



A THIRST QUENCHED

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John 4:1-26

Ninth Message

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A few weeks ago, John Daly won his first golf tournament in nine years. It has been a battle for Daly. Since 1995, he has gone through two divorces and two stints at an alcohol rehabilitation center. His rash behavior on the golf course led the Professional Golf Association Tour to suspend him. At times he has had such a severe case of the shakes he could hardly make it through a round of golf. Six months ago, Daly's fourth wife was indicted on federal drug and gambling charges, just five days after giving birth to his first son. His chances of being a winner again on the tour seemed remote. Despite all this, over the years Daly has felt the love and support of his fellow players and fans. When he won in a playoff recently, following an incredible bunker shot, everyone was thrilled for him. He had to fight back the tears.

Why do people love John Daly? Why do we love to see people emerge out of dark, tough times to taste the sweetness of success or accomplish something special? It's because we identify with human frailty and struggle. Stories like these give us hope in our own difficult times. We marvel at the accomplishments of a Tiger Woods, but our hearts are moved by a John Daly victory. We are not moved by stories of perfection, but by accounts of a life redeemed through imperfection.

That is the kind of story we are going to look at this morning in John chapter 4, the account of Jesus' meeting with a woman at a well.

Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), He left Judea and went away again into Galilee. And He had to pass through Samaria. So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; and Jacob's well was there. So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. (John 4:1-6 NASB)

Mention of Jesus' disciples baptizing connects us to the last section of John, where we saw that the ministries of Jesus and John overlapped. Jesus was not actually baptizing people. This is an interesting comment that helps us understand the distinction between preaching and baptizing, one that the apostle Paul made about his ministry in Corinth: "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name...For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor 1:14-15, 17a).

Jesus' rising popularity brought him under the scrutiny of the Pharisees, so he chose to retreat to Galilee. There were two possible routes. The shorter one, a three-day walk, went through Samaria; the longer route went up the

Transjordan. Travelers usually took the shorter route, despite the fact that the longer one was preferred because of the conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans. Jesus chose the shorter route, passing through Samaria.

The history of Samaria began when civil war broke out following Solomon's reign. Ten tribes established a different political rule and a rival worship center in the north. King Omri named the new capital Samaria, the title that was also given to the entire region. The Assyrians captured the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C. and deported all Israelites of substance. The land was settled with foreigners who intermarried with the surviving Israelites and retained some tenets of their religion. About 400 B.C., a temple was erected on Mt. Gerizim, an edifice that was later destroyed. Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch but not the other books of the Old Testament. In Jesus' time, Samaria did not enjoy a separate political existence; it was united with Judea under Roman rule. After the exile, the Jews regarded the Samaritans as defiled and unclean rebels and half-breeds.

John's story indicates that Jesus came to the city of Sychar, located on the shoulder of Mt Ebal, opposite Mt Gerizim, near Shechem. Nearby was Jacob's well, a half mile to the south. This well is attested to by a continuous line of tradition, and churches have been built on the site over the years. The text has two words for well and spring. One refers to a running spring, the other to a dug-out well or cistern. Jacob's well was both, since it was a dug-out cistern, but it was also fed by an underground spring, which still functions. It was located in a field which Jacob purchased from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, and which he gave to his son Joseph (Gen 48:22). Joseph was buried at Shechem, about a mile from Sychar. His tomb lies but a few hundred yards northwest of Jacob's well. This mention of Jacob connects to the story of Nathanael, in John 1. Jesus called him "an Israelite in whom there is no guile" (unlike Jacob), and promised him that he would see greater things than Jacob dreamed about, implying that he himself was greater than Jacob.

Jesus came to the well at the sixth hour, noon, the hottest time of the day. His fatigue is a reminder of his humanity. We can imagine the sense of history that he felt as he sat down to rest. He could have used this time of waiting as a holy moment of contemplation, but instead he looked outward.

