

## Chapter 8: The Gift of Jesus

*John 4:1–26*

The life and ministry of Jesus is filled with surprises, but everything we have read so far in the Gospel of John seems like a reasonable action for the Messiah to take. Certainly, Jesus is the one who has descended from heaven (John 3:13), so his teaching and his ministry often challenge our preconceptions; however, on the whole, the nature of Jesus' ministry since the day John the Baptist revealed him to Israel has been a steady increase of public ministry. If we were to imagine what the story of Jesus might look like from the end of John 3 onward, we would probably expect a pretty steady stream of stories like the ones we have already seen, filled with Jesus' teaching, the world's misunderstanding, and a lot of conflict. John 4, however, throws us a curveball.

When Jesus starts to attract the attention of the Jewish authorities, Jesus avoids further conflict at this time by leaving Judea altogether to go to Galilee (John 4:3), and on his way, he stops for rest in a small town in Samaria called Sychar (John 4:4). The Jews despised the Samaritans (John 4:9), but Jesus goes out of his way to have a conversation with a candidate with three strikes that should have disqualified her from Jesus' interaction, according to the standards of the day: (1) a Samaritan, (2) a woman, and (3) a sinner.<sup>1</sup> Jesus should have avoided her altogether, but he instead offers the woman fuller revelation about himself than he had even with the respectable religious teacher Nicodemus. In this story, we see God's heart for the world—a heart shaped by overflowing grace and mercy toward those whom we deem to be the least deserving. In this scandalous story, Jesus reveals the full extent of God's gift of grace to the world.

### **Necessary Labor (John 4:1–6)**

John the Evangelist does not tell us how long Jesus remained in the Judean countryside during his ministry of baptism alongside John the Baptist (John 3:22–24), but the time has come for Jesus to move toward the next installment of his mission. Accordingly, Jesus heads out of Judea toward Galilee (John 4:3) after learning “that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John” (John 4:1). The Pharisees sent a delegation to investigate John the Baptist's ministry (John 1:24), so Jesus leaves town before the Pharisees can likewise investigate him. The Pharisees will have plenty of opportunities to investigate Jesus later on (John 7:32; 8:13; 9:13–40), but the time for such engagement has not yet arrived.

### The Labor of Jesus and His Disciples

As we mentioned in our previous study, John the Evangelist waits until this passage to inform us that “Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples” (John 4:2). In part, this statement differentiates the ministry of Jesus from the ministry of John the Baptist, demonstrating that Jesus is greater than the Baptist by commissioning and overseeing—rather than directly administering—

baptism.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, it is likely that Jesus refused to baptize so that no one baptized directly by Jesus could claim that his own baptism was better than those who had been baptized only by John the Baptist or Jesus' disciples.<sup>3</sup> This statement may also prepare us for Jesus' insistence that his disciples must themselves enter into the harvest of ministry in the second half of the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:31–38).

Along these lines, we should take careful notice of the detail that Jesus was “wearied” from his journey when he came to sit down at Jacob’s well in Sychar (John 4:6). On the surface, this description demonstrates that Jesus is indeed a human being who experienced real human limitations of physical fatigue—and also of safety from persecution (John 4:1–3), thirst (John 4:7), and hunger (John 4:8, 31–33).<sup>4</sup> The word for “wearied,” however, is the same word that Jesus uses later to describe the “labor” of those who have sowed the seed of the gospel, preparing for the great harvest before Jesus’ disciples ever arrived on the scene: “I sent you to reap that for which you did not *labor*. Others have *labored*, and you have entered into their *labor*” (John 4:38). Seeing Jesus “wearied” (or, “labored”) at the beginning of this story, then, symbolizes the “labor” that God has been doing across salvation history through his various servants—the labor that Jesus’ disciples have begun to enter into through their baptizing (John 4:2), and the labor that Jesus will increasingly transfer to his disciples over the rest of his ministry, especially through the Great Commission he leaves with them (and us!) before ascending into heaven (Matt. 28:16–20). There is much work to be done (including this mission to the Samaritans), and Jesus is wearied by it.

