

John 4:1-26

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[0 : 0 0] We're all unique. Well, we all like to think of ourselves as individuals and unique, and we like to be viewed as unique. But we have a tendency to look at other people as not so unique. We like to compartmentalize and butthole people. We want others to be the same and to conform, preferably to conform with us and our ideas and views. But fortunately, from God's perspective, the individuality and the way He deals with people is according to their need and their individuality. John 3 and 4 makes a very interesting juxtaposition. There are many contrasts, but the same need. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, secretly. This woman meets with Jesus during the daytime, in the open. Nicodemus went to Jesus. This woman was found by Jesus. Nicodemus was orthodox. This woman was from what was viewed as a very heterodox society. And their status, certainly from Nicodemus' perspective or the Jewish perspective, was opposite ends of the scale.

Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. This woman was not only a Samaritan, but she was also a woman. And from Jewish eyes at the time, being a Samaritan was bad enough, but to be a Samaritan woman was just to be at the bottom of the pile. One of the rabbinical teachings about 50 years after this declared Samaritan woman to be unclean perpetually from birth.

So it wasn't a very auspicious viewpoint. And then we can ask, what kind of people were they? Now, on the surface, as we've said, for Nicodemus, it's fairly straightforward. We're told exactly what he was in human terms. But this woman, we're actually told very little about her, and nothing that gives us much insight to her history. Now, I discovered as I was thinking about what to preach on, David had preached a sermon on the Samaritan woman about three and a half years ago, and I would strongly recommend that you download that sermon and listen to it to get a perspective on the different views. And David's view, one which I share of this woman. I have to admit, I was in reading around the various viewpoints, well, there is only really one viewpoint when you read it, that just about everyone reads into this woman's life from one sentence that she was one of the most immoral creatures you would think that had ever walked the planet. Calvin calls her a prostitute.

I was shocked at basically even the most modern commentators, without very much explanation, well, no explanation, just write her off as having that kind of character. David, in his sermon, gives a different perspective.

One of the things John does, or the Gospel of John in particular, is when we do sort of things like that, because John is writing from a post-resurrection perspective, he speaks to us, and as we approach the Word of God, and as we read sometimes into it, it reveals quite a lot about ourselves, and how we are willing to view other people on the sparsest of information.

[3 : 4 5] And one sermon I wrote, or one, it was actually, I think, on Wikipedia, I googled it, said, he preferred this woman to be of this low moral character, because it showed the power of God to save any kind of person. Of course, I can see why he wanted to do that, because the Bible is so short of people of low moral character that we can focus on. I don't think so. But don't you get the feeling, maybe it's just me, but when you can say things like that, there's just a hint of self-righteousness, I'm not, isn't it great that God saves people like that, I'm not quite that bad, so there's hope for me.

I don't think that is the correct perspective at all. David, in his sermon, asked what two words could characterize this woman, and for me, the two words that characterize her are feisty feisty and single-minded. And I also think she has some spiritual, well, let's say religious awareness, if not full spiritual awareness, but she is certainly feisty. And from that, we can certainly draw some comparisons between the woman of Samaria and Nicodemus. Now, I was going to look at them both equally, but the more I got into this, the more the focus has become on John 4 rather than John 3.

We need to get some context. Jesus had to go through Samaria before he met this woman. Now, there are two ways he could have gone. You can go through Samaria to get to Galilee, or you can go the long way around. Most Jews, despite their animosity to the Samaritans, did tend to take the shorter route and go through it. So, that's a fair enough comment. God's providence, he was going to meet with this woman. Now, the Samaritans and the Jews really did have no time for one another. There was real animosity. Samaria was not a separate political entity at this time. It all came under one Roman provenance, and with one Roman procurator ruling them over, ruling over both of them.

The distinction of Samaria is defined not by its geographical region, by its history and its religion. In the Old Testament, Omri, king of Israel, built Samaria. After the separation of the two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judea, Omri built Samaria, and it became the capital. Once the Assyrians deported the affluent Israelites out of the northern kingdom, they imported other pagan foreigners who intermarried with the Israelites that were left.

