

Come and See: Encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John

The Samaritan Woman and the Wisdom of Outsiders – John 4:4-10

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Writing on his experience of starving in the Russian Gulag's of the mid-twentieth century, Alexander Solzhenitsyn once said "The belly is an ungrateful wretch, it never remembers past favors, it always wants more tomorrow."¹

Through the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we will explore what's wrong with the world. We will see it is our thirst and the broken ways we fill ourselves because we believe lies about God.

An Ode to Those People

John 4:4-10

We underestimate the power of our conditioning. Our realities are dictated by categories that are often outside the realm of our conscious thought. Categories like 'safe' or 'normal', like 'clean' or 'dirty' are imprinted onto us. These are not mental abstractions, but visceral and physical realities we experience.

Jesus, as conditioned by Judaism, should have been physically revulsed by seeing this woman. As a Jewish man, His tradition dictated He could not speak with women who were not His relatives or a spouse. Samaritans were considered half-breeds that were unclean for Jews to associate with. And Samaritans were seen to be heretics who did not accept the whole Bible and syncretised Judaism with paganism.

A possible answer to what is wrong with the world is: people. People are. But not just any people, 'those people.' You know 'those people.' The ones who don't hold your beliefs. The ones who don't live your lifestyle. The ones who 'aren't from your country'. The ones who dress or talk or eat differently than you do.

Jesus breaks moral and social convention by asking this woman for a drink. Moreover, this type of 'meeting at a well' scene is a romantic trope—Isaac, Jacob and Moses' wives were found at wells (see Gen. 24, 29, Exod. 2). And the gospel writer, John, gives us a hint that Jesus expected to be here. In verse 4 we read "Jesus *had to* go through Samaria." Even though many Galileans avoided Samaria in their travels.

This isn't accidental evangelism. This is Jesus searching for his bride. Not in the literal sense, this isn't the Da Vinci Code, but finding His bride in the sense of building His Kingdom and His Church.

¹ *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

Which means that the Christian answer to the question “what’s wrong with the world” can *never* be ‘those people.’ Because each of ‘those people’ is someone Jesus would journey across social and moral boundaries to sit across from and say:

“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.”

Living water is just the Jewish way of saying flowing water, bubbling from a spring or stream. It’s the cleanest water you can get, and there isn’t a lot of it in the desert. But Jesus is not talking about physical water. Keller paraphrases this passage:

“I’ve got something for you that is as basic and necessary to you *spiritually* as water is to you *physically*. Something without which you are absolutely lost.”²

This story is an ode to ‘those people’ and a desperate reminder of the lengths Jesus will go to find them and give them the drink they really need.

After all, the Bible does have a word for ‘those people’, it’s *neighbors*.

Drink Here and You Will Thirst Again

John 4:11-18

So, what is wrong with the world, then? If it isn’t ‘those people’, what is it?

Just this.

We are thirsty. But it’s a problem in two parts.

We are thirsty and we drink from wells that leave us thirsty.

As the Prophet Jeremiah once wrote:

“My people have committed two sins:

They have forsaken me,

the spring of living water,

and have dug their own cisterns,

broken cisterns that cannot hold water. (2:13)

Jesus is defining sin for us as drinking from something that leaves us thirsty.

He brings up this woman’s history and the traditional view is that she’s promiscuous. However, we see that she chooses to draw water in the heat of the day—most likely to avoid other women who would gather during the cooler hours. Also, divorce was a male-initiated process in the Ancient Near East.

² Tim Keller, *Encounters with Jesus*, pg. 26.

Sin makes us victims and perpetrators. It is an addiction to death. It is drinking what leaves us thirsty, for her, it was her history with men.

For us, we may find where our sins are by filling in the blank: I'll be happy when _____.

We should imagine ourselves in her position and ask: what would Jesus bring up that has been my brokenness? Where have I been trying to find ultimate meaning outside Him and His gift of free life?

Because Jesus is making an offer, as prophesied by Isaiah:

"Come, all you who are thirsty,
 come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without cost.