Ultimately, Jesus himself will face a unique labor that he cannot share with his disciples when he goes to the cross. At the cross, Jesus will experience an even greater “thirst” (John 19:28) than the thirst that prompts him to ask for a drink from this Samaritan woman (John 4:7), for the cross will drain every last drop of strength, life, and vitality from him as he labors to undo the curse of sin and death by bearing it himself.<sup>5</sup> Still, Jesus certainly did not come to do *all* the labor. On the contrary, Jesus came to call, equip, and commission his disciples to carry on the labor of the harvest on his behalf. The example Jesus sets here, though, is not of engaging in ministry from a position of strength, but of engaging in ministry when his Father puts him in conversations with people who need the gospel, whether Jesus feels strong enough for the task or not. We will return to the theme of the labor of ministry in the next chapter when we study the second part of the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman.

### The Necessity of Samaria

For Jesus to get to Galilee, John writes that Jesus “had to pass through Samaria” (John 4:4). This is an important statement in the narrative, since Samaria is the last place we should expect to find Jesus, and we need some kind of explanation for this surprising layover. In Jesus’ day, faithful Jews had no dealings whatsoever with Samaritans (John 4:9), and this animosity was not entirely unjustified. The Samaritans are related to the Jews as the surviving remnant of the northern ten tribes of the kingdom of Israel, who were conquered by the Assyrians in 722–721 BC.<sup>6</sup> Tragically, the Assyrian strategy for keeping the people they conquered in subjugation involved dividing and scattering people groups into many different places. By this, the Assyrians shattered any remaining notions of national identity and prevented any single group from gathering their strength together. So, a few Israelites remained in the land of Canaan, but the rest were scattered to other areas under Assyrian control. Then, the Assyrians also imported into that area various foreign peoples who worshiped various

foreign gods (2 Kgs. 17–18). Eventually, the remaining Israelites not only intermarried with these foreigners, but they also began to incorporate foreign worship practices alongside the worship of Yahweh—although it should be noted that the whole reason that the ten tribes of Israel were conquered by the Assyrians in the first place is that they had forsaken the faithful, pure worship of Yahweh (2 Kgs. 17:7–23).

From intermarriage and syncretism, then, arose the Samaritans. They worshiped in a rival temple on a rival mountain (Mount Gerizim instead of Mount Zion), and they rejected most of the Hebrew Scriptures except for their own corrupted version of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). The Jews were wrong to despise the Samaritans, but we should not read this as a simplistic story of blind racism. The division between Jews and Samaritans runs far backward into history, all the way back to the moment that the northern ten tribes of Israel split from the southern tribes of Judah during the reign of Rehoboam, King Solomon’s son (1 Kgs. 12). From that moment onward, the northern ten tribes rejected not only their southern brethren (the people of Judah—that is, the “Jews”), but in the process they also rejected Yahweh (1 Kgs. 12:25–33; 14:8–16).

For these reasons, many Jews traveled from Judea to Galilee not by a straight path northward through Samaria, but by crossing the Jordan River eastward before heading north, and then crossing back over the river after they had passed the land of Samaria on the west side of the Jordan.<sup>7</sup> The major exception to using this inconvenient travel itinerary happened when Jews did not have enough time and were compelled to take the more direct route from Judea to Galilee through the heart of Samaria.<sup>8</sup> Still, John does not tell us that Jesus was pressed for time or in any kind of hurry to get to Galilee. Instead, he simply informs us that Jesus “had to” pass through Samaria, without elaborating further. Whatever the immediate reason for taking the path through Samaria, Jesus now finds himself providentially in a field that is white, ready to be harvested (John 4:35).

### Living Water (John 4:7–15)

If Samaria on the whole was bad, then the specific Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets is worse. As the conversation unfolds, we will discover that Jesus is talking with not only a Samaritan woman, but a woman who is trapped in deep sexual sin (John 4:16–18). In the second dialogue of Jesus that John records for us, it is difficult to imagine a more glaring contrast between this Samaritan woman and Jesus’ first dialogue partner, Nicodemus, who was “an eminent representative of orthodox Judaism.”<sup>9</sup> And yet, as John Calvin rightly notes, “This is certainly an astonishing instance of his goodness. For what was there in this wretched woman, that, from being a prostitute, she suddenly became a disciple of the Son of God? *Though in all of us he has displayed a similar instance of his compassion.*”<sup>10</sup> Even if we do not share this woman’s tragic history, not a single one of us is worthy in ourselves for Jesus to call us to be his disciple. Everything that we receive comes by grace.

