

John 4a The Woman of Samaria

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Overview

We are in the second series of events outside of Jerusalem:

- 3:22-36, John and his disciples
- 4:1-42, the Woman of Samaria
- 4:43-54, the Nobleman at Cana

In 5:1, the Lord returns to Jerusalem for a feast.

1-6, The Setting

Departure in view of the Pharisees.—These will be his adversaries later in the gospel. He does not want to precipitate a crisis with them too early; his hour had not yet come (2:4; 7:30; 8:20).

Calvin:

Knowing that the Pharisees were ill-disposed towards him, he did not wish to expose himself to their anger before the proper time. ... Hence too we hear that our minds ought to be regulated in such a manner that, on the one hand, we may not be deterred by any fear from going forward in duty; and that, on the other hand, we may not too rashly throw ourselves into dangers. All who are earnestly desirous to pursue their calling will be careful to maintain this moderation, for while they will steadily follow the Lord even through the midst of deaths; they will not rush into them heedlessly, but will walk in their ways. Let us, therefore, remember that we must not advance farther than our calling demands.

3 He left Judaea.—*afi8mi*, lit. “abandoned.” Cf. Matt 23:37-39. He gives it up because of its hardness of heart and lack of responsiveness.

he ... departed again into Galilee.—Note how John explicitly takes us back to Galilee, alternating between “his own place” and the hinterland. John is the only gospel that shows that the Lord went back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem. The synoptics all have a one-directional movement from Galilee to Jerusalem (though Luke does acknowledge that he was in Jerusalem as an infant, and Matthew implies that he passed through there as an infant).

4 he must needs go through Samaria.—The necessity is not geographical. There were two other routes: the coastal route that pierced the Carmel range at Yokneam, Megiddo, or Taanach, and the Jordan valley, ascending by Bethshean. The NET Bible notes of this verb that “normally in John’s gospel its use involves God’s will or plan.” He had a divine appointment there.

Application: This sense of “ought-ness” is critical to our spiritual health. We should go through each day with a sense that the heavenly secretary has ordered our affairs, seeking the appointments that he has made for us.

5 the parcel of ground.—Jacob’s gift of a special parcel to Joseph is recorded in Gen 48:22. “Portion” is the same word as “Shechem,” and given that Joseph was later buried in Shechem (Josh 24:32), it seems that this is the place in view.

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6 Jacob’s well.—Gen 33:18-20 records the beginning of Jacob’s sojourn in Shechem as the purchase of a parcel, where he camped and built an altar. We have no other record of a well there, but in that culture it would be very reasonable for him to dig a well to support his extensive encampment.

Jesus ... being wearied.—Even with his very high view of the deity of Christ, John must remind us that our Lord was a man, subject to the limitations of human flesh. “The word became flesh.”

The sixth hour.—About noon, reckoning from sunrise (see on 1:39). It may be an unusual time to draw water, but

- Josephus describes the water-drawing in Exod 2:15ff as happening at noon (Ant ii, 257ff);
- the woman may have wanted to avoid other women;
- more particularly, the Lord needed to talk with her, and the time was divinely appointed to make this possible without interruption.

From notes on Gen 16:

This story is the last of a series of episodes in the Bible in which a deliverer meets a needy woman by a well.

	Gen 16:7-14	Gen 24:11-20	Gen 29:1-12	Exod 2:15-22	John 4
The Man	Angel of the Lord	Eliezer	Jacob	Moses	Lord Jesus
The Woman	Hagar	Rebecca	Rachel	Daughters of Reuel	Samaritan woman
Her need	Afflicted by her mistress; carrying a baby	(none)	Stone needs to be removed from the mouth of the well	Oppressed by the shepherds	Sinful; multiple marriages
Man’s need	(none)	Immediate: thirsty Longer: wife for Isaac	Fleeing Esau; seeking a wife	Fleeing Pharaoh	Thirsty
Man’s initiative	Questions her	Asks her for a drink	Rolls the stone away	Defends girls from the shepherds	Asks her for a drink
Water drawing	(not mentioned)	woman	man	man	woman
Outcome	She obeys the Lord	Eliezer takes Rebecca home to marry Isaac	Jacob marries Rachel	Marries one of the girls	She obeys the Lord

Note that the first and last show us the Lord seeking out a sinful, needy, helpless person. The middle three deal with men seeking a bride: Robert Alter (Art of Biblical Narrative, ch. 3) shows that these are examples of a conventional “type-scene” associated with betrothal.

- Marriage is in both OT and NT a figure for the relation in which God’s people stand to him (Ezek 16; Eph 5).

- The outer two deal with women who have been frustrated in marriage; the Lord invites them into a spiritual relation with himself that will rise above their physical marriage and deliver them from its burdens.
- We come to the well, seeking an answer to our thirst the best we know how, yet beset by threats; God graciously meets us and gives us more than we knew to ask, only on condition that we submit to his authority (marriage in the middle three; obedience in the outer two).

7-26, The Conversation with the Woman

The conversation features seven interchanges. A major challenge is to figure out in each case how the answer responds to the question. The Lord is steering the conversation deliberately, to bring the woman to acknowledge her need.

7-8, *Initiation*

The Lord is waiting at the well when the woman arrives on her daily duties. He takes the initiative to open the conversation, with a simple request for water.

