

15. LIVING WATER FOR THE SOUTH AND THE NORTH (4:1-26)

In chapter 3 we read of a man called Nicodemus who met Jesus in the evening, in Jerusalem. We found Nicodemus to be a well-educated man, who had a social stature, found to be religious as he was a ruler of the Jews. Now as chapter 4 opens, we find a woman who is nothing like Nicodemus. She is on the opposite end of the spectrum, religiously, socially, and morally.

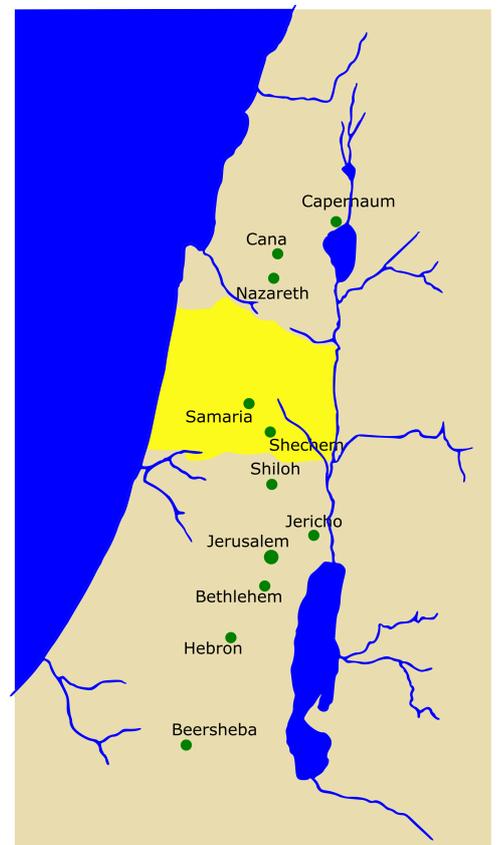
Jesus encounter with Nicodemus, in the evening, in darkness was with this highly esteemed man. Whilst Jesus met with the woman midday, in Samaria, a woman who was a Samaritan, who would be considered a moral outcast. But why is this so significant and how does it influence our interpretation of the text? Well let us begin by putting the events into context.

SAMARIA

Verse 3 tells us that Jesus and his disciples leave Judea and travel north toward Galilee. Then in verse 4 we read that Jesus has to pass through Samaria. This implies that He has no choice in the matter. And when you look at the map this sort of makes sense.

Jerusalem is in Judea in the south of the country. Just north of that is the region of Samaria. And then further north is the area called Galilee where Jesus and His disciples are heading. Connecting those regions is the most important internal route in Israel, known as the Judean Ridge Route, also known as the Water-Parting Route. This road follows the mountain ridges (or watershed) from Hebron to Shechem. Its importance lies in the fact that it is the only direct route between Judea and Samaria and it is sometimes referred to as the Route of the Patriarchs because Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob travelled its length.⁷⁴

However, the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans is complicated. There is a hatred between the two peoples that goes all the way back to the time of the Kings. During the reigns of King David and Solomon, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee were all united under the single Kingdom of Israel. But when Solomon's son, Rehoboam, assumed the throne, the country was divided into two due to his poor decision-making and sin. The southern Kingdom, the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, took the name Judah after the larger tribe and was ruled by Rehoboam, and were called Jews. The northern kingdom made up of the remaining ten tribes, took the name Israel and was ruled by Jeroboam and the people were known as the Israelites (NOTE: Judah was later called Judea from the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew).



⁷⁴ Rasmussen, 1989. *Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, p28.

When the kingdom split into two, the capital of Judah in the south was Jerusalem, while the capital of Israel in the north was established in the city of Samaria – this name later became the name for the region surrounding the city, as reflected on the map.

Due to their idolatry, Israel was overthrown by the Assyrian Empire and the people who survived and not taken into captivity or scattered, remained in the region (cf. 2Ki. 17). Some other nations whom the Assyrians conquered were invited to settle in Samaria. This resulted in many foreign gods being introduced and the Jews beginning to inter-marry with those groups and became known as Samaritans. The Jews who lived in Judah called them half breeds, and despised them because of that very reason.

So by the time of Jesus, the Jews thought that contact with the Samaritan's, even stepping on their soil, would defile them. Many would do anything possible to avoid the Samaritans completely, even travelling around the region rather than through it – when they reached Judea's northern border they would cross the Jordan River, travel up on the east side of the Jordan and then cross again when they reached Galilee.

The feeling, however, was mutual, with the Samaritans equally hating the Jews. We learn in Luke 9:51-56 that the Samaritans also later reject Jesus.

