

“The Water of Life”

John 4:1-26

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Text Comment

This is a long text of which we will take only part this morning. Verses 1-26 are the narration, the account of the Lord’s encounter with the woman at the well. The next two sections report the aftermath of that conversation. We will read the account of the conversation itself this morning. In the organization of John’s Gospel, this is the second of the Lord’s “discourses,” the first being the discourse on the new birth with Nicodemus, which we read in John 3:1-15.

v.3 Here is the very first instance of the Lord taking a step to avoid precipitating heightened tension with the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leadership. They were envious of the Lord’s growing popularity, he knew they would be offended by his message, and, for the next several years, to the extent that he was able, the Lord stayed out of their way. He couldn’t avoid them altogether, but he did his best. He made no public claims that he was the Messiah, he told others to remain silent about his identity. By this means he lengthened his ministry and the growing hatred of the Pharisees for him did not culminate in his death until fully three years had passed.

v.4 Preachers have long waxed eloquent on how Jews hated Samaritans so much that, if going north to Galilee, they would ordinarily take a longer route, first eastward across the Jordan and then to the north up the eastern side of the river, thereby avoiding contact with Samaritans. Therefore, when we read that Jesus “had to go through Samaria” we are to understand this as indicating that Jesus had a divine appointment in Samaria. He had to go through Samaria precisely because, in God’s plan, he had to meet the woman at the well at Sychar and, perhaps, he had, by his own example, to show that he came to save Samaritans as well as Jews. However, it is not clear that Jews regularly detoured around Samaria when traveling north to Galilee. It seems that most of them did not. So, when we read that Jesus “had to go through Samaria” on his way to Galilee, that is probably a reference to geographical necessity. It was the quickest, easiest route. But, characteristic of John’s gospel, there could well be a double meaning here. John often uses “had to” in referring to the mission of Jesus. And he may be telling us, in this way, that it was necessary that the light shine among the Samaritans as well as among the Jews.

The Samaritans, as you may remember, were the result of the deportation of the ten northern tribes when Israel was conquered by Assyria in 721 B.C. The Assyrians brought in others to populate the conquered territory and these intermarried with the few Israelites that remained. They came to practice a faith that was a variant of the Mosaic faith of Israel. Israelites regarded them as bastard heretics, imposters in the Promised Land. The Samaritans even set up a temple at Mount Gerizim, but the Jews, in a frenzy of patriotism, destroyed it near the end of the second century B.C. So, there were religious, racial, and historical animosities between the two peoples and mutual contempt. That, by the way, is what lends such power to the Lord’s parable of the Good Samaritan.

v.6 The sixth hour would be noon. John, who has taught us already that Jesus is the Son of God, come from heaven, the Creator of the world, also teaches us that he is a true man.

Here he sits weary beside a well. As Chrysostom, the great preacher of early Christianity, observed in his sermon on this text: “Not upon a throne, not upon a cushion, but simply, and as he was, upon the ground.” [In Morris, 258]

