

# Encounter with a Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:1-45)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

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## I. Introduction to this Lesson

- a. In this lesson Jesus leaves Judea (where Jerusalem is located, in the south) on his way back to Galilee (where He grew up, in the north) and passes through a village in Samaria.
- b. There he encounters a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and has a noteworthy discussion with her.
- c. In recent times, it has become popular in many churches to re-interpret this discussion with the woman at the well to show Jesus as the Great Women's Liberator, changing the way men would relate to women. We will weigh the validity of this popular claim in the light of what the passage actually says.
- d. One early Christian writer, Eusebius, saw in this story a *different type* of liberation that would come to millions of oppressed people. We will consider those insights, as well.

## II. Jesus Meets the Samaritan Woman

- a. Read **John 4:1-9**
  - i. Geography lesson (simple)
    - 1. Jerusalem, where the temple was located, is in the south (Judea).
    - 2. Galilee, where Jesus grew up and where most of the apostles were from, was in the north.
    - 3. Between those two regions where the Jews lived was Samaria, where the Samaritans lived.
  - ii. Significance of the Samaritans in the New Testament
    - 1. As indicated in **John 4:9**, the Jews disliked the Samaritans and did not want to associate with them.
      - a. Note that the reason that the woman was surprised Jesus spoke to her was because she was a Samaritan, not because she was a woman!
      - b. Jesus would later be given an extreme insult by his opponents, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (**John 8:48**, NKJV)

- c. When Jesus sent out the twelve in **Matthew 10** he told them, “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans.” (**Matthew 10:5**, NKJV)
  - d. Jesus deliberately used the Samaritans as an example in his teaching to show the religious Jews their hypocrisy.
    - i. The Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:29-37**, when teaching on what it means to love your neighbor.
    - ii. The one man who returned to give thanks, in **Luke 17:11-19**, when teaching about thankfulness and saving faith.
- 2. The Samaritans were the first non-Jews to receive the word of God, through Philip and others, in **Acts 8:1-15**. (followed by the Ethiopian eunuch in **Acts 8**, and the household of Cornelius in **Acts 10**.)
- iii. History and Background: Who were the Samaritans?
  - 1. In 931 BC, after Solomon, the kingdom split into two pieces during the time of Rehoboam and Jeroboam.
  - 2. The southern kingdom (two tribes) was called Judah, based on name of the most prominent tribe.
  - 3. The northern kingdom (ten tribes) was called Israel, or sometimes referred to as “Samaria.” That kingdom started off bad and only became worse; ultimately, the Jews there were defeated and deported by the Assyrians in 722 BC.
    - a. Read **2 Kings 17:1-6**
      - i. Israelites were removed and relocated.
    - b. Read **2 Kings 17:24-41**
      - i. People from other nations were resettled into the land of Israel.
      - ii. Lions killed the new settlers; they sought “the God of the land”, and priests were sent in to teach them how to worship Jehovah.
      - iii. However, they also continued to follow their own gods. Therefore, sort of spiritual half-breeds.
  - 4. When Jews returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon (c. 536 BC under Zerubbabel by edict of Cyrus king of Persia), those resettled in the land asked if they could assist in rebuilding the temple.
    - a. Read **Ezra 4:1-5**