A woman of Samaria.—Not the same phrase as John uses in 4:9. The expression is literally, “there came a woman from Samaria,” and other instances of “from X” in the NT are all adverbial, not adjectival. The city is two hours away, so all commentators understand the expression adjectivally rather than adverbially. But her fixation on Jacob and the Samaritan claims suggests that she may in fact have made a sort of pilgrimage to this well, hoping by ritual to achieve the righteousness that has eluded her in her daily life.

Give me to drink.—The Lord takes the initiative to make contact with the woman. There is a valuable example here for us.

- God has put us in this world to bear witness to him, and we need to reach out to the unbelievers around us. If we are fishers of men, we must put our nets into the water, and not stand by waiting for the fish to jump into our boats.
- We don’t necessarily lead with the gospel. Our initial contact may be on very different grounds, and the Lord can then turn it for the sake of the gospel. But we must break out of our cocoon.
- We need to be ready to reach out to people who are socially different from ourselves. Here the Lord reaches across three barriers: Jew/Samaritan, man/woman, rabbi/prostitute.

For his disciples.—It would presumably be their duty to carry the waterbag that travelers routinely packed to draw water from wells along the way, and to draw water for their master, but they have gone into the town, and so are unable to help him.

9-10, Themes

9, The Woman Mocks.

9 How is it—The woman shows her sensitivity to issues of theological refinement by highlighting the difference between herself and Jesus. There are two good reasons he ought not to talk with her:

- She is a woman, held in low esteem among the Jews. Cf. Pirke Abot 1.5 (via Gill on 4:27), “do not multiply discourse with a woman, with his wife they say, much less with his neighbour's wife: hence the wise men say, at whatsoever time a man multiplies discourse with a woman, he is the cause of evil to himself, and ceases from the words of the law, and at last shall go down into hell.”
- She is a Samaritan. The Jews despised this group for four reasons (see Gill).
 1. They lived in the area of the northern kingdom, where Jeroboam set up alternative sanctuaries in Bethel and Dan to keep the people from going to Jerusalem to worship.
 2. After the Assyrian captivity, the King of Assyria repopulated the region with heathens who developed their own corrupt and idolatrous religion, 2 Kings 17:24.
 3. After the return, the Samaritans led the opposition to the rebuilding of the temple (Neh 4:1,2; they were the people of Sanballat).
 4. Neh 13:28 records the expulsion of a priest who had married the daughter of Sanballat. Josephus (Antiquities 11.8.2 (11.306)) gives his name as Manasseh, and records that Sanballat obtained permission from Alexander the Great to construct a temple on Mt. Gerizim, where he installed Manasseh as high priest. (The timing is a bit stretched; Neh 13 must be about 400, while Alexander's visit to Jerusalem was in 332. See discussion in Williamson on Neh 13:28.)

the Jews have no dealings.—The English text is a bit misleading. After all, the disciples went into a Samaritan city to buy food. See Gill for evidence that certain Samaritan foods were permitted to orthodox Jews. The expression probably means that the Jews will not share eating utensils with Samaritans for fear of ritual defilement, thus preventing the Lord from taking a drink from the woman's bucket.

One cannot miss the hostility and mockery in the woman's comments, particularly if this last phrase comes also from her lips (thus Calvin). Tenney's paraphrase: “We Samaritans are the dirt under your feet until you want something; then we are good enough!” “Look at this holy Jew, who wouldn't have anything to do with us Samaritans. He's too careless to carry a waterbag when he travels, and now he has the nerve to ask us for a drink!”

10, The Lord graciously offers

We need to appreciate the Lord's answer at two levels, emotional and rational.

Emotionally, he answers her mockery with kindness. It would have been remarkable enough if the only evidence he had of her character were this coarse jesting. But he knows the depravity of her style of life as well (v.18), and yet offers her the good news. This is a picture of God's grace toward sinners.

Thou wouldst have asked ... he would have given.—In spite of her rudeness and mockery, he is always ready to give. This is a marvelous characteristic of our God:

- “ask, and it shall be given unto you,” Luke 11:9
- “thou hast heard the desire of the humble,” Psa 10:17
- “him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out,” John 6:37
- “And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely,” Rev 22:17

Over and over, God has proven his grace toward sinners, in that when they humble themselves and call on him, he answers.

- The king and people of Nineveh, Jonah 3:10
- Wicked Manasseh, humbled in captivity, 2 Chron 33:13
- The publican in the temple, Luke 18:13,14
- The thief on the cross, Luke 23:42,43
- Saul of Tarsus, Acts 9:11

Application: People may abuse us for our Christian stand. We must never seek to return evil for evil, but rather be ready to show them the grace and forbearance of the Lord.

Rationally, he responds to the substance of her question. He has something to offer that transcends the differences between Jew and Samaritan. If she only knew, she would be taking the initiative to bridge the gap, not trying to reinforce it. He highlights two topics that will dominate the conversation:

- the gift of God
- the Messianic giver

living water.—He briefly summarizes the gift. “Living water” has a double meaning. It can refer to a spring as opposed to a cistern, cf. Gen 26:19; Lev 14:5. Or it may refer to the issue of the “fountain of life,” often mentioned in the wisdom literature (Psa 36:9; Prov 13:14; 14:27), thus life and vitality. The use of the physical sense as a metaphor for the spiritual is clearest in Jer 2:13, “For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, *and* hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

11-14, The Gift

Once again, the relation between the woman’s questions and the Lord’s answers is oblique. He is seeking to guide the conversation.

11-12, The Woman Challenges

Sir.—In keeping with her earlier attitude, this title of respect seems almost sarcastic. “Oh, my, this wonderful man thinks he can provide living water.” The Lord’s offer of a gift seems incredible to her on two fronts: **ability** and **authority**. First, he has no means for drawing water.

