

“NOW HE HAD TO GO THROUGH SAMARIA”

John 4:4-14

Two thousand years ago, two strangers met at Jacob’s Well in Sychar, Samaria. Sychar was located near the village of Shechem, where Abraham built an altar to the LORD upon entering the land of Canaan. The time of year was likely summer, when temperatures in Samaria soared into the nineties. The time of day, according to John 14:6, was **“about the sixth hour;”** by Jewish reckoning, high noon.

One of the strangers that day was a Samaritan woman. We’re not told her name, age, or occupation. However, we do know that she had lived a difficult life—five failed marriages; a sizeable number even by Hollywood standards, and almost unthinkable in ancient Israel.

The other stranger that day at Jacob’s Well was Jesus Christ, the Son of God. His conversation with the Samaritan woman—one of the longest one-on-one conversations of Jesus recorded in Scripture—forever changed this woman’s life. The conversation began with Jesus asking the woman for a drink of water. It continued with the woman asking Jesus for a drink of “living water;” and her eventual recognition that the stranger she had encountered at Jacob’s Well was none other than the long-awaited Messiah. The woman said, **“I know that Messiah, called Christ, is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us.”** Jesus declared, **“I who speak to you am He.”**

Jacob’s Well still exists today and is located within the complex of an Eastern Orthodox monastery. I visited the site in 1976, and was privileged to sip water from the same spring flowing one hundred and fifty feet below the surface. As the Samaritan woman told Jesus in John 4:11, **“The well is deep.”**

And though millennia have passed, what happened that day at Jacob’s Well is still of vital importance to us. We too, like that Samaritan woman, have an overwhelming need to drink the “living water”—the Greek is literally “water of living”—that only Jesus Christ can provide. Times change, but human beings and human needs do not change. Indeed, our own needs are no different from those of that nameless woman at Jacob’s Well: the need for forgiveness; the need for purpose and belonging; the need to feel loved and wanted; the need to come to Jesus Christ, and the need to recognize when Jesus Christ comes to us. All people by nature have that same dreadful thirst of heart, mind, and soul that can only be quenched by the Savior.

Ultimately, today’s text teaches us two important lessons; namely, that Jesus Christ came to save the individual; and of equal importance, that Jesus Christ came to save the whole world. And both of these truths are uniquely summarized in the words of John 4:4, **“Now He had to go through Samaria.”**

First, Jesus came to save the individual; meaning you and me. At first glance, that meeting that day at Jacob's Well may seem like an accident or mere coincidence. According to John 4:1-3, the verses preceding today's text, after learning that the Pharisees were aware of His growing popularity, Jesus left Judea for Galilee; a distance of about seventy miles. And remember, His journey was made during the heat of summer; and by foot, not by horse, camel, donkey, or boat. Along the way, Jesus grew hot, tired, and thirsty. He was, after all, not only true God but also true Man.

So, He happened to be near Sychar and Jacob's Well. He happened to arrive at the well at high noon. He happened to sit down at the well the exact moment a Samaritan woman came to draw water. He happened to ask her for a drink. He happened to carry on a conversation; and so on, and so on, and the rest is Biblical history. Just favorable coincidence, right? The same way you and I inadvertently encounter strangers at a convenience store when getting gas; or at McDonald's when buying a burger and fries; or at Bismarck airport when waiting for a flight.

As stated in John 4:4, Jesus **"had to go through Samaria."** And if Jesus had to go through Samaria to reach Galilee, His encounter with the Samaritan woman had to be coincidence, not planning. But what if the phrase **"had to go through Samaria"** had nothing to do with geography, mileage, time, or distance. What if going through Samaria that day was entirely for the purpose of finding and saving one lost woman at Jacob's Well? What would this say about the grace, love, and compassion of our Savior?

True. When traveling from Judea to Galilee, crossing through Samaria was the fastest and most direct route. But it was not the only route. In fact, many Jews of that era preferred to cross the Jordan River to the east; then travel north through Perea and the Decapolis; then enter into Galilee, avoiding Samaria altogether. Jesus did not. Jesus went into Samaria. His travel plan had purpose.

