

# John 4:1-26

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I invite you to turn back to the same chapter in God's Word that we read, John's Gospel, chapter 4, and we'll read again verse 28. John 4, 28.

Just then, his disciples returned and were surprised—that's verse 27, so I'll just carry on—to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, what do you want or why are you talking with her? And then particularly, verse 28, then leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ? When I was a boy in primary school, one of the lessons that we had to undertake in the English class was to write what they called in those days compositions, little essays, stories, to help us in our practice of writing English, and help us too in our thinking and our imagination.

And the teachers, they'd got a stock of titles of these compositions. Some of you, I don't know how it is today, but some of you who are, you know, a little bit older may remember some of these kind of thing would be, what I did in my summer holidays, or what presents I'd like to get for Christmas, or what I'd like to be when I grow up. And every year, the teachers would trot out these titles, and we had to scribble away and write our compositions. I remember that there was one, it was a rather different style of writing that was demanded, and it was called The Adventures of a Shilling. A shilling, for those who are a bit ignorant about such things, a shilling in our day was a coin, a silvery kind of coin, worth about 5p nowadays, although it could buy a lot more than 5p can buy nowadays. And the idea was that we had to write as the shilling, as if the shilling, the coin was writing about the kind of life it had. You know, it came out of the bank, and it was in somebody's house, and described something about the house, and then it was used to buy something, and then it was given a change to a sailor, and it got in a boat, and then the sailor did something else with it, and then it was a miser who, you know, he had it in a pile in his house, and then somebody stole it. And you could make a very exciting story if you were imaginative. I still remember to this day this story that I had to write, Adventures of a Shilling. And as I read the story of the woman, the Samaritan woman, and what happened to her, it struck me that we could well write a story entitled Adventures of a Water Jar. This item, when the woman went running back to the town, was left lying there. And anyone could say that it looked just like some old crockery destined for the scrap heap.

But think, what a story that water jar could tell of all the things in this woman's life, going back, and then what seemed to be happening all around it that particular day.

And if you think I'm being a bit fanciful in offering a sermon based on a water jar, the adventures of a water jar, remember how Jesus, on His last visit to Jerusalem, when the children were crying out, Hosanna to the King of Israel, and the Pharisee said to His disciples, stop these children, they shouldn't be saying that sort of thing. Remember how Jesus said, well, if the children didn't speak out, the very stones would cry out. Or again, we think of how the prophet, prophet Isaiah, spoke about when he was talking about the great good news that he was prophesying that he was prophesying of Messiah who was to come and the great salvation and blessing that would come through him. He said, the trees of the forest will clap their hands, and the streams, they will shout for joy. So, I've got good precedent for taking you to the life and adventures of this water jar. And I think that if we divided our composition or story into chapters, the first chapter that the water jar could tell us about was a chapter of a dissatisfied life, a dissatisfied life. The water jar would know very well with what heavy steps this woman went every day, carrying it on her shoulder or on her head, every day down to the same old well under the burning midday sun. Because of the kind of life she lived, we suppose she had to go at that most unattractive time of day when nobody else would go. And the water jar well knew that this was expressive of her feelings, of the dissatisfaction that marred her life. It would know that years before, she had looked, when she was young, she had looked, when she was young, for a lively life, for young admirers, for parties, for music, for nice dresses, for dancing, for drink. And these things, she would assume, she had assumed, would bring her happiness, but it hadn't worked. She got one, whether a literal husband, the word that Jesus himself uses, or whether he was euphemistically describing a partner with whom she lived, whichever it was. She tried one, but it didn't work.

[ 7 : 21 ]     The happiness she sought never came. So, another, and another, and another, and another. Each time, putting hopes that now it would be better, but each time less appealing, and becoming more and more trapped in her life of what the writer of Ecclesiastes calls vanity, a grasping after wind.

And how true that woman could have sung, how truly she could have sung the words of the hymn writer, I've tried the broken cistern's, Lord, but ah, the waters failed. Even as I stooped to drink, they fled and mocked me as I wailed. And if the water jar could speak, it would tell of that deep dissatisfaction in its mistress's life, because now she's like the prodigal. The prodigal who'd gone away with a fortune and looking with all his dreams of a new life, far from the restrictions of his old father at home, the prodigal now glad to eat the swill that the pigs were eating, but no one would give anything to him. And so was her case, a dissatisfied life. And I think that the water jar could write chapter 2 of this woman's experience and describe it as a sinful life, not just dissatisfied, but sinful, because she deliberately flouted God's commands with respect to marriage, and she was suffering for it.