- v.8 It is somewhat unusual that a woman would have come alone to the well. It has been wondered whether the woman’s public shame (we will hear about that later) had resulted in her isolation from others. In any case, the woman immediately was startled by the request, the Lord being a Jew and she being a Samaritan and a Samaritan woman at that. Ritually observant Jews of this period would have thought that they would contract ceremonial defilement from such a person.
- v.10 She saw in him a weary Jewish traveler. She did not see his glory or know of his salvation. If she had, she would have forgotten all about his request for a drink of water and sought from him a far greater gift, living water. It is a metaphor taken from the OT and particularly powerful in an arid land, where living or fresh, running water was particularly precious. In Jeremiah 2:13 the Lord says, “My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” Isaiah (55:1) calls to his contemporaries, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat.” “Living water”, as a biblical image, speaks of God, his grace, new life, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Remember, Jesus spoke to Nicodemus (3:5) of the need to be born of “water and the Spirit.” Here Jesus is offering her the satisfying eternal life that only he can provide. [Carson, 219]
- v. 12 The woman appears disinterested in the Lord’s deeper meaning and so chooses to take his remark as referring to nothing more than a regular drink of water. She continues to see him as nothing out of the ordinary, surely no one as significant as Jacob! Her question is slightly derisory. She is putting Jesus in his place. Like to Dan Quayle: "You’re no Jacob!”
- v.14 The woman’s question may have been skeptical, but the Lord answered it, but, in doing so, he went back to what he meant by “living water.”
- v.15 The woman, like Nicodemus before her, continued to think only on the naturalistic plane, of the sort of water one finds in a well.
- v.16 This seems an abrupt change of direction in the conversation, but it has a clear purpose, as we shall see.
- v.18 Presumably each of the five had either died or divorced her. The Lord’s information was, of course, accurate, as the woman later acknowledged (v. 39).
- v.20 Her quickly going on to raise a question about a disputed point of theology between Jews and Samaritans is usually taken to be a ploy on her part to distract the Lord from a subject that she finds too embarrassing or painful to discuss, viz. her personal life. But the question she raises was a perennial issue between Samaritans and Jews. “This mountain” is a reference to the nearby Mt. Gerizim, which the Samaritans held to be sacred and the place appointed by God for his worship. They had built a sanctuary there and the Jews had destroyed it, judging it an illegitimate rival to the true temple in Jerusalem.

But, once again, the Lord took up her question, whatever her motivation was in asking it, and turned it to his own purposes.

- v.21 The NIV's "time" is lit. "hour" the important term in John that refers to time of the fulfillment of his work in the world: his death on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension to heaven *and all that comes from that and is related to that.*

- v. 24 The Lord's concern was not with the place of worship but its essential character. He mentioned that the day of a central sanctuary was, in any case, almost over. Remember he had already mentioned, in an oblique way, that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed (2:19). In other words, there is little to be gained by a prolonged debate over the relative merits of Jerusalem or Gerizim (though clearly Jesus sides with the Jews, as a matter of fact, though he does not press that point), and such a debate misses the central issue. The worship that God approves is that worship offered to him in spirit and in truth, sincerely, with living faith. Because God is essentially spirit, the worship that is brought to him must be of a spiritual nature. And the reference to the hour coming clearly indicates that all of that is possible only through Jesus Christ and the salvation he has come into the world to bring.

- v.25 Once more, the woman's response was a form of evasion. How much she understood of what Jesus has said to her is debatable. She replied, in effect, that this sort of question will be resolved when the Messiah appears.

- v.26 The Lord could disclose openly to a Samaritan woman what he had to hide from the Jews. For the Jews the title "Messiah" came with so much political and military baggage that to use it was inevitably to create fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus' mission. So, by and large, he avoided the use of the term with Jews. [Carson, 227]

We stop our reading at the end of the Lord's conversation with the woman. But, remember how the story ends. The woman's heart had been conquered by the Lord's approach to her and by the demonstration of the truthfulness of what he said by his supernatural knowledge of her personal situation. That was the key evidence in her mind, as she told her neighbors, so we read in v. 39. What she believed was precisely what all must believe and what John is writing to convince you to believe: that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing in him, you will gain eternal life.

The Lord's first conversation concerning salvation recorded in the Gospel of John was with Nicodemus, a Jewish theology professor. But, his second such discourse was with a person at the very opposite end of the social and religious spectrum: a Samaritan woman. As a woman she would not have expected much intellectual attention from a rabbi and as a Samaritan she would have expected nothing but contempt from a Jew. Instead she got a conversation that went to the very bottom of her life and was the means of transforming her life.

And so it has been ever since. In the Christian church you will find the brilliant, the strong, and the powerful, and you will find beside them the lowest of the low. The gospel is for everyone. Everyone needs to know Jesus Christ and to find eternal life through faith in him.

She hadn't come to the well that day, of course, with any such expectation or intention. And when the Lord Jesus began asking her questions she had no idea where the conversation was to take her or that through his words she would find the path to eternal life. How many times has that happened in the history of the world since that day at Sychar? Think of Justin Martyr, the great defender of the Christian faith in the 2nd century, out for a stroll one day. He was a student of philosophy but by no means a Christian. But he happened to run into an old man on his walk and they fell into conversation and the old man, who was a Christian, began asking Justin questions, one after another. And at the end of that conversation, Justin was a changed man, just as this woman had been changed. And what multitudes of people could tell a similar story.

