

## Chapter 9: The Labor of Jesus

*John 4:27–42*

We cannot be surprised to see the disciples marvel at Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman when they return with food (John 4:27). They have come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, but they do not yet fully understand what that means that he will be or do—and furthermore, they do not understand what that will mean for their own lives as they continue to follow Jesus. What surprises them today will eventually become their mission in life, and Jesus begins to prepare them for that calling in this second half of the story of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman. After having explained to the Samaritan woman the nature of true worship in the first half of this story, Jesus now turns to teach his disciples about the nature of kingdom work, including the sowing and reaping into which he is now calling them to enter.

In this passage, Jesus explains the way that the kingdom will grow: each generation will sow *and* reap. Through this process, reapers will bring in a harvest that they have not labored for, and sowers will not be cheated out of the joy of their labor if someone afterward enters into the labor that they began. On the contrary, sower and reaper will rejoice together in the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ (John 4:36). True worship of God in spirit and truth necessarily flows out into the true work of sowing and reaping an eternal harvest of sinners reconciled to God through Christ. This is not merely the mission that Jesus gives to his immediate disciples, but the mission that Jesus has entrusted to his entire church throughout the ages.

### **“Come, See!” (John 4:27–30)**

John puts emphasis on the fact that immediately after Jesus reveals himself as the Christ to the Samaritan woman, the disciples return: “Just then his disciples came back” (John 4:27). In the same way that Jesus “had to pass through Samaria” (John 4:3), leading him to meet this woman, so also his disciples have been away until now, giving Jesus the perfect amount of time to finish on this high point of his conversation with the woman. The Gospel of John does not record any other place where Jesus reveals himself to anyone else that he is the Christ, although some people have reached that conclusion on their own (John 1:41, 3:28). Jesus, though, chooses to reveal his identity to this woman, and the disciples do not return a moment too soon to interrupt him from doing so.

When they do return and “marvel” to see Jesus talking with a woman, John notes that none of the disciples is willing to ask Jesus about it (John 4:27). According to the customs of the day, rabbis were forbidden from speaking with any woman in public—even the rabbi's own wife—for a variety of reasons. One reason for such a rule was a super-abundance of caution to prevent the kind of gossip that could undermine the rabbi's teaching authority.<sup>1</sup> Another reason, sadly, was the belief that women were simply not worth a rabbi's time. Some rabbinical writings warned that taking the time to teach a woman (even one's own wife) represented such a wicked diversion from studying the law

that it could possibly lead the rabbi to hell—and some more extreme teachers even argued that teaching a woman the law was as bad as selling one’s own daughter into prostitution.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Jesus’ disciples marvel to find their rabbi engaged in this forbidden conversation underscores Jesus’ simultaneous love for people and disdain for any rule, custom, or barrier that might prevent him from reaching the people whom he loves.

### Leaving the Water Jar

The Samaritan woman, however, has heard enough. Immediately after Jesus reveals himself as the Christ (and just as the disciples are returning), she departs to go back into her town, and John includes for us a small detail that the woman leaves her water jar behind to do so. As with many of these small details in the Gospel of John, there is a surface-level explanation for what we read that opens up into a larger, symbolic meaning which then teaches us something more significant about what we are seeing. On the surface, the fact that this woman leaves her water jar behind suggests that this conversation with Jesus has so significantly “gripped her heart” that she leaves behind anything that will slow her down from telling her people what she has heard.<sup>3</sup> Still, John writes this small detail in such a way to communicate *more* than eager zeal behind her leaving the water jar behind.

Significantly, William Hendriksen points out that John does not say that the woman “forgot” her water jar, but that she “left” it.<sup>4</sup> The same verb for “left” appears at the beginning of this chapter, where we read that Jesus “*left* Judea and departed again for Galilee” (John 4:3), which was a deliberate act. Is it possible that this woman did not, in her haste, simply forget to take her water jar with her, but that she chose to leave it behind? Additionally, notice that John has not used the word for “water jar” until now in *this* passage, even though the presence of some kind of jar has been assumed (cf. John 4:11). But while John has not spoken of a water jar in this passage, the word he uses in John 4:28 for “water jar” is same word he used in John 2:6–7 to describe the “six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification,” and these two locations are the only place in the entire New Testament that we find this word. In some way, it seems that John means for us to see a connection between the way that Jesus set aside the six stone water jars for purification in order to make wine there, and the way that the Samaritan woman sets aside her own water jar when she goes back to her people here.