²Why spend money on what is not bread,
 and your labor on what does not satisfy? (55:1-2a)

When we make His ways and Kingdom our priority, when we find our satisfaction in Jesus, the other parts of life become properly fulfilling. Moreover, we become springs of life where others can drink.

Lies about God

John 4:19-26

The conversation has covered her sex life, geopolitical tensions and now religion. She wants to know who is right about all this God stuff anyway.

Our culture sees an exclusive claim to religious truth as arrogant. Yet, truth claims are exclusive in every other sphere of life—including whether or not that bus moving at 60km/h will hit you.

Jesus will not let us believe lies about God. He doesn't wax philosophical about what the Samaritans have right about God, He says it straight up: the Jews are right about God and the Samaritans are wrong.

Because lies about God are what's wrong with the world. Because they are lies about us. Lies about how things work.

But God is spirit, meaning that God isn't bound totally to any system or culture. It also means He is accessible to all; He is universal. The lie that an exclusive truth claim makes God stingy or distant is a lie, because Jesus went out of His way to sit before this woman and make an invitation to her.

God does not look for us to be members of any particular group or club or program, He's looking for people who worship in spirit and truth. Some translations say, 'the Spirit' and truth. But 'the' is not there in the Greek. This is about God being master of our internal and external reality. Our actions and our thoughts. Conforming us to truth inside and out.

Epilogue: What the Outsiders Know

So, how does this woman's story end?

John 4:27-30, 39-42

Many will tell you that we are supposed to see the story of Nicodemus and the story of the Samaritan woman as a contrasting pair. D.A. Carson's comments:

"[Nicodemus] was learned, powerful, respected, orthodox, theologically trained; she was unschooled, without influence, despised, capable only of folk religion. He was a man, a Jew, a ruler; she was a woman, a Samaritan, a moral outcast. Both needed Jesus."³

That's the key. Both needed Jesus.

But this woman's response is more positive than that of Nicodemus. She becomes the first Christian missionary, leaving behind her water jug to go face the people she had been avoiding and invite them to see Jesus.

For the rest of us, there's a theme in the gospels that has always troubled me, and it's this, those who know they are on the outside know something those who think they are on the inside don't know.

Perhaps, what people like this woman know is their need. Everybody has a hungry heart, but not everyone is aware of it. As Jesus will say to some Pharisees later in John's gospel— "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." (John 9:41) To use the metaphor from our text, if you knew you were thirsty, I'd fill you. But you claim to be full, so you'll remain empty.

The appropriate place for Christians to stay is in touch with our thirst. In part, that's what communion is about. It's a reminder that we are still hungry. We are still thirsty. We still tend to drink that which leaves us thirsty and spend our money on that which does not satisfy.

We must come again to Jesus' invitation and accept that, without Him, we are all equally outside of this life with God.

So, I invite you to go back to that earlier moment, to imagine Jesus there before you, offering Living Water, and pay attention to what He asks you about. Where have you been drinking and leaving thirsty? Invite Him to fill you again to the point of overflowing.

³ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, pg. 216.

Discussion Questions

Open Up

What problem(s) in the world do you tend to think of as ultimate? What are you convinced is 'wrong with the world'?

Dig In

Read **John 4:4-26**

1. Who would you be surprised to see Jesus conversing with? What is it like to imagine Him conversing with them like He is this Samaritan woman?
2. What are some places you are prone to drink that leave you thirsty again?
3. How have you practiced letting Jesus be the source of your fulfillment? What has it been like when you're doing well at that? When you're doing poorly?
4. Pastor Jon Thompson says a healthy church, and by extension, healthy Christians have a balance between truth, allegiance, and power. They base their lives on Biblical truth, they live a life of faithfulness to Jesus as Lord over every aspect of their lives, and they rely on the power and leading of God's Holy Spirit. These balance like three legs on a stool. Of truth, allegiance, and power, which do you think you are strong in? Which are you weak in?

Prayer

Re-read this passage a couple times slowly, put yourselves in the story. Ask Jesus what He would bring up with you like He brought up this woman's romantic history. Where does Jesus want to fill you? If you're comfortable, you can share with the group.