There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) (4:7-9)

As Jesus is resting, a lone woman approaches the well. Women usually came to the well in groups at morning and evening time. This woman's isolation marks her as an outcast and an object of public shame. She would have caught people's attention, just as a woman going to a supermarket in the dead of night would attract attention today.

Jesus initiates a conversation with the woman and asks her for a drink of water. He did so because the disciples had gone into town to buy some food, and thus were not available to draw water. The woman is stunned by his request. Jews would not associate with Samaritans, who were considered unclean. If a Jew touched a Samaritan, he would become ritually unclean and defiled. The phrase "have no dealings" means they did not use the same dishes. The fact that the disciples go into town to buy Samaritan food indicates that Jesus was very free. Ironically, in chapter 8, the Jews will dismiss Jesus as a Samaritan. By asking the woman for a drink, Jesus is breaking all social and cultural norms. Conversing alone with a woman was out of the question.

The Samaritan woman is quite a contrast with Nicodemus. He, a Jew, a ruler and teacher, had a name. He was learned, influential, respected, orthodox, and theologically trained. He had his act together. This woman, a Samaritan, was a moral outcast with no name. She was unschooled, without influence, despised, and possessed only a "folk" religion. She had made a mess of her life. But these two had one thing in common: they both needed Jesus. He could relate equally well with a man like Nicodemus or a woman like the Samaritan. He perceived their needs and related to them at their level. Kipling said that a real man is one who "can talk with crowds and keep your virtue or walk with kings nor lose the common touch."

This raises an important question: How do we look at people? Do we categorize them by their appearance, how they dress, their title, or whether they go to church? Do we relate differently to them as a result? Do we isolate ourselves from some so as to remain clean? Do we build a Christian cocoon to keep ourselves safe and undefiled by the world? Jesus sanctified what he touched. Rather than becoming unclean, he cleansed that which he touched. Christians bear the image of God and can have the same influence on people.

In the ensuing conversation between Jesus and the woman, three topics of conversation come up: living water, a messed-up life, and true worship.

Jesus answered and 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." She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw." (4:10-15)

To the rabbis, the "gift of God" would have been the Torah, but for Jesus it was eternal life through the Spirit. The rebuke that Jesus gives to the woman is similar to the one he gave to Nicodemus. If she really understood the Torah, then she would know who was speaking to her.

The woman might have thought that Jesus was "giving her a line." She thought she had heard them all. She understands him to be speaking in a natural, physical way about fresh running water. She has her doubts, since Jesus had no bucket (the same word as "to draw"), and the well was deep. Today, this well is still over 100 feet deep. It was probably deeper in Jesus' time. She wonders where the water might come from. She cannot understand Jesus' opinion that he is greater than Jacob. Her response is like that of Nicodemus: "What are you talking about?" She considered Jesus' statement to be absurd.

She is wrong, of course. Jesus is not talking about water from Jacob's well. He goes on to further define what he means. He is offering water that one does not have to expend energy to get, water that will satisfy a deep thirst. One who drinks of this water will never thirst again.

"Living water" is a powerful image that can speak to us on several levels. For one thing, living water represents a bubbling, refreshing stream—quite a contrast to murky, stagnant water. The thought of being refreshed and revived is a powerful image to someone who feels weary and without hope. It's a wonderful feeling to be revived by a cool, fresh stream when you are hot and tired from the labors of the day. We certainly don't feel attracted to a pool that has green algae on top. We see this image of living water in Isaiah 12:3: "Therefore you will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation."