Second, he cannot compete with the one who dug her well. These are obstacles that people cast up even today.

Thou hast nothing ... from whence hast thou?—Her first question is about the Lord's **ability**. He has no bucket, such as travelers usually carry. How can he produce water from a deep well (about 100 feet)?

In our age, when we talk about the blessings that the Lord can give, people sometimes respond in the same way. "I've been in therapy for twelve years, and I'm still unhappy. What can you possibly do to make me feel better? What's the name of your therapy?" Now, as then, people want to understand *how* the Lord works before they will believe *that* he works.

But this is exactly opposite to the dynamic that the Lord described to Nicodemus in 3:8, concerning the wind. The salvation that he brings is supernatural, neither constrained by nor dependent on natural mechanisms.

The well is deep.—She uses a different word than John did in v.6. The word in 6 implies that there was a spring at the bottom of the well, but she uses the word for a cistern. Before the Lord arrived with his offer of living water, this wasn't a bad well. But now that he is here, it's no better than a cistern.

Art thou greater?—Her second challenge concerns **authority**. She is already dedicated to a traditional authority figure, Jacob, to whose well she has come as a pilgrimage. She has never heard of Jesus.

Here is a natural tendency, to put the authority of men (especially dead men) before that of the living God. This tendency evidences itself in the power of tradition to overrule the Scriptures (e.g., Rome).

Ironically, for many people today, the greatest competition to the Lord's authority is the false image of him promulgated by the churches. He is presented as a spineless do-gooder, or a political reactionary, or a hippie. The notion that he is God in the flesh, the holy creator come to redeem his sinful people, is as foreign to many as it was to the woman of Samaria.

13-14, The Lord Responds

For all of her rudeness, the Lord does not reject her claim to be a child of Jacob. Compare his response to the Pharisees in 8:33-44, where he rejects their claim to be the children of Abraham. He knows her heart, and where he is sovereignly leading her.

He does not directly respond to either of her challenges—that of ability or that of authority. Instead, he draws her attention back to the gift that he offers her. There is a lesson here for us. It is easy to get distracted into discussions of whether or not God can save, or whether his word is authoritative. Recall Dr. Fullerton's exhortation that soldiers in battle do not argue with the enemy about the strength of their bayonets—they simply use them. So the Lord here brings her back to the central question: her need (thirst), the inadequacy of her current approach (water from Jacob's well), and the living water he has to offer her.

13 Whosoever drinketh ... shall thirst again.—Gill helpfully points to John 19:28, our Lord's word from the tree: "I thirst." When it came to physical water, even he was not exempt from this principle: "Whosoever."

14 Whosoever drinketh ... shall never thirst.—The negative is emphatic, “shall absolutely never thirst.” Now, believers do have dry seasons, spiritual low spots, and most commentators feel compelled to make an apology for this absolute statement.

- Gill: “not but there are desires and lustings after carnal things in regenerate persons, ... yet these are not so strong, prevalent, and predominant; they are checked and restrained by the grace of God.” (Note: Gill’s third explanation, that the verse means that their thirst will not continue forever, is at variance with the consistent usage of the construction *ou <verb> eis ton aiwna*, which always means “never,” not “shall not continue to <<verb>> forever.”)
- Calvin: “Believers, to the very end of life, burn with desire of more abundant grace. ... Thus believers thirst, and keenly thirst, throughout their whole life ... When, therefore, he says that they shall be satisfied, he contrasts not with *Desire* but only with *Drought*.”
- Matthew Henry: “He shall *never thirst*, he shall never want that which will abundantly satisfy his soul's desires; they are *longing*, but not *languishing*. A *desiring* thirst he has, nothing more *than* God, still more and more *of* God; but not a *despairing* thirst.”

Yet these seem to fall short of the intensity of the promise. Compare also Matt 5:6, which promises that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled.

The key to understanding the Lord’s promise is to recognize that it is essentially the same promise that he repeats in 7:37-38. As the table shows,

- He addresses those who thirst;
- “Drinking” is a metaphor for “believing”;
- “Water” represents the Holy Spirit.

John 4:13-14	John 7:37	John 7:38-39
13 Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:	If any man thirst,	
14 But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him	let him come unto me, and drink.	38 He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said,
shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.		out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.
		39 But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive

It’s important to recognize *what* is being promised, and *how* we appropriate it.

Consider first the *how*. We take it by drinking, and never thirsting means that we have to drink only once. What is the act of drinking that the believer does only once? It is to believe on the Lord. Not only do we never need to drink again; it is impossible to drink again (Heb 6:4-6).

In this case, *what* is the thirst that is being allayed? It is not frustration over our spiritual weaknesses, but the blast of heat from the furnace doors of hell that we feel so acutely when the Spirit of God works true repentance in our souls. It is the burden of our guilt, when we first realize the enormity of our wickedness before a holy God.

Those who have truly received Christ know that their sins are gone, completely and absolutely. They no longer fear God's wrath. They may confess themselves unprofitable servants and immature children, but for all that they know that they are still servants and beloved children. As Paul will later write, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16).

The spiritual longings and frustrations that Calvin, Gill, and Henry mention are very real, but they are themselves evidence of a redeemed heart, governed by the Spirit and tender to his direction.

Unto everlasting life.—Here is yet more confirmation that the thirst in question is the need for salvation, not a lack of sanctification.

