

The Gospel of John

Session Eight: The Samaritan Woman at the Well and Her Testimony Commentary

John 4:1-42

4:1–42 Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman took place by divine necessity (v. 4). Unlike Nicodemus, the woman progressed in her understanding. She viewed him first as a Jew (v. 9), then as someone who could make her life easier (v. 15), then as a prophet (v. 19), and then possibly as Messiah (v. 29). The woman's fellow townspeople concluded that Jesus was the Savior of the world (v. 42).

4:1 The Pharisees had investigated John the Baptist's credentials (1:19, 24); now they were looking into those of Jesus.

4:2 John the Evangelist, author of this Gospel, here clarified the earlier statement in 3:26.

4:3 On Jesus going from Judea to Galilee, see 3:22.

4:4 Had to travel may indicate that Jesus's itinerary was set by the sovereign plan of God (9:4; 10:16; 12:34; 20:9). Through Samaria was the most direct route from Judea to Galilee, but strict Jews, wishing to avoid defilement, bypassed Samaria by taking a longer, less direct route. This involved crossing the Jordan River and traveling across from Samaria on the eastern side of the river.

4:5 Sychar was located just east of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. The reference to the property that Jacob had given his son Joseph reflects the customary inference from Gn 48:21–22 and Jos 24:32 that Jacob gave his son Joseph the land at Shechem that he had bought from the sons of Hamor (Gn 33:18–19) and that later served as Joseph's burial place (Ex 13:19; Jos 24:32).

4:6 Jesus was worn out from his journey. This underscores his genuine, full humanity.

4:7 The first sentence would have raised the question: What will Jesus do? Those who knew the Samaritans would have been shocked by Jesus's request.

4:8 Jesus and his disciples usually carried little or nothing to eat on their journeys. Rather, they brought money to buy provisions along the way (12:6; 13:29). Purchasing food was a common assignment given to disciples. Jesus did not fear being defiled by food bought in a Samaritan village.

4:9 The author's aside that Jews do not associate with Samaritans explained to his Diaspora readership that rabbis considered Samaritans to be in a continual state of uncleanness.

4:10–15 The references to Jesus as the giver of living water involve double meaning (see notes at 3:3–8, 14–15). Literally, the phrase refers to fresh spring water (Gn 26:19; Lv 14:6). God was

known as the source of life (Gn 1:11–12, 20–31; 2:7) and “the fountain of living water” (Jr 2:13; see Is 12:3). In Nm 20:8–11, water gushed out of the rock, a much-needed provision for the Israelites.

4:11 Jacob’s well may have been the deepest well in Palestine. It is more than a hundred feet deep today and was probably deeper in Jesus’s day.

4:12 The woman’s account of Jacob giving the Samaritans the well and drinking from it himself was based on tradition, not Scripture. The book of Genesis does not record Jacob digging a well, drinking from it, and giving it to his sons.

4:14 The phrase will become a well of water springing up in him is reminiscent of Is 12:3 (cp. Is 44:3; 55:1–3).

4:16 Jesus’s instructions gave the woman the opportunity to admit that she was living with a man who was not her husband.

4:17 While technically truthful, the woman’s statement was potentially misleading because it could be taken to imply that she was unattached. Jesus knew the full truth.

4:18 The woman had had five husbands—or five “men” (the Gk *aner* can mean “husband” or “man”)—having engaged in a series of illicit relationships, and she was not married to her current lover. Sexual relations outside of marriage are forbidden in both Testaments.

4:19 The woman recognized that Jesus knew her life circumstances without apparently having been told by anyone—hence he must be a prophet (cp. Lk 7:39).

4:20–21 The fathers who worshiped on this mountain—a reference to Mount Gerizim (Dt 11:29; 27:12), the OT setting for the pronouncement of blessings for keeping the covenant, and the mountain on which Moses commanded an altar to be built (Dt 27:4–6)—included Abraham (Gn 12:7) and Jacob (Gn 33:20), who built altars in this region.

4:22 True worship must be based on true knowledge of God, and the Samaritans limited themselves to just the Pentateuch. Salvation is from the Jews means that in salvation history the Jews are the conduit through which salvation comes to the world.

4:23–24 Because God is spirit, the Israelites were not to make idols “in the shape of anything” as the surrounding nations did (Ex 20:4). Jesus’s point was that since God is spirit, proper worship of him is also a matter of spirit rather than physical location.

4:25–26 On Christ as a title of Jesus, see 1:38.

4:27 The disciples' amazement that Jesus was talking with a woman stemmed from the common Jewish teaching that talking too much to a woman, even one's wife, was a waste of time, diverting one's attention from the study of Scripture and reflection on God.

4:28 The woman's water jar was probably a large earthenware pitcher carried on the shoulder or hip. She abandoned her original purpose for coming to the well in order to tell her townspeople about Jesus.

4:29 Who told me everything I ever did was an exaggeration—but understandable in light of her excitement. See v. 39.

4:30 It is interesting that the woman had such credibility that people left their work to see the man she spoke of.

4:31 Rabbi, eat something reflected the disciples' customary concern for their Master's well-being. Jesus had been worn out from his journey before his conversation with the Samaritan woman (see note at v. 6). He still had not had anything to eat.

4:32–34 The accomplishment of Jesus's mission was more important to him than physical food (Mt 6:25; Mk 3:20–21). His statement may echo Dt 8:3 (cp. Mt 4:4; Lk 4:4). On Jesus's work, see 17:4.

4:35 In agriculture there is always a considerable separation in time between sowing and harvesting. The disciples needed to realize that with the coming of Jesus, sowing (preaching) and reaping (conversions) coincided. The immediate reference may be to the approaching Samaritans (vv. 39–42).

4:36 This saying is reminiscent of Am 9:13, which depicted the prosperity of the new age. Hence Jesus claimed that he was ushering in the messianic age, a time of swift, abundant harvest.

4:37–38 This saying may allude to Mc 6:15, "You will sow but not reap." Yet Jesus's adaptation left judgment unmentioned. The others who had labored were Jesus and his predecessors, most recently John the Baptist, the final prophet associated with the OT era. Jesus's followers were the beneficiaries of their work and would bring in the harvest.

4:39 That town refers to Sychar (see v. 5). Though people would naturally be skeptical about religious pronouncements made by an immoral woman such as this Samaritan, her sincerity (and perhaps a noticeable change in her morality) convinced her townspeople to take her seriously as she spoke about Jesus.

4:40 Jesus obviously did not share in the Jewish bias against Samaritans since he spent two days with them (see vv. 4, 9).

4:41–42 As others had done (1:40–41, 45), the woman brought people to Jesus so they could see for themselves. Ultimately, it was on the basis of a personal encounter with Jesus that they believed. His large harvest among the Samaritans marked the first sign of the universal scope of his saving mission (10:16; 11:51–52). The early church also undertook a Samaritan mission (Ac 8:4–25; cp. Ac 1:8). In fact, the pattern of Jesus’s mission from Judea (Nicodemus, Jn 3), to Samaria (Jn 4), to the Gentiles (vv. 46–54; cp. 12:20–33), anticipated the post-Pentecost mission of the early church (Ac 1:8).¹

¹ *CSB Study Bible*. Edited by Trevin Wax. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).