

AWAKENED FROM FALSE HOPES

by Steve Zeisler

Our study is of a woman who was a life giver, not by physically bearing children, but by evangelism. By testifying to her village what Christ had done for her she had a powerful influence on others. This message is intended to be a word of thanks to God for the women who are life-givers, both physically and spiritually.

The San Francisco Giants started the season with a third baseman who had a terrible time hitting curve balls. Matt Williams was a number one draft choice, a talented young man of whom much was expected. Most of his professional career, however, he has struggled with his hitting. He has received solicited and unsolicited help from every side as to what he ought to do to improve himself at the plate. There has been advice concerning his stance, position in the batter's box, his mental approach, and yet none of it has succeeded. As a result, he is now in the minors, dealing with the situation in a less pressure atmosphere, away from the media and baseball fans all over the bay area.

We were having trouble with a circuit breaker in our home that tripped off regularly at the slightest use of electricity. Since I have no proficiency in wiring I had visions of calling in an electrician and spending hundreds of dollars to deal with the problem. Our friend Jerry briefly looked at the situation, and concluded that there was one wire that had been attached incorrectly. After he diagnosed the difficulty solving our problem was a simple matter.

For centuries contracting a bacterial disease meant certain death to its victim. Ironically, the cure could be found in their own kitchens. In this century scientists discovered that penicillin could be derived from mold found in ordinary food. From that point it was a simple procedure to formulate a medicine to destroy bacteria and restore health. A simple answer, yet no one had realized the connection between mold and penicillin to remedy the situation.

Matt Williams needs help to diagnose and correct his problem of hitting the curve ball. Someone with expertise in electrical circuitry can see the solutions that are hidden from people like me. The potential for penicillin was always there, but it took the scientist who understood the principles to make the drug that has since saved countless people. In this message we will see how Jesus used his insight into a Samaritan woman to diagnose and solve her spiritual need.

In John 4 there is a woman who understood the problem of thirst in her life. She had to go to a well to draw water on a regular basis in order to quench her thirst and provide for her household. In conversation with Jesus she was able to understand that her physical thirst was figurative of a deeper internal problem. She had a spiritual thirst, a hunger for wellness in her soul that no one had helped her see before. Her problem was in her belief that if she found the "right" man in which to commit herself, he would take away her sense of inadequacy. Jesus's diagnosis, however, was that she needed God, that her inner thirst was a problem that only he could abate. He had the information and understood the requirements to fulfill her desires, giving her a glorious testimony for others as well.

We are introduced to the situation in John 4, verse 1:

The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It

was about the sixth hour.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

At a superficial level, our attention is not drawn to anything unusual in the plot of this story. We can imagine the set of circumstances that led to Jesus and this woman being at the well at the same time. But there was in fact something very dramatic taking place, beginning in the previous verses. In order to decipher the situation, imagine yourself as a character like Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes was the type of person who would look at what appeared to be ordinary and see in the minor details of the situation that something greater had taken place. From a bit of mud on a person's shoe or a scar on their hand, he would uncover reality that other people could not see.

John's gospel is similar to a mystery. On the surface, circumstances seem fairly ordinary and straightforward. It appears to be a chance meeting, but it is obvious that there is a crisis as the Scripture unfolds. In the details, there is potential for spiritual enlightenment if the evidence is sorted and interpreted correctly.

Although the text is not clear whether it used a Jewish or Roman timetable, it is my conviction that Jesus and the disciples had started at daybreak and walked six hours. Thus, at this juncture it was the middle of the day. Since it was hot in Samaria it makes sense that they stopped at a water source to rest while those in charge of the food went into town to prepare for the meal later. The leader, Jesus, was weary, so he sat down. To the casual observer, there was nothing unusual about the woman's encounter with Jesus at the well. To provide for her household it was necessary to draw water. However, there are nuances in this story to which we should draw our attention in order to understand the implications of the situation.