15-16, The Demand

The woman fails to understand that the Lord is speaking on a spiritual level. Compare the misunderstandings of Nicodemus concerning the spiritual birth (3:4), or of the Jews in Capernaum concerning partaking of Christ by faith (6:52). She knows physical thirst, and asks for physical water that would satisfy that thirst once for ever.

Jesus tells her to bring her husband.

This seems at first a jarring discontinuity in the discourse. What does her husband have to do with anything that has gone before?

- Some think that he is frustrated with her inability to see beyond the carnal images, and wants to talk with someone more reasonable.
- Others suggest that he wants her to prove the sincerity of her emerging faith by sharing it with someone else.
- I used to think that at the point of decision, he wants her husband to lead her (and this might be a part of it, but not the major issue.)

The answer becomes clear when we understand the nature of the thirst and the drinking from the previous verses. The Lord must turn her attention toward the spiritual. He must point her to the thirst that he intends to satisfy. This is the point of his request that she bring her husband. He knows her wickedness, but he must bring her to acknowledge it, so that she will ask for the spiritual water as eagerly as she does the physical. Thus he has to put his finger directly on her guilt.

17-18, The Accusation

The woman is nonplussed. Gone is the mocking "sir" that marked her previous two comments. This stranger has somehow stumbled on the most embarrassing feature of her life. We imagine that she hesitates and stumbles a bit as she denies any marital involvement. Hopefully she can deflect such questions.

Even so, we can expect people to be evasive when we get on the topic of sin. They do not want to admit their sin to themselves, much less to another person.

Jesus refuses to be deterred. He presses further, showing his detailed knowledge of her moral condition. Her “five husbands” might have been legitimate, each dying before the next (cf. Matt 22:25ff), but more likely she divorced them or was divorced, and her present living arrangement is surely unacceptable morally.

He emphasizes this by reversing the word order. She says, “I don’t have a husband.” He replies, “A husband you don’t have,” emphasizing the word “husband.”

The Lord does not usually grant us such detailed knowledge into the moral failings of the people to whom we speak. But we should be assured that they are just as insecure in their moral situation as this woman was. Even the God-given levitical sacrifices were powerless to cleanse the conscience, Heb 9:14. How much greater is the inner turmoil, the spiritual thirst, of those with no knowledge of God or his word.

There are several techniques we can use to make them aware of their sin, even if we are not in a position to be as detailed as the Lord is here.

- The demand for perfection: James 2:10, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all.” Being better than other people is not enough. The Lord demands perfection, Matt 5:48.
- The demand for inner obedience, Matt 5:20ff, “except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (with emphasis on the need for obedience in the heart, not just in outward actions).
- The demand for consistency, Rom 2:1-3, “Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. 2 But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. 3 And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?” Even leaving aside the law of God, our own standards are sufficient to condemn us before God.

Our Lord’s approach supports the consistent demand of the scriptures, that people repent and believe. Mark 1:15 (Christ himself), Acts 2:38; 3:19; 26:20.

19-24, “Thou art a prophet”

He responds to her question, but shifts the focus from the past to the future.

19-20, The Woman Evades

Sir.—Seeking to recover herself from this frontal challenge, she returns to her false formality. She seeks to divert him from herself first by a flattering comment directed to him, and then by a theological question.

I perceive.—By calling him a “prophet,” she is taking the first step toward acknowledging him as the Messiah. Morris:

"The Samaritans acknowledged no prophet after Moses other than the one spoken of in Deuteronomy 18:18, and him they regarded as the Messiah ... For her to speak of Jesus as a prophet was thus to move into the area of messianic speculation."

Some, including Borchert and Carson, feel the term is more general. But it would be in keeping with her womanly wiles and her desire to get the focus off of herself to appeal to this man's ego.

This continues to be one technique that the world uses to blunt the edge of our witness. It hopes to buy our favor by flattery.

20 Our fathers.—Her second attempt at a diversion is to bring up a theological point of controversy between Jews and Samaritans, the proper location of worship.

Sanballat's temple on Mt. Gerizim was one of the stumbling blocks between the two groups. John Hyrcanus, nephew of Judah Maccabeus and grandson of the priest Mattathias who defied the Syrians at Modiin, destroyed the temple in 128 BC.

The Samaritan version of the Pentateuch reads "Gerizim" instead of "Ebal" at Deut 27:4. Cf. also Deut 11:29, which describes Gerizim as the mount of blessing. She expects that her interlocutor will not be able to resist the temptation to engage such a meaty question. Even if the discussion turns ugly, she will at least have gotten the focus off of herself.

Again, anyone who speaks to people about the Lord has encountered this technique of a divergent question, a "red herring." Examples:

- What about Cain's wife?
- How about the contradictions in the Bible?
- Translations differ
- ...

21-24, The Lord Focuses

He refuses to take the bait, and leads her back to the issue of her responsibility toward God.

This section is divided by the two references to "the hour cometh." The first outlines the *place* and *object* of true worship, with an emphasis on things that will happen in the future. But these future events illustrate a principle that is true even before they come to pass, thus the second "the hour cometh" continues "and now is," and offers a general statement of the nature of acceptable worship that summarizes the two prophetic glimpses.

Woman.—As 19:26 shows, this address is not rude. There and in 2:4, he applies it to his mother, and elsewhere (Matt 15:28; Luke 13:12; John 20:13,15) in a comforting sense.

21b-22, The Hour Cometh

21b, The Place of Worship: neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem.—The prophetic event in view here is the coming Roman invasion. The Maccabean family had already destroyed the Samaritan temple in 128 BC, and the Jews now gloried that theirs was the only surviving temple, but the Romans would destroy the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. Neither will be an enduring sanctuary.