The Lord began with her by asking her to do him a favor. No doubt he was thirsty, but he also disarmed her with his request. As the French commentator Godet observed, "[The Lord was not] unaware that the way to gain a soul is often to ask [some] service of it." [In Morris, 258] I told you last Sunday night of how Thomas Bilney won Hugh Latimer, then an unbelieving priest, later the English Reformer, to Christ by asking him to hear his confession and then confessed his sins to him in such a way as to teach him the gospel of Christ. Well that was something of the Lord's strategy here.

Then the Lord spoke to her of living water welling up to eternal life. But she refused to take the bait. Like so many people who need salvation, who need the living water, they are too proud to admit it or too afraid to take that careful look at their own lives that would be required to think honestly about salvation. And so the Lord abruptly changed course. He asked her a question about her personal life: about her husband. He was putting his finger on the real problem, though she did not know it yet. He was after a recognition on her part that she needed salvation, that she really was thirsty for the living water. Even those who are dying of this thirst refuse to admit it. And she did. Her equally abrupt answer – "I have no husband" – was an effort to evade, to ward off any further probing of this sensitive part of her life, no doubt full of guilt and pain. The Lord was gentle with her: commended her for telling the truth. But, his probing had hit the mark, as we learn later in the chapter.

"You know," said Lord Melbourne, British prime minister in the 1830s, "things have come to a pretty pass if religion is going to become personal." [Cited in Lloyd Jones, *The Heart of the Gospel*, 59-60] So many people are like that. They hold religious faith at arm's length. Even people who think themselves religious. It never touches the core of their hearts, their selves, their lives. It is kept away from where they really live – used only on Sundays for the purpose of filling the square and checking the box, as if God is somehow going to be pleased with that! Well, the Lord made it personal, highly personal. He began talking about that part of her life that she would least want to disclose or discuss, that part of her life that had most to do with who she really was, because only in that way could he break through to her true need and do her the everlasting good he wanted to do her.

And then he has much as said to her: This eternal life, this living water, can be yours as well. Samaritan, five husbands, an illicit relationship with a man at present, all of that notwithstanding, God is seeking those who will worship him with the heart and from the heart and by true and living faith in his Son who has come from heaven and now stands before you. You must come to God honestly, holding nothing of yourself back. And, in an instant of glorious recognition and realization, she found herself standing before her Savior and felt the living water being poured into her dry and cracked heart.

I've been reading recently in Ernest Shackleton's, *South*, the riveting account of his heroic but doomed expedition to Antarctica from 1914 to 1916. They had planned to cross the continent, but their ship was caught in ice, eventually crushed, they had to take to the water in open boats. After having all made it safely to Elephant Island, an uninhabited island in the South Atlantic, Shackleton and five others, set out to sail 800 miles in an open lifeboat, through seas that are considered some of the most savage on earth, to get help on the island of South Georgia. Making the crossing successfully, he eventually was able to rescue all his men. The book is one of the greatest accounts of perseverance against all odds that has ever been written.

But, what caught my attention was the terrible struggle with thirst that they endured in the last days of the crossing to South Georgia. They were cold and wet, struggling against mountainous seas, but, says Shackleton, "it was thirst that took possession of us." [175] "Lack of water is always the most severe privation that men can be condemned to endure, and we found, as during our earlier boat voyage, that the salt water in our clothing and the salt spray that lashed our faces made our thirst grow quickly to a burning pain." [176] His men would beg to be given the next day's small allowance of water, but he had to refuse them. The last few days were a long nightmare. Their mouths dry, their tongues swollen. "The wind was still strong and the heavy sea forced us to navigate carefully, but any thought of our peril from the waves was buried beneath the consciousness of our raging thirst." A day later, with land in sight, but unable to find a place to come ashore along a coast of sheer cliffs and reefs, "our thirst was a torment." After a desperate night and another day, they finally came ashore. "We heard a gurgling sound that was sweet music to our ears, and, peering around, found a stream of fresh water almost at our feet. A moment later we were down on our knees drinking the pure, ice-cold water in long draughts that put new life into us. It was a splendid moment." [180]

You remember that one of the terrible sufferings of those who were crucified was a raging thirst. It was to be the Lord's fate. He, who so perfectly controlled himself during that torment, and kept his terrible miseries to himself, could not keep himself from saying, at one point, "I thirst." Well, thirst of that kind is a perfect metaphor of the human condition, just as living water is a perfect metaphor of salvation.

