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## The Savior of the World

John 4—5

### **a** Jesus Provides Living Water (4:1-14)

**Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.**  
—John 4:14

During Jesus' day Palestine consisted of three major provinces. Galilee was to the north, Samaria occupied the central highlands, and Judea was to the south. Jesus grew up in Nazareth and made Capernaum His hometown during His earthly ministry (see Mark 2:1). Both of these towns were in the province of Galilee. He was born in Bethlehem, which is just south of Jerusalem. Both of these towns were in the province of Judea.

While Jesus was ministering to people in the Judean countryside early in His ministry, the Pharisees became curious about Jesus as His following increased. In fact, more people were going to Jesus to be baptized by His disciples than were being baptized by John. John, of course, had already provoked the

Pharisees, and Jesus probably did not want to clash with the religious establishment of Jerusalem at this time. So He decided to return to Galilee by the shortest route, which was through the province of Samaria (John 4:1-3).

While passing through Samaria, Jesus stopped in Sychar. Sychar was a small village that was famous because Jacob, ancestral patriarch of the Jews and the Samaritans, had bequeathed some of the land nearby to his son Joseph (vss. 4, 5; see Gen. 48:22). After the Israelites returned to the promised land from Egyptian bondage, Joseph was buried in this plot of ground (see Josh. 24:32). The Samaritans claimed that they were direct descendants of Joseph.

One of the historic landmarks in Palestine was Jacob's well at the foot of Mount Gerizim. At around noon Jesus came to the well, weary and thirsty from His journey. The heat was probably most intense at this time of the day (John 4:6).

Normally women drew water from the wells at sunset, so it was unusual for the Samaritan woman to come at noon. Perhaps she had an urgent need for the water. But since there were other wells nearer



to Sychar, she probably came to this well at this time in order to avoid the other women of the community. The woman at the well might have been shunned by the other women because of her apparently tainted character.

*Ask Yourself . . . How could I extend a hand to some of the outcasts in my society?*

Jesus was alone at the well when He asked the Samaritan woman for a drink. Remarkably, Jesus'

Jewish companions had gone ahead to purchase food in a Samaritan town. Perhaps the barriers were already beginning to fall because of Jesus' influence. But even more remarkable was Jesus' request. Not only did He, as a Jewish rabbi, carry on a public conversation with an unfamiliar woman, but also He was willing to drink from a cup of a Samaritan—an act that most Jews would have considered defiling. Jesus' request even astonished the Samaritan, who noted the wall between their two peoples (vss. 7-9).

As we saw in the Lord's conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus had a unique way of provoking people into discovering spiritual truth. Jesus also did this with the woman at the well. He said that instead of asking Him why He wanted a drink, she should have asked Him for living water. "Living water" (vs. 10) was normally understood to mean "running water" like a river or a stream. If she had realized with whom she was talking, however, she would have asked Jesus for a kind of living water that would nourish her spirit for all eternity.

The woman responded to Jesus' unusual statement with two questions: First, she asked how He planned to get this water, since He was without the means to draw the water out the well. Recent archaeological investigations have discovered that Jacob's well is over 135 feet deep. Second, she attempted to provoke Him by asking whether He was greater than her patriarch Jacob. Jacob and his sons had drunk from



*Jacob's well. Today a church marks the traditional site of this well.*

this well, and he had given it to her people. The woman may have been comparing Jesus' apparent unimportance with the Samaritans' importance as descendants of Joseph. Her racial hatred for the Jews was beginning to bubble up within her—she expected no less from this Jewish man at her well (vss. 11, 12).

Jesus ignored her provocation and indicated that He was the one who provided this living water. In fact, He was greater than Jacob. The water from Jacob's well could satisfy a person's physical thirst for a short time, but the water He gave would abundantly satisfy a person's spiritual thirst forever (vss. 13, 14).

## A Despised Race

**Many Jews would not enter Samaria because they believed that they would be defiled if they had any contact with the Samaritans. The mutual hatred between these two people groups can be traced back several hundred years.**

**In 722 B.C. the Assyrian Empire defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and deported most of the Israelites to other parts of their empire. The Israelites who remained intermarried with foreigners. Out of these marriages came a religion that mixed the worship of Yahweh with that of other pagan deities.**

**In 539 B.C., when the Jews returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity, they encountered Samaritans who were hostile to them and their religion. By Jesus' day the Jews had cultivated and nurtured a deep hatred for the people who lived in the province of Samaria.**

## **b** Believers Worship in Spirit and Truth (4:15-26)

**God is spirit, and his worshipers  
must worship in spirit and in truth.**

—John 4:24

The Samaritan woman still had not taken Jesus' words seriously. She might even have smirked when she told Jesus to get this living water for her. After all, it would be nice to not have to make all these tiring trips to Jacob's well (vs. 15). More than likely she considered Jesus' statements preposterous. What kind of water can permanently satisfy a person's thirst? No water, of course, in her judgment.