And that, the religion that came out of that was a mix of paganism and the Israelite religion. When the Jews returned to Judea, the Samaritans tried to join up with them. Nehemiah 13 gives the story of that, and they were rejected by the Jews because of their mixed religion. They were viewed as political rebels, racial half-breeds with a tainted religion, and Judaism kept itself pure and separate. So, the Samaritans were a bit peeved by that. They only accept the Pentateuch, whereas the Jews accepted the whole of the Old Testament. And that led them to a different form of understanding of certain things. So, where in Deuteronomy God said, seek the place the Lord has chosen, the Jews understood that to be Jerusalem. But they looked at the first place Abraham had built an altar in Palestine, which was at Shechem, which is overlooked by Mount Gerizim. So, they built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim, which was destroyed in the second century BC by somebody called John Hyrcanus, who was the ruler of Judea at that time. But they continued to sacrifice on Mount Gerizim after that time. And by the first century BC, they had a well-established religious heritage, totally based on the

[7 : 52] Pentateuch with some mixed in other things. So, that combination, that historical relationship between Samaria and Judea led to real religious and theological animosities on both sides. And that's the context into which Jesus steps when he meets this Samaritan woman. So, he meets this woman, he gives a well. He is weary and tired because they've been walking for quite some time.

The location is about half a mile outside Sychar, the well. There are a lot of springs, natural springs, in that area. So, they could have gone to any of them, but they turn up at Jacob's well. Now, there's some debate about the time of this, and it depends on whether you take the Jewish or the Roman calendar or timing chronology. Most people seem to take the Jewish one, which means this would be noon. And that's convenient because then you can say, why is this woman out in the middle of the day? And it's obviously because she's hiding from people. But on the other hand, some commentators point out there are places in John where you have to take the Roman counting of time. And that's like our counting of time from midnight and midday. So, if that were the case, the sixth hour would be round about 6 p.m., which is the normal time for going to collect water.

Now, one thing that swings it for me, I'm in favor of the 6 p.m. because if it was the middle of the day and only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun, then there's no evidence that the disciples thought or put up any protest about being asked to go and look for food at this time of day.

So, it was obviously a time you could go and expect to find markets open or wherever shops were around. There are some places even today that if you go there, you won't find a shop open at midday, or between midday and 4 p.m. in some places, just because of the heat. So, it could just be, I'm going to take it that it was 6 p.m. And that then leaves the question of why was she on her own?

Was she really skulking around because she was ashamed because she was such an immoral woman, she didn't want to meet people? I don't see anything in the story, the way she reacts, the way she interacts, that would support that. Why was she on her own? Well, we don't know actually that she was on her own. We only know that Jesus spoke to a Samaritan woman, but we can take it that she was. It could just be that she was wanting to avoid people because, well, she was really fed up with them that particular day and wanted to go to the place they were least likely to be and just get her own water. We all have days like that. There are better springs in the vicinity. It could be that she had some, she was thinking, religious thoughts, and this was Jacob's well. So, although it was a bit more inconvenient, she would go to that one that day, any number of reasons, just like the well.

[10:44] Maybe she just woke up that day and thought, I'm going to go to that well. We don't know. And the fact is, it was in God's providence that she went to that well and she met with Jesus. So, Jesus starts the conversation. In John 3, it's Nicodemus that starts the conversation with a question.

But in all these cases, as with all the Gospels, it's all about Jesus, about Him as our Savior, and about Him and how He deals with each individual person at their point of need.

And He, unlike us, has a full understanding of what people need. Jesus asks her for a drink, and that was a genuine request. He was thirsty. But in it, there was also a goal for the woman.

The two things are not in conflict. He obviously had this woman's best interests at heart. And He has this gentle guiding of the woman, using the woman's own ideas to lead her through to the ultimate understanding that He wishes her to get. And it's through this, Jesus' divinity, as the Son of God, is hereby most clearly revealed through His true humanity.

Now, the woman's reaction is not the reaction of mumbling something and saying, oh, there's a guy there. I just don't like to meet people. I'll just go away. She's straight in there. And it's not a, I mean, we can read a thing, you know, straightforwardly, but there's an edge to her answer.

[12:14] There's an attitude. What she sees, we've also got to remember, this woman does not know at all that this is Jesus. She's not probably heard of Him, unlike Nicodemus. She's not seen any of His miraculous work. She doesn't know Him as a teacher. All she sees is this man, who is a Jew, a Jew in Samaria.

Now, as soon as he opened his mouth, Jesus' accent would probably have revealed him as a Jew. And the response is straight back at you, son. You have made a rule, not us. It's you Jews who have said you're not going to have any dealings to us. What are you doing asking me for water, you hypocrite? She's going to make him work for the water. Why are you speaking to me? I know what you really think of me. You treat me, you treat us all as the lowest of the low, and yet you're desperate now. I'm the one with the water jar, and you've got nothing to dig with, to get the water with. Ha! Not so confident now, are you, you Jew or Israelite? Jesus is, gives a, well, the woman's answer highlights that when we have basic needs, and water is an absolutely basic need, a lot of things go out the window. Now, hold that thought, because water in John serves a lot of purposes, but in this chapter, it's focused on an absolutely basic need.

