

February 7
Lesson 10 (NIV)

CALLED TO TESTIFY

DEVOTIONAL READING: John 1:37–51

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: John 1:37–51; 4:25–42

JOHN 4:25–42

²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

²⁷ Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

³¹ Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

³³ Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

³⁴ “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. ³⁵ Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers.

⁴² 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.”

KEY VERSE

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” —John 4:39

CALL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Unit 3: The Call of Women

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the impact of the Samaritan woman's witness.
2. Explain the sense and reference of Jesus' illustration in John 4:35.
3. Identify elements of Jesus' approach to evangelism that he or she will use.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Unnamed but Not Unimportant
- B. Lesson Context
- I. A Woman's Declaration (John 4:25–30)
 - A. Messiah Revealed (vv. 25–26)
 - B. Disciples Startled (v. 27)
 - C. City Challenged (vv. 28–30)
- II. A Crop Prepared (John 4:31–38)
 - A. Spiritual Food (vv. 31–33)
 - B. Spiritual Harvest (vv. 34–35)
 - C. Spiritual Reward (vv. 36–38)

Speaking to be Understood
- III. A Community Transformed (John 4:39–42)
 - A. The Woman's Testimony (v. 39)
 - B. The Samaritans' Request (v. 40)
 - C. The People's Belief (vv. 41–42)

Drawn by a Friend's Words

Conclusion

- A. Women of Faith
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AhabAy-hab.

AssyriansUh-sear-e-unz.

GerizimGair-ih-zeem or Guh-rye-zim.

Messiah *Meh-sigh-uh*.

messianic *mess-ee-an-ick*.

Omri *Ahm-rye*.

Palestine *Pal-uh-stain*.

Samaritans *Suh-mare-uh-tunz*.

Sychar *Sigh-kar*.

Introduction

A. Unnamed but Not Unimportant

The American Midwest is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. Large acreage produces tremendous yields as farmers use state-of-the-art seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, and specialized equipment. Farming has grown to be so productive that only 2 percent of the American population needs to live and work on farms to feed the other 98 percent.

But those figures were reversed for most of history: before mechanization as a result of the industrial revolution, 98 percent of people lived on farms due to the labor-intensive nature of the work. It's no wonder, then, that agricultural contexts, references, parables, illustrations, etc., are encountered so often in the pages of the Bible. That was their world—a world foreign to the large majority of people living in industrialized countries today.

To grasp the truths of the Bible most fully, we need to step into that world. Why did Jesus decline a suggestion for lunch by speaking of sowing, reaping, and harvest? What connection did he see between fruit and eternal life? And what did all that have to do with an unnamed foreign woman with whom he had just spoken? Today's lesson answers those very questions.

B. Lesson Context

Fullest understanding of today's text requires some insight into the relationship between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day. When King Solomon died in about 930 BC, the nation of Israel split into two parts: the northern 10 tribes were then often referred to collectively as Israel, while the remaining tribes to the south were called Judah (example: Jeremiah 50:4).

King Omri of Israel built the city of Samaria to be his capital in about 875 BC (1 Kings 16:23–24). He ruled from Samaria as did his infamous son Ahab (16:29), establishing the city as a lasting site. Both kings aroused God's ire because of their idolatrous religious practices (16:25, 33).

Ignoring warnings of the prophets led to judgment (2 Kings 17:13). The ultimate form of that judgment came when the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel about 722 BC (17:5–18). Many Israelites were exiled, and outsiders were brought in to resettle the land (17:24).

Israelites who were not taken into exile were left impoverished and without clear identity for many years.

Eventually, the resulting mixture of people came to be known as Samaritans. They developed a religion that accepted the five books of Moses but did not recognize the other books that make up the Old Testament. When Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Jerusalem temple destroyed in 586 BC, the Jews refused (Ezra 4:1–5). This angered the Samaritans, and we see some of this anger come out when Nehemiah began to rebuild the city walls (Nehemiah 4:1, 2).

About a century before Christ, a ruler of Judea destroyed the Samaritans' rival temple on Mount Gerizim. This and other things caused deep animosity between Samaritans and Jews. For the Jews of Jesus' time, Samaritans were not quite Gentiles but were definitely not Jews either (see Matthew 10:5; note the attempt to discredit Jesus in John 8:48).

