

# (You are) The Woman at the Well

## The Conversation Jesus Had with All of Us at the Well of Samaria

### An Exposition of John 4:1-43

In the first century, as the eyewitnesses and original disciples of Christ began to die off, the stories that had for years been shared only orally began to be written down. Verbal first-hand testimony is always best, especially in a day when the majority of people couldn't read or write. Some estimates put the Jewish literacy rate at the time around 3%.<sup>1</sup> So, it's understandable if the writing of the Gospel accounts were at first seen only as a second-best option. Perhaps like the writings of Paul to the early churches, his epistles were often written down only because he couldn't be with them in person. As most of us have found, face to face is the best method of communication when life-changing information is being shared. So it is, when the time came for the ultimate message from God to be shared, as the scripture says, *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*.<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, some eyewitnesses and qualified followers of Jesus wrote down this story-of-stories for the rest of us. While they might never have imagined the reach of their written accounts, these inspired and "God breathed"<sup>3</sup> records have been preserved, proved, and disseminated like no other ancient writings in the history of the world.

Scholars tell us that the Gospel of John was likely the last gospel written. Possibly a decade or two after Matthew, Mark and Luke had been in circulation, the Apostle John offers a supplement to the familiar stories of the Synoptic Gospels. Ninety percent of John's Gospel is unparalleled material. He had so many to choose from, as the disciple closest to Jesus, that he says, "*if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books.*"<sup>4</sup> John tells us that the stories he selected, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are especially chosen for their ability to give transformative life and faith in Jesus the Christ.<sup>5</sup> His theme is stated early on: Beholding the glory of God-Incarnate, full of grace and truth<sup>6</sup>. Many "Ah ha!" moments, when someone "sees and believes," are shared and cherished in John's Gospel. Whether it's the disciples as a group, John himself, the top tier of society (Nicodemus), or the bottom (the Samaritan woman at the well), everyone is included and has access to this sacred process of beholding<sup>7</sup>.

As our story opens, the Gospel of John tells us simply that Jesus "*had to go through Samaria.*"<sup>8</sup> This brief intro was no mere geographical footnote. To the original audience it would have been the first tip that something remarkable was about to happen. The intentional visit and venture into the Land-of-the-Unclean for a Jewish rabbi and his followers was unheard of in the day. A stop at the city's well and a one-on-one visit with possibly the lowest-tier person in town was even more unthinkable. In so many

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<sup>1</sup> History of Education in Ancient Israel and Judah, Wikipedia.org

<sup>2</sup> John 1:1, 14

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>4</sup> John 21:25

<sup>5</sup> John 20:30-31

<sup>6</sup> John 1:14

<sup>7</sup> John 1:50; 2:11; 2:23; 4:19; 29, 50, 9:37-38; 11:15, 42; 20:8

<sup>8</sup> John 4:4

ways this ancient story represents the very gospel record in a nutshell and reveals God's heart for a lost world. If Jesus' entire rescue mission ever fit into one chapter of the Bible, it's captured in this brief conversation and the unique two-day event that followed. It's a story that can represent us all as the woman at the well. She unexpectedly happened upon the shepherd in the midst of her weary life doing her mundane chores. He had left the 99 to seek the one stray sheep and that changed everything. The way he engages her and brings her into the fold, the way he reveals himself to her and gives her the living water is more than enough detail to give us all hope. This story has been preserved for all time because it offers ageless, living water for every tired and weary soul. If you have ever been on the outside looking in at the mysteries of God, with some goofed-up theology, living a life that is missing the mark, all the while precariously holding onto a spiritual thirst with a slight openness to letting God touch that inner place, then you are the woman at the well and this ancient, holy conversation is for you.

### **Water in the Desert**

John's select story about the life-giving water from Heaven takes place in the dry and arid hill country near the capitol city of Samaria. This ancient site of Jacob's well was more than a simple watering hole. It held both physical water as the source of life in the desert, and it held a connection to the faith of the patriarchs as an even greater source of hope and sustenance.

