

## **“Living Waters” (John 4:1-42)**

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In two weeks, Super Bowl LI will be played and some team is going to win. It could be the Patriots. (We’ll find out who will play in the big game later today.) You would imagine that winning the Super Bowl would be the fulfillment of years of hopes and dreams. I’m sure all NFL players dream of winning the Super Bowl. I’m sure they think that if they win, their careers will be complete. I’m sure some big-name players who never won the Super Bowl, people like Dan Marino and Warren Moon, retired thinking that their careers would have been that much better if they had won just one ring.

In other words, you would think that winning the Super Bowl would leave players feeling satisfied and complete.

But if you think that, you would be wrong. Tom Brady has four Super Bowl rings, of course. After he won the third one, in 2005, he sat down for an interview with Steve Kroft for *60 Minutes*. And he said this:

Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I mean . . . I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think: God, it’s gotta be more than this. I mean this can’t be what it’s all cracked up to be. I mean I’ve done it. I’m 27. And what else is there for me?<sup>1</sup>

I doubt that the fourth Super Bowl ring that Brady won two years ago left him feeling satisfied. A fifth ring would cement his status as the greatest quarterback of all time, but I have a feeling he would still feel like something is missing.

That is what life is like for all of us. We all feel a bit of emptiness. I should say, we all feel a bit of emptiness if we think that the things of this world like accomplishments, fame, money, and pleasures are going to satisfy us fully.

If you think Brady is alone, you would be wrong. There’s an interesting video you can watch on YouTube that shows a number of celebrities saying in different ways that their fame and success has often left them depressed, empty, and isolated.<sup>2</sup> These celebrities include Lady

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant portion of the transcript of that interview can be found here: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-tom-brady-part-3>, accessed January 20, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Celebrities Speak out on Fame and Materialism,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYDKCx4hSQQ>, accessed January 20, 2017.

GaGa, Josh Radnor from the TV show *How I Met Your Mother*, Russell Brand, John Lennon, and others. These are people who are tremendously successful in the eyes of the world. They've made a great deal of money, had legions of fans, and experienced things that we can only dream of. And yet they still feel empty.

As I think about this issue, I could probably come up with dozens of examples of this reality. These examples could come from the lives of the famous and from the lives of people that I know, and even my own life. The things of this world often leave us empty, yet we keep hoping that something will satisfy us.

Some of the most insightful Christian thinkers have commented on this idea. One of the most famous is Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century mathematician and philosopher. He writes:

All men are in search of happiness. There is no exception to this, whatever different methods are employed. They all aim for this goal. . . . The will never takes the slightest step except with that aim [to find happiness]. This is the motive for men's every action, even those who are going to hang themselves.

However no one without faith, over so many years, has yet achieved that target which everyone constantly aims for. . . .

Such a lengthy, continual, and universal test ought to convince us of our powerlessness to achieve good through our own efforts.<sup>3</sup>

What does this greed and helplessness proclaim, except that there was once within us true happiness of which all that now remains is the outline and empty trace? Man tries unsuccessfully to fill this void with everything that surrounds him, seeking in absent things [i.e., the things he doesn't have] the help he cannot find in those that are present [the things he does have], but all are incapable of it. This infinite abyss can be filled with an infinite, immutable object, that is to say, God himself.<sup>4</sup>

C. S. Lewis put it this way, in what is often called his "argument from desire":

Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 135.

But before Tom Brady, C. S. Lewis, and Blaise Pascal, there was Jesus, and he told us the same thing. The things of this world will leave us feeling empty. But Jesus offers us something that will fill our lives and give us hope.

Today, we're going to look at John 4, particularly a conversation that Jesus has with a Samaritan woman. Last week, we saw how Jesus interacted with a religious man named Nicodemus (John 3:1–21). Jesus told him that his religion wouldn't save him. He needed to be born again and he needed to come into the light and put his trust in Jesus in order to enter into God's kingdom and have eternal life. Today, we'll see how Jesus interacts with what we might call an irreligious woman. He tells her that pursuing the things of this world will leave her dissatisfied and empty. These things will not give her eternal life.

Let's start by reading John 4:1–6:

<sup>1</sup> Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John <sup>2</sup>(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), <sup>3</sup> he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. <sup>4</sup> And he had to pass through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus had been in Judea when the Pharisees heard about Jesus' growing ministry. Perhaps to avoid conflict with that group of men, Jesus left for Galilee, his home turf to the north. The region between Judea and Galilee was Samaria.