Our lesson begins after Jesus and a Samaritan woman discussed her marriage situation (John 4:16–18). Jesus' knowledge of her personal life astounded her. For this reason, she addressed him as a prophet (4:19). She changed the subject to the less personal but quite controversial topic of the proper site for worship. Jesus' answer cut through this temple-location controversy to get to the heart of worship: spiritual surrender to the Lord (4:23–24). Such truth telling had opened the woman to discuss matters of the heart as today's text opens.

I. A Woman's Declaration

(JOHN 4:25–30)

A. Messiah Revealed (vv. 25–26)

25. The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Both Jews and Samaritans looked for the *Messiah*, or *Christ*; these Hebrew and Greek words both mean "anointed one." The Jews believed he would be a national leader who would free them from foreign oppression, based on expectations tied to King David (2 Samuel 7:12–16). Because Samaritans held only the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy as Scripture, they did not share any such expectation. Instead, they emphasized the Messiah's role as a teaching prophet who would *explain ... everything* and bring the people back to true faith, reminiscent of Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:15–18).

26. Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

Jesus did not seek to set the woman straight regarding whether the Jewish or the Samaritan understanding of the Christ was correct. Instead of laying out every Scripture regarding himself (something he would do after the resurrection; see Luke 24:25–27), Jesus simply claimed to be the one she was waiting to meet.

The woman had already affirmed Jesus to be a prophet. Her reaction to his escalating claim to be *the* longed-for Messiah is delayed until John 4:28–29, below.

B. Disciples Startled (v. 27)

27. Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

The *disciples* returned just then, having come from the village with food (John 4:8). The author, John, was one of these men, so he had firsthand knowledge of the group's reactions. They *were surprised*, but were not bold enough to ask him *What* or *Why*. Their timidity contrasts with the woman's own insistence on asking Jesus questions (4:9, 11–12).

C. City Challenged (vv. 28–30)

28. Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,

The woman's abandonment of *her water jar*—representing the errand that brought her in contact with Jesus in the first place—to return to *the town* suggests a hurried, excited departure. In initiating conversation with *the people* there, she cast aside any cultural restraints from doing so. Any shame at being an adulteress was overcome. She had to spread the news.

What Do You Think?

What "baggage" do you need to leave behind so that your witness for Christ is not impeded?

Digging Deeper

In what ways do the things of Matthew 4:20–22; Mark 1:20; 10:28; Hebrews 12:1; etc., differ from one another in terms of how, when, and what to leave them behind?

29. "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

Her straightforward message has two parts. First, she gave evidence that Jesus was something more than an ordinary man.

Second, she proposed, in the form of a question, a tentative conclusion to that evidence. In wondering whether Jesus might be *the Messiah*, the woman challenged others to *come* and investigate for themselves.

30. They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

The woman's testimony intrigued the people enough so that they wanted to investigate her claims personally. She was a disreputable person in this community, but they could not ignore her earnest and fascinating testimony. If the man of whom she spoke truly was the Messiah, they wouldn't want to miss a chance to meet him and hear his teaching.

II. A Crop Prepared

(JOHN 4:31–38)

A. Spiritual Food (vv. 31–33)

31. Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."

The *disciples* either mentally dismissed the woman as being unimportant or simply moved on to what they thought was a more pressing task: lunch. Perhaps they themselves were hungry and wanted Jesus to begin the meal.

32. But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."

Jesus' cryptic statement forms something of a parallel to the "living water" he offered to the woman earlier (John 4:10). It also foreshadows Jesus' coming self-description as "the bread of life" and "living bread" (6:48–51).

33. Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

The confused *disciples* did not detect his reference to spiritual rather than physical food. And once again, they did not ask Jesus the question that was on their minds. Instead, they spoke to *each other* (compare Matthew 16:5–12).

B. Spiritual Harvest (vv. 34–35)

34. “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

A theme of the book of John is that Jesus had been sent by the Father with a mission *to finish* (also John 5:36; 17:4). At the heart of this work was bringing people to faith in Jesus (6:29). Knowing of the disciples’ confusion, *Jesus* began explaining: his *food* was spiritual in nature. Doing the work of *him who sent* Jesus (5:19) was the great sustenance for his soul. While the disciples had been away in pursuit of food for the body (4:8), Jesus had been busy ministering to an open-minded woman. Doing so was what energized him.

35a. Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’?