#### Giving a Drink

When the Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water, Jesus begins his conversation with a request: “Give me a drink” (John 4:7). Certainly, Jesus asked this because he was a wearied human being who needed something to drink; however, we should also notice that Jesus here employs a shrewd evangelistic strategy. William Hendriksen observes:

It was an altogether natural request, for Jesus was, indeed, thirsty. At the same time it was also a manifestation of divine strategy and of psychological insight, for if you wish to gain entrance into the heart of another person two methods can be employed: a. do that person a favor; b. give that person an opportunity to do you a favor. Often b. is more effective than a. Rightly considered, however, Jesus combined the two (a. and b.)!<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, Jesus does not see this woman as someone he can coerce into his servitude by fetching him some water; rather, his intention in striking up this conversation is that he might give *her* a gift (John 4:10).

We should not miss the repetition of the word “give/gift” in this passage.<sup>12</sup> So, Jesus asks the woman to “Give” him something to drink (John 4:7), and then turns around to tell her that, if she knew the “gift” of God, she would have asked him, and he would have “given” her living water (John 4:10)—and ultimately, the woman asks for the living water that Jesus promises (John 4:15). Also, notice that John goes out of his way to tell us that this scene happens “near the field that Jacob had *given* his son Joseph” (John 4:5; cf. Gen. 48:22?). Then, when the woman questions how Jesus would give her better water than she could find in the well, she points out that it was none other than Jacob himself who “*gave* us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock” (John 4:12). In a conversation with the least deserving woman from the least deserving nation, Jesus insists on giving this woman a better gift than Jacob had given either to Joseph or to his descendants through the living water that Jesus alone provides. In this, we see a remarkable picture of God’s free grace so that we might be reminded that we too need God’s gracious gift toward us just as much as she does.

### Living Water

Given the racial and cultural tension of the day, it is not surprising that the woman scoffs at Jesus’ request: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?”, and, lest we fail to recognize the scandal of Jesus’ request, John adds a parenthetical note for our benefit: “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9). Much is standing between Jesus and this woman, and while the woman displays keen awareness of these obstacles, Jesus seems “oblivious of the boundaries and barriers that alienate and separate” them.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus does not repeat his request, and much less does he berate the woman for refusing to do as he has asked. Instead of demanding that she give something to him, Jesus instead begins to speak to the woman of what he might give to her: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10). In this context, the “gift of God” refers to the living water that Jesus would give to the woman if she would only ask. To what, then, does the “living water” refer?

Part of the answer is that the living water that Jesus speaks of forms a contrast with the water drawn from Jacob’s well (or any earthly well, for that matter). This kind of a contrast is frequent in the Gospel of John. Already, we have seen John the Baptist contrast his own water baptism with the baptism of the Holy Spirit that the Christ would bring (John 1:33). Then, Jesus’ miracle at Cana contrasted the inadequate waters of the Jewish rites of purification (John 2:6) with the abundance of Jesus’ wine.<sup>14</sup> After that, Jesus contrasted the physical temple with the temple of his body (John 2:19–21), and in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus contrasted physical birth with the new birth of

the Spirit (John 3:3–8). Later, Jesus will draw a contrast between the inability of the bread that Moses had provided to satisfy the Israelites in the wilderness with the eternal satisfaction of himself, the bread come down from heaven (John 6:26–58).

This last contrast between the bread of Moses and the heaven-sent bread of life makes the closest kind of comparison to what Jesus says to this woman when he speaks of living water.<sup>15</sup> In both places, Jesus acknowledges the greatness of the patriarchs who had fed (Moses) and watered (Jacob) God's people; however, Jesus also observes that the gifts of Moses and Jacob were temporary. The people who drank Jacob's water and who ate Moses' bread continued to thirst and to hunger (John 4:13; 6:27), and all of those people eventually died (John 6:49, 58). In contrast, Jesus promises that all those who drink his water and eat his bread shall never thirst again (John 4:13–14; 6:35) or hunger again (John 6:35)—and that those who take from Jesus will live forever (John 4:14; 6:27, 50–51, 57–58).