The removal of a geographic focus for worship is consistent with the OT prophets, compare Mal 1:11, “For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name *shall be* great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense *shall be* offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name *shall be* great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts.

True worship cannot be defined in terms of a physical place, a “worldly sanctuary” (Heb 9:1).

22, The Object of Worship: ye know not ... we know.—The contrast is important.

- Many religions are a groping after the unknown, reaching up to God. Recall that the Samaritans were descended from idolaters who worshipped the gods of other lands, 2 Kings 17:24,29. The Jewish rabbis felt that they worshipped at Gerizim because of the idols that Jacob had buried there, Gen 35:4. In that case they would be worshipping the hidden idols of false gods.
- The true religion is a response to what God has already revealed.

This contrast is, in another form, the contrast between works and grace. Unregenerate people think that they “by searching find out God” (Job 11:7), but he is so far beyond us that we can know him only if he condescends to reveal himself. And since he has so revealed himself, it is blasphemy to worship any other than he.

Calvin puts it well:

This is a sentence worthy of being remembered, and teaches us that we ought not to attempt any thing in religion rashly or at random; because, unless there be knowledge, it is not God that we worship, but a phantom or idol. All good intentions, as they are called, are struck by this sentence, as by a thunderbolt; for we learn from it, that men can do nothing but err, when they are guided by their own opinion without the word or command of God.

Salvation is of the Jews.—Literally, “the salvation.” It seems likely that he is alluding to himself as the Messiah, and in particular to the sacrifice that he will make when “his hour is come.” This is the prophetic event of this second issue.

The point here is that true worship cannot be made up by the worshipper, or based on supposition. It must be grounded in the revelation of God.

23-24, The Hour Cometh and Now Is

The destruction of the temple at Jerusalem, and the sacrifice of Messiah that brings salvation through the Jews, are yet future. But they teach a critical lesson about true worship that is valid even before those events take place. This section is structured ABBA.

- The A sections are the repeated insistence that worship be “in spirit and in truth.”
- The B sections are two reasons for this insistence.

A: 23a, 24b, the requirement: in spirit and in truth.—The key to understanding these two words is to recall the two prophetic points that the Lord has just made. Each of them corresponds to one of these words.

“In spirit” corresponds to the prediction that worship will one day be cut free from any physical location. The true sanctuary is one that the worshipper enters “in spirit,” not with the physical

body. The woman, with her focus on Gerizim, needs to understand this. This point is illustrated with several passages of Scripture.

- The most direct is Rev 1:10. John's exile on Patmos could not prevent him from worshipping. On the Lord's Day, he was "in the spirit," communing with the Lord though there was no physical sanctuary.
- In the Revelation, John frequently speaks of being taken somewhere "in the spirit" (4:2; 17:3; 21:10). His language appears to be based on that of Ezekiel (in the LXX) (11:24; 37:1). The point in these passages is not that the seer is transported physically, but that he has spiritual access to the scenes in question. Both of these men were exiles, separated from the land of promise, and the Lord demonstrates to them both the principle of spiritual presence.
- The Ezekiel passages emphasize the role of the Spirit of God, but Paul refers to his human spirit in a similar phrase in Rom 1:9, "whom I serve in my spirit" (cf. Phl 3:3). "Serve" here is *latreuw*, which refers to the kind of service that a priest does in a temple, and is another word for "worship." It is probably overly picky to try to restrict the expression to either the Holy Spirit or the human spirit; compare Rom 8:16, which shows that the whole point is that we can now have communion with God at a spiritual level, completely independent of our physical location.
- The NT recognizes a special role for the Spirit in prayer: Rom 8:15, 26-27; Eph 6:18; Jude 20.

"In truth" corresponds to the contrast between worshipping what one does not know and what one does know, and the prediction of the salvation that God is providing through the Jews. Acceptable worship cannot be grounded on groping ignorance or traditions of men. Its only adequate foundation is the revelation of God. If we do not know something to be true, we cannot acceptably base our worship on it, for true worship must be "in truth." The woman's focus on the holy water from Jacob's well shows that she needs to understand this as well. The notion that Jacob dug the well was based on tradition, not on any explicit historical reference in Genesis. Her pilgrimage to obtain that water was thus not only physical rather than spiritual, but traditional rather than truthful. The Lord corrects her on both points.

B: 23b, 24a, the reasons.—For each of these requirements, our Lord gives a further, deeper reason.

"the Father seeketh such" reminds us that worship does not start with us, but with God. He desires worship, and he takes the initiative in drawing worshipers to himself. Thus this reason relates most directly to the requirement that worship be "in truth," founded on divine revelation rather than ignorance or human tradition.

"God is spirit" relates most directly to the requirement that worship be "in spirit." The one whom we approach is spirit, not flesh. He does not dwell in temples made with hands (Acts 7:48), a fact understood by Solomon even as he dedicated the temple (1 Kings 8:27). A physical sanctuary was a concession to a people not yet permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Now that we have this precious gift, we have no more need of such crutches.

Application to how we worship

This section not only corrects the woman's carnal conceptions and lays the foundation for our Lord's conflicts with the Jews, but it is critical for understanding the nature of true NT worship. Each of these suggests how we can prepare ourselves for worship.

