

The Samaritan Woman at the Well

The first 42 verses of the Gospel of John chapter 4 described how Jesus and His disciples left Judea and journeyed northward through Samaria, on their way to Galilee. Samaria was, for the most part, the land that had been originally allotted to the Tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, and lies between Judea and Galilee. The events recorded in this first portion of the chapter tell us of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. As described, it is rich in explaining God's grand purpose and how Jesus was here on earth to implement it.

Verse four tells us that "...as He must needs to go through Samaria." There was severe mutual hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. Jews were often harassed and even killed, especially as they journeyed southward through Samaria toward Jerusalem. Therefore, Jews seldom crossed through that province, preferring instead to cross the Jordan and go a long way around that area when they had business to the north. The controversy between these people began when the Jews returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity, and began rebuilding the Temple. In Ezra 4 we learn that the Samaritans offered to help, but the Jews wouldn't allow them to because they were by then a mixed breed, both racially and religiously. Racially, they were a mixture of the Jews who survived the Assyrian occupation and of foreign gentiles whom the Assyrians brought in to occupy the land. Religiously, the Northern Kingdom, even before the Assyrian conquest, had turned to idolatry. Furthermore, the Assyrians brought additional false gods into the culture. Later the Samaritans did adopt Jehovah as God but without repudiating or abandoning the other gods (2Kings 17:25-41). Nevertheless, by the first century, at the time of Jesus, they again had become monotheistic, and somehow came to believe that they were all descendants of Jacob, through Joseph. However, after not having been allowed to help build the Temple, they made Mount Gerizim their holy mountain in contrast to Mount Moriah the real holy place of Jerusalem. Also they had removed all mention or reference of Jerusalem in their copies of the torah. This, in some

perverted way, may have been an additional response to their having been denied participation in the building of Jerusalem's Temple. Sometime during the rebuilding of the Temple, according to Josephus, Manasseh son of Judah, the high priest in Jerusalem, contrary to law, married the daughter of a Sanballat chief of the Samaritans. When the Jews demanded that he either repudiate the marriage or renounce his sacred office, he fled to his father-in-law's, where he hoped to rebuild the faith structure which had been so long denied to these people. They apparently hungered for what they had lost long ago and were seeking its return. Therefore, they embraced Manasseh as their hope for restoring their ability to properly worship God, because he was a genuine, trained priest of the descendents of Aaron. However, Manasseh, although eager to fulfill this need, viewed things somewhat differently than the whole of Scripture demanded. Therefore, he fashioned a religious system to his liking that is described hereinabove. It then followed that Sanballot sought and obtained permission for Alexander the Great to build their own Temple on Mount Gerizim. This stood as their place to worship until it was destroyed by Hyrcanus in 129 BC, after which they had only this "holy mountain" as their religious center. How easily it is for Satan, through false teaching, to twist truth and to selectively omit or add, so as to totally corrupt the Word of God. Because of this corruption, the Jerusalem Rabbis decreed very limited contact with the Samaritans. Jews were forbidden to ever, in anyway be obligated to a Samaritan. That is why, as we are told, that the Samaritan woman was surprised when Jesus asked her for water without offering payment.

Why did Jesus choose to go to Galilee at his time? First in Luke 3:19-20 and Matthew 4:12 we learn that John the Baptist had been imprisoned. This posed a threat of imprisonment for Jesus who had been the focus of all of John's preachings. Second, it was to avoid a confrontation with the Pharisees as we learned in verse 1. Third, Luke 4:7 tells us Jesus was "led by the spirit." Fourth, He had this preordained ministry to accomplish in Samaria. As we can see, Jesus' route was deliberate, for He had this divine appointment with the woman at the well.

Verse five tells us that they came to a city called Sychar, which means, “purchased.” It was located near a portion of land Jacob had purchased and given to Joseph. This is probably the basis of their belief that they were descendants of Joseph. Also this is where Jacob’s well is located, at the foot of Mt. Ebal. That well is still in use and is reputed to be over 60 feet deep. To have hand excavated it was no small feat. To have shored it such that it would remain functional for 2500 years required supernatural involvement.