Now, we should note that the woman’s water jar would be a common water jar for carrying water from the well back to her home, so that the water jar could not be used for any kind of ritual purification.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the point of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman has not been to contrast Jesus against the inadequacies of Jewish rites of purification (as in John 2:1–11), but to contrast the gift of Jacob’s well (a well that cannot eternally quench thirst; John 4:13) with Jesus’ gift of living water, so that anyone who drinks from the living water that Jesus gives will never thirst again (John 4:14). The “water jars” in Cana are abandoned for a different reason from why the woman leaves her own water jar with Jesus, but the overall effect in both cases makes the same point: “Just as Jesus’ gift is greater than the waters of ritual purity, it is greater than the gift of Jacob’s well.”<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Hendriksen expands on his observation that the woman did not *forget* her water jar to suggest that she may have deliberately left the water jar to give Jesus the water that he asked for at the beginning of the conversation. If she did deliberately leave her water jar in order to give this Jewish man a drink, though, her actions could reflect a significant theological application of what

Jesus told her about the nature of true worship:

Having heard the stranger's great declaration, and being now fully convinced that genuine worship is of an entirely spiritual nature and that accordingly there can be no basic objection to the idea of Jews and Samaritans drinking from the same pitcher, she purposely leaves the jar at the well, so that Jesus may quench his physical thirst, and so that he may know that she has taken to heart the lesson [about] the nature of true religion. Afterward, having led a multitude of people to the well, she can retrieve her pitcher.<sup>7</sup>

It may be a stretch to suggest that the woman has performed all of these theological calculations on the spot, for even the great Apostle Peter had to receive three visions from God before he could be persuaded that Christ had superseded purity laws (Acts 10:9–16). Nevertheless, the explanation for leaving her water jar behind may be altogether simpler. The woman may have merely come to trust the Messiah who “will tell us all things” (John 4:25). If the Messiah asked her to give him a drink of water (John 4:7), who was she to turn him down?

### “Come, See!”

While we may wish to have more information about why the woman left the water pitcher with Jesus, John gives us plenty of information about why the woman went back to her town. When she meets the people in her town, she urges them, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29). Earlier, Jesus had invited two of his disciples to follow him with the words “Come and you will see” (John 1:39), and then Philip responded to Nathanael's skepticism about Jesus with “Come and see” (John 1:46). When we looked at Philip's response, we observed that he did not try to answer Nathanael's objections—perhaps because he did not yet know enough to be able to do so. In the same way, the woman does not pretend that she understands everything about who Jesus is or what his arrival might mean. Instead, she simply invites her fellow Samaritans to come and see this man for themselves, asking them, “Can this be the Christ?”

The woman does give evidence that this man might indeed be the Christ, but the evidence she gives comes not by wielding some complicated biblical or theological argument. Instead, she declares, “Come, see *a man who told me all that I ever did*. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29). In order to urge her people to come see Christ for themselves, she gladly reports the way in which Jesus exposed her sin to her. From this, we cannot possibly interpret Christ's earlier question and revelation about the woman's multiple husbands as though he were pouring more shame on a woman whose life was already characterized by shame. Rather, her testimony serves as “a profound indication that Jesus had offered grace to a shame-filled sinner. She had tasted enough of the grace of God that she could allow her sins to be exposed, first to Christ, and then to her neighbors.”<sup>8</sup> Because we care about people, we cannot overlook the destructive sin in their lives any more than a doctor could ignore cancer in a patient. Nevertheless, when we must lead people to deal honestly with their sin, we must do so by pointing to the hope of grace that Jesus offers in the living water of the gospel. May multitudes of sinners come to Christ in our own churches, saying the same thing that this woman said about Jesus about the way that we walk with them through their sin and shame!

