



Biblical Commentary – For your Personal Preparation

John 4:1-26

As John 4 opens, the Scriptures reveal that Christ was enjoying the blessings of a successful ministry. People were flocking to Jesus rapidly, and his disciples were baptizing people in droves. In fact, the Pharisees had taken notice of his success and saw an opportunity to create a division between his ministry and that of another “problem” they were facing, Jesus’ cousin John. Rather than undermine John’s ministry in Judea, Jesus decided to head North to Galilee.

Jesus resolved that he had to go through Samaria to get to Galilee (v. 4). This resolution had nothing to do with logistics. Jewish travelers had developed a well-used route between Galilee and Judea that completely circumnavigated the region of Samaria. In fact, Christ’s determination to go through Samaria was both scandalous and provocative. That Jesus “had to” go this shortest, most logical route showed disregard or even contempt that had separated the Jewish and Samaritan people for centuries. From an eternal perspective, Christ’s claim of immediate need to go through Samaria has ramifications on two levels: what would happen in Samaria by his being there was ordained by God as necessary, and that the direct route was necessary so that Christ could fulfill his entire, eternal purpose.

The Samaritan and Jewish people agreed only on the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch). On virtually every other matter, they disagreed:

There had been bitter feelings between Jews and Samaritans for centuries. The Samaritans find their origin at the time of the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. According to Assyrian figures, nearly 30,000 Israelites were deported, being replaced by heathen captives from all over the Assyrian empire (cf. 2 Kings 17:3f.). It was not long before the purity of the Israelites was defiled, not only racially, but spiritually.

Ultimately, Samaritan theology differed greatly from that of Orthodox Judaism. The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) as inspired and authoritative. They rejected the Psalms, the prophets, and other books of the Old Testament. When the Babylonian exiles returned to the Holy Land, the Samaritans made efforts toward merger, but were rebuffed and rejected (and rightly so). As a result, open hostility sprung up from time to time. The Samaritans held that the center of worship was at Mt. Gerizim, while the Jews maintained that it was Jerusalem (cf. John 4:20). The Samaritans actually tampered with the Scriptures to substantiate their theology. Around 400 B.C., a Samaritan Temple was built on Mount Gerizim. Around 128 B.C., this temple was destroyed by the Jews and relations between

these two peoples worsened...Evidence to the friction between the Jews and the Samaritans is easily found.¹

Once Jesus and his followers arrived in the town of Sychar, he stopped at a water well that had significant historical and religious significance. How poignant it must have been for Jesus to stop at that well at that time, where he could uniquely reflect on the forefathers who He himself created had built this water depot. At the same time, He was fully human. He had traveled a long, hot, dusty road. He was hungry. He was tired. He was thirsty.

Yet, it is here where He met a Samaritan woman and entered into a relationship where He spiritually courted her. **He began by striking a conversation with her.** The fact that He did so was even more scandalous and provocative than His decision to journey into Samaria. Tradition had dictated that Jewish people and Samaritan people not mingle. For a Jewish man to talk to a Samaritan woman was considered unthinkable and certainly inappropriate. This mattered little to Jesus, and He began talking with her.

He initiated a relationship by simply asking her for water. Make no mistake, though, this was no little question. In fact, He was destroying centuries of stereotypes by doing so, because it was considered taboo for Jewish people to drink from the same vessel as Samaritans. More than that, though, **Jesus was establishing value in the woman.** He was affirming her that she had worth, that she had something meaningful to offer Him, and that He could be blessed by her engaging in the relationship.

This initial question accomplished its purpose. It opened the door to conversation. She reveals herself to be an intelligent woman, well versed in the prejudicial barriers that separated their two cultures. When Jesus knocked down that first wall by asking for a drink, it permitted her to relate with Jesus that she never would have assumed possible.

As they talked, the woman asked a series of questions highlighting the differences between her culture and his. In this conversation, you can observe Jesus building the relationship through a series of principles reflected in his conversation. As the conversation progressed, **Jesus gently seasoned his language with spiritual truth.** He talked about "living water." When she focused on religion, he focused on relationship. He gently probed with this spiritual truth, appealing to her curious nature. In a situation where it would have been appropriate to not talk at all, Jesus instead "massaged" the conversation to make sure they would cover the only issue that mattered.

He never compromised himself by discrediting the Jewish practices and traditions of worship, just to keep from offending her by disagreeing with her traditions and practices. While he spoke to the truth about their cultural divide, Jesus wisely never

¹ http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=590

engaged in divisive language. He did not ignore the differences they had. He also did not compromise himself by simply excusing her immorality, as reflected in her attempted misdirection about not having a husband. Even so, he refused to make a lesser matter the most important matter. Rather, **he focused on what united them** – true worship of the true God through true relationship. In this he completely stepped outside of her preconceived notions about God, and gave her a new vision for relationship with him!

John 4:27-38

Jesus was well in to the courtship process when his disciples arrived from having eaten their evening meal. Understandably, they were shocked by what they saw. Jesus was confronting every social and cultural obstacle and knocking it over, right in front of their eyes! Yet, not one of his disciples challenged him, because they watched him as one who had spiritual authority and the prescience of mind who knew what he was doing certainly better and more than did they.

Certainly aware of their arrival, and perhaps uncomfortable of their presence, the woman rushed off back to her townspeople, where she shared excitedly that Jesus had just “read her like an open book” and invited them to come meet him! **Her trust in Jesus had increased. Because of that, Jesus’ opportunity to court her increased.**

While that was going on, the disciples of Jesus tried to redirect his priorities and efforts. They knew he had traveled far. They knew he was hungry. They thought they knew what was best for him. They figured he didn’t need to be wasting his time nor his energy on this Samaritan woman. In their eyes, she was a distraction to the real objective – getting quickly through this region of spiritually corrupt half-breed apostates and getting to Galilee where “real ministry” could begin. Jesus, though, resets their priorities. **Jesus refused to be distracted by less important opportunities.**

Jesus tells them to look all around and to see others with his eyes. Jesus didn’t see the Samaritans in terms of their culture, or their history, or their even of their differences. He looked across Samaria and saw the same thing he saw in Judea: a veritable field of lost and dying people, virtually ripe to be harvested in salvation through the good news he brought them. **Jesus was sensitive to where God was at work.** Accordingly, he refused to be taken away from there.

John 4:39-42

No sooner did Jesus finish exhorting his followers that the fields were white unto harvest that the “harvest” came forward. A multitude of Samaritans immediately believed because of her testimony. They knew this woman. They were fully aware of her reputation in the community. They were familiar with her history and her standing. They were impressed and amazed that a total stranger could know all the sordid details of her life without being told. Because of this amazing feat, they placed belief in his claim that he was in fact God’s Messiah. To meet their need, Jesus made spiritual

investments in Samaria. Accordingly, Jesus was able to **share with even more people.**

Jesus agreed to stay longer with the people of Sychar. In a place that was nothing more than a dinner and drink stop on the way to Galilee, Jesus ended up staying more than 2 days. We will never know in this life everywhere he went in those two days, and all the people he spoke with. We will never know all the people he met by introduction through the woman he first met at the well. What we do know, though, is that many more believed because of his word. **Jesus gave these people extra time.**

There is a direct correlation here. **The more time he spent, the more people came to faith.** He stayed and invested in these people. He shared the truth time and again. He showed people they mattered, even though they had so very little in common. He gave of himself so that they could know the truth. They declare as much, "we know that this is the Savior of the World!"