So, Jesus' response, like a lot of the Bible, is a progressive revelation, and the progression is to make an ambiguous statement. If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water. Now, we know what that living water means. It's spiritual, it's eternal life, it's to drink from spiritual fountains that will give us solace, comfort, refreshing in Christ, in God. But the woman didn't know that, and the words that are used could refer not to the water that was in the well, which you'd have to take, might have been sitting for a while, but the fresh stuff, the real spring water that was feeding the well and was coming into the bottom. Now, this world was a hundred feet deep. So, from the woman's perspective, what this man, Jewish man was saying is a retort back to her, that I've got the means to get to the real stuff at the bottom, which you don't have. Now, in John, there's no incident, well, maybe there are, but when you read it, you have to be careful about treating what is the content and what are the incidentals. John paints pictures in which just everything has some significance, whether it's symbolic or not. Water is symbolic.

In John chapter 2, it's the ceremonial jugs that are used, the water's turned into wine. In John chapter 3, it's the ceremonial washing, if you're not washed by water and the spirit of baptism. But here, water is just water. Its most basic feature is to refresh a thirsty person.

Now, when we think again about this woman, and this is another reason why I do not think this woman was necessarily of an immoral character. Jesus is the one who initially needs the water. Why did Jesus need water? Jesus was the sinless one, but He was still affected by the world, this fallen world that groans and travails from the fall until the redemption of all things. It wasn't His fault that He was thirsty.

[16 : 12] It was just He'd been out walking, and a very natural need occurred. It was the environment that caused His thirst. Now, yes, we could take it that some people get thirsty because they get themselves into situations of dehydration, and it's their fault, but that's not the case here. And I think that is quite telling that, again, with regard to this woman, she needs the spiritual water, but is it not the case that she is the one who has been more sinned against than sinning, and it's that environmental sin that has brought her to the position she is currently in, having had five husbands, as we'll get to. And I think there's something in that.

People need Jesus regardless of where the sin lies. I think we have a very narrow view of sin and its effects. Sins are internal to us, but we interact. We're all sinners, and so our sins have effects on other people, which are not necessarily their fault in that context. Also, people do not always have a great what's called conviction of sin at the time when they're converted. Sometimes that conviction of sin grows so that in their older life they have a far deeper conviction and understanding than they had when they were first converted. A case in point is John Newton, and he will illustrate both this and the effects that sin can have on other people. John Newton, in his autobiography, points out that at the time when he came to believe in God and to believe in Jesus, he had absolutely no conviction of sin or nothing that he could point to as conviction of sin. But yet the man who wrote, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, obviously grew to have a conviction of sin.

And John Newton, as an older Christian, met a shipmate that when he'd been a ship's captain, he had taken a young, naive boy and led him into all kinds of immoral activity. And when he met him as a minister, it was too late. Nothing he could do or say would shift that person from their debauched state.

And this was a great agony to John Newton. The effects of his actions had effectively destroyed another human soul. So our understanding of sin has to be much broader than simply, this woman needs to be a really bad person. So there's an ongoing dialogue. The woman responds, she takes the physical interpretation, as you, not too surprising. But she's, she is a very single minded woman, as I said. She is focused on one thing, and that's, this guy's a Jew, I'm a Samaritan, the Jewish and Samaritan relationship. And she asks a rhetorical question.

Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his flocks and herds? The import of that is, ha, you are not greater than our father Abraham, or Jacob, who gave us all these things. She's actually trying to needle this Jewish man to point out, you've got Jerusalem, we've got Jacob's well. Jacob, this is the plot of ground Jacob gave to his son Joseph, his favorite son. You don't have that.

[19 : 21] Then Jesus gently reveals a bit more. He points out that this life, this water that he can give, will quench her thirst forever. The spiritual aspect starts to come more to the fore, moving away from the physical. It becomes harder, but she's still focused on the physical, because she sees this as just going a little bit too far. Is this guy some kind of magician?

