

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD WOMAN

by Ray C. Stedman

The story of Jesus and the woman at the well of Samaria helps us deal with many modern issues. Here Jesus crosses the barrier of race prejudice and interacts with a race hated and rejected by the Jews. That helps us greatly in our own bigoted, prejudicial society. Our Lord encounters a moral outcast and displays for our instruction the proper approach to take with such a person. In this story he also settles a theological quarrel that had been going on for centuries as to the proper place and manner of worship. We, too, are still wrestling with those issues today, so this account is of great value to us.

John gives the background and the setting of this encounter in the first six verses of Chapter 4 of his gospel.

Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John [although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples], he left Judea and departed again to Galilee. He had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. {John 4:1-6 RSV}

John particularly calls to our attention three factors here:

First, the reason Jesus left Judea was to avoid a growing controversy. The Pharisees were distressed and aroused over the apparent rivalry between the baptism of Jesus and the baptism of John. They could not understand it. They were choosing up sides, and a rift threatened.

That is a problem yet today. Many denominations split from each other over the proper mode to employ, or what is the meaning of baptism. But Jesus walked away from this controversy, thereby indicating its lack of true significance and importance. In fact when John says Jesus "left" Judea, he means he *forsook*, he *abandoned* Judea. Jesus walked away from controversies of that nature.

Then John calls attention to the route Jesus took on his journey to Galilee. He chose the most direct route, traveling through Samaria, which lies between Judea and Galilee. It is interesting that Prime Minister Menachem Begin has reintroduced the practice of calling this section of the Holy Land, Samaria. We know it as the West Bank, but he insists that its proper title is Samaria. This direct route from Judea to Galilee was about 70 miles, or two and a half days' walk. But many of the Jews chose not to go through Samaria. They traveled the hot desert road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and up the Jordan valley. Thus, because of the terrible prejudice that prevailed against the Samaritan people, they journeyed almost twice the distance on a much hotter and more uncomfortable road. But our Lord cut right through that ignorant, narrow-minded prejudice and went through Samaria.

We have seen recent demonstrations of Christian prejudice and bigotry in this regard. It is amazing how narrow-minded some people can be. I heard of a woman so narrow-minded she could wear only one earring!

Thirdly, John calls attention to the place where Jesus stopped. It was an historic spot -- Jacob's well, at the foot of Mount Gerizim. The Israelites were commanded to read the Law of Moses every year from the tops of the twin mountains that span the valley that leads up to the city of Samaria, Mt. Gerizim on the east and Mt. Ebal on the west. Mt. Gerizim was the place where the blessings of the Law were read; while Mt. Ebal was where the curses of the Law were read to those who disobeyed it. There, about one-half mile west of the village of Sychar, where Joseph's tomb is located, at the well which Jacob, in his day, had dug for his flocks and herds, Jesus sat down to rest.

I had an interesting experience at Jacob's well a number of years ago. I was traveling alone in a rented car

through the West Bank, and I picked up three Israeli soldiers who were armed with sub-machine guns. Though their camp was located right outside of town, they had never been to Jacob's well. They did not even know it was there. But, when I told them I was going to visit it, they were very interested. When I showed up at the well with a bodyguard of three armed Israeli soldiers, the Syrian priest who was in charge of the well mistook me for some important dignitary and he really rolled out the red carpet! I fared much better than the Lord did when he went there!

According to this account, it was "the sixth hour" when Jesus stopped at the well. By Jewish reckoning that would be noon. But according to Roman time, which I think John uses throughout his gospel, it was six o'clock in the evening. So it was no surprise that Jesus was weary. He had been walking in the hot sun all day. He was thirsty, so he sat beside the well to rest while the disciples went into the city to find something to eat. Thus we have here a very beautiful picture of our Lord's humanity.

Verses 7 through 26 give an account of a most remarkable conversation our Lord had. Jesus himself seizes the initiative with a woman who comes to the well to draw water.