In evangelism, we would do well to learn from the Samaritan woman's example. On the one hand, if we feel that we do not know enough about Christianity to evangelize, we should see the

way that this woman knows almost nothing—except the fact that this man must be the Christ—so she does what she can by inviting people to come see for themselves to make up their own minds about whether he is indeed the Christ. Even if you aren't equipped with all the knowledge about Christianity that others have, would you be at least able to invite people to come and see for themselves the little that you *have* come to understand about Jesus?

On the other hand, if you *do* know much about Christianity, beware getting in the way of other people from coming to see Christ directly, for themselves. Rely less on your clever arguments (or, at least, the arguments that seem clever to you in your own spiritual journey), and instead put a priority on directing people to read about Jesus for themselves in the Scriptures. Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand, so we are not able to bring people to him bodily. Nevertheless, the word of God is mighty to save, since God's Holy Spirit uses the word to connect us with Christ in the heavenly places. Let Jesus speak for himself in his word, and don't eclipse his glory by trying to impress people with your own learning. It is through the humble, simple testimony of this woman that the Samaritans "went out of the town and were coming to him" (John 4:30).

### **The Labor of Jesus (John 4:31–38)**

Meanwhile, back at the well, Jesus' disciples urge their master to eat something (John 4:31). Presumably, the original reason they left Jesus at the well to go buy food was that he was weary (John 4:6), thirsty (John 4:7), and hungry (John 4:8), so they purchased this food largely for him. Nevertheless, Jesus refuses to eat, telling them that "I have food to eat that you do not know about" (John 4:32). The disciples quite naturally understand Jesus' words to mean that someone else has given him food to eat (John 4:33),<sup>9</sup> but Jesus explains instead that "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34).

By describing his work as "food," Jesus speaks to the satisfaction he gains from it. Jesus does not do ministry "with professional ease,"<sup>10</sup> but instead he "was so anxious about the salvation of men, that it gave him the highest delight to procure it."<sup>11</sup> We often hear of the way that scholars, artists, and business people can become so thoroughly engrossed in their work at times that they forget to eat meals, losing track of the time; how much more does Christ here forget his physical hunger through the nourishing satisfaction of seeing a sinner come to faith in him? This was the plan for the salvation of the world that he entered into with his Father before the foundations of the world were laid (cf. Eph. 1:3), and he was at last seeing these plans come to fruition—not only with the timeless, eternal eyes of his divine nature, but with the time-bound eyes of his human nature that had to wait roughly thirty years in anticipation of seeing broken sinners like this woman come to salvation. What joy he must have experienced to watch the woman rushing away, transformed by fresh faith and ready to share that faith with other lost people who also needed him!

Specifically, this is not the work of Jesus alone, but the work that the Father and the Son planned from all eternity past, which is why Jesus says that his food is "to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." As God, the eternal Son shares in the full glory of the Father, so that this is his plan from all eternity past as well. As the incarnate Christ, the Son has emptied himself of his divine glory and privilege in the form of God (Phil. 2:6) in order to take the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7) to do all that his Father sends him to do—and Christ is determined to complete the work that his Father has given him. The word for "accomplish" is a word that we will encounter frequently in the

Gospel of John, meaning “finish” or “fulfill.” Most significantly, we will find this same verb used in John 19:30, when Jesus cries out immediately before his death, “It is finished.”<sup>12</sup> Just as Moses had preached to the Israelites in the wilderness that they would not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God, so Jesus insists that he does not find his food in eating, but in fulfilling every part of the mission that his Father has sent him to accomplish.<sup>13</sup>

### Fields White for Harvest

We do not know the original source of the saying that Jesus assumes to be well known to his disciples: “Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?’” (John 4:35). It is possible that there were actually four more months from this story until the time of the Harvest, which would help us to date this story as taking place some time in December or January, since “barley was harvested in March, wheat from mid-April until the end of May.”<sup>14</sup> This interpretation is unlikely, though, since it that would mean that the disciples must have been talking about how much time was left until the harvest, even though we do not know of any specific disciple who was a farmer before leaving everything to follow Jesus. How much do fishermen, tax collectors, and political zealots care about the harvest from four months out? This interpretation is possible, but unlikely.