And she says, what sounds like a sarcastic response, give me this water, I don't have to come here to drink, to draw water all the time. She still doesn't get it. She hasn't recognized Jesus even as a prophet at this point. All she is seeing is a man, a Jew, and all the buildup of animosity is out there to get at this guy and make him face up to what they have done to the Samaritans and where they stand with regard to the great Samaritan race. But that's just a step too far, because she hasn't really got it, and it needs a reset. She still is going to continue on this single-minded focus, but Jesus needs to stop her short and make her stop and take stock and redirect the conversation.

So he says to her, go and get your husband and come back. Now, if you think about it, given what she believes or who she believes she is talking to, this is just another slap in the face from a Jew to a Samaritan. What right does this Jewish man have to tell me to go and get my husband and come back? This is just another man in my life telling me what to do, trying to control me, trying to fit me into their male-dominated perspective. And she gives a very short answer, I have no husband. But that feeds exactly to what Jesus then wants to say. He can say, you're right. Now, she doesn't know him, so how is he going to, he's never seen him before in her life, and he comes out and says, you've had five husbands, and the man you're now living with is not your husband. You have spoken the truth. Now, that may be, you know, you weren't actually intending to tell me something, I'm sure you were just trying to get me off your back, but you have spoken the truth. We don't know anything about what these five husbands were, what they meant. We can conjecture, and as I've mentioned, a lot of people do conjecture. It's the woman, and it's nearly always, it was the woman's fault that these five men left her. Now, it could be that these men all died, the five of them all died, highly unlikely, although the Sadducees didn't particularly think it was totally unlikely, because although it was an exaggerated statement, they had seven husbands all dying when they wanted to confront the Pharisees with the idea that there was no resurrection. So, unlikely, maybe some died, maybe some divorced her, but divorce, or putting away of a woman, was very much a man's prerogative, and the question that was rife, a real question in Jewish society was, can a man put away a woman for just any reason?

Because some people said that. There were ideas that, you know, no, I don't like her. She snores. Whatever. Man's prerogative. Nothing so far in this picture is making me think there's anything necessarily in the story that we can say this woman is immoral, and the fact is, the reason we're not told these things is it's actually none of our business. The fact is that Jesus is using this not to confront the woman with her moral status, but to confront her with the fact that he knows things about her that he would have to be a prophet to know. If you go back to John chapter 1, verses 47 and following, there's a very similar encounter.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said to him, here is a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false. How do you know me? Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you. Then Nathanael declared, Rabbi, you are the Son of God.

[23 : 59] You are the King of Israel. A very similar thing. It's the other way around because Jesus is trying to bring Nathanael in to understand who he is. Nathanael's asking him, how do you know me?

We don't know what that meant. We're not meant to, but whatever that was, it spoke to Nathanael. It gave insight. There was something going on under that fig tree. We don't know. We don't need to know.

What we need to know is that Jesus knew something that revealed himself to Nathanael in ways that others could not have known about. And therefore, Nathanael came to see immediately, it's a strange, that Jesus is the Messiah. And this woman, she takes it on board. Just that statement about the five husbands. And she is moved from the position of, this is just a Jewish man, to, oh, this guy's a prophet.

But the juggernaut's back on track. He's a prophet. Prophets know about the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. So, tell me, prophet, Gerizim or Jerusalem? And that's a reasonable question.

And it opens for Jesus to tell her exactly what she needs to hear about where worship's going to take place, to set aside these distinctions between Gerizim and Jerusalem, but to realize that worship does not take place in these things, but God wants people to worship him in spirit, not formal, not always, you know, is it going to be the forums in Jerusalem? Is it going to be the syncretistic worship on Gerizim? But spirit and truth, not mixed truth. So, at this point, this woman has now arrived at the point that Nicodemus started.

[25 : 45] Rabbi, we know you're a prophet sent from God because nobody could do the things you do unless he was, God was with him. And this woman recognizes Jesus as a prophet, and she learned from it. But it's still going. I mean, these are a lot of things to take in at one time. She's getting a lot of teaching in a very short space of time and needs to think it over. And you consider the reaction of the disciples over a three-year period to Jesus' teaching. It can't be too surprising if she doesn't actually get very much. But this woman, this is what I meant by saying she had some religious thoughts. She's not just an ignorant woman. She actually gets more than Nicodemus does.