The scriptures tell us that the patriarchs all dug wells. In the understated fashion so common in the sacred record, Genesis 26 tells us that Jacob's father, Isaac, took on the dangerous task of unplugging the wells that his father Abraham had dug. Their arch-enemies, the Philistines, had systematically been filling them in as the most effective way to wipe out a community. If you wanted to kill your enemy or drive him out of existence, these warriors knew, just fill in his well and shut off his water supply. In a bold act of faith and vision, Isaac had determined to get the water flowing again for his people. Apparently, he and his servants had taken on the difficult and dangerous task of digging out the stopped-up wells. It's a lot easier to fill in a well than to dig it out. It takes no faith or virtue to throw back in the stones and dirt that someone else had painstakingly shoveled out. It takes less time and far less talent. Digging a well, on the other hand, was another matter altogether. There must've been a certain level of faith required to start digging down for water in the dry soil of a desert with nothing but a few hand tools. It's not hard to imagine the nagging feeling that would've accompanied the hard work of well-digging; Day after day, by the sweat of the brow, one would slowly dig deeper and deeper, wondering if the blessed flow would ever appear. Abraham was a digger of wells. His son, Isaac, unplugged them. Isaac's son, Jacob, we know from this story, dug at least one well. Though there is no mention of it in the Old Testament, this story in the Gospel of John validates the claim that Jacob too dug a well in the desert. So, this site of our story had a rich heritage. In addition to the precious well, we know it was property that Jacob had purchased for 100 pieces of silver,<sup>9</sup> and defended with "sword and bow."<sup>10</sup> He eventually gave it to his favored son Joseph, whose children later inherited it.<sup>11</sup> At the center of this gift of land was the hard-dug well. In 1866 an exploratory visit to the archeological site<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 33:19

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 48:22

<sup>11</sup> Joshua 24:32

<sup>12</sup> G. H. Dalman, *Sacred Sites and Ways* (1935), 212-215 "There are hardly any sites that have less doubt as to their authenticity than the site of Jacob's Well. All traditions agree on this as being the scene described in John 4. "

measured the diameter at about 7 ½ ft, dug mostly through limestone. When it was cleaned out in 1935, a depth of 135 ft was found<sup>13</sup>

### **The Gift of God**

So, our story opens with the simple declaration that Jesus had to go through this area on His way from Jerusalem to Galilee. This was much more than a statement about the shortest route from south to north. The pious Jews of the day, and especially the rabbis with a following, would by-pass the land of the Samaritans, going around to the east, across the Jordan River and adding several days to their journey. In their mind, taking this inconvenient detour was far better than the risk of becoming unclean by setting foot in the Land of the Unclean. While the Samaritans chose to focus on their sacred connection to the Patriarchs for hope, the Jews saw only their scandalous inter-marrying past and their heretical rejection of all but the writings of Moses. Even the wind blowing across the land of the Samaritans, it was believed by many Jews, was unclean. Drinking their water or eating their food while passing through their God-forsaken cities would be unthinkable. So yes, Jesus *had* to pass through there. Much in the same way he *had* to confront the other man-made traditions so entrenched in Israel. His cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem had just put him in the cross-hairs of the Scribes and Pharisees. Now he was in the process of confronting other wrong-headed traditions: extreme Sabbath-keeping, extreme food and washing taboos. Next stop was confronting the bigoted attitudes toward the Samaritans and it that would earn him one of the worst insults a Jew could be given: “You are a Samaritan and have a demon,” he was eventually told by his adversaries.<sup>14</sup> Only the accusations of blasphemy and treason were worse. Claiming to be deity and implying He was a king would eventually bring those deadly charges and get him crucified. But for now he was still moving freely, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the crowds with attesting miracles.

And that is what makes this encounter at the Samaritan well so unique and so symbolic of the way most of us will encounter the Son of God. He had no crowds following Him, no fanfare and reputation proceeding the visit; no healings or miracles surrounding the divine appointment. By all appearances the encounter, at least initially, was only mildly remarkable -a stark interaction that seems to casually interrupt a mundane routine on a mundane day in the middle of a mundane week. A dusty traveler, breaks into the woman’s world with a simple request for a drink of water. As she comes to draw water from a very familiar well for the thousandth time, she has no idea who he is or where he’s come from, or why he chose to be there engaging her in conversation. She can only try to make an honest assessment based on what will become a very personal interaction.