In spirit.—True worship is not defined by a physical sanctuary, but by believers who enter into communion with the Spirit of God at a spiritual level. If believers have a building dedicated to their meetings, they should think of it only as a meeting hall, not as a sanctuary. The most magnificent cathedral, while artistically beautiful and historically significant, can make no contribution to true worship. Early believers met in homes, as we do today, with no compromise to the level of worship they were able to achieve.

To prepare ourselves to worship in spirit, we need to be sure that all known sin, which might grieve or quench the Holy Spirit, is confessed, and that we have put away distractions to our own spirit by avoiding fleshly recreations and meditating on God's word. As we gather to worship, it is well to come a few moments early, not to chit-chat with each other, but to draw before the Lord in prayer and enter into the spiritual communion that is the true sphere of worship.

In truth.—True worship is based on God's revelation, not on human tradition. We must strive to free ourselves from the reliance on human tradition that characterizes so much fleshly worship.

An excellent preparation for worship in truth is meditation in the Scriptures.

25-27, The Giver: "Messiah"

The woman.—The reference to the future leads her attention to the Messiah. Notice the lack of the sarcastic "Sir." For the first time her attention is where a godly Jew's should be: not on traditions derived from the patriarchs (Jacob's well), nor on sectarian arguments (Gerizim vs. Zion), but on hope for the promised deliverer. Note "I," no longer "we."

Jesus.—He identifies himself as the one whom she awaits.

It is interesting that his first and most direct claim of messiahship is to a Samaritan near Shechem rather than to the Jews in Jerusalem. Recall our discussion of 4:1-3. His "hour was not yet come," and he will not precipitate the crisis in Jerusalem prematurely.

He claims more than messiahship, using here for the first time a phrase that is common John, *egw eimi*, "I am." John uses this expression more than any other NT writer (24x; it appears only 24x in the rest of the NT, and no one else uses it more than 7x). See 8:58 for a clue to its full meaning. It is part of the LXX's translation of the divine name in Exod 3:14, and a common translation for the Hebrew *ani hw'*, which always refers to the Lord when it appears (as here) without complement (Deut 32:39; Isa 41:4; 43:10,13; 46:4; 48:12; 52:6). Thus it is part of the Lord's claim to be not just Messiah, but also God.

Lessons for Others

The woman is not the only one affected by this interview. John draws our attention to two other groups: the disciples, and the residents of Samaria. He alternates between them.

27, The Disciples

his disciples ... marvelled that he talked with the woman.—Recall the Jewish teachings we discussed under v.9, that a man should not talk much with a woman, even his wife, and especially not in public. They were as amazed as she was.

No man said.—In spite of this, they hold their peace. Contrast their attitude here with that in the synoptics (Matt 19:13; Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15, “suffer the little children”), where the disciples act almost as gatekeepers for the Lord (and must be rebuked for it; Mark 10:14 is the only place where the verb *aganaketw* is used of Jesus; elsewhere it describes the indignation of the chief priests at the triumphal entry [Matt 21:25], or the synagogue ruler at the healing on the sabbath [Luke 13:14], or most commonly of the disciples in their fleshly zeal and jealousies).

The difference between the two attitudes on the part of the disciples may be due to the different periods in the Lord’s ministry. Here, near the beginning of his ministry, they are still somewhat in awe of him. The blessing of the children happens on his final journey to Jerusalem, when the disciples think they “know it all.”

Application: This is one of the examples in Scripture of the danger of losing one’s “first love” (Rev 2:4, cf. Jer 2:2). Our love for the Lord can either “wax cold” (Matt 24:12) or “abound yet more and more” (Phil 1:9), and we must be on our guard.

What seekest thou?—Probably a word that would be addressed to the woman. They have not yet set themselves up as gatekeepers.

Why talkest thou with her?—This would have been to the Lord, challenging him for breaking with rabbinic custom and talking openly with a woman, a Samaritan, and a libertine.

Application: It is common in many circles to question authority. Even some believers are sometimes flippant toward the things of God, challenging aspects of his revelation that we do not understand. Calvin pointedly remarks,

we are taught by their example that, if any thing in the works or words of God and of Christ be disagreeable to our feelings, we ought not to give ourselves a loose rein so as to have the boldness to murmur, but ought to preserve a modest silence, until what is hidden from us be revealed from heaven.

28-30, The Samaritans

28 The woman then left her waterpot.—The verb indicates deliberately leaving something, as the disciples their nets and their ship when the Lord called them (Matt 4:20,22), or the Lord’s departure from Judea (4:3). She is going to bring others back, so she need not carry it, but in addition, she may have been leaving it for the Lord’s use.

and went her way into the city.—The expression is the same as that describing what the disciples did in v.8. We are thus invited to compare their two missions—theirs to obtain physical food, hers to do the will of the father and thus obtain spiritual nourishment.

and saith to the men.—Actually, “the people,” not necessarily her clientele.

The HS has preserved three elements of her simple testimony for our instruction.

1. “Come, see a man.” She is not commanding or pushing, but inviting them. Compare the invitation of Jesus to Andrew and John in 1:39, or of Philip to Nathanael in 1:46.

2. “which told me ...” Her invitation is not impersonal. Jesus has touched her life, and she wants them to know it.
3. “Is not this the Christ?” She does not invite them to see him as a clever rabbi, or an unusually tolerant Jew, but as the Messiah. She faces them up with the real issue.

30 Then they ... came unto him.—The invitation has its desired effect, and they come to see Jesus.

31-37, The Disciples

The disciples’ simple invitation to eat leads the Lord to an exposition on true nourishment. First he responds to their direct question, then expands it to a lesson on spiritual ministry.