SYCHAR (SHECHEM)

We read verse 5 that Jesus and His disciples came to a town called Sychar, also known as Shechem, and were near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

Shechem first appears in Scripture when Abram enters the land of Canaan – it is the first city to which Abram came (cf. Gen. 12:6). Here he built an altar to the Lord, and God confirms His promise to give the land to Abram. Later, Abram's grandson, Jacob, came to Shechem after he returned from Padan-Aram. He built an altar and named it "*El-elohe-israel*", meaning "God, the God of Israel" (cf. Gen. 33:17-20). Here also Jacob digs a well for his many herds. The well is still there today.

While in Shechem, Jacob's daughter, Dinah, is raped by a man named Shechem, the son of the ruler, Hamor. Jacob's two sons, Levi and Simeon, make a deceptive pact with the males of the city and slaughtered them all in revenge of Dinah. Years later, Jacob sends his 17 year-old son, Joseph, from Hebron to check on his brothers as they kept the flocks in Shechem (cf. Gen 37:12-14). Joseph's last memories of Israel, before his brothers sold him, was of Shechem and Dothan. He believed that God would one day return the nation to Canaan, and so he gave the command for his bones to be carried back with them and buried there (cf. Gen 50:25). A tomb that is believed to contain Joseph's remain still stands today (cf. Jos. 24:32).

Shechem next appears in Deuteronomy. After Moses brings Israel out of Egypt, God commands Israel to enter the Promised land and go to Shechem to pronounce the blessings and the curses of the Mosaic Covenant on the nation (cf. Deu. 27:4). This eventually happens under Joshua. There he divides the nation, "*Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal*" (Jos. 8:33) –

the two mountains that overlook the city. From Mount Ebal, they declare the curses for disobedience, and from Mount Gerizim, they proclaim the blessings of obedience. On Mount Ebal, Joshua built an altar to God, and on a pillar of stones he wrote a copy of the law (Jos. 8:30-35). At the end of the conquest Joshua gathers the whole nation at Shechem again, reminds them of their previous pledge and the blessings and curses they themselves pronounced. He then set up another stone in Shechem (Jos. 24:27).

After the reign of Solomon, his son Rehoboam, goes to Shechem for all Israel had to make him king (1Ki. 12:1). But because Rehoboam followed the foolish and harsh advice of the youths with whom he grew up, the nation divides at Shechem (1Ki. 12:1,16). Because Jerusalem was the only appointed place God allowed for worship, and since Jerusalem lay in Judah, Jeroboam set up a rival sanctuary in Bethel just south of Shechem, complete with a golden bull image. This rival center would enable the northern tribes to worship without crossing the border into Judah (1Ki. 12:25-33). Jeroboam also chose Shechem as the capital for the Northern Kingdom, but was later moved to Samaria by Omri.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Consider not just the historical but the physical context here as well. The “sixth hour” was noon – the hottest time of the day – and Jesus is seated alone at a well. Read John 4:1-8 again and picture the scene. What strikes you and why?

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

John 4:1-26 is a wonderful story describing the friend of sinners crossing the boundaries of race, gender and culture. Let us be reminded firstly that in John 3:17, it is written, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*”. Jesus went against the *status quo* of society to save the world, in this case the Samaritans, by engaging with the enemies of the Jews, engaging with a woman, and crossing the boundary of culture. We will unpack each of these as we proceed.

Now we ask, what is Jesus doing at a Samaritan well? How come did these two people meet at this time and engage with each other so much so that this meeting changed the woman’s life forever? Chance? Fate? How does this happen? Is it not the providence of God? Do you remember your first encounter with Jesus? Was it chance or fate? No....by the hand of God, the right person was directed to show you your need of a saviour? By God’s providence he opened your eyes to your need of a saviour. John recorded this for us, to display God’s sovereignty over all. Nothing happens, except by the will of God. Nothing can stop God from moving and changing a person’s life.

We learn from verses 6 and 8 that Jesus is seated alone at Jacob's well wearied from his journey. This is a reminder that Jesus, the Son of God, was here in the flesh. He is Truly God, Truly Man, truly tired and truly needing a drink of water. We are also told it is about the sixth hour – in the Jewish reckoning of time, this is high noon – and a Samaritan woman arrives to draw water (v7). This is an odd thing because women do not draw water at noon as it is the hottest time of the day. Typically women would come in

the early morning in the cool of the day to draw water, and so you right away are alerted to a peculiar situation.