In order to understand the significance of what is about to happen, we need to understand what Samaria was and where the Samaritans came from. This region had once been part of the united kingdom of Israel. After Solomon's death, the kingdom split into two kingdoms: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Assyria besieged Israel and captured Samaria (the name of the capital of the northern kingdom), taking some of the Israelites into exile. After Samaria was captured, foreigners came into the land and settled there (2 Kgs. 17:24). These foreigners intermarried with the remaining Israelites. Therefore, Samaritans were the result of intermarriage between two ethnicities and Jews viewed them as unclean half-breeds.

The Samaritans had their own form of Scripture, which was a corrupted form of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). The Samaritan Pentateuch said that Mount Gerizim was the place of worship and around the year 400 BC, Samaritans built a temple there, one to

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

rival the temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans' temple was destroyed in the second century BC, but they continued to believe that worship was supposed to be conducted on Mount Gerizim.

What is important is the view that Jews had towards Samaritans. "In Jesus' time the Jews hated the Samaritans even more than they despised 'pure' Gentiles, for they regarded them as polluting the blood of the patriarchs."<sup>7</sup> When the Jewish leaders tried to slander Jesus, they asked him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (John 8:48).

It has been said that Jews avoided traveling through Samaria at all costs. That's not quite true. Many Jews passed through Samaria when traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, because it was the shortest route. Some would cross the Jordan River and travel on the eastern side, but this was Gentile territory. Some commentators believe that the statement, "he had to pass through Samaria" (John 4:4), indicates that Jesus had a divine appointment. In other words, the Father wanted him to speak to this woman.

Jesus was tired and thirsty when he came to the town of Sychar, so he just happened to sit down at Jacob's well. The location of the well is still known. It's near Mount Gerizim. And it was about noon, the middle of the day.

Let's read the next few verses to see what happens next. Let's read verses 7–15:

<sup>7</sup> A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."<sup>8</sup> (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." <sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." <sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

It was about noon. Usually, women came in groups to the well, and they often came earlier or later in the day, when the heat of the sun was not as strong and oppressive. This particular woman was probably ostracized by her community because of her immoral life. Jesus, left alone by the disciples, does not ostracize the woman. Instead, he asks her for some water.

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<sup>7</sup> Jerram Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 38.

The woman is incredulous. How can a Jewish man ask a Samaritan woman for water? Jesus was crossing many boundaries. He was crossing an ethnic boundary, a religious boundary, and a gender boundary. He even crossed an ethnic boundary, by speaking to a sinful woman.

Though Jesus asks the woman for a drink, he is the one who has something to offer. He lets her know that he is someone special who has come to give “living water.” John 7:37–39 makes it clear that this living water is the Holy Spirit. The woman at first does not understand what Jesus is saying. She thinks in narrowly literal terms, the way Nicodemus does in chapter 3. “How can you give me water if you have nothing to draw it with?” Jesus lets her know that what he is offering will satisfy her completely. It is unlike anything else in this world. By describing what he offers in this way, Jesus is presenting the gospel to this woman in a very positive light. Of course, it is not the full gospel, but what he says makes her interested in learning more.

Let’s see how Jesus continues the conversation. We’ll first read verses 16–18:

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” <sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; <sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.”

Now we learn this woman’s secret. She has had five husbands and is now living with another man. It’s true that we don’t know whether her previous husbands divorced her or if they died. But it seems there’s a clear pattern in her life, and, at any rate, she is living with a man who she’s not married to, which is against God’s design for marriage and sex. This is probably why she is alone at the well in heat of day. It’s possible that she may have been at the well hoping to find yet another man, one traveling through town.<sup>8</sup> This woman could have interpreted Jesus’ request for water as flirtation.<sup>9</sup> Jesus tells her to go find her husband. He may be doing this in an effort to repel any possible advances she is making. But he also reveals his knowledge of her life, which is made clear in verses 17–18. Again, Jesus does not condemn, but he brings her sin into the light. What he’s really hinting at is this: “You keep going back to the ‘well’ of men, but they’re not satisfying you, are they?”

It seems that the woman isn’t very comfortable with this topic. So, she changes the subject and starts talking about religion. We see that in verses 19–26:

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<sup>8</sup> J. Mack Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 112.

<sup>9</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 272.

<sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

Since Jesus has supernatural knowledge of this woman’s life, she thinks he’s a prophet. Samaritans believed that a messianic figure called the Taheb, or the Restorer, would come. Eventually, this person was expected to be the prophet whom Moses prophesied would come (Deut. 18:15–19). At first, the woman doesn’t think Jesus is the Taheb, but she knows he is special.

Then she shifts gears and starts talking about the theological differences between Samaritans and Jews. This seems like a bit of a diversionary tactic. The real issue here isn’t the proper place of worship. Jesus says that the hour is coming when true worshipers won’t worship at the temple in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim. It is true, Jesus says, that the Jews were right. To quote the apostle Paul in Romans, “the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2). As he says later in that same letter, “They are the Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises” (Rom. 9:4). And salvation is from the Jews. We might say that salvation is from one particular Jew, the Jew that is standing before this woman.

But, Jesus says the hour is coming when everything is going to change. What matters will not be the location. What matters is whether God is worshiped in spirit and in truth. After all God is spirit; he’s immaterial. He’s not bound to one location on earth. God can be worshiped from anywhere. But what’s more important is that people have the right spirit. It’s more important that people have right hearts in worshipping God. And they must do so according to the truth. They must truly know God and worship in a way that God has ordained. And the only way people can do that is if they have the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), in their lives. Those who worship God by the power of the Holy Spirit are God’s people (see Phil. 3:3).

For some reason, Jesus’ words on worship prompt the woman to say that she knows that when the Messiah comes, he will reveal all things. The Messiah, or Christ, is God’s anointed

ruler. He is the true Prophet, the true King, the one who will restore everything. And Jesus tells this woman, “I am he.” That might be like the other times in John, when Jesus says, “I am he.” It’s a subtle way of saying, “I am the God of Israel. I am Yahweh.”<sup>10</sup> At the least, Jesus means that is indeed the Messiah.

Jesus’ conversation with the woman is interrupted when the disciples return. We see this in verses 27–30:

<sup>27</sup> Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” <sup>28</sup> So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup> “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” <sup>30</sup> They went out of the town and were coming to him.

The disciples marveled because Jesus was talking to a woman, a Samaritan woman. But they managed not to say anything. The woman, for her part, rushed into town to tell others about the man she met.

Before those people could meet Jesus, the disciples talk to Jesus. Let’s look at verses 31–38:

<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” <sup>32</sup> But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” <sup>33</sup> So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?” <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. <sup>35</sup> Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. <sup>36</sup> Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup> For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ <sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

When the disciples ask Jesus to eat, he tells them he has food they don’t know about. They, like the woman at the well, don’t get it at first. They don’t understand that Jesus is speaking metaphorically. He means that what really keeps him going, what really gives him life, is to do the will of the one who sent him, God the Father. And part of that work is reaping a harvest. He’s referring to people coming to believe the message of the gospel, the message of Jesus. He says that this harvest of gospel fruits is now ready to be reaped.

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<sup>10</sup> See Isaiah 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4; 48:12.

What Jesus seems to mean is that people have sown the message of God. In the case of this Samaritan woman, she had some limited knowledge of the first few books of the Bible. She knew enough to know that there would be a Messiah who would come. And at this point in her life, she was ripe to hear the gospel. She was searching for something that would give her life meaning and hope. When she realized with whom she was talking, she ran and told others. Jesus is telling his disciples that there will be others like this. The disciples are to reap what the prophets had sown long ago. That's what we often saw in the book of Acts. The apostles later went to various places in the Roman Empire and persuaded people that the Messiah had come.

At the end of this passage, we see the results of Jesus' conversation with the woman. Let's read verses 39–42:

<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

Many people came to faith in Jesus because this woman went and told other people. These people believed because of her testimony. But notice that more people came to faith because they actually met Jesus and heard his words.

Now that we've come to the end of this passage, I want us to think about what it means for us. First, I want the Christians here to think about what it means for evangelism. When Jesus met this woman, he was encountering a woman who had spiritual needs. She was very different from him and obviously had a bit of a shady past. We should first notice that Jesus was willing to cross several boundary lines to talk to this woman. He wasn't afraid of her.

Who are the "unclean" people we would rather not talk to? Imagine the worst "sinner" you can imagine. Would you be willing to talk to a lesbian working for Planned Parenthood? A drug addict? A tattoo-covered, dangerous-looking, foul-mouthed man? Imagine this: Jesus would talk to them. We should also ask ourselves, If we don't tell them about Jesus, who will?