“*Will you give me a drink?*” were his first words to her. He was understandably thirsty from the long journey. However, it wasn’t really water he was after, but it was a start.

Her correct assessment of the man and his purpose will change gradually by degrees. As she remains open to each step he will stealthily lead her down a path of revelation and salvation. “You are a man, talking to me, a woman?” She first thinks out loud, ...and a Jew, no less, asking me to give you unclean water, from my unclean bucket? What kind of man is this, she wonders accurately? He has piqued her curiosity in a disarming way that drew her further into the conversation. “*If you knew the gift of God,*”

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<sup>13</sup> Bromiley, Geoffrey W. (1982), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*

<sup>14</sup> John 8:48

Jesus soon replies to her, “you would be the one doing the asking”<sup>15</sup> Suddenly there was something much deeper than natural thirst for natural water going on here. But it was interrupting her day and her plans, maybe even an important schedule with important obligations to keep. Would she remain open? Would she have eyes to see and ears to hear God’s further engagement and revelation? God saw the thirst that she had in her soul after years of hardship and sorrow, and He had sent her a gift, if she could receive it.

### **The Gift Comes in Disguise**

This sort of gift-in-disguise had already made many appearances through the ages and pages of scripture -and it was just getting started. God showing up in understated and disguised ways was embodied in Jesus Christ from beginning to end. His gospel message and those who would carry it forward would continue the theme far into the future. One example occurs early in the Book of Acts. In a few brief verses we see a poignant snapshot of this divine principle playing out again. It says simply:

*They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and leading them out, he said, “Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple area the whole message of this Life.” Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple area about daybreak and began to teach.*<sup>16</sup>

Here we see a few lowly ex-fishermen, now called apostles, standing in the temple attempting to teach anyone who will listen to their revelation about Jesus’ true identity and “*the whole message of this life.*”<sup>17</sup> Who was giving them their attention? Who would get past what they saw with their eyes and listen to what was being said? What the random audience of passers-by couldn’t know or appreciate was all that had just preceded that moment which made it possible for them to be standing there, sharing their crucial message. The hearers couldn’t know it was nothing short of a supernatural miracle that they were standing there sharing the good news. Only a few hours earlier they had been arrested and locked in jail but an angel of the Lord had come and opened the gates and led them out with the directive to share the message in the temple. The story implies that they said nothing to their audience about having just seen an angel or experienced a miracle. They simply showed up as instructed and began to proclaim their passionate message. If the audience had known the back story maybe more would have listened. But God rarely works that way, it seems. He sends a little light and when we respond, more floods in.<sup>18</sup>

The woman at the well had no idea of all that had preceded her appointment with Jesus. What appeared as a casual encounter in the midst of a routine day was in fact a divine appointment with none other than the long-awaited Messiah. The one whom the prophets had foretold for centuries; the one who had no earthly father and who’s birth angels had announced; the one who Herod The Great had tried to kill as an infant, knowing that the King of Kings had been born. He was the one who the Devil himself had tempted and failed; the one who had been performing miracles in the region, and who had just cleansed the temple in Jerusalem a few days earlier. But she knew none of this, and the stranger wasn’t announcing it. Initially all she could know and appreciate was that he was kind and willing to

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<sup>15</sup> John 4:9, 10

<sup>16</sup> Acts 5: 18-21

<sup>17</sup> Acts 5:20

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 13:12

engage in an unorthodox conversation with her. It is the humble way he still comes to most of us. He had her attention and rather than being dismissive or too busy to listen, she began interacting. Jesus could work with that.