Much stronger is the suggestion that this may have been a common proverb of the day, even though scholars have not found this *oral* saying repeated in any *written* document.<sup>15</sup> If a proverb, then the saying probably means something along the lines of “indicating that there is no hurry for a particular task. The seed may be planted, but there is no way of getting around the months of watering. Growth is slow and cannot be hurried.”<sup>16</sup> If this interpretation of the saying is correct, then Jesus is drawing a contrast between the steady, unhurried nature of bringing in the agricultural harvest and the urgent task of bringing in the spiritual harvest now. The fields of the spiritual harvest, Jesus insists, are ready for harvest immediately—they are “white for harvest” (John 4:35). Farmers live seasonal lives with work that varies according to the current season. Some seasons involve relatively light physical work, but not harvest season. When the harvest time comes, everything comes to a stop, and everyone pitches in with all their strength to do all that is necessary until the harvest has been brought in, losing the harvest would mean the waste of an entire year’s work. If the farmers do not collect the harvest, the grain may “fall to the ground and be lost,” and in the same way, any delay in the spiritual harvest would be “injurious.”<sup>17</sup> We cannot wait even four months—the harvest is ready immediately.

### Spiritual Rewards

To motivate his disciples, Jesus does not urge his disciples into the harvest only by warning of the loss that could come through delaying, but also by the promise of reward: “Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together” (John 4:36). Ultimately, Jesus is the supreme Sower.<sup>18</sup> He is the first Sower who begins the work of scattering the seed of the gospel across multiple kinds of soil (Matt. 13:1–23). Furthermore, he himself is the seed who must fall to the ground and die in order to bring about a harvest of much fruit (John 12:24). Finally, when Jesus speaks of the “labor” that his disciples will enter into (“I sent you to reap that for which you did not *labor*. Others have *labored*, and you have entered into their *labor*”; John 4:36), the word for “labor” is the same word that we read about Jesus in the beginning of

this passage: “Jesus, *wearied/labored* as he was from the journey, was sitting beside the well” (John 4:6). The harvest that Jesus sends his disciples to bring in from the Samaritans began with the labor that Jesus has been busy doing, given to him from his Father who sent him (John 4:34), from even before the moment that Jesus arrived at Sychar in Samaria. Jesus is sending his disciples to begin “receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life” from what *he* has done as the Sower. Certainly, many others will assist Jesus in the work of both sowing and reaping, but the work chiefly belongs to Jesus himself.

So, the harvest will not wait, and “already” reapers are receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life. Probably, “the one who reaps” who is “already” receiving wages is the Samaritan woman who is right now on her way to go reap a harvest from her fellow Samaritans. As they come to Jesus (John 4:30) and believe upon him, she will have a special opportunity for rejoicing in seeing the people of her city come to know the Savior of the world (John 4:42). But, when Jesus says that the one who reaps is “receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life” (John 4:36), is Jesus teaching us about some kind of wages that we will receive for our labor. Or, does this mean something else?

The language of rewards, wages, and fruit in passages like these (cf. Matt. 20:1–16; Mark 10:23–31; Luke 14:12–14; 1 Cor. 3:5–15) have been explained in many ways. Some argue that these passages cannot speak to any kind of rewards, since rewards are given on the basis of merit, and therefore incompatible with grace. This may be true in the rewards that are given according to the ways of the world, but this is not the basis on which God rewards his people. In this passage and others, the biblical idea of reward is never that Christians will receive rewards according to the measure of our meritorious contributions, but the opposite: we are rewarded on the basis of *grace*, not merit. We are saved on the basis of God’s grace, and not our own works (Eph. 2:8–9), in order that God might reward us with eternal life (John 3:36). In the same way, when we are rewarded for the work in the harvest that we do as believers (“receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life”), we must confess that we have done nothing on our own, but that every good thing we do flows from the grace of God working in us (1 Cor. 15:10) to give us the desire and the power to do what he commands (Phil. 2:12–13).