Not so long ago, I was preaching. It wasn't the same sermon, but I was preaching on the Samaritan woman, and I was describing her as living a sinful life, and the evidence, these five husbands, and we don't know what happened to them. Well, she ditched them, or they ditched her, and now living with this other man. And a member of our congregation in Leith, we were chatting at the coffee afterwards, and got chatting about the sermon, and said, I don't agree with you. It doesn't say that she was living, she'd lived an immoral life with all these men. Maybe they'd all died. Well, maybe they had. One, two, three, four, five. But I think, as we continued to discuss, that he came round to what I was saying, what I think Scripture clearly tells us. She was now living in an immoral relationship with this man.

And as you think of her marital situation, or her sexual proclivities, how modern, how desperately and tragically modern all of this is. I remember some 20 years ago or so, I was reading an article in, it was in some French magazine, Paris Match, or one of these, and it was an article about Brigitte Bardot, famous actress, film star in the 50s, and it was describing how the kind of life she lived. She was known as a sex kitten. The kind of life that she lived then, she had to struggle in order to live it, because the article went on to say that living in the 50s, it was before the contraceptive pill, it was before abortion was legal, it was before divorce was acceptable, it was while the church still had or was considered as a moral arbiter, and here she was, this valiant woman, breaking beyond all these bounds, and obviously trampling underfoot the laws of God. You perhaps know that she changed her life completely afterwards and became a champion of animal rights. No evidence that she came to any kind of recognition of the sinfulness, though the inappropriateness perhaps of the life she had lived. But here is this woman living that same kind of life. Doubtless there were other sins that Jesus doesn't spell out, but certainly whatever kind of sinful life she was living, it was compounded, it was made worse by a religious veneer. Because there in verse 20, you see how she says to Jesus, we worship. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain. You Jews claim that the place where we must worship is

Jerusalem. So, she claimed to be a religious kind of woman. She claimed to have a concern for the things of God. But that surely made her sin all the worse, as the prophets on many occasions reminded her people in generations before. You think, for example, of the prophet Malachi, who's berating the Israelites because they're being very religious, they're bringing sacrifices, but they are the wrong kind of sacrifices, the kind of animals that they wouldn't present to the governor because they were sick or rickety or diseased in some kind of way, but they would bring them to God. And you remember that searing comment of God through the prophet, oh, that somebody would shut the doors of the temple so that people wouldn't come in and offer these kind of sacrifices on my altar. And Isaiah says the same thing, chapter 58 and elsewhere. So, here is this woman living this dissatisfied, sinful life, and therefore dissatisfied life, and she's become a prisoner, a prisoner of her lusts and her passions and her sins with no hope of escape. And the water jar knew that very well, day after day after day after day. On, I imagine, on the woman's head, the way they would do it in the east, back and forth it went.

[ 14 : 25 ] So, it knew all about dissatisfaction. It knew all about sin. It knew all about what Jesus said, he who commits sin is a slave of sin. It comes to my mind a young man who worked for London City Mission in our congregation in London. And his particular ministry was among homeless people, particularly young homeless people, because he was young himself. And we had a lunchtime service every Wednesday, and he used to help us at that lunchtime service. And I remember him coming in one day, he'd been walking along the embankment that's beside the River Thames, and was very near our church.

And he told us that he had been speaking for a long time on this occasion, not with young homeless people, but with a much older man. And he was obviously a bit the worse for drink, but he was perfectly able to converse rationally. And so, Will, that was our friend's name, said to him, look, it was obvious he slept on the embankment on the embankment on a bench. And Will offered to take him along to the Waterloo Centre of London City Mission.

He could get a change of clothes, he could get a shower, he could get a bed, he could get a hot meal. And he said, no. And it turned out that he was a doctor, and because of drink, he'd lost his home, his family, his house, his job, and ended up on the streets of London. And Will then said, but there is hope. He said, I'm a Christian, and why not come along with me to the service that we're having? And the doctor very politely thanked him.

He said, son, there's no hope. You could do all that for me, and tomorrow I'd be back on the bottle.

I can't. I'll never, ever be free. We know he was wrong. We know there is freedom through Jesus Christ for the worst of sinners. But like this woman, he was a slave of sin. And so, there are two chapters so far that the water jar has written for us, a dissatisfied life, a sinful life. But then there is thirdly, a transformed life, a transformed life. Because the water jar at this point is lying there, forgotten, abandoned beside the well. There was no trudging back that day, finally balanced on the woman's head.

[ 17 : 37 ] What had happened? Well, no doubt, he could tell us. He was there. It could tell us. It was there. Something exceptional had led this woman to leave her vital means of sustenance. She needed the water.