- i. The Jews said, “*No, thanks*”
  - ii. People of the land (the Samaritans) then opposed the Jews in rebuilding the temple.
- 5. The Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* Book XI, chapter 8) tells the story of how the Samaritans came to build their temple, a replica of the one in Jerusalem, at Mount Gerizim, the most notable mountain in Samaria. (Josephus lived in Galilee just after Jesus and witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem.) According to Josephus, the building of the Samaritan temple at Mount Gerizim was authorized by Alexander the Great, which would have been c. 330 BC.
  - a. Mount Gerazim was the highest mountain in Samaria.
  - b. This was where Moses said the Jews should pronounce the blessings from obedience, when they entered the promised land (**Deuteronomy 27:11-13**). Recall that the corresponding curses were to be uttered from Mount Ebal.
- 6. About 200 years after it was built, the temple on Mount Gerizim built by the Samaritans was destroyed (c. 128 BC) by the armies of John Hyrcanus, the Jewish high priest. Josephus discusses this in *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XIII, chapter 9.
- 7. Bottom line: there was a long history of animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans.
- 8. Note that the Samaritans lived in the same part of the world as the Jews. Both groups of people were trying, to some degree, to follow Jehovah.
  - a. The Samaritans also had their own copy of the Law of Moses (a/k/a “the Samaritan Pentateuch”), which they claimed was more ancient and more accurate than the Hebrew versions then being used by the Jews.
  - b. In some notes in the Old Testament it may reference where the LXX or Samaritan Pentateuch have alternate readings from the Masoretic Text.
  - c. Early church historian Eusebius, writing around the year 325 AD, stated he believed that the Old Testament truest to the original in his day was the Septuagint (LXX). However, he also said that the Samaritan Pentateuch was also fairly close to the original version of the Hebrew Old Testament.
- b. Why the woman was surprised that Jesus was speaking with her.

- i. Text says, because she was a Samaritan (NOT because she was a woman)
- ii. Old Testament is full of examples of men speaking with women they did not previously know!
  - 1. **Genesis 24:15-24**, Abraham's servant speaks to Rebekah, asking her for a drink of water.
  - 2. **Exodus 2:16-19**, Moses helps out the daughters of Jethro at a well.
  - 3. **Joshua 2**, the two spies talk with Rahab in Jericho.
  - 4. **1 Samuel 25**, David and his men talk with Abigail, who provides them with food and drink.
  - 5. **1 Kings 17**, Elijah spoke with the widow of Zarephath.
  - 6. **2 Kings 4**, Elisha speaks with the poor widow and helps her by providing oil, and also speaks with and helps the childless Shunamite woman, tells her she will have a son, then later raises him from death.
- iii. So, this popular myth that Jesus was being radical and breaking social norms by speaking with a woman is clearly agenda-driven nonsense. Men spoke with women they did not know throughout the Scriptures!
- iv. It is important to note that Jesus, in the new covenant, *actually did* bring in some changes that would have a positive impact on the lives of women. They include:
  - 1. Jesus abolished polygamy. Jesus said that marrying another person while your first spouse is still alive is now adultery. (**Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18**)
  - 2. Jesus put extreme limits on divorce and affirmed the permanence of marriage. (**Matthew 5:32**, etc.)
  - 3. Under the new covenant, husbands are called to a higher standard: to love their wives as their own bodies; and to lay down their lives for their wives, as Christ did for the church. (**Ephesians 5:25-28**)

### III. Living Water

- a. Read **John 4:10-15**
- b. Jesus uses this discussion with the woman at a well to speak about "living water."
- c. Jesus is using a play on words. Like in John 2 when he said "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus was talking about the temple of his body; they thought he was talking about the temple building.

- d. Here, Jesus is doing the same thing. Yet the woman is confused, seems to be looking for magic water so she does not have to keep coming to draw and fetch water from a deep well and carry it back to her village. (Water is very heavy and this woman may be taking many trips a week)!
- e. So, what does Jesus mean by living water? Jesus later tells followers shortly later:
  - i. “On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (**John 7:37-39**, NKJV)
  - ii. The “living water” is a figure of speech that refers to the Holy Spirit given to Jesus’ followers – like a fountain that wells up inside us to spiritually sustain us.
- f. We plan to discuss this subject of the Holy Spirit more in future lessons. Note that the Holy Spirit is typically neglected or underemphasized in emphasis in Churches of Christ, due to historic reaction against the emotionalism and subjectivism of Pentecostal churches in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### IV. A Question for the Prophet