Furthermore, when we stop to think honestly about the rewards that even the best works that we accomplish might deserve, we are forced to recognize how far short we fall rather than how successful we have been. John Calvin writes this:

It is for this purpose that Scripture everywhere mentions reward, and not for the purpose of leading us to judge from it as to the merits of works; for which of us, if we come to a reckoning, will not be found more worthy of being punished for slothfulness than of being rewarded for diligence? To the best laborers nothing else will be left than to approach to God in all humility to implore forgiveness. But the Lord, who acts towards us with the kindness of a father, in order to correct our sloth, and to encourage us who would otherwise be dismayed, deigns to bestow upon us an undeserved reward.

This is so far from overturning justification by faith that it rather confirms it.<sup>19</sup>

As Paul demands, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). We earn and deserve nothing but condemnation, but God in his super-abundance of grace toward us nevertheless chooses not only to bless us in Christ,

but to reward the work that we do in Christ as well. Everything we have comes by grace alone, though faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

Others, however, go to the opposite extreme by building elaborate schemes from flimsy proof-texts to describe God's compensation package of the types of rewards that we can expect for various kinds and degrees of services. Reading passage after passage in the Bible out of context, they twist the gracious nature of what God promises into a crassly materialistic structure of rewards. In these cases, charitable giving becomes an investment in a heavenly bank account that we will be able to draw upon in glory. Or, some prosperity preachers even twist these biblical passages shamelessly for their own profit, urging (usually poor) people to give money to their "ministries" with the assurance that God will give a "hundredfold" (Mark 10:30) of that money back to them in return, as though giving were a more secure version of a slot machine at the casinos. This is a wicked, abominable lie, and it is a blasphemous distortion of God's promises and God's grace.

In this passage, Jesus corrects this materialistic error by describing the nature of the reward that God promises his people for their labor: *joy*.<sup>20</sup> The reaper receives wages and gathers fruit for eternal life "so that sower and reaper may *rejoice* together" (John 4:36). It is not that the reaper is trying to earn a bigger mansion in heaven, but that the reaper works for the joy of seeing God's work come to fruition unto salvation—salvation that will endure among the people of God throughout all eternity. The rewards that God gives us are not like the bonus that your employer might add to your paycheck for a job well done any more than the reward of a good marriage would be for a husband to tip his wife when she pleases him. In such an intimate relationship, material rewards are inappropriate and demeaning. The only appropriate reward for a good, intimate relationship—whether that of a husband with a wife, or of God with his people—is the ever-increasing joy that unfolds between the two parties. We work for God's harvest because we desire an ever-increasing experience of God's *pleasure*.

### The Labor of the Sower and the Reaper

Notice, though, that Jesus describes his disciples exclusively as the *reapers* in the language he uses here. Their job is to bring in the harvest now that *others* have already sown the seed: "For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor" (John 4:37–38). The nature of sowing and reaping is fairly clear not only from this story, but also from passages in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 13:1–9; Mark 4:26–29; 1 Cor. 3:5–9). To sow is to preach the good news of Jesus, and to reap is to lead people into faith in that good news. Jesus is telling the disciples that they have a remarkable opportunity to bring in a harvest directly, since other people have already done the hard work of sowing the seed—not to mention the hard work of preparing the soil or watering the sown seed. They will see the fruit of their work immediately, whereas others who went before them have labored long without seeing their work ready for harvest.

Jesus then points to another common, proverbial saying of the day: "One sows and another reaps" (John 4:37). Normally, this statement speaks to great inequalities and injustices in the world, where the work of one person is enjoyed by another; however, Jesus is teaching his disciples that they will not enjoy the harvest alone, but instead *together* with the sowers.<sup>21</sup> He is indeed sending his disciples to reap what they have not sown (John 4:38), but when his disciples bring in this harvest, the sower and reaper will rejoice together (John 4:36). When they enter into the labor of others, they

will not cut out the earlier laborers of the fruit of their work; rather, all the laborers (sowers and reapers alike) will enter *together* into the joy of God.