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. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." {John 4:7-10 RSV}

How very beautifully Jesus overleaps the barriers that separated him from this woman. He was a rabbi, and according to the rabbinical law, rabbis were instructed to never talk to a woman in public -- not even to their own wives or sisters. In fact the rabbinical law said, "It is better to burn the law than to give it to a woman." In that culture women were regarded as totally unable to understand complicated subjects like theology and religion.

Ever since the days of Nehemiah, 450 years earlier, this race of Samaritans -- who had been brought in by the Assyrians to populate the area after they had removed the Jewish population -- were regarded as a hated, heretical Jewish cult. The Samaritans accepted only the five books of Moses, and they had mingled with the Law of Moses pagan, idolatrous practices. They had even erected a temple on Mt. Gerizim as a rival to the temple in Jerusalem. Thus they were regarded by the Jews as reprobates, and were hated even more than the Gentiles. No wonder, then, that this Samaritan woman was surprised when Jesus addressed her.

But notice how Jesus treats her. He read her heart, evidently judging from the circumstances something about her. Although there was another well in the village, as a moral outcast she was forced to come all the way out to this well, half a mile away. Meeting her, our Lord understood this to be a sign from his Father that here was one of those sinners whom he came to call to repentance. Remember that he himself said on one occasion, "I did not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners," {cf, Matt 9:13, Mark 2:17, Luke 5:32}. He probably knew more about this woman's history than this introduction suggests, because later he tells her some facts about herself that he evidently knew. He had been through this small village several times, and had probably heard something about her. Now to have her meet him at the well is to him an indication that God the Father wanted to reach out to her.

So, as he always did in such a wonderful way, Jesus seizes what was right at hand. Here was a thirsty woman coming to draw water, and he said to her these remarkable words, "If you knew about the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me to drink,' you would have asked of him and he would have given you living water." The "gift of God" here is really the Holy Spirit. Later, when Peter addresses three thousand or more Jews on the Day of Pentecost, he says to them, "Repent and be baptized and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," {cf, Acts 2:38}. The Jews knew all about that. They knew that God had promised this gift to Abraham, which would both make him a blessing and be a blessing to him. So Jesus is saying to this woman, "If you knew about the Holy Spirit and who it is that is talking to you, you would have asked from him this living water."

But, as with the Jews in the temple in Jerusalem recorded in the first chapter of this gospel, and as with Nicodemus, recorded in the third chapter, this woman misunderstands what he says. Although he is speaking figuratively, she takes him literally.

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water" Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle'?" {John 4:11-12 RSV}

She is obviously puzzled by his words. She responds, "You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep." If you have been there you know the well is indeed deep. It is at least 60 feet down to the water. If you do not have a long rope and a bucket you cannot get the water out. Then when Jesus says "living water," she thinks of running water. That is what the figure means metaphorically -- a fountain or a stream, compared with a well or a cistern. She is puzzled by what he says. "You have nothing to draw with; and what do you mean, 'running water'?"

That she has already begun to suspect she is talking to a most unusual man is shown by her second question, "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" Jacob was the great founder of the Jewish faith. The Samaritans, who had the five books of Moses, looked to Jacob as their founder as well. Her question, "Are you greater than Jacob?" indicates that she does not clearly understand what he means. But now Jesus explains:

Jesus said to her, "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." {John 4:13-14 RSV}

That is a very clear explanation. What Jesus says immediately is, "I am not talking about the water in the well. Drink of that water and you will thirst again." (She knew what he meant. She had been coming to that well for years.) "But I will give you living water, and the one who drinks of the water I give will never thirst." He did not, of course, mean that one could take one drink of living water and never again feel a thirst of soul, any more than one could take one drink of any kind of physical, literal water and never feel thirsty again. What he means is what we Americans have discovered in our own homes. How do we keep from thirsting? We have water piped in, available to us all the time, so that when we feel even a little thirsty we take a drink of it. This is what Jesus means here. The water he would give would be available constantly so that when one was thirsty one could drink immediately and so would never get terribly thirsty.

Many Christians never seem to learn this truth. They never realize that there is a place where their inner thirst -- their sense of restlessness, their desire for more than they have got -- can be met instantly.