She needed to take it home. She needed to cook for her lover in the house. She needed to do the washing. She needed to have water for drinking. But nothing. She'd left it. No water. And she'd run back to the town, not skulking under the midday sun when nobody else would be out, but running openly, exuberantly, because she had met with Jesus Christ. And that meeting with Jesus Christ had done many things, but let me mention three. It had exposed her sin. It was painful for her, but it was necessary. Jesus went to the heart of the matter. She began to talk about religious practices. I think that was a diversion tactic. He says, go home and bring your husband. And of course, the whole immoral situation of our life was revealed. But that way of dealing of the Lord Jesus with a sinful soul is absolutely vital for every single one of us. For we all need to recognize our transgression of God's holy law and of God's moral code. We may not have sinned the way she did, but the Bible teaches that not only she but everyone else is born in sin and shapen in iniquity, and that we need that sin to be exposed, and we need to confess it, and we need to repent, and we need with open arms to receive

God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. It's worth remembering that in Romans chapter 1, the Apostle Paul, when he describes the dreadful moral and spiritual state of the human race, speaks first of ungodliness. He says, the wrath of God is reeled from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Unrighteousness, the bad things that we do and that we think and that we say, but at the root of it, says the Apostle, there is ungodliness, there is rebellion against God our Maker, and that must be recognized and confessed. And that, of course, is the point which this woman reached. Now, the degree of conviction of sin may vary. It does vary from person to person.

If you've read, I know many of you will have read *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, but if you've read his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, you'll know how he was brought under very, very deep and heavy conviction of sin. And for not just weeks, but months and even years on end, he was so burdened with his sin, he never thought of sin before as affecting him. But God showed it to him, and things that he might have thought before were rather trivial. He saw them in the light of God's holy law. And Bunyan himself tells us that he was so burdened by conviction of sin that he came near, near to a desire that his life would be ended, that there was no hope for him, so great a sinner. Now, that doesn't happen in everyone's experience, but God wants each of us to see our sin. In the light of his law and in the light of his love,

God's love shone at Calvary, when his beloved Son had to suffer so profoundly in body and soul because of sin, our sin. Jesus exposed our sin, and then he revealed himself. In verse 26, we find him saying to the woman, when she talks about Messiah, God's anointed King, who was to come, Jesus declared, I who speak to you am He. And it wasn't simply that he said it to her, but that that penetrated into our own soul to bring her recognition of sin and her recognition of the Savior. And so, you find her saying in verse 42, saying to the woman, or saying to, not verse 42, that's where she spoke to, where the Samaritans spoke, but she says, come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Is not this the Christ? She too acknowledges the one who has revealed himself to her. He revealed himself as human, as he was. The water jar knew that because it had to go down into the well and bring up water for this man to drink. Fully man, but now fully God. And as the Samaritan said, the Savior, the Savior of the world.

[ 23 : 27 ] So, this transformed life. Jesus exposed her sin, He revealed Himself, and then He gave her new life.

Now, of course, she at first viewed it materialistically. In verse 15, when He talks about living water, she thinks it's fresh water. In many languages, actually, the word for fresh and the word for living is the same. And she obviously was thinking it's the bubbling water in the well.

But Jesus points her away from what is materialistic. Oh, how can I get out of having to come to this well every day, carrying this water jar on my head every day, and having to get water every day?

This is some new guru who will help me to get fresh water in some other way. But by God's grace, her eyes were opened, and she came to know that water of life, the water that I give, which if a man drinks of it, he will never thirst. And she came to know that he who believes in the Son has life. She came to know the experience of the psalmist when he was able to sing, he took me from a fearful pit and from the miry clay, and on a rock he set my feet, establishing my way. And what did the water jar now matter? Of course, she's going to leave it lying there, because she has the water of life, of eternal life, a dissatisfied life, a sinful life, a transformed life. And the water jar can still write a couple of chapters for us, because we notice that it becomes a witnessing life. Strange, strange for the water jar. Her mistress leaves it there, it's abandoned, but it knows that she still has, after the five, she still has one lover left. He's back there at home, and he's going to expect the water that's needed for all the domestic needs, but she seems to have forgotten about him. And that she would run into the village or the town when she normally shunned everybody, and everybody shunned her. And now, amazing, she comes back with crowds. She's surrounded by those people who shunned her, those people who knew all about her immoral life, and they're eagerly listening to her, because she is now witnessing to the one whom she had despised, God and God's own Son.

She is now His child through faith in this man. And there are two things in this witnessing life that are obviously important. First is sin abandoned. He told me everything I ever did, and she wouldn't say that openly if she weren't going to leave it behind her. I know that everything I ever did is sinful, but by God's grace, I'm going to live a different kind of life.