The first piece of evidence is that the woman was alone. It would have been typical in that region for the women of the community to go together in the early morning or the cool of the evening to draw water. In addition, there were closer water sources than Jacob's well where more people would gather. As the Lord looked at those details, he perceived this woman's life was different. She was a loner, an outcast in her own community, one who had to draw water at a time when others wouldn't be there to ridicule her. She was someone with a deep and sorrowful history who had no hope for a change in her circumstances.

As detectives, there is evidence about Christ that we can observe if we look closely. First of all, he was without prejudice. The woman was startled that he would talk to her because she was a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans were antagonistic towards each other. To the Jews, the Samaritans were a sub-species since they were part Jewish and part Assyrian. The Samaritans had taken the tradition of Scripture and left out great parts of it, synchotizing it with other religions. Since there was no freedom of expression between these two people, the woman was startled at Jesus's lack of prejudice.

Later, when the disciples came back from Sychar they were surprised that Jesus would talk to a woman. As a rabbi, he was an important man. The woman was quite ordinary and had no particular standing. They also were surprised at his lack of prejudice towards her.

Furthermore, Jesus was accessible as an individual. He didn't grab her bucket and draw water for himself. He asked for her help precisely to put himself in her debt to some degree. Thus, he had created an accessibility towards himself so that she would feel free to approach more closely and hear what he had to say.

Review what you know about Jesus Christ. Do you believe that he is without prejudice towards anyone, that there is no category of people that are beyond his concern? Do you understand him to be accessible to you? Unfortunately, there are too many people in our world who do not feel welcome in Christian churches. Many people feel as if they are disqualified from associating with Christians because of a past sin or failure. They don't feel welcome in homes that are godly and upright. These people may feel cutoff from many aspects of the Christian experience, but the reality is that no one is cut off from the Lord. The Lord Jesus longs for everyone who comes to him, and no one will be received with sternness or rejection. He has made himself

available to all.

Through verse 8 the plot is quite simple. It begins to change a bit in verse 9:

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "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."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to everlasting life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

After the woman's initial surprise at Jesus's interest in her, she finds his openness and availability even more remarkable. She comments, "Sir, why would you a Jew be interested in water that I might draw?" Sharing an eating utensil with a Samaritan would be out of the question for a Jew. The Jews had strict traditional customs and laws forbidding them to consume anything from implements used by a non-Jew. The woman realized that there was something unusual in this man. Jesus spoke enigmatically but expansively when he said, "If you knew who was speaking to you, you would ask to be granted the gift of God because he is sovereign and capable to do so. If you knew him and the gift, you would ask for living water and he would make it available to you."

The phrase "living water" was a bit ambiguous in that context. It wasn't absolutely clear what Jesus was offering, because living water could mean simply "running water". Jesus meant it in the spiritual realm, that which gives life to the soul. Since they were at a well, the woman could have perceived that he was speaking about a stream of running water. So her response was limited to the physical arena: "Our father Jacob, was granted this land by God. We are his descendants and so have access to this water. Do you have territory nearby that has running water on it? Can you give me something more valuable than what our father Jacob gave to his people?"

At this point, I used to think that the woman understood what Jesus meant about spiritual reality, but was resistant to the truth. However, I now believe that it was her expectation that answers to life's secrets ultimately came from people manipulating external circumstances. It was through this intellectual disposition that she heard Jesus's offer of living water. Since it was unimaginable for her that life could come directly from God to one's spirit without human intervention, she could not even consider that potential solution.

Many Christians respond in the same way. They feel uncomfortable trusting God directly without a series of tapes from an eminent authority on how to do it. How difficult it is to trust in the power of God without a counselor validating it. We might assume that money or a certain organization is required in order to receive a blessing. In God's simple plan, however, it is only his action in our life which grants life and joy to human experience.

Jesus's offer struck at the heart of her problem. The Lord increasingly peeled back the layers to reveal an ordinary solution. What initially seemed to be about water was not about water. The issue was not physical thirst, he said; the issue was thirst of the spirit. Remarkably, he offered not to quench her thirst, but to banish her thirst once and for all.