- a. Read **John 4:16-26**
- b. Jesus tells the woman things about her life that shows He is a prophet from God.
- c. The woman asks Jesus a spiritual question: “Should we worship God on this mountain (Mount Gerizim next to Jacob’s well), or in Jerusalem?”
  - i. A multiple-choice question with two possible answers is given to Jesus.
  - ii. *Any other* Jewish prophet would have answered, “In Jerusalem”.
    - 1. Read **Deuteronomy 12:1-14**
    - 2. Why didn’t Jesus just give the “right answer” here? Instead, he declines to answer the immediate question but instead replies:
      - a. “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (v. **21-24**)

- iii. Eusebius (bishop in Caesarea and early church historian, writing c. 315-325 AD) speaks to Jesus' answer here.
  - 1. Eusebius points out an inherent limitation in the Law of Moses: it could not be applied to the other nations. However, God had clearly stated that his plan was to bless *all nations*, all people everywhere, through Abraham.
    - a. "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." (**Genesis 22:18**, NKJV)
    - b. **Genesis 49:8-12** prophecy regarding Judah's descendant says, "to Him shall be the obedience of the nations/ Gentiles".
    - c. In **Isaiah 11:10-12** it says that the Gentiles shall seek Him.
    - d. In **Isaiah 42:1-6** (and elsewhere in Isaiah) it says He will be a light to the Gentiles.
    - e. In **Jeremiah 16** it says that the Gentiles, the nations will come to Him from the ends of the earth.
  - 2. However, Eusebius pointed out that the Law of Moses *could not* be followed by all nations. It would have to be superseded!
    - a. **Deuteronomy 16:16-17** states that *all men* were to appear in Jerusalem three times a year.
    - b. **Leviticus 12:6-7** states that all women must bring an offering on the eighth day after childbirth, to the tabernacle (or temple), which of course would be in Jerusalem.
    - c. Eusebius correctly pointed out that these rules could only be followed by Jews living near Jerusalem. They could not be followed by all the nations scattered throughout the world.
    - d. Therefore, the Law of Moses had to be replaced in order for God's promise to the Gentiles to be fulfilled. (See: Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel* Book 1, chapters 2-3)
    - e. The only one qualified to replace the Law of Moses would be the one Moses said would come, in **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**, the Prophet "like him": Jesus. Jesus is the One that God told Moses about at Mount Sinai. He is the One who would come later, whom the people must obey.

3. Therefore, when Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that the time is coming when the true worshipers will worship in a new and different way (*in spirit and truth*, not based on a specific location), He was in effect stating that the Law of Moses (which included the directive to worship in Jerusalem) would have to be set aside and replaced. In the future, all people would be able to worship God “in spirit and truth”, regardless of where they were located.
4. Read **Jeremiah 31:31-35** (corresponds to **Jeremiah 38:31-34** in the LXX)
  - a. The old covenant had its purpose in preparing a people for God. However...
  - b. The new covenant it promised, delivered by the successor to Moses would be a better one. It would have greater laws, and one that all nations everywhere could follow.
- d. This Samaritan woman knows that the Messiah, the Christ, is coming. Jesus reveals to her that He is the one. In his conversation with her, Jesus reveals that the hour is coming when He will replace the Law of Moses, ushering in a new covenant, just as promised by Jeremiah.

## V. Jesus Uses Food to Teach About Doing God's Will

- a. Read **John 4:27-45**
- b. Jesus' food, the thing that sustains Him, is work: to do what the Father prepared for him. Jesus is driven and sustained by the work God gave Him to do. This is his “fuel” and the very thing that energizes Him.
- c. Major problems for many Christians today: laziness and being self-seeking, rather than being sustained by the work God has prepared for us to do!
- d. There is much work to do in the world! Jesus prays for workers.
- e. Jesus says that we need to open our eyes: the fields are white for harvest! (The harvest is ready if we are willing to work hard.)
  - i. Do you really believe that the fields are still ripe for harvest *today*, where you are? Or do you believe that *no one* around you is open to the gospel?
  - ii. Others (the prophets) did the hard labor preparing the way for the gospel, before Jesus' time (and before us). Now it is time to finish the job and reap the harvest!
  - iii. This includes getting involved in people's lives, and sharing the Word of God, planting and watering. This is the work that the Father has given us to do!