It is also significant that she is on her own, as women typically went together to draw water. This woman is not functioning with the rest of the women of the village. Perhaps she is an outcast for some reason – maybe her current living situation (see verse 18).

As she approaches she sees Jesus there and is probably quite surprised to see a Jew sitting by the well. She recognises Him easily as a Jew by the way He is dressed – back then, and through to today, the Samaritans wear brilliant white cloaks that make them stand out from the Jews. Jesus would not have been dressed in the same white or style outfit, so He is noticeably not a Samaritan.

Nevertheless, in verse 7 Jesus asks her for a drink of water. Taken aback, she responds, *“How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?”* (v9). And so begins a very important conversation between Jesus and this Samaritan woman about Living Water.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Based on what we have already learned from the beginning of our study, especially the prologue in 1:1-18, what aspects of Jesus affect your understanding and perception of this scene?

LIVING WATER

Jesus opens the conversation with, *“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”*. To which the woman responds, *“Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?”* As with Nicodemus in 3:4, the woman takes Jesus literally about living water – she thinks He is talking about real water that you drink rather than the spiritual implications that are behind it. But her misunderstanding is quite understandable because in ancient times they would refer to water that came up out of a spring as living water. They did so because it bubbles up out of the ground and it looks like it is alive. So, they literally referred to a fresh spring as living water. This woman is probably thinking that Jesus is simply telling her about a nearby active spring.

This thinking is seen in the rest of her response in verse 12, *“Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock”*. A little more historical background is needed here to understand what she is saying. Although the Samaritans are part Jew, part Gentile, Jews in the time of Jesus would have been highly offended by her claim that she was a child of Jacob and that the Samaritans are in fact an offshoot from Jacob. But that is what the Samaritans believed. But more than that, they also believed that they were descended from Jacob through his son Joseph, and his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Although this is not true.

So she is essentially asking Jesus if He is greater than their father Jacob, the father of the Jewish and Samaritan people who came to this area, dug this deep well with his own hands and draw water from it

for his family and livestock. She is shocked that this Jew claims He has something better than what they received from Jacob. Little does she know that she is talking to the God of Jacob.

So the answer to her question is that Jesus is greater than Jacob, but notice that Jesus does not answer that way. He could easily answer her by saying “I am greater than Jacob and I pre-date him”. He does not proceed with this line of conversation. Although He knows that living water is not found down a well and He knows that He is greater than Jacob, these are not the important issues at the moment. He is not meeting with her to brag as it were about His greatness, but instead He wants her to understand something about herself. He wants her to understand her spiritual need, and to do that, He needs to get her to see that he is not talking about physical water, but spiritual water, of which He is the only source.

But what is significant here is the purpose of the living water. This is seen in verses 13 and 14, “*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 again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life*”. At the heart of this conversation is the fundamental idea that all of us have a deep need in our lives that the world can not satisfy. We may try to satisfy it through experiences, possessions, physical pleasures, relationships, careers, etc. – the physical water. Although many may not know what they truly need, their greatest need is eternal life – the living water. Man was created for eternal life, but we lost it when sin entered at the Fall.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Although the woman immediately focusses on the living water, Jesus’ words in verse 10 ask her to focus on what? Does this conversation remind you of an earlier one in John? In what way?

The idea of living water interests her and she is now curious – imagine not having to go to the well each day, that would save her from all the comments she normally receives. She would not have to drink anything again. And so in verse 15 we see that she does not get it as she asks Him for some of the water

So Jesus turns the conversation around, and He does so masterfully by confronting her about her marriage situation in verses 16 to 18. This is Jesus’ way of getting this woman to look in the mirror and see herself for as she truly is. He is showing her that she cannot find satisfaction in the things of this world – that’s why she has had five husbands and is living with a man who is not her husband. Whatever she was seeking for in each of those men, she either did not find it or it did not satisfy her. But now, what she truly needs is seated right in front of her.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Why do you think unbelievers are so clueless about their need (or longing) for eternal life?
2. Jesus’ technique of showing the woman who she is, is still present and active today. He uses His Word to reveal the true nature of our hearts. When you read the Bible, do you see yourself in the

reflection of the Word? Have those experiences been pleasant or painful? How have those experiences changed you?

But notice, she responds in verse 19 in a way that shows she still has not got His point. Despite being confronted with her sin, she still deflects the conversation. She says to Him, *“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet”*. However, what Jesus says is not really a prophetic word, but a word of knowledge – He knows something about her that only God can know.