Nevertheless, while Jesus claims that he is the bread of life (John 6:35), Jesus does not similarly claim to be the living water.<sup>16</sup> Later on, Jesus clarifies the nature of this living water:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

Those who thirst must indeed come to Jesus in order to drink (John 7:37), for it is Jesus alone who can provide the gift of God (John 4:10). Nevertheless, when Jesus speaks about the “living water,” John explains for us that Jesus is speaking “about the Spirit” (John 7:39). If indeed Jesus is speaking about the Holy Spirit, Craig Keener wisely writes, “The informed reader will probably think back to ‘born of water’ in 3:5,”<sup>17</sup> that is, to Jesus' words to Nicodemus: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). This may explain the reason that God symbolizes the work of the Holy Spirit with water baptism, for it is the Holy Spirit who provides *living* water.

Bible scholars debate the meaning of what the woman says to Jesus next: “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water” (John 4:15). Does she remain unconvinced, saying this merely to humor a madman, which explains Jesus' need to confront her with his knowledge of her sins so that he can get her full attention?<sup>18</sup> Or, does she think that this man can actually offer her an unlimited physical water supply, even though she does not quite grasp the spiritual significance of Jesus' words?<sup>19</sup> Or, is she thoroughly intrigued by this mysterious man and his mysterious promise, yet without enough understanding to do anything other than to repeat Jesus' words in hopes that he will further explain himself?<sup>20</sup>

### Ask for the Gift of God

Much to the chagrin of our imaginations, John does not answer this question for us. His primary purpose is not to give a full psychological profile of the woman, but to reveal the glorious nature of Jesus through his dialogue with this woman.<sup>21</sup> Don't let your questions about what is going on in the mind of the Samaritan woman cloud you from recognizing the great promise that Jesus offers here. If John wanted to give us insight into this woman's secret thoughts, he could have, but he has

something much more important to teach us.

Consider, then, all the ways in which the theme of life-giving water fills the Old Testament, from beginning to end. In the beginning, a river flowed out of Eden, first to water the garden of Eden, and then out of the garden to give life to the whole world (Gen. 2:10–14); in the same way, the River of Life in the New Jerusalem will bring healing to the nations (Rev. 22:1–2). The Israelites complained about their physical thirst as they wandered in the wilderness (Ex. 17:3; Num. 20:5), even as they rejected the Fountain of Living Waters himself (Jer. 2:13). The Psalmist, however, exclaims that his thirst for God is like the thirst of a deer panting for water (Ps. 42:1), and that he thirsts for God as someone would in a dry and weary land where there is no water (Ps. 63:1). Moreover, the prophets envisioned the in-breaking of God’s salvation into this world in terms of freshly flowing water (Is. 12:3, 35:7, 41:18; Eze. 47:1–12). The Old Testament proclaims a gospel of *water* to demonstrate to us that we need God *more* than we need water, and Jesus now tells this unsuspecting Samaritan woman that he alone can give her the living water she herself has sought throughout her entire life.

Jesus doesn’t dangle the promise of water as a tantalizing, yet unattainable, false hope. He instructs the Samaritan woman that she only need to ask him for the gift of God, and he would give it to her. The same promise applies to us. For all those who are desperately thirsty for the living water that only God can give, come to Jesus and ask—he will give it to you!

### **True Worship in Spirit and Truth (John 4:16–26)**

At first glance, there seems to be no compelling reason for Jesus suddenly to bring up the Samaritan woman’s sexual sins. The fact that “Jesus accepts, Jesus commends, Jesus completes [the woman’s] confession”<sup>22</sup> that she has “no husband” by describing her full sexual history (John 4:17) informs us that Jesus knows exactly what he is asking when he tells the woman to go, call her husband, and come back to him (John 4:16). Jesus wants to bring this woman’s sin out into the open, but why would he want to do this?

#### *Wells, Wives, and Jesus*

On one level, Lenski rightly recognizes that the woman needs to see Jesus’ promise to give her living water in light of her great need for a savior:

The entire conversation on Jesus’ part is misunderstood when it is not observed that up to this point Jesus is using the gospel and that from now on he employs the law. This means that Jesus knew that the woman could not yet believe and he did not expect her to believe so soon. The law must first crush the heart in contrition, then faith can enter in, and not till then.<sup>23</sup>

While modern readers might see Jesus’ actions here as the worst kind of sexual shaming, Jesus speaks from love. He knows that the most unloving thing he could do to this woman would be to hold out the promise of living water while leaving her to remain in the pollution of her sin. Jesus extends great grace to the woman, but not the kind of false, cheap grace that *overlooks* sin. Rather, the grace of Jesus always leads us *out* of sin. The woman, for her part, eventually recognizes the kindness of

Jesus in doing this, for the gospel she preaches to her fellow Samaritans is that they must “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29).