Man suffers from a raging thirst. He cannot think of anything else. He is thirsty for love, for happiness, for security, for goodness, for fulfillment, for high purpose in his life. She is thirsty for acceptance. He is thirsty for the forgiveness of his sins that weigh on his mind even when he will not admit it to himself. She is thirsty above all for eternity, for a life that does not end in either blackness or judgment. He is thirsty, in other words, for all that he was made for, made as he was in the image of God. He is thirsty for God and for the knowledge of God and for communion with God.

He doesn't know it; he never or rarely thinks in those terms. But that is what he or she is thirsty for. Men and women are always trying to slake that thirst. They draw from all the wrong wells and the salt water and the brackish water they bring up cannot slake their thirst, but they keep drawing up the bucket. Look at human life, observe it closely, even those people who seem to be making a success of it, and still it is true, as the Bible says it is true, that men are held in bondage all their lives by the fear of death. Men are greedy for what they know they do not yet have but what they cannot escape the desire for. They are thirsty. They live thirsty and, alas, multitudes die thirsty.

That is why people take drugs as they do in such immense quantities in the United States. It is why they drink to excess. It is why they devote themselves so religiously to career advancement or to entertainment and sports or to listening to music, especially loud, overwhelming music. And, it is why, like this woman of Sychar, they hold at bay, sometimes angrily, even ferociously hold at bay the dark thoughts about themselves, the voice of their conscience, the fear of death. They are thirsty for life, for life as they instinctively know life ought to be, life that is worthy to be called "LIFE."

But, John is telling us and as Jesus told the woman, nothing can slake that thirst but living water. Nothing can fill up that void in our lives except the gift of life from the Prince of Life, who made us for himself, who planted eternity in our hearts, and then came into the world to give us back this life when we had thrown it away.

But, no one will stoop down – for that is what it is, a bending down, a bowing down, a humbling of oneself, a needy sinner before a holy and gracious God – to drink this living water until first he or she is made to admit how thirsty he or she really is. That was the woman's problem here. She continued to dodge, to evade the Lord's offer of living water for fear of having to admit how thirsty she was, for fear of exposing the yawning emptiness in the middle of her life.

In Jesus, however, she had met her match and all of her evasions and misdirections were nothing to him. He bored in to the pain and guilt in the middle of her life and forced her to admit her thirst for living water. And once she had admitted that, she was free to drink her fill and she is still drinking it today in heaven.

What, my friend, would the Lord Christ ask you? Would he ask about your marriage, as he did this woman? Would he ask about your addictions? Your anger? Your pursuit of pleasure? Would he ask about your sins that you could not surmount and now cannot forget? Would he ask you about your death and your fear of it? How would he discover to yourself your thirst for living water? Perhaps you know very well what the Prince of Life would ask you were you to have had such a conversation with him as this woman did. Well, he speaks now. What is he saying to you by his Holy Spirit?

Is he seeking you as he did this woman? Hunting you out of all the defenses you have put up to protect yourself from him, for fear of his judgment? The terrible, tragic, paradox of human life: men and women avoid like the plague the only one who is both willing and able to grant them the desires of their hearts and the fulfillment of all their dreams.

Can you not yourselves say, at this moment, that the Lord has spoken to you as he spoke to that poor but soon so happy woman? And cannot you say what she said to her friends, "He told me everything I ever did." And, so, cannot you say what her friends said who came to Jesus and talked to him themselves: "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." He speaks to you now, just as he did to them then:

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters...come to me...that your soul may life." [Isaiah 55:1-3]