In this verse we are also told that it was the sixth hour, or high noon, when the woman came to draw water. This in itself is revealing because it was the custom to draw water only in the morning, before the heat of the day made it more difficult, and also when it was most needed for the animals as well as for human use. This woman came at noon when no one else was likely to be there. Perhaps the reason for her choosing this time may have to do with what we learn about her in verse 18.

The woman was surprised at Jesus’ request for water, without an accompanying offer to pay. We should recall, as mentioned above, that this was a very deep well. A long rope and special bucket were required to bring up water. Although this was difficult work, we learn from other scripture passages, such as Genesis 24:43, that this was generally deemed to be part of a woman’s duties. In verse 9 we also notice two more things. First, she knows immediately that He is a Jew and second, that He has chosen to speak to her in spite of the fact that it was forbidden. That He was a Jew, she probably determined from the identifying blue threads that were commonly woven into the hems of Jewish outer garments. That He spoke to her at all, being that she was a Samaritan, was a surprise, but further that He spoke to her alone without the presence of witnesses was shocking. It was against Pharisaic law for a man to speak to a woman other than his wife without others being present.

Now we get into Jesus’ divine purpose, where in verse 10 He proceeds to tell her who He is, and about the living water, which only He can give. She could not understand what “living water” was because at that point, she could think only literal, worldly terms. Living water is spiritual imagery, symbolizing eternal life. Until we can see ourselves as

God sees us, as condemned sinners, and thereby understand that we need a Savior, we cannot, as she could not yet, comprehend Jesus' message. But our Lord had now laid the groundwork for her understanding. Then in verses 16-18 Jesus proceeds to point out her sins, which were very evident to her, and which, must have weighed heavy on her conscience as well as having plagued her socially. In pointing out her sins, without any human way of knowing about them, He had proven to her that He was even greater than Jacob, their most revered ancestor.

Here we might stop to notice how her perspective of Him changed as their conversation progressed. First, he was a Jew, then one greater than Jacob, next a prophet, and finally the Christ. Calling Jesus a prophet was a big step for her because in Samaritan theology, the next prophet after Moses would be the Messiah. The Samaritans had rejected the whole Scripture except the five books of Moses, and in all other writings as previously noted, they had removed all references of Jerusalem. Therefore, she knew of none of the other prophets or of all of the great knowledge and insights, which God had provided through them, and through the Psalms and other Old Testament Books. Calling Jesus a prophet was calling Him the Prophet, i.e., the Messiah. In verses 21-23, Jesus informs her that their theology regarding Mt. Gerizim was totally wrong and Jewish theology was correct, that is, that the Temple in Jerusalem was the proper place to worship. Jesus also said that the time was coming when worship would no longer be limited to any one place. This came true when the Messiah died, after which worship would be in the spirit of truth during this yet current dispensation of grace. Finally, Jesus revealed the true content of faith, and also unmistakably identified Himself as being the Messiah, a fact she was already strongly suspecting. This excited her so much that she forgot her pitcher of water as she ran home in her eagerness to spread what she had learned. Christ had so satisfied the thirst of her heart that she completely forgot the thirst in her throat.

Near the end of the conversation, the disciples returned with the food they had been sent to bring back. But as they urged Him to eat, He said, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of." Opportunity to do God's work had presented itself. The woman went back, and He knew she would return with many who needed to hear in order to believe. His

physical need could wait, because the spiritual fulfillment that that opportunity provided was far more satisfying and nourishing than any earthy food. His time was short and He had yet much to do. Before the woman would return with the many who were aroused by her report, Jesus used the time to instruct His disciples about sowing and reaping spiritually, using the grain harvest as an analogy. Jesus was foreseeing, in the short term, the coming of these Samaritans who were ready to be “harvested” and whom in the long term would sow for others to harvest in the future. Also Jesus was teaching the disciples a long term lesson pointing in a geographically broader sense that the seeds sown through past ages by the prophets and the continually existing remnant of believers, were now as fields of white grain ready to be harvested. It would be their commission and lifelong work to both harvest what others had sown and to sow what others would later harvest. We today, who are the result of the sowing of others and who are thereby His disciple as well, have that same divine duty and privilege, that is to do exactly what He called these first disciples to do. That, I believe, is the principal message to be gleaned from this one precious episode in our Lord’s short earthly life.