Jesus did not try to explain that she was missing the point. Instead, He cut to the chase. He began to bring her sin out in the open—the one thing that stood in the way of her partaking of this living water. He told her to go bring her husband, knowing full well that she was not married to the man she was living with (vs. 16).

Jesus' first request for water was a way of pointing her to God. His second request forced her to look at her sin. Yet she was not going to acknowledge to a stranger that she was living immorally. Perhaps because the woman didn't want Jesus to pursue this topic, she replied curtly rather than sarcastically as before. She simply said she didn't have a husband (vs. 17a).

The woman at the well certainly did not expect this stranger to lift the curtain of her past. Yes, she had spoken truthfully, Jesus replied. Though she had been divorced five times, the man she was currently living with was not her husband (vss. 17b, 18).

Suddenly it dawned on the woman that Jesus was not an ordinary person. Indeed, He must be a prophet to have such discernment! Still, she did not want Him prying into her personal life, so she changed the topic to worship (vss. 19, 20). She might have wanted to know the right location to make a sacrifice to God for her terrible sins. More than likely, however, she brought up the Jewish/Samaritan controversy about the proper place to worship God in order to steer the conversation away from her chosen lifestyle.

Jesus used the woman's reference to the Jewish/Samaritan debate to strike at the heart of her problem. The woman was concerned with an external aspect of worship, that is, the right place to worship God. Jesus made her focus on the internal aspect of worship, namely, worshipping God with a cleansed heart. The woman's frame of reference needed to be adjusted. Jesus began to do this by bluntly stating that soon it wouldn't matter where people worshiped—be it Mount Gerizim or Mount Zion (vs. 21).

Jesus addressed the issue that she had raised. The Samaritans acknowledged the true God, but they worshiped Him in ignorance.

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Since they considered only the Pentateuch as sacred, they ignored the prophets. The Jews worshiped God as He revealed Himself in the entire Hebrew Bible. Jesus clearly sided with the Jews on this issue by identifying Himself with them by using the word “we” (vs. 22). God had chosen the Jews to be the vehicle through which He would reveal His plan of redemption.

The time was soon coming when a Jew, a Samaritan, or any person could worship His Father as long as that person worshiped God in the Spirit and in truth. Such worship is to worship from the heart, not merely go through the motions of worship, that is, being at the right place, doing the right rituals. To worship in truth is to worship God as He has revealed Himself, not as the would-be worshiper has created Him in his or her own mind. Indeed, God actively seeks people who worship Him with sincerity and dedication. Since the essential nature of God is spirit, God expects our worship to be spiritual and not merely a ritualistic duty (vss. 23, 24).

*Ask Yourself . . . How can I deepen my awareness of God when I worship?*

The woman at the well made the point that the Messiah, when He came, would explain the mysteries of proper worship. Perhaps the woman was still evading her spiritual need, or maybe she was finally admitting her need for a Savior. Like the Jews, the Samaritans believed that one day God would send a Messiah, but the information they

## Where Do You **Worship?**

*The Jews recognized that God had instructed Solomon to build a temple in Jerusalem. There they could go to offer sacrifices to Him and worship Him. Meanwhile, the Samaritans argued that worship of God should be performed at Mount Gerizim, where they claimed many blessed events occurred.*

*The Samaritans taught that Abraham proved to God that he was faithful and obedient when he offered his son Isaac on Mount Gerizim. They taught that Abraham and Melchizedek met on this mountain. More importantly, they taught that the Lord had commanded Moses to build an altar on Mount Gerizim for God’s people to worship Him. Since the Samaritans regarded only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) as sacred, they naturally dismissed the Jewish belief that the center of worship should be at the temple in Jerusalem. The Jews, on the other hand, claimed that the Samaritans distorted the Scriptures. This controversy over the proper place to worship God only added to the enmity between the Jews and Samaritans.*

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had was meager at best. Whatever may have prompted her to mention the Messiah, and whatever her understanding of the Messiah was, Jesus responded by telling her that He was the one she was seeking (vss. 25, 26). This is one of the few times in His ministry that Jesus identified Himself as the Christ.

