

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

In John 4:4-42 we read that Jesus and his disciples were travelling from Jerusalem to Galilee and took the route through Samaria. Jesus stopped by Jacob's well as he was tired from the journey while the disciples went into the village to get food. It was around noon, at the hottest part of the day, when a Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well. This could have been to avoid the other women from the village because of her immoral lifestyle, as it was usual to draw water at cooler times of the day. Jesus knew this yet still approached her, he was already at the well when she arrived. By doing this Jesus broke Jewish customs, not only religious, but gender, racial and moral traditions. Approaching a woman in public was not usual practice then and this was a Samaritan woman with an immoral lifestyle. Jews did not associate with Samaritans, as they were a mixed race and looked down on them religiously and racially. Jesus asked the woman for a drink of water which surprised her, as according to Jewish custom would have made him ceremonially unclean if he drank from her water jar. The woman must have known he was a stranger passing through and also a Jew, possibly by his appearance or accent.

You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman," she reminded him. "How can you ask me for a drink?" (John 4:9).

Natural & Spiritual Water

Jesus then makes a comparison between natural and spiritual water. Jesus told the woman that he could give her living water to drink so that she would never thirst again. He was referring to eternal life, which was only available through him.

"Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never thirst again; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life". (John 4:13-14)

She didn't realise at this point, that this was a divine appointment for her. Although they had never met, Jesus revealed she had five previous husbands and the man she was now living with was not her husband. The woman replied, *"I perceive you are a prophet"* (John 4:16-19). Jesus revealed enough for her to acknowledge him as a prophet. The Samaritans believed the Saviour of the world would be a prophet and an earthly ruler. They also claimed, as did the Jews, Abraham as one of their ancestors as well as Jacob.



In the Old Testament this was where Jacob first met Rachel, at Sychar and was the site of Jacob's well mentioned in Genesis 29, the Jews and Samaritans were one people at that time.

Are you greater than our father, Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself, as did his children, and his livestock?" (John 4:11-12)

The woman had heard of 'Messiah' as the Samaritans believed in the God of Israel and the coming of their Messiah. Jesus here claims to be the Messiah, he said to her, *"I who speak to you am he"* (John 4:26). The disciples return to find Jesus speaking to the woman but say nothing. She came to the well for water but leaving her water jar behind, rushes back to town and invites the other people to *"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did"* (John 4:29). Jesus uses the woman to start a revival. Excited by what she told them, the others came to meet Jesus and they begged him to stay after realising for themselves who he was. He stayed for two days teaching them on the Kingdom of God. Although the Jewish religious leaders had rejected Jesus as the Messiah, the Samaritans recognised and accepted him.

"we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world." (John 4:42)

The woman at the well shows God's love and acceptance and is also a lesson on effective evangelism. Social and racial barriers hinder revival, but they can be brought down by reaching out with the gospel. The woman brings others to faith as many Samaritans now believe in Jesus due to her testimony. God uses those who are willing and available. By reaching out to the Samaritans, Jesus showed the disciples his mission was not just to Jews but also to gentiles. Reaching out with the gospel can be difficult. In our human nature we often view people by their religion, social environment or skin colour, but Jesus views each of us as individuals. The message of the gospel is for everyone regardless of their lifestyle or background. Jesus often reached out to those no-one else would, the moral outcasts in society.

Samaritans and Jews had different beliefs on how God should be worshipped. The Jews worshipped God in Jerusalem and the Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerizim. Jesus doesn't get drawn into a religious debate on where the right place was to worship, instead he addressed more important issues and explained the worship God was looking for was neither Samaritan or Jewish, but worship in the spirit and in truth.

Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."
(John 4: 21:24)

However, there was error in the Samaritan's doctrine that Jesus did correct. In verse 22 he tells the woman salvation is *"of the Jews."* If Samaritans wanted salvation, they would have to acknowledge it only came through the Jews. As Jesus was a Jew it could only be obtained through him, as he was the fulfilment of God's promise. This the Samaritans did when they accepted Jesus as 'saviour of the world'. Although salvation came through the Jews, it was not only limited to the Jews.

Many of us would probably think it rather insensitive or politically incorrect to mention the woman's sin or bring up her past. When Jesus asked her to get her husband it led to the exposure of her sin. She doesn't go into detail, instead she replies, *"I have no husband."* This was true but not the whole truth! Jesus then confronts her with the whole truth, that she has had five husbands and the man she is currently living with was not her husband. Five husbands in those days was unusual, even today. Husbands divorced their wives, but wives did not divorce their husbands. If she had been divorced five times, she would have been 'put away' five times by the husband. Although the Bible doesn't give details of the woman's age or if she had been divorced, we know that immorality was now involved as she was currently living with a man outside of marriage, as if she hadn't even bothered with marriage this time around.

Jewish religious leaders would probably have looked down on this woman, as in the case with the woman caught in adultery in John 8. The woman was brought to Jesus, but no man was brought to give an account for his part in the adultery. The woman at the well was not the only encounter Jesus had with an immoral woman. Luke 7:37-39 tells us of the woman with the alabaster oil who anointed Jesus' feet. Although the Pharisees viewed the woman as sinful, Jesus viewed the woman differently and speaks out in her defence.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner"
(Luke 7:37-39)

Although times have changed, human nature, feelings and emotions haven't. Many of us have experienced shattered dreams, failed relationships and like the Samaritan woman, have jumped from one relationship to another in search of happiness. Even with the right person, no human relationship can satisfy our spiritual need. When Jesus offered the woman 'living water', he was offering her something no man could give her. Jesus didn't give her a lesson on how to live a moral lifestyle, instead he got to the root of her problem and offered to fill her empty void.

God's love is reaching out regardless of a person's sin. However, truth is still required with the gospel even if it's not politically correct today. With the woman caught in adultery, Jesus did not condemn her, but neither did he condone her sin, he told her *"go and sin no more!"* (John 8:11). Jesus does not condemn the woman at the well or make her feel ashamed, but neither could he help her beyond that point until she was confronted with the truth of her sin. Jesus gently brings her to the realisation where she understands she is a sinner and her Samaritan beliefs are not enough to save her. Although she was familiar with Samaritan and Jewish religion, knew about a Messiah and recognised a prophet, she still lived a sinful life. The woman's sins were obvious, and her reputation would probably have been known throughout Sychar. You can live a religious lifestyle with strong beliefs yet still live a sinful life without a relationship with Jesus. This woman had an encounter with the living Christ which changed her life!

Harvest Time

Jesus told the disciples the time for harvest was now. The harvest for souls was ready but the disciples had plans for lunch and were unaware of the revival that was just about to happen.

"There are four more months and then comes the harvest" I tell you, look up and see that the fields are already white for harvest! (John 4:35)

Jesus refers to the harvest several times in his ministry. In Matthew 9:35 he mentions a vast harvest that was ready with very few workers. In Matthew 13:24-30 Jesus compared the harvest to the Kingdom of Heaven.

No miracles were recorded being done by Jesus in Samaria. However, in Acts 8 after persecution had broken out against the church, the disciples were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Philip went to Samaria and many of the Samaritans were being dazzled by the power of a sorcerer named Simon. Philip preached the gospel and did many miracles, signs and wonders which amazed many, even the sorcerer. Peter and John then followed, and many new believers were baptised.