What else should we learn from this story that might help us to know Him, to better understand His purpose and His ways, and to thereby be able to serve Him better? The following is what has come to mind as I have studied these verses:

1. Jesus chose by divine guidance to reveal His message of salvation to the very lowest, most hated of all people from the Jewish perspective. That His message drew such a big and positive response from the Samaritan is evidence that these despised people were as eager for, and as responsive to, the truth as one might find anywhere. From what we are shown, it seems that they exceed the Jews in their willingness to receive the true faith.
2. For those who claim that Jesus never said that He was God, verse 26 should be examined. When Jesus says, “I that speak unto you am He.” Who is the He to whom He is referring? The woman had spoken of the only prophet, the only Messiah she ever heard of, the One of which Moses spoke as the Eternal One who would reveal all things. Jesus’ words are better translated as “The One of whom

- you speak, I AM.” There is no he in the Greek version. It was added by the translators. Jesus is the great I AM of the burning bush and it is of Him whom Moses prophesied. Notice in verse 42 the men of the city now believe the truth and know Him to be the Christ, “the Savior of the world.” This is the first time in Scripture that Jesus is so identified.
3. In this story, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach His disciples of the great need for “workers,” for evangelizers to sow the word and to reap the harvest of salvation through faith in Jesus. Are you one of His? Have you joined His working army, or are you pleading 4F status, that is not even Functionally Eit For genuine Fellowship with our Savior? In verses 34-38 He is speaking to His disciples. That’s you and me as well, if we are truly saved. We are called to sow and to harvest, to spread His Word, to bear fruit for Him, for after all He is our Lord and Master, as well as our Savior. James 2:18 speaks of fruit (works) being evidences of faith. In different words, Jesus was teaching the same thing when in verse 36 He speaks of gathering fruit unto eternal life. Are you gathering fruit so as to assure yourself that you indeed have the faith, which provides eternal life? This is something we must each ask ourselves. Complacency, coasting, dormancy, backsliding, these take no effort at all. Certainly they provide no evidence of real faith either. Serving Jesus is work, but it is work that those who are His are most eager to do. Why? Because our hearts are so filled with love and gratitude for having been rescued from sin and called unto salvation, that nothing is more important for us to do than to do that which He wants from us, while we yet have the time and the strength to do it!!
 4. This is something not necessarily learned directly from this message, yet it is desirable and applicable for the enhancement of any Scriptural message. It deals with context, but not necessarily with what is normally meant by that term. I’m speaking of historical context, a knowledge of the times and places of which Scripture speaks, and what was behind the situations and events with which it deals. The first part of this essay deals with this type of context in order to provide an enrichment and a clearer understanding of what lay behind the scenes, and what historically preceded and influenced conditions, attitudes and behaviors

there described. Without such background information we are all too frequently relegated to understanding only superficial portions of a message and not the full rich depth of meaning, which such knowledge can provide. For instance, without more understanding than the immediate text offers as to whom the Samaritans were and what they believed, the story may seem somewhat abstract and less relevant to us than it is when we have these additional background details. So here we have a case for greater study of the whole word of God and of what more can be learned from other sources. On this point, many will rush to state that Scripture is everything we need in order to know God and what He wants of us. That is absolutely correct. However, if historians such as Josephus and Heroditus, along with the many archeological discoveries can add background context to God's Word, are they not also beneficial and worthy of use?

I pray that this little story of the woman at the well, as Jesus has chosen to tell it, will fill the reader with another increment of increased or renewed love and zeal for our Lord, and also be an inducement to take up the work He has assigned His disciples, past and present. Jesus admitted to the woman His deity, and this most sinful woman became not only saved but also an ardent follower and fruitful disciple of the Lord. From this one little seed planted in a rich, though initially foul soil, much fruit resulted and caused the planting of many more seeds, which the later disciples harvested. Are any of us less qualified or less capable than that woman whose name we will never even know? Perhaps it is through the subsequent generations of her sowings and plantings that you or I have been harvested. We surely owe it to someone's sowing that we are His. Will your or my conscience allow either of us to do less in gratitude than she did? I pray not.