As with much in the Gospel of John, Jesus' imagery here of sowing and reaping a harvest is not new, but picked up and expanded from the Old Testament where Israel (like Eden) was the garden (or, "vineyard") that God himself had planted (e.g., Num. 24:5–6; Is. 5:1–7; Is. 27:2–6) as well as the vine that God had planted *in* that garden (e.g., Ps. 80:8–13; Eze. 15).<sup>22</sup> Later on in the Gospel of John, Jesus will pick up this language, claiming that he himself is the vine (John 15:1–11). Then, the Apostle Paul will write that the church is the field of God (1 Cor. 3:9). These metaphorical vineyards and vines (referring to God's *people*) help to explain the reason that God promised the Israelites in the old covenant that they would reap the harvest that which they themselves did not plant in the Promised Land (Deut. 6:11; Josh. 24:13)—and also the reason that God warned that the curse for disobedience would be that others would reap the harvest of what *Israel* had sown (Deut. 28:30).<sup>23</sup> God was graciously giving his people the land inhabited by the Canaanites not because God ultimately wanted them to own real estate or to profit from the harvest that the land would give to them; rather, the point was ultimately to symbolize the greater harvest of God's *people*.<sup>24</sup> Just as the the water of Jacob's well points forward to the living water that Jesus gives (John 4:12–14), and just as the bread from heaven that Moses fed the Israelites in the wilderness points forward to Jesus, the true bread who comes down from heaven as the bread of life (John 6:32–35), so the harvest that God gave his people in the Promised Land (a harvest that they did not sow) points forward to the spiritual harvest that Jesus sends his disciples in to collect.

Additionally, Jesus' saying here about one sowing and another reaping echoes two of Jesus' parables recorded for us in the Synoptic Gospels. First, in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16, Jesus tells of a vineyard owner who hired laborers at different times in the day, promising each of them a denarius for their work. At the end of the day, the vineyard owner paid his laborers, beginning with those who had begun their work at the very end of the day, and ending with those who had worked a full day—that is, those who had "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Matt. 20:12). Those who only worked a few hours were delighted to receive a denarius, since a denarius was the payment for a full day of work. But when those who worked all day along realized that they too would only receive a denarius for their work, they complained that they should receive more than those who came much later. The vineyard owner disagreed, saying, "Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (Matt. 20:13–15). In other words, all the laborers will share in the joy of the master *together*, and the point of Jesus' parable is to warn the earlier laborers (Jews? cf. Matt. 19:28) against a sense of entitlement that begrudges God's generosity toward those who began working later (Gentiles? cf. Matt. 19:30, 20:16—the first will be last, and the last first).

Second, in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30 (cf. Luke 19:11–27), we find the saying about one reaping and another sowing on the lips of the wicked and slothful servant who buries the talent that his master entrusted to him: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, *reaping where you did not sow*, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours" (Matt. 25:24–25). This wicked servant was unwilling even to invest his master's talent in a bank because he knew that his master would reap what he had not sown—that is, the servant believed that his master would reap what *the servant* had



sown. Essentially, the servant was unwilling to work because he did not believe that he would be adequately compensated, and that his master would profit from the work he had done instead of him. As with the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, the warning in the parable of the talents is against a hard-hearted unwillingness to *sow* (or, to work earlier in the day) if we might have to share in the rewards for our efforts with those who come after us to *reap* (or, to begin working later in the day).

### Sowing and Reaping Today

The beauty of what Jesus is promising here, though, is that those who sow will rejoice with those who reap, even when they do not live to see the fruit of their labor. Ultimately, all of us will reap what we have not sown when we see individuals come to Christ, for who knows how many other people have labored in their lives before us? Were these people baptized as infants in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, surrounded by the prayers of the church? Did their parents talk to them about Jesus, read the Bible to them, and pray both with and for them? Did some elderly woman who has long since died patiently teach them in Sunday School when they could scarcely sit still for even a minute? Did some pastor preach to them, week after week, year after year, when their hard hearts were still blind to the gospel that was being proclaimed? Did a friend on the playground or in school or in the workplace share the gospel without ever seeing this person come to faith? When it seems that someone comes to Christ suddenly, remember that you are witnessing a harvest that others who went before you sowed without ever seeing the fruit of their labor. Give thanks for the faithful ministry of people you may not meet until eternity.