31-34, Direct Question and Answer

Master, eat ... I have meat.—The Lord’s interchange with his disciples reflects their inability to discern the spiritual side of life from the physical. This is a common theme in John:

- Nicodemus couldn’t discern the new birth from physical birth.
- The woman couldn’t discern spiritual water from physical water.
- In John 6, the people can’t discern spiritual food and drink from physical.

We live in a physical world, but one that serves as a window onto the spiritual. Cf. the discussion in Heb 8:5 about how the tabernacle was “the example and shadow of heavenly things.” Their confusion exhorts us in two ways.

1. We must always seek the spiritual reality behind the physical circumstances of our lives.
2. We must keep our priorities straight, and not allow the physical to get in the way of the spiritual.

We are apt to think ill of Nicodemus, the woman, and the Jews of Capernaum for their short-sightedness, but the disciples’ misunderstanding shows that even those who have been in association with the Lord are prone to the same error.

The Lord’s response in v.34 makes four very important points.

Him that sent me.—In keeping with the picture that Isaiah repeatedly draws of “the servant of the Lord,” he is very conscious that he is not his own man, but lives to serve the one who sent him.

Do his will.—As a servant, the Lord is guided not by his own will but by the Father’s. 6:38 makes the disjunction explicit. More generally, this is the standard for how we are to live the Christian life: 7:17; 9:31.

Finish his work.—“Doing his will” focuses on the present. “Finishing his work” focuses on our objective, completing the assignment he has given us. The Lord had a set of such tasks assigned by his father (5:36), but the work *par excellence* was the sacrifice he came to offer, 17:4; cf. 19:30.

There is a careful balance to be maintained here.

- On the one hand, we need to focus on “doing his will” and letting him worry about the result. Too often those who call themselves believers have compromised “doing his will” in the hopes of “finishing his work.” This is wrong; the end never justifies the means.
- On the other hand, we do need to keep God’s overall goal in mind. Many of our decisions are not governed by a direct command of Scripture, and we need to act in a way that advances the ultimate objective. Paul (Phil. 3:14; 1 Cor 9:24-27) spoke of running with the goal in view, the goal being satisfying the judges and receiving the crown (2 Tim 4:8), and our Lord’s goal-directed behavior is described in Heb 12:2 as focused on “the joy that was set before him.”

My meat.—This activity is nourishing to him, and takes priority over the food that they have brought. He has “done the will” of the Father in speaking to the woman, but has not yet “finished the work,” for he knows that she will shortly return with a crowd of inquirers, and he does not wish to be in the middle of eating when they arrive.

35-38, Amplified Response

This section is structured AB C A’B’, where

- A, A’ are proverbial sayings about agriculture
- B, B’ are the Lord’s comments on those sayings, interpreting them in the light of evangelistic work. Both of these comments make a contrast between physical agriculture and spiritual work.
- C (v. 36) summarize the fulfillment that comes to those who engage in the spiritual harvest, and thus corresponds to and amplifies v.34.

The Lord was fond of comparing evangelistic work to farming: compare the parable of the soils (Matt 13, Mark 4, Luke 8), which draws points of similarity between agriculture and the spread of the gospel. But there are differences as well, and here the Lord uses two folk sayings to highlight those differences: how long it takes to get results, and who enjoys the benefit of the work.

To emphasize the effect of the chiasmic order, our exposition will present the two proverbs first, then come back to the central element as a summary.

35, First proverbial saying: the time of harvest is here

35 There are yet four months.—Probably, this is a proverb, not a statement identifying the time when the Lord spoke. The Talmud divided the agricultural year into six two-month periods: seed-time, winter, winter solstice, harvest, summer, and the great heat (Morris p. 279, quoting Lightfoot—see the quote in Gill). This is consistent with the Gezer calendar. Thus from the end of seed-time to the beginning of harvest is four months.

The proverb would have had the force of our expression, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” Don’t think that now that you’re done sowing, the harvest should pop out of the ground instantly. Be patient and wait for the crop.

The point of citing this proverb at this point is to contrast spiritual agriculture with physical.

Lift up your eyes.—The Lord has just sowed, in preaching to the woman. Already he can see the people of Shechem leaving the city gate and heading toward them. Unlike physical grain, which takes time to sprout, spiritual grain can bring forth immediately, if it falls into good soil. This was to be a characteristic of the messianic age, Amos 9:13.

Application: The Lord is not denying that sometimes spiritual grain takes time to germinate. But he is warning the disciples against an attitude of non-expectancy. It's easy to think, "Even if I share with someone, it won't have any effect for weeks, or months, or years." This can lead us to a defeatist attitude—it's only a short step from "this will take months" to "they will never believe," and thence to "Why bother?" But in the hands of the master farmer, the seed brings immediate results. He is able to diagnose where people are stuck, and to address their questions right away, and when this is done, one can expect rapid responses. Growth in the spiritual life takes years, but the span from evangelism to the new birth can be rapid enough to enable the kind of missionary campaigns that characterize the book of Acts.

37-38, Second proverbial saying: you have the right to harvest.

37, One soweth, and another reapeth.—This proverb is intended to be cynical.

Psa 126:6 is a good vignette of the risks and joys of farming in the semi-arid middle east. Sowing is hard and risky work. The seed sown cannot be eaten, and if the crop fails, a family may starve. Thus those who go forth and sow often do so with weeping, and the harvest is their reward for this labor and risk.