On another level, this entire scene demands that we read it in light of stories in the Old Testament about conversations that took place at wells. In fact, three of the greatest figures in the Old Testament found their *wives* through encounters at wells. Abraham’s servant finds Isaac’s wife, Rebekah, at a well (Gen. 24:15–28). Then, Jacob meets Rachel at a well (Gen. 29:1–12). Finally, Moses also meets Zipporah at a well (Ex. 2:16–22).<sup>24</sup> The way Jesus brings up the woman’s marital status is not incidental, but central, to the story, for we are to read this conversation at the well while asking, “Is Jesus, like the patriarchs of the Old Testament, somehow seeking a bride?” Indeed, this sinful woman serves as a symbol of the church, which is the bride of Christ, brought out of sins of infidelity to God (Eze. 16, 23; Hos. 1–14) and made pure by the cleansing power of Christ’s living waters (Eph. 5:25–32; Rev. 19:7–8).

### True Worship

When Jesus exposes the woman’s sin, she responds with a theological question: “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship” (John 4:19–20). It is common to read this woman’s response as an attempt to wriggle out of an awkward situation by changing the subject, but in my judgment, that explanation does not do justice to the context of the situation. While it is true that some people prattle on about religious minutiae in order to escape dealing with the condition of their souls, it is rare for someone to *bring up* religion when they are exposed in their sin if their goal is to avoid further condemnation. Remember that up to this point Jesus and the woman had not been discussing religion (at least, not explicitly); they had been talking about the gift of the living water that Jesus would give to her. It is the woman who at this point brings up the subject of theology. If the woman wanted to change the subject to deflect attention away from herself and her sexual sins, she could have brought up absolutely *anything* other than a religious question. If she were attempting to avoid further embarrassment, changing the subject to religion permits her to escape the frying pan, but only by jumping into the fire.

If, on the other hand, you have ever spoken with people in a condition of absolute brokenness, anxious for the state of their eternal souls because they recognize the undeniable guilt of their sins, then you know that this is precisely the kind of question that they raise. They do not deflect away from their sin, but they also do not dwell on their sin, strictly speaking. Instead, they become anxious to find the *solution* to their sin, and they inquire pleadingly about Jesus Christ. When God convicts sinners of their guilt, they become desperate to find out what they must do to be saved (cf. Acts 2:37; 16:30).

Furthermore, we should notice that Jesus does not force her to return to the subject of her sin as he might have done if she were deflecting or willfully ignoring his point (cf. John 8:12–58). Rather, Jesus is eager to take up her question. While we are tempted to think that the subject of true worship is unrelated to sexual sins, Jesus takes the opposite opinion. To Jesus, *nothing* is more relevant in a conversation about sexual sin than the nature of true worship!<sup>25</sup>

### The Indwelling Spirit

Still, while the woman is inquiring about the right *subject*, she is asking the wrong *question*. She

imagines that true worship is defined along the lines of the worship wars in which the Samaritans and the Jews had been locked for some time. For them, the question of true worship was a question of *place*—that is, where should worship be offered, on Mount Gerizim or on Mount Zion (John 4:20)? In other words, was the temple that the Samaritans had set up legitimate, or would this Jewish man tell her (like all the other Jews) that she and the rest of the Samaritans were wrong to worship on Mount Gerizim. In other words, is all that she had devoted herself to throughout her life (albeit through significant hardship and sin) a sham, or would this prophet vindicate her worship on Mount Gerizim?

Now, the woman's question may sound strange to our ears today, but it was an entirely reasonable question to ask, since God himself had put the *place* where his people worshiped him as an issue of the utmost importance under the old covenant. In Deuteronomy 12:1–28, Moses instructs God's people to sacrifice and worship him only at the place where God would "put his name and make his habitation there" (Deut. 12:5). In case they missed it, Moses repeats and emphasizes the commandment several times, even saying, "Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, but at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you" (Deut. 12:13–14). In the closing statement of this chapter, Moses reiterates the importance of the place where God's people worshiped: "Be careful to obey all these words that I command you, that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God" (Deut. 12:28). *We* might not care much about the place where God's people worshiped now that we enjoy the blessings of the new covenant, but during the days of the old covenant, *God* cared deeply about the place of worship, and this woman understands as much.