Secondly, living water, and more specifically, thirst, is a metaphor for deep needs and desires. Thirsty people want their thirst slaked. The fact that so many people carry a water bottle around these days is a reminder of our need for water. People try to satisfy their thirst in various ways, of course. Some seek things like success, money, status, sex and pleasure, only to find that they can't quench their thirst. In the words of Jeremiah, we dig our own wells to satisfy our thirst, and in the process we forsake God, the fountain of living water:

"For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water." (Jer 2:13)

Jesus offers water that quenches our thirst so that we will not grow thirsty again, water that quenches our deep desires and yearnings. The O.T. spoke of this water:

"They will not hunger or thirst,
Nor will the scorching heat or sun strike them down;
For He who has compassion on them will lead them
And will guide them to springs of water." (Isa 49:10)

"Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without cost." (Isa 55:1)

But this living water that Jesus offers is more than just a means of quenching thirst. It speaks to us on another level. It connects us to the wedding at Cana, where Jesus transformed the water of purification, or law, into the wine of the Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom of God, one must be born of water and the Spirit. Jesus is indeed greater than Jacob, because he offers something better than Jacob's water. He is the one who fulfills the promise in Ezekiel 47 of a river flowing from under the temple that gives life—a promise reiterated in Revelation of the water of life flowing from under the throne of God. Jesus gives a greater gift than Torah, he gives Spirit. Our thirst is never met by removing the aching desire, but by the pouring out of the Spirit.

“For I will pour out water on the thirsty land
And streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring
And My blessing on your descendants.” (Isa 44:3)

In the context of John, “living water” is a densely packed metaphor. It's impossible to know whether the Samaritan woman was aware of the O.T. promises, since Samaritans believed only in the Torah. However, John's Jewish readers would certainly have understood. But even if the woman did not understand, she still wanted the water. She would have preferred not to have to go to the well every day and feel her shame and isolation. The word for “come” in verse 15 is the same word as “pass through” in verse 4. Even though she did not understand she was willing to embark on a journey. Jesus asked her for a drink; she asked Jesus for water. We don't have to understand everything about Jesus before we can have a relationship with him.

So Jesus takes the woman to the next stage on the journey, exposing her messed-up life.

He said to her, “Go, call your husband and come here.” The woman answered and said, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You have correctly said, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly.” (4:16-18)

The woman has misunderstood both the nature of living water and the true dimensions of her own need. Jesus forces her to face her condition: she is a mess. She has tried to find life in her marriage after another but now has given up hope. Jesus cuts to the heart of the issue in her life, exhibiting his more-than-human knowledge. He hones in on her deepest pain, guilt and despair, exposing the whole truth, but in a gentle way. He even commends her for her honest response.

Jesus has to make her understand her need. This is a good thing. If we don't know the cause of our thirst, we won't drink from the right well. There “is a gulf between him who is the author of life and the world which is thirsty for that life. The woman does not—cannot yet—understand the offer which Jesus has made. It is the offer of that which quenches not just the natural and ever recurring thirst of the body, but the eternal thirst which can only be quenched by the living God himself (Psalm 42), who has made us for himself so that nothing else can satisfy us.”¹

God has a way of cracking open our hearts. Sometimes it is a moral issue that keeps us from God; at other times it

is deep pain and sadness. But God must always expose and reveal what is going on to make us to realize our need for him. It is the grace of God that exposes our darkness so that we might be healed, even if that process is painful.

At times we skirt around the uncomfortable places and touchy issues in our relationships with others. We don't want people to feel awkward, and we fear their response. And yet there are those moments when the Spirit prepares an opportunity to reveal and love at the same time. Getting to the heart of people's lives allows us to offer living water, just like Jesus did with this woman. We must be open both to knowing our own needs and helping others recognize theirs.

The woman said to Him, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (4:19-24)

The woman's response to Jesus has changed. Here she addresses him as “Lord” or “sir.” She is open and submissive. Maybe she is getting closer to understanding. She observes that Jesus must be a prophet. Samaritans were not looking for a prophet who came between Moses and the Messiah. They accepted the Torah only, so if anything they were looking for the prophet of Deuteronomy 18 who would be the Second Moses.