In John 4:4, the Greek word translated as "had to"—**"He had to go through Samaria"**—literally means "it was necessary." And each time this Greek word is used in the Gospel of John, it is connected with God's purposes and God's plans, not accidents or coincidences. For example, this same word is used in John 3:7, **"You must be born again;"** and in John 12:34, **"The Son of Man must be lifted up;"** and in John 20:19, **"They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."**

Therefore, when John 4:4 states that Jesus **"had to go through Samaria,"** His going through Samaria had nothing to do with accidents or coincidences or an unforeseen change in travel plans. This journey through Samaria was determined by God's plans and purposes. Said differently, Jesus Christ went through miles of Samaria, not to save time or distance, but to save one lost, troubled, hurting woman.

Think about that: Jesus Christ, God the Son, the One of whom John wrote in the Prologue of his Gospel Record, **“through Him all things were made”**—this same Jesus, this same Creator God, chose to travel through Samaria; chose to sit down at Jacob’s Well at precisely the right moment and the right location in order to save this one Samaritan woman. Staggering. Amazing. And above all, enormously comforting.

How often haven’t we gone about ordinary tasks—tasks as ordinary as drawing water from a well: driving to church or sitting in the living room or visiting a loved one in a nursing facility or struggling to save a marriage or worrying about a job; sweaty, thirsty, hurting, like that woman who came to Jacob’s Well in the heat of high noon; and all the while thinking, “God has no idea where I am or what I’m going through”? Can we not see from today’s text how wrong such assumptions are? God does see. God does know. God does care. God is involved in even the smallest tasks and smallest heartaches of our individual lives.

Consider the words of Psalm 139: **“O LORD, You have searched me and You know me...You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb.”** How personal and individual is that? Or how personal and individual are these words of God in Isaiah 43: **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine”**—or these words of Jesus in Matthew 10: **“Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered”**? So, do we truly think that the encounter at Jacob’s Well was a coincidence? No. Almighty God does not do coincidences. He carries out everything, every detail, in accordance with His gracious will and purposes.

It was not a coincidence that Jesus performed His first miracle at Cana in Galilee. It was not a coincidence that Jesus called ordinary fishermen to become fishers of men. It was not a coincidence that Jesus was walking into the village of Nain as a poor, grieving widow was walking out. It was not a coincidence that Jesus stopped directly beneath the sycamore-fig tree where little Zacchaeus was perched; and looking up, said to Zacchaeus, **“Come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”**

It was not a coincidence that Jesus found that Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well. And it was not a coincidence that Jesus Christ found and saved you. Tell me, isn’t this blessed knowledge alone—the knowledge that Jesus not only walked through Samaria to save one woman, but walked to the cross to save you—isn’t this knowledge alone living water for the thirsting soul?

Second, Jesus also came to save the whole world. In the dealings of Jesus with one Samaritan woman, we see God’s great love for the individual sinner. But this same text, John 4:4-14, also reveals God’s great love for the entire world. Because for Jesus Christ to be the Savior of all people, **“He had to go through Samaria”** too.

And when Jesus traveled through Samaria, He was going where few Jews and none of Israel’s religious leadership were willing to go. This is because Jews and

Samaritans hated each other. Jews believed that Samaritans were un-savable and beyond the scope of God's redemptive love; worthless, useless, with no other purpose than to serve as fodder for the fires of hell. According to Jewish rabbis and Jewish writings, it was a sin for a Jew to even touch a dish or a cup that a Samaritan had used. And by the time Jesus sat down at Jacob's well, the animosity between Jews and Samaritans had existed for more than seven centuries.

And what of us? Are we willing to associate with Samaritans? Are we willing to travel through Samaria? Or, like the Jews of Christ's day, do we prefer to go out of our way to avoid such people and such places? Frankly, I think the Lord would want us to ask ourselves these questions.

Obviously, I don't mean "Samaritans" and "Samaria" in a literal sense. But there are other ways to ask these questions. For example, what type of people do we prefer to have in church? People wearing nice clothes or people wearing hand-me-downs and pushing squeaky shopping carts? Where do we prefer to proclaim the Gospel message? Neighborhoods with finely manicured yards and white picket fences or neighborhoods with bars on the windows?

I sometimes asked myself similar questions when caring for my ailing, bed-ridden, 94-year-old stepfather, Andrew Murphy—especially when he kept repeating the same things and kept making the same messes and kept waking me in the middle of the night because he was cold or thirsty or afraid of dying.