Jesus goes on to make clear that it is going to be from within: "The water I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (By the way, notice when Jesus addresses this woman he does not change the pronoun; he uses masculine pronouns because that is a generic use of the pronoun "him." That is, women have a right to be called "him" as much as men.) "The water shall be in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." He means, of course, that that Spirit which he will impart is a life-giving Spirit, that as one drinks of that Spirit one experiences the quality of life which is called, in the Scriptures, eternal life.

That means far more than everlasting life. It means refreshing, invigorating, exciting life; life that has the qualities of love and joy and peace about it. When you lack these qualities, if you have drunk of the water that Jesus gives you can immediately slake your thirst -- again and again and again. It is a beautiful picture: a well springing up to eternal life.

But, still confused, the woman replies:

"Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." {John 4:15 RSV}

It is obvious that she still does not understand him. But the issue is up to him. She has asked for the water which he offered, now it is up to him to find a way to supply it.

Jesus knows that there is something hindering her, that she is still in darkness. This very gospel begins with the words "the light shines in darkness and the darkness cannot get hold of it; does not apprehend it, does not grasp it, does not understand it." That is what Jesus is up against with this woman. There is something inhibiting her understanding.

Jesus knows what it is, and he proceeds immediately to deal with it.

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly." {John 4:16-18 RSV}

Jesus is not making fun of her. He is recognizing the truth in what she said. I do not think this is divine omniscience, because he did not exercise that in his earthly period. This is really information that he had gathered, probably on previous visits to this area. He had not personally met this woman but he knew about her. He knew she had had five husbands, and that she was regarded as a moral pariah in the village. He also knew that she was now living with a man without benefit of marriage. Jesus shared that with her not to condemn her, but to help her face the problem in her life.

The gospel tells us that the steps to redemption are twofold: repentance and belief: Repentance is a human act; belief and regeneration is a divine act. Until we admit our need there is no way of releasing God to act and to regenerate. Jesus knows that she must come to that place, so he proceeds to deal with the hindrance. "Go call your husband," he tells her. She admits that she has no husband, and he tells her she has had five, and is now living with another man. As I have suggested, he knew this much about her. But he knew more than that. He knew there was a thirst in this woman's heart, a hunger for something more.

What is it that causes a woman to have five husbands and then keep on living with men anyhow? It sounds like the life of a Hollywood movie star. This may be the story of many here this morning. The hunger after the thrill and excitement of falling in romantic love is a most remarkable phenomenon to which the human race is subject. Falling in love transforms a perfectly ordinary boy into a Greek god in the eyes of a girl; while it can transform a nice young girl into a captivating creature who makes a boy's heart pound and his head swim! Falling in love is a kind of glorious intoxication. I remember a night in the moonlight many years ago -- Well, I won't go into that now!

Falling in love imparts an arm-flinging ecstasy, a beat in the blood, a heady euphoria. You can hear about it in the popular songs of any day: "It's June in January because I'm in love." All the songs reflect the yearning of people after a new affair, a new sense of this euphoric excitement. That is what this woman wanted. But that kind of excitement is intended to lead to marriage and to simmer down to a steadier, growing, deeper, richer kind of love which is intended to last a lifetime. C. S. Lewis rightly said, "That richer, quieter love is the fuel on which the engine of life runs. Falling in love is the explosion that gets it started."

But many insist on living in the heady intoxication of falling in love; they long to have that preserved and perpetuated. It is simply impossible to do that. It cannot be retained no matter how hard a couple may try. If they are unwilling to let that go they never allow the deeper love to form. When romance fades, as it always does, they become restless. They feel cheated, deprived and angry. Eventually they feel desperate, trapped. They fling over the old, a new partner appears, and they fall in love again. The fires begin to glow again, never quite as brightly as the last time; there is always a diminishing return. At last, they end up as millions are doing today, like this woman who had five husbands. Finally, not bothering with the formalities of marriage at all, they just have a male roommate live with them.