Some years ago, in the middle of winter, my wife and I were driving home from town one Saturday afternoon when we saw an old pickup truck in the ditch on the last curve before reaching our home in the country. The icy roads were perilous at this time of year and this was an especially treacherous corner. The truck was imbedded in the snow and the grill was partially caved in by a tree. No occupants were around so we continued on home. When we got in the house, there on our couch sat the distraught driver and his younger brother. They were friends of our daughter who sat there with them trying to help decide what the next step should be. We called a tow truck and the disabled vehicle was brought to our place, since they had no money or insurance to get it fixed anywhere. The young man who owned the truck agreed to give me a call on Monday to make a plan. Between that time and Monday, I heard more from my daughter about the plight of the young man and the jam he was in. There was no dad in the picture, the mom had loaned him the money for the truck and he couldn't afford insurance... I looked the damaged truck over and prayerfully decided I could help him repair it in my little shop next to where it was parked. It would help him out of a jam and maybe even teach him some autobody repair skills. It wasn't just something I decided or wanted, I sensed it was what God wanted. I waited for the young man to call or stop by, but that conversation never happened. Eventually I heard that he skipped town and left his mom with the truck and the liability. Over the months that the wrecked truck sat in our yard I would often look at it, remembering the young man and the conversation that never happened and think, "if you just knew the gift of God..." There was a solution, even a blessing, poised and waiting that God had prepared, a door that with a few steps forward would have opened. How many of these gifts-in-disguise are we surrounded by in this life that go unrecognized? - situations and conversations that God has at the ready if we will but ask.

### **The Gift of Asking**

Coming to the point of asking can be a gift. But only the needy ask, and no one likes to be needy. However, that seems to always be God's starting point. In this sacred story, even Jesus is needy. He is tired and thirsty.<sup>19</sup> He begins the conversation by asking for a drink. The woman was used to hauling up water from the deep well for others, she'd had five husbands. There was no hesitation to give the stranger some of her water, but there was astonishment that he, being a Jew, would ask her for anything. She was amazed at his apparent willingness to receive and drink from her unclean bucket. The enmity between Jew and Samaritan melted away. She was disarmed. She was ready to give, and so the door was open for her to receive. Jesus continues with his mission:

*"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that says to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water,"* Jesus says to her. She's puzzled but interested. There was a strange mixture of love and authority in his voice and manner. She questions his credentials, "You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you, who gave us this well?" If she only knew... not only was he greater than the giver of the well, Jacob, he was the one who, according to Colossians 1:16 had created the very heavens and earth, all things visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers, rulers or

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<sup>19</sup> John 4:6

authorities. By him and through him, all creation had been formed.<sup>20</sup> But apparently creating faith and devotion in the human heart was altogether another matter. This type of the digging of wells could take ages to unfold. What Jacob had done was no small feat, but what Jesus was doing was immeasurably greater. He was the greatest digger of wells that ever walked the earth.

Her simple yes-or-no question, “You are not greater than Jacob are you?” is answered by Jesus with a mysterious claim that made it clear, he was indeed greater: *“Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. The water I give will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”*<sup>21</sup>

It sounded a lot like something he would cry out at his next visit to the temple in Jerusalem. It was the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, a celebration commemorating God’s provision during the Israelites sojourn in the wilderness. For seven days the priests had performed a ritual of pouring out water on the altar as they recited, *“with joy you shall draw water out of the wells of salvation.”*<sup>22</sup> But on the last day, there was no pouring out of the water, to symbolize the end of the sojourn. It’s at this point that Jesus stands up and cries out. He could hold it in no longer. He boldly interrupts the dry religious ritual with a life-giving proclamation, urging the people to believe in him. Isaiah 42:2 prophesied of the messiah: *“He will not cry out nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.”* So, this was not his usual form of communication. He preferred making more of a personal connection with his hearers than crying out to the faceless masses, but this was a rare exception. In the middle of the crowd, Jesus stood up and cried out, *“If any man is thirsty let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’ But this he spoke of the Spirit...”*<sup>23</sup>

Jesus alone can touch that “innermost being” part of us with the living water. And he was about to do it with this woman. But first she had to ask. It doesn’t seem to matter that she didn’t fully understand what she was asking for, it was still the turning point. Her motives were shallow but that didn’t stop the process. The important thing was she had asked, and she had asked the right person, and he knew how to engineer these things...