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## **C** The Harvest Is Ready (4:27-38)

**I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.** —John 4:35b

Like most ancient cultures, Jewish society in Jesus' day treated women with little public respect. In fact, one rabbinic teaching said, "A man shall not talk with a woman in the street, not even with his own wife, and especially not with another woman, on account of what men may say." Because of this cultural prejudice against women, Jesus' disciples were astonished to discover Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman in public (vs. 27). Yet they had been with Him long enough to know not to question the actions of their Master, who had taught them to break down the walls of prejudice.

Meanwhile, the woman hurried back to the village to tell the townspeople about her conversation with Jesus. Meeting Jesus had made her forget not only why she had come to the well but also the shame she

# A Rabbinic View of Women

The disciples were surprised that Jesus was talking with a woman (John 4:27). The ancient Jewish rabbis considered women to be far inferior to men. This can be seen in some of their sayings:

- "He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna [hell]."
- "If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery."
- "Blessed art thou, O Lord . . . who hast not made me a woman."

may have carried for years. She seemed thrilled that Jesus was able to tell her everything she ever did (a slight exaggeration) and still talked with and accepted her. The woman did not say to the people, "I have found the Christ," but asked humbly, "Could this be the Christ?" (vss. 28-30). Her testimony certainly moved the villagers, for many of them went to see Jesus.

*Ask Yourself . . . What exciting thing about Christ could I share with my neighbors this week?*

Jesus' disciples had left Him weary and hungry. When they returned with the food they had bought, they urged Him to eat. Jesus declined with a puzzling statement. He said they didn't know about the food that sustained Him. Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, the disciples took His strange comment literally. They wondered among themselves whether someone had provided Him with food (vss. 31-33).

Jesus explained to His disciples that the food He was talking about was to do the will of God, who had sent Him, and complete God's work (vs. 34). (Jesus would later finish God's redemptive work on the cross.) He then used a couple of farming proverbs to teach them spiritual truths.

Perhaps as Jesus spoke they could see the Samaritans approaching in the distance. Jesus might have pointed to the Samaritans as He told His disciples to open their eyes and see the ripe harvest coming toward them. "Four months more and then the harvest" may have been a common saying among the farmers just after they planted their wheat. Jesus' disciples did not have to wait four months before the spiritual harvest was ready to be reaped. In fact, others had planted the seeds and sown the crops before them. Now they could reap the benefits of the work of others (vss. 35-38). Whether we sow or reap the good news of salvation, together we rejoice when repentant souls bear fruit as a result of God's redemptive plan.

## **d** The Samaritans Believe for Themselves (4:39-42)

**They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."** —John 4:42

The Samaritans were amazed that Jesus had such incredible insight into the personal life of the woman they knew so well. As a result of the woman's testimony, many of them came to believe in Him. They were even more impressed with Jesus when they met Him face-to-face. They insisted that He remain with them, so Jesus stayed for two days. During this time other villagers came to believe in Him after listening to Him preach (vss. 39-41).

After listening to Jesus, the people told the woman that their faith was no longer based on her testimony but on their own experience of being with Him (vs. 42). They had discovered and experienced God's truth for themselves, not secondhand.

*Ask Yourself . . . At what point in my life did I "own" my faith?*

As a result of their time with Christ, the Samaritans believed and declared Jesus to be "the Savior of the world." The only other time this title is applied to Jesus in the Bible is in I John 4:14.

From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus extended His hand to people steeped in sin and lost in false doctrine. Truly there is no one Jesus cannot reach.

### **John 4:43—5:47 in Brief**

After Jesus spent two days with His new followers in Samaria, He went to Galilee. There He was greeted enthusiastically, for the people there had witnessed the miracles He had performed in Jerusalem during the Passover Feast. In Cana a high official approached Jesus and begged Him to go to Capernaum and heal his dying son. Jesus told the man that only a miracle would persuade him to believe. The official continued to plead and Jesus responded by telling him that his son would live. As the official was returning home, his servants met him and told him that his son was getting well. After the man

learned that his son's fever broke just when Jesus related this to him, he and his household became believers.

Jesus performed another healing miracle later at a pool in Jerusalem where He enabled a lame man to walk. Since it was the Sabbath, however, some Jews were disturbed that the man who once could not walk was now carrying his mat. Because Jesus made other people well on the sabbath and declared Himself to be equal to God, these Jews plotted to kill Him.

Jesus also told His enemies that others had testified to His divine Sonship. First was John the Baptist, who prepared the hearts of the people for this truth. More importantly, Jesus' earthly works were evidence that God had sent Him. Indeed, God the Father and the Scriptures testify concerning Jesus. If Jesus' enemies had truly believed what Moses wrote, they would have believed in Jesus—but they did not.