

March 19 Lesson 3 (NIV)

## Jesus Talks with a Samaritan

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 44:1–8

Background Scripture: John 4:1–42

John 4:7–15, 28–30, 39–41

<sup>7</sup> When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

<sup>9</sup> 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.)

<sup>10</sup> 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.”

<sup>11</sup> “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

<sup>13</sup> Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them 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 won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

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

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

### Key Text

*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

# Jesus Calls Us

## Unit 1: Called From the Margins of Society

Lessons 1–4

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*Much More*

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#### How to Say It

Askar *Haz*-kar.

Ebal *Ee*-bull.

Gerizim *Gair*-ih-zeem

or Guh-*rye*-zim.

HyrcanusHehr-*cayn*-uhs.

ManassehMuh-*nass*-uh.

Pentateuch *Pen*-ta-teuk.

SamariaSuh-*mare*-ee-uh.

Sychar *Sigh*-kar.

syncretisticsihng-*creh*-tis-tihk.

## Introduction

### A. The “Wrong” Neighborhood

As a small child, I lived in a mobile home park characterized by ethnic diversity and lower-income families. When I learned that my friends who lived across the street from the mobile home park were not allowed to come over and play with me, I was hurt and embarrassed. Apparently I lived in the “wrong” neighborhood.

Yet I remember ministers, Sunday school teachers, and youth ministers. They would take me to church services, out to eat, to baseball games, and even to a rodeo! I do not know where I would be today if they hadn’t disregarded social barriers in order to invest time in a kid like me.

Today I’m humbled at the opportunity to spread the gospel to other communities and individuals who might otherwise be barred from meeting Jesus. In today’s text Jesus himself modeled breaking barriers in ministry. What would be the impact of reaching into the “wrong” neighborhood?

### B. Lesson Context

The Gospel of John was written later than those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, probably in the AD 80s or 90s. The Apostle John likely wrote his Gospel from Ephesus, according to long-held church tradition. John’s authorship is established primarily by his identification as the beloved disciple (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20, 24; see lessons 7 and 8).

As our text in John 4 begins, Jesus and his disciples had left Judea and were heading to Galilee (John 4:3), where he made the headquarters of his ministry (Matthew 4:13–16). For this journey, Jesus chose not to take one of two longer routes that would allow him to avoid Samaria (John 4:4), as some other Jews would do (compare and contrast Luke 9:51–53; 17:11). Samaria was the central region of what had been the kingdom of Israel, with Judea to the south and Galilee to the north. Travel between Jerusalem and the region of Galilee would take about three days on the reliable Roman roads that ran through Samaria.

## I. The Stranger

(John 4:7–15)

### A. Physical Need (vv. 7–9)

**7. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”**

At the sixth hour (noon), Jesus came to this well that was known to have belonged to Jacob (John 4:5–6, not in our printed text; see commentary on 4:12, below). It was uncommon for anyone to be at the well at that hour, as the day was at its hottest. From ancient times, women journeyed *to draw water* as a group in the morning or the evening (example: Genesis 24:11; contrast 29:7). A *Samaritan woman* came alone, likely indicating she was outcast from her

community, especially from other women (consider John 4:16–18, not in our printed text). *Will you give me a drink* does not seem an unusual request at a well. But John 4:9 (below) reveals several levels on which this was a very surprising request.

**8. (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)**

Jesus and *his disciples* sometimes carried funds to buy what they needed along the way (example: John 13:29), though other times they depended on other means for their sustenance (examples: Matthew 10:9; Mark 6:8; Luke 10:4). This journey took them through Samaria, specifically *the town* Sychar (John 4:5, not in our printed text; see commentary on 4:28, below). Ancient Jewish tradition suggests that the disciples would have been careful about ritual purity and social boundaries when procuring *food* from Samaritans. Ordinarily they would not accept food as a gift from Samaritans, but allowed for the need to buy from Samaritans.

**9a. The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”**

The reasons Jesus’ request was surprising are given here (see commentary on John 4:7, above). One was a gender issue. Women were often viewed as “less than” by men in the ancient Roman world. For a Jewish man, this would be especially true for any non-Jewish woman. Samaritan women were doubly stigmatized because of the animosity between Judah and Samaria. (On the barriers between Jews and Samaritans, see commentary on 4:9b, below.)

Within this conversation, *the Samaritan woman* would be amazed that Jesus knew about her several marriages *and* the man she was living with at the time (John 4:16–19, not in our printed text). Both Jews and other Samaritans would consider this pattern suspicious, if not downright sinful. We do not know why she’d been married so many times. But the implication of living with a man she had not married suggests there were less than pure reasons for the ending of the other relationships.