Taylor Caldwell, the author of the book *Captains and Kings*, which was telecast in a nine-hour production last year, was asked if that production would bring her solid satisfaction. This was her answer:

There is no solid satisfaction in any career for a woman like myself. There is no home, no true freedom, no hope, no joy, no expectation for tomorrow, no contentment. I would rather cook a meal for a man, bring him

his slippers, and feel myself in the protection of his arms, than have all the citations, awards and honors I have received worldwide, including the ribbon of the Legion of Honor, my property and my bank accounts. They mean nothing to me. And I am only one among the millions of sad women like myself.

This is the kind of woman Jesus met at the well. He knew that somehow he must gently lead her to face the thing that was destroying her; that she must understand what it was that was ruining her life and keeping her from the satisfaction of her thirst. So gently, plainly, forthrightly, but without condemnation, he led her to see what was wrong.

Her response is very revealing:

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." {John 4:19-20 RSV}

Most of the commentators take her response to be an evasion on her part, a change of subject in order to escape a very unpleasant probing by Jesus. I once thought that, but I have come to see her response in a deeper light. I believe now that this is an admission on her part that Jesus is dead right: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. You have seen me, and you are right on. You know all about me." (Later, she goes into the village and says to the people, "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did.") By her response, she is admitting that he is right; this is what she has done and been. Then she links with it not an evasion, not a religious question to try to turn him off, but an honest plea for help. "Where do I go to get life?" is what she is saying. "You Jews say that the only place to offer the sacrifice that can cleanse my sin is in the temple in Jerusalem. Our people say it is here on this mountain. Where do I go? How can I find God?"

Jesus' words, then, fit very beautifully:

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on 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 the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." {John 4:21-24 RSV}

Jesus says three remarkable things:

First, he says, in effect, "Your question about where to worship is soon going to be entirely irrelevant. The hour is coming when geography will no more be an issue. Temples or buildings will not be necessary to worship God. God is going to, and has already provided, that your body is the temple; that is where he wants his worship to go on." By his death and resurrection, Jesus knew that he was going to destroy all the symbols of worship on earth. So temples, buildings and geographical locations are no longer significant. Your own body, your own person is the place where God wants worship.

Secondly, he said to her, "Your knowledge is incomplete. You have been the victim of garbled truth. You have some truth but there is much error mingled with it; you have been misled." This often happens. Most of the cults teach garbled Christian truth mixed with error. But Jesus says, "The Jews know more. They at least know where is the proper place to carry on worship by symbol because they are part of God's plan. 'Salvation is of the Jews.'" Jesus does not deny it. He himself speaks as a Jew. He recognizes that Israel is indeed part of God's program to bring salvation to the world, and he does not set it aside.

Thirdly, Jesus says, "Here is what true worship is: true worship is done in your human spirit." It is what we call worshipping from the heart. And it must be in truth. It must be honest, not a put-on. It is not something you do with your body while your mind is somewhere else. Worship is what you mean with all your heart. When we sing hymns, God is not interested in our just mouthing words. He is interested in our hearts meaning what we sing. Most of our hymns are hymns of worship, prayer and praise addressed to God. They are to come from the heart, so we are to sing with meaning. God is seeking such to worship him. In every congregation God is looking for those who mean what they are singing, who, from the heart, are saying these

things to him. That is what worship is. And the reason it is worship is because it is in line with God's own nature. God himself is a Spirit, he is invisible; and we too are spirit, in the innermost part of our being. Therefore, worship is the joining together of Spirit with spirit. How true are the words of the old hymn,

Speak to Him then for he heareth,
And Spirit with spirit can meet.
Closer is He than breathing,
Nearer than hands and feet.

The woman still cannot quite believe that it is that easy:

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." {John 4:25 RSV}

"Yes, I know you are right, but we must wait until the Messiah comes. We cannot expect these kinds of things in our time." Her words drew from our Lord this wonderful response,

Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." {John 4:26 RSV}

Doesn't that send a shiver down your backbone? Some critics say that Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah. If someone ever says that to you, turn him to this verse: "I who speak to you am he." Now she knows. Clearly and unmistakably Jesus has identified himself, what he can be and do.

John goes on to give in three paragraphs the fruitful results of this conversation.

