

Why Jesus Chose the Woman at the Well

John 4:1-42

It seemed fairly random. Jesus, wearied by His long walk from Judea, sat down to rest by a well in the country of Samaria, the very well that Jacob had dug generations earlier and had bequeathed to his son Joseph. But the well was deep, and although Jesus was no doubt thirsty, He had nothing with Him with which to draw up water. Then a woman approached the well, carrying a waterpot. He asked her if she would give Him a drink.

The woman was surprised. Never before had a Jewish traveler spoken to her like this. Of course, she knew why they didn't. The Jews looked down on the mixed-race Samaritans and would not socialize with them. In fact, even though many of the Samaritans worshipped the same God as the Jews, they were not allowed to enter the temple area in Jerusalem. Why then, she wondered, had this Jewish man asked her for a drink? So she asked Him.

Jesus, on the other hand, was not surprised. He knew exactly who the woman was, He knew her past, and He knew she would be there that day. But more importantly, He knew she was a woman who was thirsting for something even more than He Himself was thirsting for water. So sidestepping her question, Jesus said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

Confused, the woman pointed out that Jesus had no way to get even ordinary water, much less this thing called living water. "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?"

Again not answering her directly, Jesus confused her even more. "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst."

At this point there was something in the woman's heart that began to trust Jesus' words. Although she had never before imagined a kind of water that would end her thirst forever and would allow her to retire from water-drawing, she simply asked Him to give her that water.

But for a third time, Jesus changed the subject. "Go, call your husband, and come here."

In complete honesty, the woman answered that she had no husband. Jesus responded, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly."

Let's pause for a moment and consider what we know about this woman...and what we don't know. We know she was a Samaritan and a divorcee. We know she was respectful, intelligent, and aware of the history and traditions of her people. We also know she was honest and clear-thinking, and willing to believe something that was difficult to understand.

What we don't know is that she was immoral. Our normal assumption that she was comes from the unconscious transfer of our cultural patterns back into hers. Today, divorces can be initiated by either a wife or a husband. But looking at the biblical record, here is what we find.

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

This rule that only the husband could initiate divorce was apparently still in force in New Testament times. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife....A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (I Corinthians 7:10,11,39). In other words, even though God disapproved of it, men still had a legal option of divorce that women may not have had.

More significant however than the involuntary nature of this woman's divorces was their probable motivation. The Hebrew term “uncleanness” mentioned in Deuteronomy, which gave a husband the right to divorce his wife, incorporates the idea of shame and nakedness. While it is possible that it might refer to evidence of lost virginity the first time she married, it is doubtful this would be the concern in a second marriage. More likely the woman had some kind of physical defect which a husband could only discover after he married her.

And if this was the situation with this Samaritan woman, it is certain that her life had been one of much pain and hardship—quite possibly due to something beyond her control. Even the fact that she was now living with a man to whom she was not married does not necessarily reflect on her character. The two categories of “single” womanhood that were culturally accepted in her day were virgins and widows. Virgins lived with their fathers; widows were cared for by a family member or by the church. But divorcees were probably outcasts. Perhaps she had finally found a man who would allow her to live in his home, even though he wouldn't marry her. It might have been her only option for survival, especially if she had had no children.

This is not to say she was not a sinner. She may have been partly or even significantly to blame for her circumstances. But it is arguable that over the course of her difficult lifetime she had been driven to seek comfort and strength from God with a desperation most women did not have. In any event, we can be assured that Jesus knew her heart, and He made no statement about her sin.

Returning to the story, it finally dawned on this woman that she was speaking with a man with supernatural powers, who could tell the events of her past with complete accuracy. When the truth of this fact sank in, she assumed He was a prophet. From deep within her there rose a specific question no one else had been able to answer. Sir, she asked, the worship of my people here on these mountains—does it truly please God?

If this question had been intended to distract Jesus from the complexities of her past, He would not have fallen for such a maneuver. But instead, for the first time in their conversation, He

answered her directly. He explained that soon worship would no longer be tied to a particular place, as had been the case for centuries for the Jewish people. It would become more important to know whom one was actually worshipping, specifically the Savior who was of Jewish descent. But even beyond that, true worship would be characterized by the response of both the mind and the heart to the Spirit of God.

And then, in a final amazing disclosure, Jesus revealed that He to whom she was speaking was in fact the very Messiah she and her people knew would one day come.

Thus, to a lowly, broken Samaritan woman, Jesus chose to unveil three astonishing truths: that He could give her living water, that worship must be “in spirit and truth,” and that He was the long-awaited Messiah. When at this point His disciples returned from their trip into the city for food, the atmosphere must have been sufficiently filled with the glory of divine revelation that none of them, not even the inquisitive Peter, dared to speak.

Moreover, the woman was so touched by God’s grace that she abandoned her waterpot and went quickly to the city, calling to the men of her community, “Come, see a man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”

Here again we have evidence that the woman was not a complete social outcast, for the men did not treat her like she was crazy. Instead they followed her back to the well, where they themselves urged Jesus to stay longer in their country. Jesus agreed to remain a couple more days, and, we are told, “many more believed because of His own word.”

Long before this, God had spoken these words through the prophet Isaiah: “I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (Isaiah 57:15). Jesus was now fulfilling this prophecy, even as He promised to give living water to anyone who authentically thirsted for righteousness (Matthew 5:6; John 7:37).

If the woman had not been fully contrite, she might have asked the prophet a lot of other questions, perhaps starting with why had God given her such a difficult life and would a man ever love her despite her flaws. But her pain had brought her beyond herself into a longing for God, and a desire to please Him, and it may well have been His awareness of her heart that motivated Jesus to divinely arrange this unusual rendezvous at a lonely well on the dusty roads of Samaria.

*Diane Woerner
October 11, 2008*