Jesus responds by first telling the woman that place would not be the central issue to worship forever: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" (John 4:21). The woman had given Jesus two options—Mount Gerizim and Mount Zion—and Jesus chooses neither as the long-term option. Second, Jesus also rejects the idea that any kind of worship at all will do. Despite the fact that place will not always be important for true worship, the Jews (and not the Samaritans) have been correct in their insistence of worshiping at Mount Zion: "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). God did indeed choose Mount Zion in Jerusalem as the place where he would cause his name to dwell, and much of the reason that the Samaritans rejected all of the Hebrew Scriptures aside from the first five books of the Bible is that Jerusalem and Mount Zion begin to take a much more central place in the storyline through the rest of the Scriptures. Jesus is vindicating the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament as being the truthful account of God's dealings with his people, Israel.

Third, Jesus returns to the first, long-term answer he had given by again foretelling a time when place would no longer matter: "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23–24). In the Old Testament, the reason that *place* was so important is that God had actually chosen one specific place where he would uniquely dwell. As Solomon reminds us in his prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kgs. 8:27), yet nevertheless this temple would be "the place of which you have



said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place” (1 Kgs. 8:29). At the dedication of the temple, the cloud of God’s glory was so overwhelming that even the priests could not stand to minister in the temple (1 Kgs. 8:10–11).

Yet, when Israel sinned against God, defiling the temple by their unfaithfulness, the glory of the LORD departed from the place of the temple, taking God’s presence away from that place (Eze. 10–11). What made the *place* of the temple significant was the presence of God’s Spirit, but when God’s Spirit departed from the place, the temple became a meaningless building. What Jesus is saying, then, is that God’s great desire is to dwell with his people directly. In part, Jesus has accomplished this through his incarnation, where he, the eternal Word, became flesh and tabernacled among us (John 1:14). Jesus’ own body is the temple (John 2:21), the place that God’s glorious presence fills. The reason Jesus has come, then, is not to bring the indwelling glory of God into the temple building in Jerusalem, but to create a new kind of temple where God, who is spirit, will directly indwell his people, so that God’s *people* will become his temple (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–5).

### Worship in Spirit and Truth

It is only when God the Spirit indwells his people that they are capable of becoming “true worshipers” who “will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23). Worship can no longer consist of bare external rites, but true worship must spring from the depths of our spirits, as the Holy Spirit aids us. In addition to saying that we must worship in spirit, Jesus adds that we must worship in truth, possibly to communicate to the Samaritan woman that the false worship on a false mountain of the Samaritans would not be permissible, but also to insist that we must worship according to *all* truth. As Lenski writes, “Omit the spirit, and though you have the truth, the worship becomes formalism, mere ritual observance. Omit the truth, and though the whole soul is thrown into the worship, it becomes an abomination. Thus ‘spirit and truth’ form a unit, two halves that belong together in every act of worship.”<sup>26</sup> This new worship that Jesus himself inaugurates will require that we offer the totality of our hearts and our minds in love toward God.

The process of transforming the nature of true worship has already begun, but, as of the time of his conversation with the woman, is not yet complete: “the hour is coming, and is now here...” (John 4:23). Jesus must complete his earthly ministry, suffer and die on the cross, and be raised up from the dead in order to usher in the fullness of this new worship in spirit and truth through the giving of the Holy Spirit—that is, through giving his people the living water that Jesus had spoken of earlier in his conversation with the woman.

Tentatively, the woman makes an observation about the coming of the Messiah that invites Jesus to confirm his identity: “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things” (John 4:26). There is no way that the Samaritan woman began her day with the expectation that she would later meet the Christ, but in the course of her conversation with this strange Jewish man who asked her for a drink of water, she can now reach no other conclusion. And indeed, Jesus confirms her suspicions: “I who speak to you am he” (John 4:26). The Messiah has come, and he has revealed himself to a sinful Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in Sychar—and he continues to reveal himself to you and me!

### Receiving the Gift of Living Water

No matter whether your background is every bit as respectable as that of Nicodemus, or as

shameful as that of this Samaritan woman, you need the living water that only Jesus can provide. This living water of the Holy Spirit quenches, purifies, and wells up into eternal life to make true worshippers in spirit and truth, and no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of this water—that is, of the Spirit.