Second, think about how Jesus conducted this conversation. What did Jesus do? Did he say, "You're a sinner! Repent!" No. He first made simple conversation with her. He asked her for something. Asking a non-Christian neighbor for help, or to borrow a tool, is a good way to

befriend someone. And Jesus treated this woman with respect and dignity. He didn't make her feel like she was unclean. He didn't make her feel like she was below him.

Third, think about the way Jesus brought up her spiritual needs. He didn't condemn the woman. Think about that for a moment. Jesus is the only one who can pull off a "holier than thou" attitude, because he is sinless. Every other person is a sinner, equally deserving of condemnation. But Jesus didn't condemn this woman. Instead of doing that, he mentioned that he has something that she lacks. She can keep coming back to this well to get water that will leave her thirsting for more, but he has living water that will satisfy her soul. By bringing up her history with men, Jesus revealed that going to that well wouldn't work. Another man wouldn't satisfy her. We can do the same with people we know. Of course, that takes getting to know them, to see what wells they're trying to drink from. But when we know that, we can observe that those wells will always leave them dry. It doesn't matter if the well is money or entertainment or relationships or anything else. Unless that well offers the Holy Spirit, the person who drinks won't feel full.

Fourth, the non-Christians we encounter will be like this woman in the sense that they worship what they don't know. Many people today simply don't know the true message of Christianity. They don't know what the Bible really says, even if they think they do. So, we'll have to give them correct information.

Here's the second thing I want us Christians to think about: Though we know that God is greater than anything else that he has created, we tend to go back to the old wells of this world, thinking that the things of this world will satisfy. It's very easy for us to do that. We think, "If only I had this. If only I had this experience. If only I could have this thing I'm lacking." But if we were to get what we really wanted, we would realize, like Tom Brady and those other celebrities I mentioned, we would still want more.

Since both Christians and non-Christians can fall into this trap, I want to address both groups. What is it that you think will really satisfy you? What are you longing for?

Maybe it's hard to know right now. Imagine, however, that in this story, Jesus said to the woman, "I can give you living water that will give you eternal life. There's just one thing you have to do." She would ask, "What is that?" And he might say, "You have to give up that man you're living with. In fact, you have to stop looking for satisfaction in men." That would have made her idol, her real object of worship, very clear.

Now imagine if Jesus came to us to say the same thing. And when we ask, “What do I need to do to get this living water?” He might say, “Give me some money.” And we might say, “I don’t have any extra money right now.” And Jesus might ask us why. And we might say, “Because I spent it all on this house,” or, “I spent it on vacations,” or, “I spent it collecting things that I thought would make me happy,” or, “I spent it on my hobby.” That might make our idol very clear.

Now, imagine if the issue weren’t money. What if Jesus said, “I can give you living water if you just give me your time.” What would we say? “I’m busy, Jesus, because I have so much to do.” “I’m busy, Jesus, because the Pats game is on.” “I’d really like to do that, Jesus, but I can’t commit right now. Something better might come along.”

What keeps us from going to Jesus and drinking deeply from the Holy Spirit? That is the object of our true worship.

But think about this: Do you know why Jesus could give this living water to this woman? Think about why he met her in the first place. He met her because he was thirsty. Why was he thirsty? Because he was a man, who was subject to fatigue, and hunger, and thirst. Why was Jesus a man? Because the Son of God became man to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). How does Jesus save his people from their sins? By dying on the cross, paying the penalty for their rejection of God and their disobedience. And do you know what Jesus said on the cross? He said, “I thirst” (John 19:28). Jesus became thirsty so this woman’s thirst could be quenched. His life was drained out so we could drink of the cup of life.

Do you know why Jesus could ask this woman to give up finding ultimate satisfaction in men? Well, I think John gives us a clue. John tells us that this story was set at Jacob’s well. We’re not really told a lot about Jacob’s well in the book of Genesis. But we are told of a time when Jacob was at another well, in a different location. This is Genesis 29. It was “high day” (Gen. 29:7). While there, he saw Rachel, who was beautiful. And Jacob was so smitten that he rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered Rachel’s father’s flock. Then he kissed Rachel and “wept aloud.” Of course, later Jacob would marry Rachel. What is Jesus doing at this well? He’s meeting a woman he’s about to marry. No, of course he doesn’t literally marry this woman. But she becomes part of his bride, the church.

