paying for it, so in their way of thinking He became obligated to her in some way.

The Samaritans hated the Jews and would frequently stop (or sometimes kill) Jews traveling through Samaria to go to Zion. However, they never stopped any Jew going from the City to Galilee, as Jesus was doing, because they liked to see Jews leaving Jerusalem.

Third, there is the lesson of the water: **Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink (John 7:37).** First He creates in her the need for **eternal life**. Bypassing her actual question Jesus answered her saying: **If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water (Yochanan 4:10).** In Hebrew, *mayim chayyim*, literally, **living water**, means *running water from a stream or spring, in contrast with water stored in a cistern*. Figuratively, with Yeshua, it means *spiritual life*.³⁵⁹ To her **living water** meant running water, in other words, an underground well or fresh water. But Jesus is talking about spiritual **living water**. The woman does not yet understand this, but she will as the conversation progresses.

She questioned Yeshua, but in doing so she revealed something about Samaritan theology. Sir, the woman said: you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Now she is addressing the Lord with the more respectful "Sir." She probed further: Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock (John 4:11-12)? In their thinking, no one was greater than Jacob and he had been responsible for digging that particular well. She believed that Jacob himself had actually drank from the well at some time in the past. So the question she was really posing was this, "Was this Galilean Rabbi claiming to be greater than Jacob?"

Jesus made the transition to spiritual water, by answering: **Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst (Yochanan 4:13-14a).** Deprive your body of the necessary fluid, and your body will tell you. Deprive your soul of spiritual water, and your soul will tell you. Dehydrated hearts send desperate messages. Snarling tempers. Waves of worry. Growling mastodons of guilt and fear. You think God wants you to live like that? Hopelessness. Sleeplessness. Loneliness. Resentment. Irritability. Insecurity. These are the warnings. Symptoms of a dryness deep

within. Treat your soul like you treat your thirst. Take a gulp. Drink the moisture. Flood your heart with a good swallow of spiritual **water**. Where do you find spiritual **water** for the soul? **Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink (John 7:37).**³⁶⁰

Continuing to talk to the Samaritan woman, He said to her: **Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up inside that person, giving eternal life (Yochanan 4:14b NCB).** **Water**, in this verse, is a picture of the Ruach HaKodesh working within us. Later on the last and greatest day of the feast of Tabernacles, Jesus would say: **If anyone believes in Me, rivers of living water will flow out of that persons heart, as the Scripture says.** By [that] He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive (Yochanan 7:38-39 NCB). **The Spirit** had not yet been given, because **Yeshua** had not yet been resurrected.

Now **she** was really curious. Then the woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." She still didn't get it. **Jesus'** next words unexpectedly stopped her in her tracks. He told her: **Go, call your husband and come back.** Now what should **she** say? **She** felt trapped. The truth about her life was so horrible that **she** didn't want to admit it to Him. He seemed to be assuming that **she** was a typical woman with a respectable home and an honorable husband. But that was far from the truth. So instead of exposing the ugly underbelly of her life **she** told him only a fraction of the truth. "I have no husband," she replied (John 4:15-17a).

To her utter chagrin, He already knew the brutal reality. **Jesus** said to her: **You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband.** Notice He didn't call her a liar. On the contrary, He commended her for telling the truth. **What you have just said is quite true (Yochanan 4:17b-18).** **She** wasn't denying her sin . . . but **she** wasn't particularly proud of it, either. So in order to preserve what shred of dignity **she** had left, **she** simply sidestepped the implications of His question without overtly lying. No matter. He knew the sordid details anyway. Moments before, **she** had questioned whether He was greater than **Jacob**. Now **she** knew. Her faith continued to grow as they talked.

Then, **she** said: **Sir, I can see that you are a prophet (John 4:19).** He had completely unmasked her. Whoever He was, He obviously knew everything about her. And yet, instead of criticizing her, He had offered her the **living water** of life! The Samaritans believed the next prophet after Moshe would be the **Messiah**. That is why they only recognized the five books of Moshe as their Scriptures. **She** suspected **Jesus** might be the **Messiah**, but still embarrassed, **she** tried to avoid the scrutiny of her sin by debating theology.

Fourth, there is the lesson of true worship: Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation (Second Corinthians 6:2 NET).

Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem (John 4:20). In witnessing, as soon as you get to the sin issue, the first thing people want to do is argue theology. Like, "Oh yeah, where did Cain get his wife?" As if that has anything to do with their sin or salvation. So they try to argue theology to avoid the sin question in their lives. But **He** refused to be drawn into the debate.

Jesus didn't brush **her** question aside even though **He** knew what **she** was trying to do. **He** gave **her** a brief, but very compelling answer, saying: **Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. A time is coming** there will be no central place of **worship**, neither in **Zion** or Mount Gerizim, the proper place of **worship** will be **in the Spirit and in truth** (this was not true during the Dispensation of the Torah, but during the Dispensation of the messianic Kingdom **Yeshua** will be personally ruling and reigning from the Temple in **Jerusalem**). **You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.** After answering **her** theological question, **the Lord** returned to the real issue: **Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks** (John 4:21-23).

God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth (John 4:24). This verse is sometimes misused to support the mistaken idea that the Torah is inferior or is no longer in force, having been replaced by worship **in the Spirit and in truth** (the literal rendering of *spiritually and truly*). But spiritual and true **worship** is not to be compared with the Torah. Rather, true, spiritual **worship** is the universal standard of **ADONAI**, which **He** also commands in the Torah itself. The Torah opposes legalism and the mere performance of acts and routines without a true, spiritual connection with **God**.³⁶¹

Jesus finally deals with **her** faith; whom did **she** really need to believe in. **The woman** said: **I know that Meshiach (called Christ) is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us** (Yochanan 4:25). **She** was strongly hinting that **she** suspected **Yeshua** Himself might be **the Messiah**. When **Simon Peter** later confessed his faith that **the Lord** was **the Messiah, the Son of the living God**, **Yeshua** told him: **Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by My Father in heaven** (Matthew 16:17). The same thing was true of that **Samaritan woman**. **The Holy Spirit** was working in **her** heart. **God the Father** was drawing **her** irresistibly to **Christ**, revealing truth **what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard** (First Corinthians 2:9a).

Then **the Galilean Rabbi** was ready to pull back the curtain and reveal **His** true identity in an unprecedented way. The moment **she** expressed **her** desire for **Christ**, **He** answered: **I, the One speaking to you - I AM He (John 4:26)**. Nothing more was needed. **The Savior** of sinners was revealed. That was enough. It is staggering to realize that **Jesus** chose that time and that place and that **woman** to be part of the setting where **He** would (for the first time ever) unveil **Himself** as **the Meshiach**. Never again would **He** declare who **He** was so plainly, until the night of **His** betrayal.³⁶²

The first step had been taken and the door was flung wide open for the Gospel to enter the **Samaritan** town of **Sychar**. Finally, **she** recognized **Him** as the **Messiah** and the **apostles** returned.

***Father**, Your Word assures us that no one is beyond hope. **You** accept and love each one of us, in spite of our failures. **You** offer us salvation. **You** offer us mercy. **You** offer us love. Thank **You** for intervening in our lives and rescuing us from the bondage of sin. We praise **You** for **Your** mercy, forgiveness, and love.³⁶³*