*The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw.”*<sup>24</sup>

At this moment the very thing she’d asked for began to unfold. It’s also the moment when, by all appearances, the interaction with Jesus seemed to go in an entirely different direction. God’s answers often come this way. If we are looking to the east, he comes from the west. If we are looking to the west, he comes from the east.

### **The Answer Comes in Disguise**

*“Go call your husband,”* Jesus says. Suddenly this conversation seems to go entirely in the wrong direction. Probably as far as she was concerned, it was getting way too personal -yet she stayed with him. There was something in his tone and manner that made it safe to proceed. *“I have no husband,”*

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<sup>20</sup> See also John 1:3

<sup>21</sup> John 4: 13, 14

<sup>22</sup> Isaiah 12:3, see Maclaren’s Exposition of Holy Scripture.

<sup>23</sup> John 7:37-39

<sup>24</sup> John 4:15

she confesses honestly. He had touched the most sensitive part of her history and her deepest need before God. All her history of crushed hopes and failures were summed up in his saying out loud what she preferred to conceal. *"You have well said, 'I have no husband' for you have had five husbands and the one whom you now have is not your husband. This you have said truly."*<sup>25</sup> He had known the thing that only God could know and, although he was bringing it to the light, there was mercy in his tone and manner. For the first time, she had met someone who both knew her sin yet seemed to have a remedy and the power to bring change. Only God could be in this. *"Sir, I see you are a prophet..."*, she says, as the personal revelation of who he is takes another step. He is not only a Jew, he is a prophet! In the heat of the moment, and perhaps with some embarrassment, she changes the subject -and he lets her. The well of living water that he was digging just went deeper. The subject changed, but not too much. It had to do with worship. She uses the opportunity to ask a religious question that was one of the most controversial issues between the Jews and Samaritans and apparently one even she had wrestled with. *Where* should proper worship take place, she asks? Which was the holier place, Mt. Gerizim which towered in the distance, or the temple on the mount at Jerusalem? The Samaritans rejected the Psalms and the Prophets and even set up their own temple on Mt. Gerizim at one point. It had been many years since the Jews had torn it down in protest. Everyone knew, the animosity ran very deep. Jesus set the record straight: *"Salvation comes through the Jews,"* he emphatically states. And it wasn't about *where*, but *how* one worshipped. Again, as she listened, he was touching that innermost-being place. The heart of the issue, as it had always been, was in worshipping God in spirit and truth. It sounded so obvious when he said it. But why had it had alluded so many for so long? There was something hopeful in his pronouncement: *"Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father."* It sounded as if everything was about to change. When Messiah comes, she knew, everything would change. How could he be so sure of these things?

*"An hour is coming and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be his worshipers. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."*<sup>26</sup>

Who is this that knows God as Father? perhaps she is thinking. And he declares with such authority what God wants: *true worshipers*. In a few short words this prophet has cut through the age-old dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans and gotten to the heart of the matter. Countless hours that had turned into decades of debate on the subject evaporated into the one thing that really mattered: being a true worshipper of God. Was there anything as simple, yet more elusive, both for man and Creator? In seven days God had created the heavens and the earth, but creating this kind of worship would require centuries of preparation, and a trek by foot into the desert of Samaria, and eventually a trek to Golgotha. *"For such people the Father seeks,"* he says with a penetrating, yet compassionate gaze. Was there something about the way he was touching the inner-most-being part of her that gave her hope of realizing such worship? A worship not under the compulsion of the law, or fear of punishment if the place or process wasn't quite right; not out of hope for gain, or the benefits of being a chosen race; not for any other reason than simply a love of God as this man seemed to have. Could this be what he meant by *"an hour is coming and now is?"* Could this be the living water he spoke of that would finally satisfy her dry, thirsty soul? There was no doubt he was offering hope. It was something she hadn't felt in a very long time. So, she brings out the one thing she hoped for too. It was the one hope that both