What keeps you from drinking deeply from the living water that Jesus gives? Is it Nicodemus's pride of respectability, leading to fear that you would need to admit you have been wrong in what you have believed or done through your life? Or is it the Samaritan woman's shame of grievous sin, so that the prospect of being exposed paralyzes you with fear? One of the reasons that John gives us both of these stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman is so that we might see ourselves in one (or both!) of them, for both of these people eventually put their pride aside to come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. For the Samaritan woman, this faith comes quickly, as is often the case with someone who has nothing to lose and everything to gain through Christ. For Nicodemus, this faith comes more slowly, as that of a man who must calculate the cost of losing his pride of position in society and the teaching that he has devoted his life to, in order to gain Christ.

But if a legalistic Pharisee and a licentious, sexual sinner can both drink from the fountain of living waters through Jesus, then what excuse do you have? Why put off the joy of worshiping in spirit and truth? “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Is. 55:1). Come to Christ and drink.

## Discussion Questions

1. Who is the most shocking person you have ever seen turn around to become a Christian? In your heart, do you consider yourself just as unworthy to receive the grace of God?
2. Why does God describe himself through the whole Bible as “living water”? Where do you find yourself experiencing the most acute *spiritual* thirst? How has God quenched your thirst in the past? What can we learn for seeking God's living water for the future?
3. How do you react when God exposes your sins to you? Where do you turn—toward hiding (perhaps by redirecting the conversation), or toward the Savior Jesus in desperation?
4. Do you first emphasize the importance of worshiping in *truth*, or in *spirit*? When you come to corporate worship, which do you notice yourself to be the most critical about in yourself or in others around you? How do you prepare yourself for seeking to worship in spirit and truth?

## Notes

1. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 225.
2. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 146.
3. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 298.
4. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 145. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/>>

ccel/calvin/calcom34.x.i.html>

5. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 591.

6. For more details on the history of the Samaritan people beyond the brief summary given here, see Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 216.

7. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 226.

8. Leon Morris notes that “Josephus uses exactly the expression rendered ‘had to’ when he says, ‘for rapid travel, it was essential to take that route (i.e., through Samaria)’ (*Vit.* 269).” (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 226.)

9. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 225.

10. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 147–48, emphasis added. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.x.ii.html>>

11. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 159.

12. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 602.

13. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 154.

14. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 58.

15. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 60.

16. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 230–31.

17. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 601.

18. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 233.

19. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 163–64.

20. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 158.

21. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 152.

22. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 316.

23. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 313.

24. Keener points out more parallels: “But this Jacob scene in Gen 29 recapitulates in some measure the scene in Gen 24, in which Abraham’s steward finds a wife for Isaac. Thus we find several formal parallels with Gen 24, where a man who is journeying meets a woman in her homeland when she comes for water; after she runs home, others who know her (Gen 24:28–29; John 4:30) come out to meet him and invite him to stay (Gen 24:30–32; John 4:40). Further, she went to the fountain and filled her pitcher (Gen 24:16); the man asked her for a drink (Gen 24:17); like Jesus, the steward refused to eat until his mission was accomplished (Gen. 24:33; John 4:31–34)...The allusion to the finding of matriarchs for Israel may invite the reader to contemplate the ultimate identity of this Samaritan woman whom God is seeking, not on the basis of her past but on the basis of God’s calling: she will become foundational to a new community of faith and obedience (4:39).” (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 586.)

25. On these points, Lenski states the matter well: “What now follows has again been misunderstood. In fact, the previous wrong conceptions culminate at this point and create confusion. Thus it is said that a gap occurs at this point, and that John skipped what lies between. Again, that the woman with quick wit here turns the conversation away from these delicate and painful personal matters to a question that Jews and Samaritans argued; that she makes a tricky dialectical evasion. But then Jesus would never have answered as he did, carefully and to the point, the very question the woman raises. He would have rebuked her and have driven in more deeply the hook of the law she would thus be evading. Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where they must worship. The woman really asks Jesus, who are right, her ancestors or the Jews (emphatic ὑμεῖς). This she does in connection with her unqualified admission of sin and guilt. The matter is of the gravest personal concern to her for this reason and for this alone. She admits that she needs cleansing. Where is she to obtain it?” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 318.)

26. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 323.