Additionally, this promise gives us hope through the least productive seasons of our own ministry. Just as we reap what we have not sown, we will also sow what we do not personally reap that will “be gathered by others.”<sup>25</sup> If our only hope of reward rested in the people who come *immediately* to Christ, then we would be wise to cut our losses as quickly as possible when individuals do not straightaway repent from their sin and believe in Christ. Instead, Jesus commands us to sow the seed of the gospel wherever we can, regardless of whether we see the harvest come even in our own lifetimes. We are called only to be faithful laborers in the vineyard, knowing that only God can give the growth (1 Cor. 3:6), with the promise that God will permit us to share together in the joy of the reapers who come after us.

### The Savior of the World (John 4:39–42)

The last section of this story of Jesus’ introduction to the Samaritans contrasts two kinds of faith. In John 4:39, we read that “Many Samaritans from that town *believed* in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me all that I ever did.’” Then, after Jesus stayed with them for two more days (John 4:40), we read that “many more *believed* because of his word. They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world’” (John 4:41–42). Previously, John told us that not all kinds of faith in relation to Jesus are the genuine, saving kind of faith (John 2:23–25), but this passage makes a different point about the various kinds of faith, since both kinds of faith described in this passage are legitimate.

The Samaritans’ final report in John 4:42 contrasts the way that their faith transitioned from what they began to believe from *her* testimony (“It is no longer because of what you said that we

believe...”), to what they *now* believe because of their direct knowledge: “...for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” This does not mean that their original faith based on the woman’s testimony was invalid, but simply that it must grow from immaturity to maturity. In the same way, the faith of many new believers and the faith of covenant children who are raised in the church is not invalid faith or false faith—that kind of early faith may indeed be saving faith if it is genuine. Nevertheless, “This kind of faith should grow into the second kind, which believes without human mediators, by direct contact with Christ and his Word, and is thus far stronger than the other type of faith.”<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned above, Christ has ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of his Father, so we cannot approach him bodily in the same way that the Samaritans did in order to come to first-hand knowledge of him. Nevertheless, we should notice that we have a superior experience of Christ than the Samaritans through God’s word and the Holy Spirit, since the Samaritans were only able to enjoy the presence of Jesus for two days in their midst (John 4:40), whereas we have direct access to enjoy the presence of Christ at all times. Moreover, we *must* seek the presence of God through his word and Spirit to know him better. When we are infants in the faith, it is permissible to believe largely on the testimony of others—of parents, pastors, elders, or whomever. But, as we grow, God requires that we become mature, so that we believe through personal, direct knowledge in largely the same way that these Samaritans do.

Additionally, the work of this Samaritan woman helps us to understand the nature of the ministry that God is calling every one of us to do. God does *not* call all of us to be pastors or missionaries or elders or deacons or Sunday School teachers or small group leaders, but God *does* call all of us to do ministry in some way. Specific offices or ministry functions in the church are a gift that God has given for the building up of the whole body of Christ so that every last one of us can do the ministry assigned to us (Eph. 4:7–16). Most of us, however, will do the kind of informal ministry that this woman accomplishes. First, she testifies about Jesus to the people she knows (John 4:29), and then she directs them to come and see Jesus for themselves so that their own faith might be improved from believing on the basis of her testimony only (John 4:39) to believing because of what they have heard for themselves (John 4:42). She did not have a strategic plan or professional training, but she knew intuitively that “the goal of every form of Christian ministry could be summarized simply as seeking to help each person, wherever they happen to be, to take a step...to come closer towards hearing the gospel and being transferred out of the domain of darkness into the kingdom; and then to press forward towards maturity in Christ in every aspect of their lives.”<sup>27</sup>

Are there people you could help take one step closer to Jesus, whether by asking them what they believe, or inviting them to church, or helping them work through something they are struggling with, or praying for them? Just as this massive conversion in a Samaritan town arose from a small interaction at a well, so all of these small interactions in our own lives fulfill the Great Commission that Jesus sent every person in his church to help fulfill in their own way. Obviously, the growth belongs to God, but God gives growth (and, ultimately, harvest) through the means of our planting and watering (1 Cor. 3:7). The example of the simple testimony of this Samaritan woman, then, helps us to avoid over-complicating the ministry Jesus has sent us to accomplish.