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<sup>25</sup> John 4: 17, 18

<sup>26</sup> John 4:21- 24

Jews and Samaritans agreed upon. *“Some day when the Messiah comes, he will declare all things to us,”* she says, knowing it was the truest thing she could offer this man of truth.<sup>27</sup>

### **Some Day Finally Arrives**

Some day, she says. It was the hope of all the ages. When Messiah comes, he will set everything straight. Everyone knew this, and it was her one remaining hope. Moses had declared it over 1000 years earlier.<sup>28</sup> For hundreds of years also, the Psalms and prophets, who the Samaritans rejected, had filled in more details about the coming incarnation of God and the new covenant he would establish by his own life and atoning, sacrificial death. Some day, she knew, a glorious turning point was coming. If she lived to see that day, she knew she would at least hear about the arrival of this savior and the changes he would bring. Outward changes. Much needed outward changes to the system that oppressed and ruled them so cruelly. Then, maybe, life would improve. She was ready for this kind of Messiah; one who, like the system she was used to, worked from the outside in. But was she ready for one who would visit her personally, one who would know her better than she knew herself, and dig a well into her innermost being? How many were ready for this kind of messiah who would bring the changes, but would bring them from the inside out?

A few weeks later, to a different group -the ones seeing his miracles and hearing his teaching about the Kingdom of God, Jesus would announce: *“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear and did not hear it.”*<sup>29</sup> When asked if he was The Expected One, Jesus would only state the obvious: *“the blind receive sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them...”*<sup>30</sup> It was a yes or no question but these multitudes to whom he was so publicly displaying his divinity would need to deduct the obvious answer with a little faith of their own. But to this woman at the well he had a very special gift, a revelation he shared so plainly with no one else in recorded scripture. It must have been that he knew she could accept it, that it would be the final plunge of the spade into the desert limestone of her heart, in this digging of the well of living water. As she talked about the eventual coming of the some-day-messiah and her longing for that day, he says to her in no uncertain terms: *“I WHO SPEAK TO YOU AM HE.”*<sup>31</sup>

We are left to imagine the stunned look on her face; the jaw-dropping moment when she dares to believe that this man of truth, who seemed to know everything about her, was much more than a prophet -he was the actual messiah! The digging was complete. She simply believed and the living water started to flow.

At that very moment a divinely timed interruption occurred. She suddenly had many more questions but they were all cut short and she was left only to ponder, and maybe even to worship. The conversation was complete and it came to an abrupt halt as the man’s disciples arrived with food from town. They looked at her differently than the man-with-no-name other than The Messiah. She was clearly unwelcome in their midst, but she was used to that. The trip to the well for life giving water was

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<sup>27</sup> John 4:25

<sup>28</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15–19

<sup>29</sup> Luke 10:23-24

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 11:3-5

<sup>31</sup> John 4:26



complete. She didn't need her clay pot to carry this kind of water home. In her excitement she leaves the valuable vessel on the ground and hurries straight into the city to share the best news possible with the leaders and elders.<sup>32</sup> They would know what to do with this extraordinary visitation. Whether she knew it or not, she had received the living water she had for so long been thirsting for and everything was about to change.

Perhaps this scene would be the inspiration for one of the parables that Jesus would soon tell the crowds in Galilee. *"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found ...and from the joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."*<sup>33</sup>

In her excitement perhaps she forgets that there were risks in boldly seeking an audience with the men of the town, especially for a woman like her. At the moment though, she wasn't concerned about that, her news was too important. But it was a valid question: Would they listen to her? Would they give her the benefit of a doubt, that she, of all people, had just seen the Messiah? Like Mary Magdalene, being sent from the empty tomb, she was the unlikely one with a checkered past that had been chosen to bring them the good news.<sup>34</sup> Twice in one day, God was coming in disguise.