Jesus began to apply an illustration or metaphor by describing a typical agricultural timeframe. His disciples are well aware that crops are ready to *harvest* following the sowing of *four months* earlier.

35b. I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.

This verse is one of the great missionary mandates in all of Scripture. The time for *harvest* is not future! The time for evangelism, the harvest of souls, is now! The *fields* Jesus wanted the disciples to see were not plots of wheat or barley, but of people. We might imagine that as Jesus spoke he pointed to the people coming toward him from the city (John 4:30, above).

For a field to be *ripe* means the heads of grain have turned from green to a light-brown color. This indicates the grain is fully mature. When it comes to sharing the gospel, there is no time to waste. As on that auspicious day in Samaria, so too are fields ripe and awaiting harvest today. Some of the disciples had been told previously that they would “fish for people” (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17); now they hear, in effect, that they will be farmers of people as well!

C. Spiritual Reward (vv. 36–38)

36. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.

In the Palestine of Jesus’ day and before, farming involved intensive labor from people and animals. Field laborers prepared the soil, sowed seed, watered, and weeded. When harvest (reaping) time came, different persons might cut the grain stalks, bundle the sheaves, thresh the grain, and winnow the chaff in larger operations.

In evangelism as in farming, there is sowing and reaping (compare Matthew 13:1–9, 18–30). The gospel must be shared (sowed) for faith to bear *crop* (be ready to reap). The result is a crop of believing persons (see 1 Corinthians 3:6). The goal is not a full granary, but a full Heaven—full of saved souls, those who have *eternal life*.

The workers are rewarded with satisfaction for productive work. They will *be glad together*, both now and in the hereafter (see Luke 15:3–32; compare Galatians 6:7–9).

37. Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true.

Jesus quoted a traditional *saying*. Reaping requires previous work: sowing. If no seeds are planted, there will be nothing to harvest. Though the disciples didn't realize it quite yet, the moment to reap was swiftly approaching (see John 4:39–42, below).

What Do You Think?

Which skill do you need most to work on: sowing or reaping? How will you do that?

Digging Deeper

How does 1 Corinthians 3:6–9 influence your thoughts in this regard?

38. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

This verse has a sense of climax for God's plan to fashion a people according to his will. Prophets had been sent to call people to repentance, the most recent being John the Baptist (see Mark 1:4; Acts 13:24). Moses' testimony recorded in the law had sown seeds among the Samaritans. Jesus himself further prepared the heart of the Samaritan woman. Little did Jesus' followers know at the time that they were being trained to fulfill the coming Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20).

SPEAKING TO BE UNDERSTOOD

I grew up in the city. But my first ministry was to a small town in Iowa. Because I wanted to minister effectively, I had to gain a basic understanding of farming life. This involved learning a new vocabulary, almost a new language.

I knew what corn and beans looked like when they came out of a can. But it was a different matter to see what they looked like in a vast field and to be able to talk about that competently. When preaching and teaching, it was helpful to translate my theological language into terms more relevant to the people.

When Jesus spoke of a ripe spiritual crop, his audience understood him easily. He spoke their language. As we bring the gospel to the unbelieving world, we may sometimes unwittingly speak in “Christian-ese,” a language that has no meaning outside of our own “town ... on an hill” (Matthew 5:14). How can you change your “town” language to enhance your witness to a “farming” world?

—C. R. B.

III. A Community Transformed

(JOHN 4:39–42)

A. The Woman's Testimony (v. 39)

39. Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.”

The idea of testimony leading to faith is a central pattern in the Gospel of John (see John 1:7). Its author desires to testify about Jesus and bring readers to faith (21:24). Jesus' inspired words and miraculous works are testifiers themselves—that he is the one sent by the Father, the

Messiah both the Jews and the Samaritans have been looking for (see 5:36). All this is ultimately reflected in the book's purpose statement, found in John 20:30–31.

The episode at hand is an integral part of this intent. The Samaritan woman's acceptance that Jesus had supernatural knowledge of details of her life brought her to trust him and share her testimony with others. The result was that many *believed in him*, accepting that he was God's promised Messiah.

The triggers that lead to faith are different for each person. We want to expect that people will believe when they hear a clear, simple presentation of the gospel—and this does indeed happen. But other approaches may be used too. A dramatic life experience may drive people to find God. The story of a friend whose heart was changed can be a powerful motivation to believe.

What Do You Think?