First, the woman immediately becomes an evangelist.

Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, "What do you wish?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" [They had begun to learn a few things about Jesus by now.] So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" {John 4:27-29 RSV}

Actually the way she put it was even more reserved. She said, "This can't be the Christ, can it?" She believes more than she is saying, but she is being careful about how she says it to these people who regard her as mere trash. She says, "This man told me everything I did. Can this really be the Christ?"

And they respond in great numbers.

They went out of the city and were coming to him. {John 4:30 RSV}

Undoubtedly this is the work of the Spirit of God, working through this reborn woman. Immediately her words fall with unusual power upon the crowd and they respond by coming to Jesus. They never responded to her before, but now they do, because God is working in her. She immediately becomes an evangelist; she has to tell what happened to her.

Then, secondly, the disciples learned some new and valuable lessons.

Meanwhile the disciples besought him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." So the disciples said to one another, "Has any one brought him food?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. {John 4:31-34 RSV}

The first thing Jesus taught them was that there is a deep satisfaction in obedience to what God wants that is just like eating food: it fills you up; you feel satisfied, ministered to, fed. Many have discovered that there is nothing like obeying God to give a deep sense of satisfaction to life.

The second thing the disciples learned about was spiritual harvest.

Do you not say, "There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?" [That is, their proverb said, when you drop a seed into the ground it will be four months before you can reap a harvest.] I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest. He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. {John 4:35-36 RSV}

H. V. Morton suggests that these people coming out of the city to meet Jesus, as the custom was in those times, were dressed in white robes. Jesus called his disciples' attention to them: "Look at them. Look on the fields, already white unto the harvest." Then he drew a parallel. In the natural life four months elapse between sowing and harvesting, but in the spiritual realm it can happen instantly. Time is removed when you are dealing in the realm of the spirit. Though the order follows the same, the pattern is there, the time element is totally irrelevant. It can happen instantly, so that "the sower and the reaper can rejoice together." When you are dealing with the things of God you can have a harvest almost instantly.

Then the third lesson he taught them was the joy of sharing labor.

I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor. {John 4:38 RSV}

Jesus and the woman labored: he taught the woman, and she went out and spread the good news to the city. But the disciples had come in to do the baptizing of the new converts and thus to reap the harvest and enter into the labors of others. Our Lord teaches them that this will be the process of the spiritual work they are to do. And all of us are involved in this. Some sow, others reap, but all labor together under God and can rejoice together.

The last lesson John gives us is this picture of the Samaritans as they believe.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world." {John 4:39-42 RSV}

There is a wonderful lesson on the processes of spiritual growth. Many come to Christ by believing the testimony of others. They see what God has done in another man's, or another woman's, life, they are affected by it and they believe. But that is not the end of Christian growth. When you come, there is a new level of personal experience. You believe because it happens to you as well. After two days with Jesus the whole city was beginning to believe. Jesus had not experienced this among the Jews. Here were these rag-tag Samaritans believing and responding, and Jesus is uplifted and strengthened by that. The Samaritans move from merely believing him to be the Messiah come to do his political work, but that he was the "Savior of the world." Anybody, anywhere, can come to him, the Savior, the Redeemer of the world.

I have always loved that old hymn of Philip Bliss,

"Man of Sorrows" what a name
For the Son of God who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim!
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

That was what was happening to these people in Sychar. They were discovering the fountain of water springing up in their own hearts -- the forgiveness of God, the sense of peace, of joy, of love within -- and they were saying with almost unbelieving tones, "We don't need to hear the woman talk about it now; it has happened to us. He is the 'Savior of the world.'"

Prayer:

Lord, we thank you that you have revealed to us, as you did to that woman of old, the fountain within, the place of significance, the place of renewed love, of cleansing, refreshing, washing again. Teach us to drink frequently all through the day, as many times as we need, of this refreshing fountain: that we will not have to run after empty cisterns and follow after the misleading philosophies of the world around us, but drink deeply of One who has come and has proven himself in our own lives to be the Savior of the world. We ask in his name, Amen.

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