### **The Well Begins to Flow**

For a brief time, the disciples had the peace and quiet they were seeking -some time to finally eat the questionable unclean food they had bought in the unclean city. As soon as they had shooed the lowly woman back to where she'd come from, they began to press their master to eat. *"I have food to eat that you know nothing about,"* he says in the cryptic language they were slowly getting accustomed to. They look at each other in confusion. Hadn't he sent them into town to get food after their long journey? Did someone else bring him some food? Surely this couldn't be one of those teaching moments when there is something bigger going on that they weren't aware of... *"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. ...open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest,"* he exhorts them.<sup>35</sup>

Then it began to break loose. Like Isaac unplugging a well that the Philistines had long ago filled in, the water of heaven started to flow. As the disciples finished their earthly meal, they must have been astonished at what they saw. Maybe they even caught a glimpse of the kind of food their master was trying to show them. As they looked up, the Samaritans started to come in surprising numbers. Men who hadn't ventured to the well in years, because it was the job of their wives to fetch water, came to see for themselves, wondering if what the woman said could be true -that the Messiah had visited *them*.

Once they met the man for themselves, it soon became apparent that this called for much more than a brief visit around the well; an invitation to their homes was in order. Inviting a Jewish rabbi to stay in their town was unheard of, but that's exactly what they did -And he accepted. He and his disciples stayed and ate with them for two days.<sup>36</sup> The crowds pressed in on him, perhaps hoping to get the one-on-one experience the woman had told them about, as they listened to his teaching and revelation about the One True God and his kingdom. With a similar thirst as the woman, the half-breed outcast

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<sup>32</sup> John 4:27-29

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 13:44

<sup>34</sup> John 20: 17, 18

<sup>35</sup> John 4: 34, 35

<sup>36</sup> John 4:40

Samaritans received a good sip of the living water from their Jewish Messiah. More than one said to the woman, *“It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”*<sup>37</sup> There is no mention of any miracles taking place; no healings, no casting out of demons or works of power. They were coming for his words and believing because of his word. The inspired author subtly points this out, as if it was the best kind of faith, saying simply: *and many more believed because of his word.*<sup>38</sup>

As the word spread, people jostled in to hear him and the crowd grew larger, drinking in the truth and hoping for something similar to the woman’s one-on-one personal encounter. Surely as the time grew near for him to leave, they began to grieve at the thought and urged him to stay for good. Perhaps as the hour arrived to say goodbye and there were still so many who wanted to meet him, Jesus was thinking something that he would soon tell his closest disciples: that it would be better for them if he went away. The time was coming when he would be telling them all that he must soon leave, not just the town, but this earthly life. *“But I tell you the truth,”* he would say, as he breaks the news, *“it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”*<sup>39</sup> None of it made sense at the time, but eventually it would all become clear. Eventually the Helper would make it clear as the sacred work of well-digging and the flow of living water was released from heaven. It had been promised and foretold for centuries and by Jesus himself when he stood and cried out in the temple, saying, *“Whoever is thirsty let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’”* But this he spoke of the Spirit whom those who believed in him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.<sup>40</sup>

## The Second Visit

In a very real way, Jesus was leaving the Samaritan city only temporarily. Once he was resurrected and glorified, what the woman at the well experienced was just a taste of what was to come by the Holy Spirit. The outpouring would spread, first in Jerusalem, then to Judea, then to Samaria, and then to the uttermost parts of the earth.<sup>41</sup> It would be a few years but, after Pentecost and an outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem, Acts chapter 8 records the next visitation to the city of Samaria:

*At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles... Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them... And there was great joy in that city... when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized... Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed*

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<sup>37</sup> John 4:42

<sup>38</sup> John 4:41

<sup>39</sup> John 16:7

<sup>40</sup> John 7:37-39

<sup>41</sup> Acts 1:8

*for them that they would receive the Holy Spirit... Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup>*

So, the joy of the Lord returned once again to the city of Samaria. In some ways it was a lot like the first time when Jesus visited the woman at the well. There was still the disarming display of his love, the required-but-easy inclining to his word with a listening ear, the moment of asking and trusting, and the mysterious way he filled them with the living water. Only this time it was better in so many ways. Now, as the complete gospel was shared with them, they began to understand that this Jesus was not only the Messiah, he was the risen Lord of Lords and King of Kings! This time, no one was left out because of the crowds. Everyone who believed was experiencing the personal one-on-one encounter with him by the Holy Spirit. He had reached out to them again, but this time he need not ever leave.