But her deflection does not end there. In verse 20. She brings up a debate that the Jews and Samaritans are still dealing with today – *“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship”*. Because Mount Gerizim was the mountain where the blessings were pronounced in Joshua ???, they believe that it is a blessed mountain and therefore is the mountain where they ought to worship. But this is not the case – it is just a mountain, as Jesus will point out in the next verse.

But is this not how people often respond when confronted by their sin? They try to deflect by turning the focus off themselves to someone else. They try to divert the conversation to an issue that they perceive to be a stumbling block to believing. They latch on to a false belief, an apparent contradiction, or something they have heard but not verified, and use it as a diversion from dealing with the real issue. This is what is referred to as a straw-man argument. When speaking to people about Jesus, it is easy to get swallowed up by non-important issues which can lead into unnecessary arguments. But, like we saw in 2:24-25, Jesus knows her heart and aims at the real issue.

What is interesting here though, is that Jesus responds to her theological issue. Because even though she has tried to divert the subject away from her sin, the issue of worship is a matter of the heart that addresses her real need – she worships self and her own idea of God, instead of the one true God.

So Jesus answers her in verse 21 with, *“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father”*. The point Jesus is making here is that worship has no connection with geography or building. Even though the Jews were commanded to perform certain worship practices at the temple in Jerusalem – they were essentially meant to worship Him wherever they were. This is hinted at in the book of Psalms that contains hymns and prayers (worship) that they were to use on many occasions away from the temple. They were also to read and study Scripture as often as they could – an act that is considered by the Jews even today to be the highest form of worship.

As a born-again believer today, the Holy Spirit lives in you, making you His temple. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1Co. 6:19). Also, she does not need to go to Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem to find forgiveness by offering an animal sacrifice. She does not need to go and find God, He has already found her, for the ultimate sacrifice and the one who forgives people of sin is right in front of her.

He also addresses the how of worship – it is to be in spirit and truth. The Samaritans were performing their sacrifices in a location other than where God commanded, and in a manner other than how God commanded. Essentially they worship God on their terms and not His.

NOTE: We will dig into verses 23 and 24 and what it means to worship in spirit and truth in more detail in our next study.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. The woman asks about external worship, but Jesus responds by addressing spiritual worship. What truths is Jesus affirming in verses 21 to 24? What further questions do you think these truths may lead the woman to have?

Finally, in verse 25, the Samaritan woman comes full circle and acknowledges that the Messiah that is promised and so desperately needed is coming. And it appears that she is expecting Him herself. However, her expectation of Him is rather interesting, she says that He will tell them all things. The word “*tell*” in the Greek means “to disclose” or “to report”. So this woman believes, and I assume this was probably a common Samaritan belief, that when Messiah came, He was going to disclose everything to them that were important for them to know.

And then the penny drops as Jesus “*tells*” her (i.e. discloses, reveals) in verse 26 that He is the Messiah. As we shall see in the next section, in verse 28, she goes back to the town and “*tells*” of her encounter with to everyone, even questioning if Jesus is the one they are waiting for. The result, many people believe in Him because of her testimony (v39).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Verse 26 is an amazing declaration of Jesus’ identity. No other open declaration of His identity is given by Jesus again until His trial. Why do you think Jesus speaks so openly here? (Clue: see v44)
2. How do we see John 3:16-17 in action in this account?

APPLICATION

Jesus knows all people, he knows about you and what is going on inside your heart. He knows the heart of this Samaritan woman and her desire for satisfaction. She is seeking physical relief and pleasures only. In evangelism we will encounter many people like this. When we do, we can either push through or back out and let it go. Pushing through is the most difficult as the conversation often becomes challenging. We may speak of that which is uncomfortable.

Romans 2:15 speaks of the work of the law being written in an unbelievers heart and that their conscience will bear witness. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict people of their sin. It is our responsibility to say what the Bible says, even when it becomes painful, and we sweat. We do this remembering that only God can show we are blind to our blindness and sin has affected and infected every part of our

humanity including our minds. Romans 8 tells us that we are enemies of God. Jesus is full of mercy as demonstrated in Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman. Although He confronts her about her sin, He does not shame her, but proves that He knows her heart.

The miracle here is that Jesus has chosen to reveal to her what has been concealed from others. He the saviour of the world has revealed himself to a Samaritan woman, known for her serial relationships with men, meets the Saviour. No one is so bad that they have no hope of a Saviour. She had a thirst which well water could not quench. For those living outside of Christ, they will forever thirst and will never be satisfied.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. One of the key aspects about evangelism is breaking barriers. What are some ways we can break barriers with those around us in order to have chances to share the gospel with them?
2. How does this encounter challenge you in the call to evangelism? And with your thoughts regarding apologetics?