**9b. (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)**

The antagonism between *Jews* and *Samaritans* dated back over 700 years, to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel. The 10 tribes of Israel living there were taken captive in 722 BC, including the people living in the region called Samaria (2 Kings 17:1–6). The Assyrians habitually moved conquered people around the empire, so some Israelites remained while many foreign people settled in the land. When Israelites mingled with foreign peoples, the result was a syncretistic religion in which the Lord was worshipped in addition to other gods (17:24–33, 41).

All this religious turmoil resulted in a Samaritan religion that revered only the books of Moses (the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch). Samaritans excluded any history, poetry, or prophecy that was written later. The Samaritans believed that God should be worshipped on Mount Gerizim (see Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12), *not* in Jerusalem. They also expected a Messiah like Moses, not David (see John 4:29, below).

The Samaritans opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s temple and the city walls following the exiled Jews’ three waves of return that began in 538 BC (Ezra 4:8–24; Nehemiah 4:1–2). Later, the Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37–100) recorded that the Samaritans were not forced to devote their place of worship to Jupiter (as the Samaritans claimed), but instead willingly did so between 175 and 164 BC. Josephus’s account likely reflects more about his bias than any voluntary Samaritan complicity. John Hyrcanus (174–104 BC) was the high priest and ruler in Judea who briefly achieved Jewish independence by throwing off Syria and creating an alliance with Rome. In his leadership of the Jewish people, Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan place of

worship on Mount Gerizim (112/111 BC). Josephus also notes that between AD 6 and 9, Samaritans attempted to defile the temple in Jerusalem during Passover by sneaking in and scattering dead men's bones on the temple grounds (compare Leviticus 21:1, 11; Numbers 5:2; 9:6–7; 19:13).

Even with all this historic hostility (examples: Hosea 7:1; 8:5–6) continuing in Jesus' lifetime (example: Luke 9:51–54), he typically did not avoid Samaritans and even spoke well of them (10:30–37; 17:11–19; contrast Matthew 10:5). This tendency is in keeping with Jesus' habit of associating himself with outcasts and sinners (Mark 2:15–17; Luke 7:36–39). And even more, Jesus never treated people as their stereotypes—in this case, a Samaritan and a woman. He saw the person before him and valued that person, no matter their circumstances.

## B. Spiritual Bounty (vv. 10–15)

**10. 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.”**

*The gift of God* refers to the Holy Spirit (compare John 7:38–39), consistent with other New Testament usage and nuance. Looking at Old Testament uses of flowing water and other near synonyms offers useful insight. This is fresh, flowing water as opposed to bitter or salty water (Numbers 5:18–27; Jeremiah 23:15; James 3:11)—or no water at all. Spiritually and physically, God provides good water for his people to live (compare Numbers 24:7; Psalm 36:9; Isaiah 49:10; Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13; Ezekiel 47:12).

This Samaritan woman, however, had no knowledge of this gift in a spiritual sense or of Jesus' true identity. Already in John's Gospel, Jesus has been identified as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), “God's Chosen One” (1:34), and “the Messiah ... the Christ” (1:41). But this knowledge was not widely accepted (1:9–11).

**11a. “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with**

*The woman* had not yet caught on that Jesus was speaking about spiritual truths rather than about physical realities. Jesus should need something *to draw with*, or else water would not come out of the well. One would take a bucket or jar and lower it down the well with a rope to access the water. She likely assumed Jesus had no way of drawing the water for himself, or else this Jewish man would not have spoken with the Samaritan woman.

**11b–12. “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 livestock?”**

*The well* itself had long been associated with *father Jacob*, who lived about 2,000 years prior to the encounter of today's text. Jacob had bought the land of Shechem, eventually deeding it to his son Joseph (Genesis 33:18–19; 48:22; Joshua 24:32), although no well was mentioned.

The Samaritans traced their lineage through Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. But because of the divergence of Israel's ten tribes from the southern two, collectively known as Judah, the Jews thought of Samaritans as foreigners (Luke 17:16–18). This well can still be visited today. It is over 100 feet *deep* and was possibly even deeper in Jesus' time. Even if Jesus had something with which to draw water, how could he possibly reach the *living water* at the bottom, which supplied the well?

Like the Jews, the Samaritans had great respect for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and the woman thought that Jesus could not be greater (see commentary on John 4:29, below; compare 8:52–58). This question presupposes a negative answer and might even be considered mocking. But based on her faith, the woman rightly questioned whether Jesus could be *greater than* the patriarchs.

**13–14. Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”**

*Thirst* is an apt metaphor for spiritual need. Just as any person or creature dies without the water they need, so too we die without the spiritual care we need. Psalm 42:1–2 pictures the soul panting for God as a deer pants for water. Isaiah depicts one who would “draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3; compare 55:1; 58:11). And Jesus states that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are blessed and will be filled (Matthew 5:6; compare John 6:35). *Welling up* suggests especially vital properties in the living, spiritual *water* Jesus referred to. We could give a formula here: *eternal life* comes only as a gift of the Father through accepting the invitation of Jesus and the daily work of the Spirit.