### **Living Water Still Needed and Available**

The Apostle John was one of the disciples present at the original visit to Samaria. He had trekked with Jesus through the arid land when he first told them that their journey north to Galilee must pass through the unclean city. He was one of the men sent to buy food when Jesus stayed behind at the well for the divine appointment. How John eventually knew the details of this private conversation with the woman, we can only speculate. Perhaps Jesus told the disciples once they continued their journey with him. Perhaps the woman herself told him, or maybe it was the people of the town, while John stayed on with them for the two-day visit. We can only guess how he came to know the whole story. But this we do know, years later when it came time to select from the countless meaningful stories that the inspired writer could choose from for his written gospel account, this one made the cut. It was one of the pearls that he and the Holy Spirit chose to record and preserve for all the ages. It revealed so much of the Jesus he knew and loved that he would write: *these [stories] have been 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.<sup>43</sup>* John, like the other disciples, drank deeply of the Living Water and had become himself a digger of wells.

Toward the end of his life, while imprisoned for his faith, John received a great revelation of the majesty of his Lord in heaven. At first the Apostle fell at his feet "*like a dead man,*" but Jesus, whose face "*shone like the sun*" raised him up, telling him not to be afraid.<sup>44</sup> Jesus had some final words for John to record. There were some stern-but-loving rebukes for the churches who were missing the mark of worshipping in spirit and truth. But most of all there were final words which must have reminded John that this one who now reigned in such splendor and glory was still the same one who once chose to visit the ancient well, who sought out the sinful woman and enjoyed spending two days in the humble homes, eating with the Samaritans and freely sharing with them the living water. These simple but profound final words of Jesus applied to them and they apply still to all who will daily listen and believe: *Behold, I stand at the door*

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<sup>42</sup> Acts 8: 1,5,8,12,14,15,17

<sup>43</sup> John 20:31

<sup>44</sup> Revelation 1:17

*and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.*<sup>45</sup>

By this final proclamation we can know that the desire Jesus once had to interact and “dine” with the Samaritans and the sinful woman now applies to the rest of us. We may feel far removed from the setting of the ancient well site and the humble village. Our world may seem far more sophisticated and complex, but one thing that hasn’t changed over the centuries is the enjoyment of this eastern form of dining. This kind of Biblical dining is always done with family and friends. It’s so much more than just the eating of food; it includes fellowship and reclining. It includes hospitality, which by nature, cannot be rushed. This kind of dining is the intimate occasion where a relationship can grow and thrive. This is the sort of dining Jesus enjoyed in Samaria and it’s the kind he’s referring to in these final words. It’s what he’s inviting us to as he, “*stands at the door and knocks.*” We see how it happened when he came in disguise to the ancient well site; when he visited the sinful woman -who really could be any one of us. At the first knock she had no idea who he was, but she gave him her attention and let him continue. Soon he led her to the point of asking; asking for what she needed most, even if she didn’t fully understand it. He called it living water, and she wanted it. She was thirsty enough to stay with him as he probed deeper and dug the spiritual well that would spring up to eternal life. Eventually he led her to the ultimate revelation of who he was and why he came. Eventually, once Jesus had risen and the Holy Spirit was poured out on the many Samaritans who believed, she must have finally come to realize that the life-giving water she had once asked him for had indeed been given to her, and everything he ever said was true. She had heard the knocking and opened the door; He had indeed come in to dine with her and dig a deep well where her thirsty soul could be deeply satisfied, redeemed and forgiven. Eventually she must have found what we all must find too, -that the thing she had always wanted and asked for, was not a *thing* at all, it was simply *him*. And it was all made possible because, as the scripture tells us, “*he had to pass through Samaria.*”<sup>46</sup>

Jeff Sullivan

March, 2021

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<sup>45</sup> Revelation 3:20

<sup>46</sup> John 4:4