All her life, the woman had believed that the remedy for thirst was to go to the well. She knew that regardless of the amount of water she drank at any time, thirst would always return. Likewise, she believed the same to be true about the thirst inside her heart. Her need for well-being could not be satisfied by the men in her life. She would go to one husband and eventually discover him to be inadequate. The heartbreak remained. In the same way she went to the well everyday, she went to the next man, hoping he would meet the need of her heart. Her spiritual thirst could not be quenched.

Jesus said, "I intend to banish your thirst all together. I will grant you access to God that will allow you to quench your thirst every day. By trusting in the power of the spirit, you can become a whole person, lacking in nothing. You can give life to others instead of looking for someone to give it to you." He intended to make her thirst go away entirely, not just relieve her thirst for the moment.

As this is a familiar story to many, I trust that the question in verse 16 is anticipated. They had been discussing water, but at this point Jesus abruptly states:

"Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "you are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

The woman said, "I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Jesus then declared, "I who speak to you am he."

The Lord knew that if this woman would receive the help he desired to give, she would have to let him diagnose her problems. She had to understand that there was a craving in her much like physical thirst, a craving she had attempted to fill repeatedly with the next man in the series. As women through the ages have been taught, she believed that the ideal husband would provide love, security, and well-being. After five husbands, she had finally despaired of finding the right one and instead was living with a man with whom there was no commitment. What Jesus clarified for her was that the thirst she had could only be alleviated through the spirit. Wholeness could only come from God.

Pascal's illustrated it another way. He said that each human being is born into this world with a God-shaped vacuum inside. We all have an emptiness inside us that is shaped like God himself. Contrary to what the world says, nothing else will fill it adequately. No accomplishment, relationship, wealth, or status will ultimately satisfy us because the shape of our hunger is the shape of God. This woman was thirsty in a way that she did not understand. That was what Jesus had been talking about all along: "I can give you life itself. If you knew who was speaking, if you knew the gift of God, you would ask to have your heart's longing, your spiritual deprivation met, and he would meet it for you."

When Jesus asked her to bring her husband, she made the gripping statement, "I have no husband." The Lord picked up on her answer, "You are quite right when you said you have no husband. That is exactly the

problem that has filled your life with tragedy and made you an outcast in your village. That phrase 'I have no husband' is the drumbeat in the back of your mind which has ruined your life. You're quite right when you say that."

It might be a different phrase for us. We might say, "I have no child of my own. I have no rest, acceptance, security, attractiveness, or home. No one loves me, no one understands me." The merry-go-round of new relationships, new jobs, new self-improvement schemes, new religions are all trips to a well. Each one of them satisfies for a moment, but the thirst remains.

The woman's answer is a step forward in her understanding. She said, "I see now that you're a prophet." The first statement to him was, "You're a Jew. How can you a Jew ask me for a drink?" Her next notion was, "Maybe he's greater than Jacob." She now saw him as a prophet. However, her whole understanding of religion focused on religious institutions. Even God had to be mediated to her by a place, a particular mountain. The Samaritans were taught to go to Mount Gerazin to worship, while the Jews believed that Jerusalem should be the center. The woman viewed religion in terms of a theological debate with physical specifications. Jesus, however, offered a remedy to her needs that had no locational requirements.

There are two important parts to his answer. The first part affirmed that God ultimately had chosen to save the world through the Jews. He did not say, "Any spiritual idea is equal to any other." Just because a philosophy calls itself spiritual doesn't mean that it is. God's truth about himself has been revealed over the centuries, and it is unequivocal. Jesus proclaimed that salvation was from the Jews. He declared himself to be the Messiah, the Savior who was going to come through the Jews. Thus, other answers that go by the name spiritual are not equally valuable.

Jesus continued to say that the day was coming when everybody would have equal access. The time had come now when those who worshiped the Father would worship him in spirit and in truth. Going to a mountain was not the issue. The Messiah had come, and the new age had begun.

As we can see in verse 1 of chapter 4, the Jews didn't benefit from their history. It said that the Pharisees were threatened by Jesus's following and had subsequently forced him to leave town. They had a more acceptable history and more potential, but had not responded to it. To this Gentile woman the Lord Jesus was offering living water directly from God. He released her to worship in spirit without any external permission. God himself was available to bring renewal and life to the woman's spirit. It would be as rejuvenating as an eternal well of water, satisfying her internally wherever she was.