How might you discern situations that call for personal testimony over a logic- or evidence-based presentation of the gospel (John 14:11; Acts 17:2; etc.), and vice versa?

Digging Deeper

What other Scripture passages are helpful in making this distinction?

B. The Samaritans' Request (v. 40)

40. So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days.

Given the cultural context, it is surprising that *Samaritans* would ask a Jew to visit with them (see Lesson Context; compare John 4:9b; Luke 9:51–53). This speaks to the powerful impact Jesus has already had in this brief encounter.

What Do You Think?

What, from your personal experience, can you teach a fellow believer about crossing boundaries with the gospel?

Digging Deeper

From best to worst, how would you rank-order your skills at reaching across the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and nationality?

C. The People's Belief (vv. 41–42)

41–42. 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."

For some of the Samaritans, the woman's testimony was enough for them to believe (John 4:39, above). Now we read that *because of his words* belief also came to *many more*. These particular villagers did not discount the woman's testimony, but they needed more—they needed their own experience (compare and contrast 20:25). Beyond the small group of the disciples (2:11), these Samaritans stand as the first community in the Gospel of John who accept Jesus as the Christ. (John 2:23 speaks of many who "believed in his name" in Jerusalem, but that was not a close-knit community like this one.)

The concept of Christ was discussed earlier (see John 4:25, above). That marked an escalation in the woman's faith, and now the phrase *Savior of the world* marks an escalation for the entire community. Whereas their messianic expectations had focused thus far on what the Christ would do for Samaritans, they had come to grasp that Jesus had come for much more than just Samaritans. He came not merely to teach about right worship or to restore Samaria; he came to save the world (John 3:16–17).

What Do You Think?

Which aspects of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan can and should you use in your interactions with unbelievers? Explain.

Digging Deeper

Which aspects should you not use? Why?

DRAWN BY A FRIEND'S WORDS

In his early adulthood, one of my grandfathers was a functioning alcoholic. He worked all week, but when Saturday came, he got drunk. Grandpa was a mean drunk, willing to fight anyone. One day a friend came by and said, "You ought to go down to the church. The preacher can quote more Scripture than you can imagine."

His friend's challenge struck a chord in Grandpa's heart. He went to the meeting, and he turned to Christ. Life changed for Grandpa and his family. Alcohol was no longer a part of their home. The ripples of this faithful decision are still seen throughout our family.

The Samaritan woman's testimony caused waves in her community. She aroused their curiosity sufficiently that they went to hear Jesus. His words caused them to believe in him. When the story of your life is told, how many people will be able to say that they sought Jesus because of your testimony?

—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Women of Faith

The story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well serves several purposes in the book of John. It teaches the spiritual nature of true worship (John 4:23–24). It clarifies the identity of Jesus as the chosen Messiah, or Christ, from God (4:25–26). It portrays Jesus as fearlessly moving beyond the boundaries of orthodox Judaism to an awkward encounter with a Samaritan (4:9). And it demonstrates the influence a person of conviction and urgency can have when talking to others about Jesus (4:28–30, 39). She was both a part of the harvest and a farmer-sower. Her work contributed to a fruitful harvest, indeed!

Many who read the Gospel of John can identify with her: a forlorn, rejected person, ostracized by her community. A woman who came to get water at a time of day when she knew others wouldn't be there—only to encounter Jesus and be transformed. The village's object of derision became the mouthpiece of the Lord to bring others to faith.

It would be nice to know the name of the Samaritan woman. It makes us wonder about other women of faith whose names are lost to history. Many of them have spoken out to bring others to faith. Many taught their sons and daughters to pray. Many read Scripture to their children to plant seeds of faith. Some even have lived with unbelieving husbands who finally submitted to Christ as Lord after years of patient prayer by their wives.

Their names may be unknown to us, but they are not unknown to God. He has written their names “in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27). Someday in Heaven, we may be able to look into that book and learn the Samaritan woman’s name, the name of one whose testimony changed her community forever. Will yours?

B. Prayer

Father, give us the boldness of the Samaritan woman in sharing the good news about Jesus! It is in his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember¹

¹ Boatman, C. R., Krause, M. S., Taylor, M. A., & Nickelson, R. L. (2021). [Called to Testify](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, & M. K. Williams (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2020–2021* (Vol. 27, pp. 193–199). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.