The woman asks a question about worship that had long separated Jews and Samaritans. Where was the true place of worship? Maybe she was trying to create a diversion. It's easier to talk about theology than dealing with the truth about our messy lives. Or maybe she believed that Jesus could shed some light on this issue that had puzzled people for years. Or perhaps, now that her sin has been exposed, she might be wondering if there was a way to find forgiveness. Was there any hope for her with God? she wondered. Jesus saw her clearly; perhaps he could tell her more.

The debate was based on whether Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim was the proper place to worship God. This centered on Deut 12:5: “But you shall seek the LORD at the place which the LORD your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come.” The Jews held this place to be Jerusalem, where Solomon built the temple. (This temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel and expanded by Herod.) The Samaritans took the place to be Mt Gerizim. This mountain overlooks the place where Abraham built his first altar at Shechem. This is the place where the blessings of Deuteronomy were read to God's people after they entered the land.

Jesus responds by making three statements:

1. Jesus announces that Jerusalem and Gerizim are no longer important; they will soon be obsolete. “But an hour is coming,” he declares. In John's gospel, this hour refers to the passion, the cross, the resurrection and the exalta-

tion. After the crucifixion, the place where the Father is worshiped will no longer be important.

2. Jesus insists that salvation is from the Jews, and that the Samaritan worship is one of ignorance. The Samaritans worship that which they do not know. They worship what they believe, but that is not based on truth and knowledge. They stand outside of God's revelation. So in the debate Jesus comes down on the side of the Jews. Worship is not a free-for-all. Every religious experience is not valid. Worshipers of a false religion worship that which they do not know.

3. Jesus explains the nature of true worship, which now makes the place of worship obsolete. True worshipers worship "in spirit and truth." The hour for this has already begun. The reason that true worship takes place in spirit is because God is Spirit. God is not flesh, he is Spirit. He is invisible, divine, life-giving, and unknowable to us unless he reveals himself. Jesus gives the living water of the Spirit so one can worship him truly. And true worship is "in truth." Jesus is the truth, the full expression of God. Through him we can worship God "in spirit and in truth."

The mention of worship, and thus temple, connects us to chapter 2, where Jesus cleansed the temple. Jesus is saying that true worship takes place in him, in relationship with him, through the Spirit. He is the new temple, the place where God dwells. He is the locus of new worship. From under this temple flows the river of life that brings life to everything it touches.

The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He." (4:25-26)

The woman responds with Messiah-language, upping the ante from prophet to Messiah. Samaritans used a different word for Messiah than the Jews. But they were looking for the same person. It's unclear how much she under-

stands. But she knows that when the Messiah comes, he will clear it all up and tell all things. That is exactly what Jesus has been doing.

Jesus says that he is that person. Literally, he says, "I am, the one speaking to you." This is one of several "I am" statements in John that does not have a predicate. Jesus is revealing himself as "I am": "I am the Messiah that you are looking for." He did not say this to Nicodemus, a Jew. In fact, he doesn't reveal himself in this way to any other person in John's gospel other than this Samaritan woman who has a messy life and needed living water. The Messiah was standing right there in front of her. She didn't have to wait any longer. The question was, would she believe?

Living water, messed-up lives and true worship all came together at a well in Samaria. This is how eternal life happens. It's the stories of struggle and redemption, not perfection, that move our hearts. We don't have to have it all together in order to come to God. We can come to him in our weariness, our weakness and wickedness. What an encouragement this is to anyone who has a messed-up life! We don't have to live in shame and guilt. We don't have to be troubled with regrets or doubts any longer. Jesus does not condemn. He offers grace to the repentant.

The world is filled with thirsty people. They may be beggars on the street or C.E.O.'s of million-dollar companies. They may have grown up in a church or never attended a service. They may have been involved in a homosexual lifestyle or enslaved to drugs. They may have grown up with every advantage of a wealthy family and received the best education. It doesn't matter. They still need Jesus. They still need to drink water that will quench their thirst. They do not need Jacob's water, the water of law. They need living water, the Spirit of the Living God.

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 50-51.

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