The next thing that happened concerned the return of the disciples. Essentially, they came back and began a similar conversation to the one Jesus had had with the woman. They started talking about physical food, but Jesus turned it around to the food that concerned doing God's will. They wanted to talk about lunch, but he drew their attention to evangelism. Although they didn't question Jesus as the woman had, it's precisely the same thing. Their vision was too low. Their sense of concern about eating was not adequate to the moment. I'm sure the Lord said, "She's coming back." In her haste, the woman had left her bucket behind to return to the village. From the wonder in her eye and purpose in her stride Jesus could tell, "We are about to have a harvest, brothers. There are others coming back with her." The disciples weren't alert to what God was doing. The implication was that they expected the harvest of the Gentiles to come later, but instead it was coming now.

By the appointment of God we are at a place where men and women are going to come to faith. As instruments of God's work, we need to be prepared for what he will do through us. We have work to do, and it's much more important than the immediate plans we have scheduled.

The passage concludes with verses 39-42:

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

The woman, the disciples, and then the villagers of Sychar discovered something about Jesus that surprised them. They began the conversation believing one thing about themselves, their needs, and God, and concluded by believing something else. They found that Jesus's ability to diagnose what was true and to offer life went beyond anything they previously had expected. The woman started out talking with someone who looked like an ordinary Jewish man. Then she wondered to herself, "Are you greater than Jacob?" Maybe he was some sort of mysterious landowner. Then she discovered that he was a prophet. Finally she said, "Messiah's coming," and Jesus said, "I am he." Her internal spiritual need was met by Christ's revelation of himself to her.

The disciples came back with lunch for the journey south. Jesus said, "It's harvest day. We don't wait four months. We must interrupt our schedule to harvest the crop of believers." God had been at work in an unexpected way, and all of a sudden their world was expanded. Their sense of his purpose and all that he'd come for was greater than they'd previously known.

Lastly, the townspeople heard her testimony. "He told me everything I ever did. He explained to me who I am. He made sense of my life for once. And he offered me life instead of death and tragedy." The Scripture says they believed because of what the woman said. Once again, their understanding was expanded so that after some days in his presence they said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you've said. We know for ourselves that he is the savior of the world."

I would submit that each of us have the tendency more often than not to look for help every place, but to Christ himself. Even those of us who have been Christians for some time struggle with the temptation to look for human beings to fix our circumstances. We look for experts to supply the missing piece with a word, a touch, or a relationship. Instead of going to Christ himself we tend to go to various wells to quench our thirst. Unfortunately, we continue in the same hurts, anxieties, and poor choices instead of receiving the intended remedy. When we refuse the gift we negate the plumbing that the Lord has provided inside of us. The water is available to us in the spirit. God himself begins to make a transformation so that it isn't the same temporary process of thirst relief. The Lord has the potential to eliminate the need to return to the well. We are a people who too often deny the accessibility and power of God to meet our inadequacy. That is the lesson before us in John chapter 4.

The Lord is entirely available to us all. If you knew with whom you spoke when you prayed, if you understood the gift of God you would ask him and he would give you living water on the inside. It would well up to eternal life. He would take the vacuum that was meant for God inside and fill it with himself.

If you know that you aren't a Christian you can do as this woman did. You can begin a relationship with Christ by using the simplest language you know to ask for help. To say during a silent moment, "Lord Jesus, help me. You are the one, the savior of the world that can meet the deepest needs of my heart. Please help me." By that simplest of processes you can enter the kingdom of God, become a follower of him, and be on the path to renewal that is beyond anything you'd ask or think. If you in fact make the choice to become a Christian, please make a point to tell someone and ask for help.

It may be that you already are a Christian, but prefer to let human instruments meet your needs rather than Jesus. If that is true of you, then please spend time with the Lord asking him to change you. God is available, he cares, and will act on your behalf. Ask someone to pray for you because we need each other in this process.

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