An interesting thing Jesus does say, though, is, we worship what we know. You worship what you do not know. That's actually very similar to what he says to Nicodemus. Now, Nicodemus was a Jew. He was, he represented Judaism. He was part of the ruling council. But Jesus still said to him, we worship and we do what we know. You people do not know. So, what Jesus is saying to this Samaritan woman is, yes, salvation is of the Jews, but it is not necessarily of the Jewish religion as it is currently practiced. Because that subset of people, Jesus and John the Baptist, who were teaching what was required for salvation. So, merely being a Jew was not sufficient. But yet salvation came from the Jewish religion, not from the Samaritan one. And the woman does half get it. And she comes out with this

Messiah. She's moved from prophet to Messiah. We know that Messiah is coming. Now, what is interesting about this is the shift is actually quite significant from the woman who's just confronting Jewish and Samaritan religion to someone who uses not the Samaritan word for Messiah, but the Jewish one. The Samaritans had a different word. I think it's taheb, I am told. And taheb would explain all things. That was one of his functions when he came. So, she's talking about Messiah, but this is the explanation that she is waiting for when this Samaritan Messiah comes. So, you can see these gradual shifts coming. And that leads, that's the in that Jesus needs. And this is the most complete revelation of himself. I who speak to you am he. And you can just imagine all these coins or all these ducks that have been getting set up, and it all just goes ka-ching. Everything suddenly falls into place. The penny drops.

And she actually realizes who she is speaking to. And she goes rushing off in her excitement, because she has found someone who understands her, who has treated her, who is the Messiah.

Come see a man who told me all things that ever I did. Now, we don't know what that means, the five husbands of things. But whatever it was, that statement as a summary of something was sufficient. Just her going into the Samaritan town and saying this to the people was sufficient to get some percentage of them to also believe before they'd ever met Jesus. Others of them met Jesus, and they're converted. This meeting has an outcome, a very clear outcome.

[29 : 21] She's a good evangelist for Jesus. She tells straight away her townspeople. And there's no evidence there that they see her as this shame-faced woman that they're not going to talk to, or they've eschewed and treated as an outcast. She just walks into the town, tells them about this man she's met, and they're all willing to listen to her straight away. What a contrast with Nicodemus.

There is no ending to the Nicodemus story. It just stops dead. Jesus makes a statement. We don't know. We don't even know when Nicodemus went home. We don't know if he asked any more. It's just left hanging.

Nicodemus only pops up again twice more. In John chapter 7, verse 50, Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, that's the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, asked, does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he's doing? They replied, are you from Galilee too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee. So, a wee while later, Nicodemus is still not clearly an open follower of Jesus. He hasn't said anything, but he does try a little bit, that tentative, oh, this isn't right, in a general sense. Just gets straight. Are you one of them too?

No. Nothing evident. And then again in chapter 19, in verse 39, and there's a little bit of movement.

Well, verse 38, later Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now, Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night.

[31 : 19] Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrror. So, he's getting a little bit more public, but in a very quiet way. And this shows us that we cannot make judgments about how people are going to react, who are going to be the good evangelists, who are going to be the solidly converted ones, because nothing in a person's life can allow us to prejudge how the Holy Spirit will work in that life. People work and are operated on at different rates and at different stages. Evangelism's effectiveness is not related to status. It's not related to niceness. Development is not the same for everyone and not predictable. To conclude, I think there's a certain irony. If I am right, that David is right in our assessment of this woman and what this story tells us, then just reading what most commentators say about her, I think this woman was as much an abused woman as a sinner. And the irony is that by and large the church continues to abuse her in its attitude towards her. And that's something that speaks to us as John's gospel challenges us about how we react to what

God teaches us in his scriptures. It's very easy for us to misinterpret them and try and fit them into our own cultural mores rather than letting them speak for themselves. But more importantly, or at least as importantly, Jesus, about whom this whole story is focused, is the answer to both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman's needs, as he is the answer to every one of our needs. And if anyone here is not converted, if anyone is struggling under the weight of the world's abuse or grinding down or the sheer weariness of this dry wilderness, as Psalm 63 said, Jesus is the one who can bring and will bring refreshing, eternal life, springs of water flowing up into eternal life. Jesus came into the world to save the world, not to condemn the world. But lest anyone think that's a nice phrase, it's edged, and it's edged very sharply, because the reason there is no condemnation is because if you do not believe in Jesus, you are condemned already.

You can either stay condemned or you can be saved. That's the options. And for us, there is the lesson that we cannot tell by looking at anyone. As Samuel discovered when he went to Jesse's house, God looks on the heart and God works in the heart. Jesus is the one who is all the glory.

Let us pray. ■ and God ■■ God Bam and God is present, James, as Samuel ichij ■■■ and Hasel and ■■■ you Jesus, refreshed and you Have get comeift■