More than once I thought to myself, "Sure, he's a nice old man. But in the end, he's not my real father. He's my stepfather. And my mother isn't even alive. I owe him nothing. Why am I bothering with him?" And these plaintive, admittedly self-centered thoughts always led me to Sychar, Samaria, Jacob's Well, and two important questions: "Well, Mark, where would Jesus Christ be in this situation? And Mark, what would Jesus Christ be doing—the same Jesus who not only taught in the cool shade of the Temple, but in the noon-day heat at Jacob's Well?"

For a moment, consider all of the barriers that stood between Jesus and that Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well. First, a barrier of gender. In ancient Israel, men rarely spoke to women in public. This is why the Lord's own disciples were **"surprised to find Him talking with a woman,"** John 4:27.

Second, a barrier of race; as already stated, the animosity between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritan woman mentioned this barrier herself in John 4:9-10, saying, **"How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?"** Third, a barrier of religious ignorance, of which Jesus said in John 4:22, **"You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews."**

And fourth, the most impenetrable barrier of all between the holy God and lost

Mankind: the barrier of sin. Jesus led the Samaritan woman to a knowledge of her sin with a single directive. He said in John 4:16-18, **“Go, call your husband and come here.”** And the woman answered, **“I have no husband.”** And Jesus replied, **“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.”**

And yet, dear friends, it was the love and grace of Jesus Christ that broke through each of these barriers: gender, race, ignorance, and sin. For He came as the Savior of all people, not merely some; Samaritans as well as Jews. When Jesus drew near to that Samaritan woman, He drew that Samaritan woman near to Himself. As in one Bible passage: “We love Him, because He first loved us.” Or as stated in the cherished hymn: “Just as I am; Thy love unknown has broken every barrier down. Now to be Thine, yea, Thine alone, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” LH 388:6

And where is the love of God for the individual and for the whole world more clearly shown than in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins? As John wrote in chapter 3 of his Gospel: **“For God so loved THE WORLD that He gave His one and only Son, that WHOEVER believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life,”** John 3:16. WORLD refers to God’s love for all. WHOEVER embraces God’s love for the individual.

Though we know little of that Samaritan woman’s life, what we do know is very telling and very. She’d been married five times; and when Jesus found her, she was living with a man not her husband. In fact, many Bible scholars believe that the Samaritan woman came to Jacob’s Well at noon because she’d been ostracized by the rest of the community. Most respectable women came to Jacob’s Well either early morning or late afternoon. In other words, no one cared about this Samaritan woman. No one wished to associate with her. No one wanted to know more about her than they already knew.

I have a soft spot in my heart for that Samaritan woman. My guess is that you do too. Perhaps in not revealing this woman’s name, the Spirit of God is inviting us to INSERT NAME HERE. The Lord Jesus had a soft spot for this poor woman in His heart too. This is why He not only led the woman to a knowledge of her sin, but also an awareness of how futile her search for happiness had been.

How’s that old song go? “Looking for love in all the wrong places.” If that song had been on the radio in ancient Sychar, I’m certain the Samaritan woman would have been sadly mouthing the lyrics while tapping her sandals to the beat. Five marriages; and with each one the Samaritan woman no doubt thought: “This time things will be different. This time things will work out. This time I’ll get married and live happily ever after. I’m sure of it.” Instead, each time her search for happiness ended in bitter disappointment and a broken heart. Perhaps she’d been hurt so often that she no longer

wanted to risk marriage.

How many people do you know who are just like her? How many people do you know who feel lost, disappointed, brokenhearted, or bitter; people who are desperately searching for happiness, but looking for it in all the wrong places and drinking from all the wrong wells: money, possessions, relationships, careers, alcohol, drugs, human philosophies?

My friends, there is a hunger that has nothing to do with ordinary food. There is a thirst that has nothing to do with plain water. Jesus spoke of these great aches and longings in John 7; when, at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, He cried out in a loud voice—loud enough for us to hear: **“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”**

Or as Jesus told the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well: **“But whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become within him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life,”** John 4:14.

Today, if you are thirsty; if you are struggling with guilt or disappointment; if you are facing sickness or financial trouble; if you are looking for the certainty that all is well between you and your God; if you want to help a hurting friend, family member, or fellow Christian—come to the well of Scripture and drink from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. See how much He loves you. Learn what He did to redeem you. Remember how He sought, found, and saved you. Drink deeply of the “living water” and the “water of living” that only He can provide. It’s free. It’s yours” for the taking. It’s, as Jesus described it, **“the gift of God.”**

It’s the offer, His offer, not only to quench your thirst, but to end it forever.