[ 26 : 54 ] Well, of course, they knew what it was all about, and she didn't need to spell out all the unsavory details, but she confessed. And she acknowledged that now it was a new lifestyle that she was going to live. And it's vital that sin is purged, that sins are forgiven, that guilt is taken away. And then, as she would know, that the Spirit's power comes into the new life.

I don't remember, I confess, I don't remember all the details, because a long time since I've read the book, I'm referring to the story of, or the life of Brownlow North, famous aristocrat of the middle of the 19th century. He lived a good part of his life, not far from here. He was in the sort of Huntley area, round about there. He was actually related to a former prime minister, Lord North, of, for our American friends, a very infamous prime minister. But maybe they're grateful because they got their independence because of his stubbornness. That's by the way, friends. But a relative of his, a much younger relative, was Brownlow North. And if you know the story, you know that in his mid-forties, he was a great gambler. He was a great man of the world, a man who lived a life not of gross sin, but certainly a very sinful and godless life.

And God reached out to him in a wonderful way, and he became a Christian. Well, on one occasion, we're told in the book, he became a preacher, an evangelist, traveled all over the country preaching the gospel. On one occasion, he came to Aberdeen. And I don't remember what church it was, the book may well say, but there was a huge crowd ready to listen to this very well-known man who was now a Christian. And just before the service, somebody slipped him an envelope with a letter inside it.

And he opened the letter and read it, and it was from someone who listed a large number of his sins, accused him of being a hypocrite, and said, if you preach tonight, this will be published, and all the world will know. And again, if you know the story, you'll know that Brownlow North, he went in, took a seat when he was introduced as a preacher of the gospel. He said, friends, before I preach, I have something that I need to say to you. And he took out the letter, and he read it from beginning to end, detailing all his sins, some that were known, many that weren't.

And he said, it's all true. But what is more true is that God in Christ has forgiven them all.

[ 30 : 22 ] And that's the gospel I'm going to preach to you tonight. That's what that woman knew. Sin abandoned, the other thing was Christ enthroned. Remember the chapter's entitled, A Witnessing Life, A Life of Witness Against Sin and for Christ. She says to them, come, see a man. Yes, he was a man. She knew that. He had to drink and so on. But is not this the Christ? And what she's saying in effect is, he's the one that matters now in my life. My life has meaning only in him. The old woman is gone. I'm a new woman through this man, this Christ, this Messiah. And so, she knew she had to tell. She had to let it be known. And that's what she did.

She told her neighbors. She told, I was going to say her friends. Most of them were hardly her friends, but at least she knew them. And she testified to them of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And that's why we'll be singing in just a moment or two the last verses of Psalm 66, all that fear God, come, hear, I'll tell what he's done for my soul.

That chapter of witnessing life is a challenge to some of us. We know the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

We've known his love. And yet, perhaps, we're less ready than this woman who knew so much less than us to make Christ known fearlessly. By the grace of God, we may have human natural fear. By God's grace, it's overcome. And I always feel it necessary when a topic like this comes up in all our free church congregations to speak, perhaps, to one or another. And you know, as she did, that Jesus is your Savior and your only Savior. But for some reason or other, some tradition, some personal feelings, you've never professed. You've never professed that faith. And normally, for some who have not been baptized in infancy, it's through baptism. But for you, it's coming in obedience to the Lord's command, do this in remembrance of me and joining God's people at His table. Remember a witnessing life.

[ 33 : 07 ] And the last thing, very briefly, here's the water jar, writing its last chapter, and it has to say that this woman of whom it speaks demonstrates a Christ-centered life. A Christ-centered life.

I suppose that after all the euphoria of her new experience, going to her friends and acquaintances in the town, telling them of Jesus, and Jesus stays two days, and they sit at His feet, they drink in everything He says.

But I'm pretty sure she went back to the well and picked up the water jar. She was still in this world. She still had ordinary needs, and there was nothing wrong with that, to attend to all these things, but in a different, what a different way. Now, Christ was at the center of our life.

The water jar had its place, as in other things, and as they have in our lives, but Christ at the center. And she would need Him forever, even when the jar crumbled into dust.

I wonder if this evening there may be, in your life, not a water jar, but some bank account, or some aspect of your job, or your leisure activity, and if it could speak, I wonder if, and I hope, and I say it for myself, that it can say, as was said of her, that here is a Christ-centered, a Christ-glorifying, and a Christ-witnessing life. Amen.

[ 35 : 07 ] Let's pray.