**15. 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.”**

The woman’s request demonstrated her confusion about Jesus’ words. She was in search of literal, physical *water* to meet her immediate needs. But even with her misunderstanding, she admirably continued her inquiry and search for understanding.

The dialogue in John 4:16–27 (not in our printed text) continued between Jesus and the woman. She rapidly progressed from considering Jesus to be a prophet to wondering if he might be someone even greater than that (see commentary on 4:29, below).

## II. The Promised One

(John 4:28–30, 39–41)

### A. Question of Identity (vv. 28–30)

**28a. Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town**

*Leaving her water jar* behind indicated that *the woman* left in a rush (see commentary on John 4:30, below). *The town*, Sychar, sat in proximity to both Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (see commentary on 4:9b, above). Its only mention by name occurs in John 4:5 (not in our printed text). Though its location is unclear, there is reason to associate it with the modern village Askar. The village’s proximity to Jacob’s well—about one-half mile—as well as to both mountains lends credence to this supposition (see commentary on 4:11b–12, above). The name Sychar might also indicate a close relationship with Shechem, a better-known settlement in the same area. First mentioned as Abram entered Canaan (Genesis 12:6–7), the land became part of Ephraimite territory in northern Palestine (Joshua 17:8–10).

**28b–29a. and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.**

The woman’s invitation to *Come, see* is reminiscent of Jesus’ invitation when he called his first followers in John 1:39. Describing Jesus’ knowing about her marriages and current living situation

as having *told her everything* that she *ever did* reveals something about the culture this woman was living in. Her life's summary (at least in her mind, and likely in the mind of her community as well) could be told in terms of the men she had associated with (see John 4:16–18, not in our printed text). Instead of using this information to shame her, Jesus used it to further her understanding regarding his identity. He was at least a prophet (4:19), and even more (see commentary on 4:29b, below).

In confirming Jesus' accurate and supernatural knowledge of her life story, the woman's testimony reveals that she was fully impressed by him. Given the culture, one would not expect a woman to go into town and address the public the way she did. Her reputation would seem to make her a bad witness—not someone who would be taken seriously (compare Luke 7:36–50; see commentary on John 4:30, below).

### **29b. “Could this be the Messiah?”**

The woman anticipated a positive response (contrast John 4:12, above), partly based on Jesus' own assertion that he is *the Messiah* (4:25–26, not in our printed text). The Samaritan expectations of the Christ differed from Jewish expectations because of their adherence only to the first five books of the Old Testament (see Lesson Context; commentary on 4:9b, above). Jesus fulfilled prophetic and kingly expectations, though not in the way either Samaritans or Jews had imagined (examples: 6:15, 41–42; 7:25–27, 52; Acts 1:6).

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

One cannot help but notice the contrast between the disciples who went into the town to bring back food and this woman who brought *out* the people *of the town* to meet the Christ.

## **B. Revelation of Identity (vv. 39–41)**

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

In Jesus' ministry, people living on the margins sometimes made the biggest influence on their communities (examples: Matthew 9:9–13; Luke 19:1–10). This ostracized woman turned evangelist reached out to her community, which resulted in *many of the Samaritans from that town* believing that Jesus was the Christ (see commentary on John 4:29, above). Significantly, her testimony was that Jesus *told me everything I ever did*—a substantial claim when looking for a prophetic Christ.

### **40–41. 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.**

Staying with *the Samaritans* was a significant break in Jewish custom (see commentary on John 4:9b, above). As a result of Jesus' time and preaching the gospel in Sychar (see commentary on 4:28a, above), *many more* believed. As the Samaritans encountered Jesus for themselves, they confessed that Jesus really is “the Savior of the world” (4:42, not in our printed text).

One cannot help but ponder on how large the community of faith grew in Sychar. In Acts 8:4–25, the gospel spread in the land of Samaria through the work of Philip the evangelist, the groundwork for that success undoubtedly prepared by events in today's text.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Every Neighborhood**

Jesus' earthly ministry did not include limits based on typical human barriers. His encounter with the Samaritan woman is a prime example. In Jesus' presence, many of the boundaries that we have put up or that others have put up around us disappear (Romans 3:22; 10:12; Galatians 3:28–29; Ephesians 2:11–22; contrast 5:11; 1 Timothy 4:7; 2 Timothy 3:1–5; Titus 3:10). As we find our identity in Jesus, we can become the conduit of mercy and grace to those we encounter. The living water Jesus gives us is available now and will continue to well up in us until we reach the age to come. The gift we find in Jesus is not a stagnant thing; it moves us from old to new, death to life, lost to found, enslaved to free; it means we are saved!

### **B. Prayer**

Father, forgive us for the times when we have allowed barriers to prevent us from inviting others to see you. Help us to see those around us the way that you see them; help us demonstrate your love and holiness to them. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

Take *every* opportunity to offer Jesus' living water.<sup>1</sup>

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