Ordinarily, it is a tragedy when someone else reaps what you sow. Such a situation usually indicates that your land has been conquered by an adversary during the period between sowing and reaping. Cf. Josh 24:13 (spoken on this very spot! Alford); Jud 6:3-5; Mic 6:15. It is a "hard man" who reaps where he has not sown, Matt 25:24, 26.

Thus the proverb in its natural sense would be something one would utter upon observing injustice in the world. "Wouldn't you know it—he put all that work in, and someone else got the credit. One sows, and another reaps."

38, I sent you.—But in the case of gospel work, this is the rule rather than the exception.

- In the case of the disciples, their work (e.g., 4:2) built on the foundation laid by others (in this case, John the Baptist).
- The Lord himself acknowledged that he was part of a larger group (3:11, "we").
- As so often, John's record provides the evangelistic foundation for Paul's later teaching; compare 1 Cor 3:6, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase."

36, Focus: the reward of harvest

This verse is the heart of the Lord's words to his disciples. It integrates and summarizes the concepts that he has introduced using the two proverbs, and uses them to reinforce his words in 4:34.

The two proverbs are reflected in the final clause:

- the second proverb in "**both** he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice," without any sense of jealousy or bitterness;

- the first in the adverb “together,” because their labor comes so close one upon the other.

The spiritual meat of vv. 32, 34 is reflected in the first two clauses, the second of which is best taken as amplifying the first. The reward of the reaper is the knowledge that what he does has eternal value. Cf. 1 Cor 3:12-15.

39-42, The Samaritans

The response of the Samaritans is recorded in two parallel episodes, marked off by “many ... believed” (v.39) and “many more believed” (41). In each case, their belief is evident in their actions (40, 42).

39 many ... believed for the saying of the woman.—The first group heard the woman’s testimony, and were drawn to Christ by it. Recall that her witness was personal—not just an abstract argument about who Jesus was, but the record of her personal encounter with him.

40, were come ... they besought him.—Though their interest may have been raised by what she said, it led to a deep desire to know him personally. This manifested itself in two ways, which are helpful indicators for us to gauge our own spiritual health.

- They weren’t content to stand and listen to the woman, but they **came** to him. Some peoples’ testimony seems calculated to draw others to themselves; the woman’s had the effect of leading people to the Lord. Compare the Baptist’s emphasis in 3:29-30. Fleshly enthusiasm may lead someone to become a fan of a Christian musician or charismatic teacher, but when the Spirit has produced true belief, it results in an attraction to the Lord.
- They weren’t content to meet him and then pass on. They asked him to **tarry** with them. When the Lord has truly given us new life, we delight in every opportunity to be with him, and to claim the promise of his presence by being gathered with others unto his name (Matt 18:20). A fleshly response asks, “Isn’t once a week enough?” Where the Spirit has brought new life, there is a desire to spend every moment with the Lord and his people.

No doubt, during this two day period, the disciples had ample opportunity to discharge the work of “reapers” that the Lord has assigned to them.

41, many more believed ... his own word.—The second group was not persuaded by the woman’s testimony. The term they use to describe her speech in v.42 (“thy saying” *lalia*) emphasizes the sound of speech rather than its content, and is sometimes a bit derogative. It was his own speech that persuaded them (as it had first of all her).

But her witness had its effect, none the less, in that it drew their attention to the Lord. Even when people do not believe what we say, if we cause them to consider the word of God, it will have its effect. “The entrance of thy words giveth light,” Ps 119:30. Don’t argue with people over the authority of God’s word. Just get them exposed to it. The Spirit will use it to do his work.

42, we know.—The result in the case of this second group is a deep understanding of the Lord’s mission. They make the strongest confession that we have yet heard in the gospel concerning the Lord’s person: “this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.”

- “Christ” is the promised Messiah.

- “Saviour” appears in John only here and 1 John 4:14, both in this expression. The expression implies that his people were at risk, and that he has delivered them from that risk. It thus reflects the emphasis on sin and judgment that characterized the Lord’s discussion with the woman.
- “of the world”, cf. 3:17; 12:17. John’s emphasis is that the Lord has come to restore the broken world order (cf. Rom 8). The Samaritans, in their quasi-gentile status, are better situated to appreciate this than the Jews, with their focus on nationalistic supremacy.

Notes

7, *Ek ths samareias*

Does this mean simply “Samaritan,” as all vss, or is it adverbial, “a woman came from Samaria ...”? All commentators who recognize the construction insist that it couldn’t be a reference to the city of Samaria, which is two hours away. However,

3. the construction is almost universally adverbial in the Greek Bible. The only possible exceptions I can find are 2 Sam 9:4. 1 Kings 11:26 (no verb in LXX; might come from previous verse); 2 Kings 12:1 (v.2 LXX). The construction occurs only 10x in the NT, six of them in John, three in John 4, and all the NT occurrences are adverbial.
4. John elsewhere calls her *gunh samaritis*: 4:9 (2x),
5. If it is adverbial in 4:7, it brackets 4:28.

“worship in spirit” *en pneumati*

Common phrase in John for his apocalyptic experiences: 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10

Seems to be following Ezekiel’s visions, 11:24; 37:1

Matt 22:43, this was how David spoke in writing Scripture (cf. 2 Pet 1)

Rom 8:9, depends on indwelling Spirit.

Rom 1:9, Paul serves *latreuw* God *en tw pneumati mou*

“in truth” Psa 145:18 (LXX 144)—“truly”? Or (as NET Bible suggests in 2 John 1,3,4, 3 John 1,3), orthodox as opposed to heterodox? Yet in 17:19, they favor “truly.”