Before concluding our study of this passage, we should not overlook the remarkable confession of faith of the Samaritans: “We know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). While salvation is *from* the Jews (John 4:22), “salvation is not only for Jews.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus Christ has come as the

Savior of all peoples, and he will not be satisfied until he gathers for himself a harvest from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). In order to do this, he commissions us, his people, as laborers for the harvest. Sometimes, we may sow, and other times, we may reap, but God nevertheless calls all of us to do our part to bring in the harvest of the nations as the eternal inheritance of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, and for the eternally enduring joy of the sower and reaper alike.

## Discussion Questions

1. What keeps you from sharing the good news of Jesus with those you know? In what ways does the woman’s humble proclamation to “come and see” Jesus encourage you and challenge you? What is one way that God might be calling you to help someone take “one step” closer to Christ?
2. Where have you experienced the rich joy of ministry that Jesus calls his “food”? How does seeing spiritual harvest nourish you to continue laboring for the kingdom?
3. Does the promise that the sower and the reaper will “rejoice together” (John 4:36) motivate you? Are you someone gifted in evangelism, who consistently sees a harvest come in? Or, do you faithfully sow the seed without seeing much fruit? Regardless of your role, how does the promise of a reward help you to keep going?
4. What kind of faith do you have—is it built on the testimony of others, or on first-hand experience of Jesus? What is the next step you need to take to continue growing to know Christ increasingly more through hearing for yourself (John 4:42)?

## Notes

1. See rabbinical quotations cited in Beasley-Murray, *John*, 62.
2. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 227.
3. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 329.
4. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 171–72.
5. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 228.
6. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 621–22. Keener continues, writing: “For John’s biblically informed audience, the term used may also allude to Gen 24:14–46, which accounts for nine of the seventeen uses of ὕδρια [water jar] in the LXX [Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament]. In that passage Rebekah runs home when she learns the identity of the person with whom she was speaking (Gen 24:28; see also Exod 2:20); here the Samaritan woman runs to her people after a revelation of her conversant’s identity.”
7. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 171–72.
8. Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 80.
9. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 228.
10. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 330–31.
11. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 170. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/>

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

12. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 173.

13. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 228.

14. Köstenberger, *John*, 161–62.

15. “Its lack of attestation may be due to a rustic provenance. How many literary people today can cite all the rural adages now current? Modern rural sayings exist that are not embodied in formal literary works, and we have no reason for thinking it was otherwise in the first century.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 246.)

16. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 246–47.

17. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 170–71. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.x.vi.html>>

18. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 339–40.

19. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 171–72. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.x.vi.html>>

20. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 335–36.

21. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 337.

22. For a comprehensive development of the links between the garden of Eden, the tabernacle, and the temple, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

23. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 174.

24. “There are so many similarities which show that the experience of fellowship in its full rich New Testament sense fulfils analogous theological functions for the Christian as the possession of the land did for Old Testament Israelites. Both must be seen as part of the purpose and pattern of redemption—not just accidental or incidental to it. The explicit purpose of the Exodus was the enjoyment of the rich blessing of God in his ‘good land’; the goal of redemption through Christ is ‘for a sincere love of the brethren’ (1 Pet. 1:22), with all its practical implications. Both are linked to the status of sonship and the related themes of inheritance and promise. Both thereby constitute a proof of an authentic relationship with God as part of his redeemed community. For fellowship, like the land, has limits, so that the person who departs permanently from it—or refuses to accept it—shows that he has no real part in God’s people (see 1 John 2:19; Matt. 18:15–17).” (C. J. H. Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 113.)

25. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 174.

26. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 341.

27. Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Vine Project: Shaping Your Ministry Culture Around Disciple-Making* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2016), 96–97.

28. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 172.