

*John 4:4–26, 39–42 (CEB)*

<sup>4</sup>Jesus had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup>He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob’s well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me some water to drink.” <sup>8</sup>His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food.

<sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman asked, “Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” (Jews and Samaritans didn’t associate with each other.)

<sup>10</sup>Jesus responded, “If you recognized God’s gift and who is saying to you, ‘Give me some water to drink,’ you would be asking him and he would give you living water.”

<sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, you don’t have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water? <sup>12</sup>You aren’t greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did 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 from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life.”

<sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!”

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Go, get your husband, and come back here.”

<sup>17</sup>The woman replied, “I don’t have a husband.”

“You are right to say, ‘I don’t have a husband,’” Jesus answered. <sup>18</sup>“You’ve had five husbands, and the man you are with now isn’t your husband. You’ve spoken the truth.”

<sup>19</sup>The woman said, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you and your people say that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem.”

<sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you and your people will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You and your people worship what you don’t know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But the time is coming—and is here!—when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. The Father looks for those who worship him this way. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth.”

<sup>25</sup>The woman said, “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us.”

<sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, “I Am—the one who speaks with you.”

<sup>39</sup>Many Samaritans in that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s word when she testified, “He told me everything I’ve ever done.” <sup>40</sup>So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup>Many more believed because of his word, <sup>42</sup>and they said to the woman, “We no longer believe because of what you said, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this one is truly the savior of the world.”

*An outcast bears the Word and is saved. But that is not the end of this story.*

In this series, we are looking at different stories that reveal something of what it means to be saved. Here’s a related question: For what are we saved? Merely for our own sake?

*At the well*

Traveling through Samaria, Jesus comes to a well in the middle of the day. A woman is there. At the well at noon? Alone? Something is wrong with this picture. Women went to the well in the cool of the morning or the evening, but not at noon. Yet, there she is.

Though no one outside the village would know why the woman is there at noon, Jesus knows. But he soon fills the woman’s head with questions of her own. Jesus asks her for water, though Jews avoided Samaritans and would never drink from their cup or eat from

their plate. And he is a man. It was very improper for a Jewish man to be seen alone with any woman and unthinkable that he should speak with her. All this surely set her head spinning. We quickly see that there is something very odd going on. N. T. Wright elaborates on this:

For a start, Jesus was known already as a holy man, leading a movement to bring Israel back to God. (John's readers know that he is more than that, but we must learn to think with the minds of his followers at the time.) In that culture, many devout Jewish men would not have allowed themselves to be alone with a woman. If it was unavoidable that they should be, they would certainly not have entered into conversation with her. The risk, they would have thought, was too high—risk of impurity, risk of gossip, risk ultimately of being drawn into immorality. And yet Jesus is talking to this woman. Later in the chapter John shows how startled the disciples were by this (4:27).

Second, the woman is of course a Samaritan. Ever since some of the Jewish exiles had come back from Babylon, to find that the central section of their ancient territory was occupied by a group who claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham, and who opposed their return, there had been constant trouble. Sometimes it had broken out into actual skirmishes, with bloodshed and murder. But mostly it was simply a matter of not mixing. The Jews wouldn't have anything to do with the Samaritans. They would, especially, not share eating and drinking vessels with them. And yet Jesus is asking this woman for a drink.

Third, compounding both of these problems, the woman is obviously a bad character. The normal time for women to visit the well, set as it was at some distance from the town, would be at a cooler time of day, most likely first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. This woman has come at the time when she is least likely to meet anyone—at least, anyone who knows her, her past and her immoral lifestyle. The last thing she would want would be to rub shoulders with the other women of the town, and they would feel the same about her. Jesus will presently show that he knows all about this. And yet he engages her in conversation—conversation with a teasing, double-meaning flavor to it.<sup>1</sup>

Then Jesus begins to talk with her about some kind of water that forever banishes thirst and has something to with eternal life. Who could blame her for focusing on the straight-forward possibility of never having to carry water from the well again.

Next, we learn why she is there at mid-day when no one else comes to the well. She has had five husbands and is currently living with a man to whom she is not even married. She comes at noon to avoid the smirks and snickers of the other women in the village. She lives a lonely life, socially cut-off in a world driven by family and community. She is, in a word, an outcast.

Not surprisingly, she quickly gets over her astonishment that Jesus knows these things about her and tries to change the subject. Isn't that so like us all. When we get close to the heart of the matter, when we begin talking about something that makes us uncomfortable, we try to shift the conversation elsewhere.

The woman begins to talk about worship, especially the "where" of worship. I guess that shouldn't surprise us either. We can get pretty caught up in the importance of this spot of land or that one, in one building or another. Certainly, Jesus' fellow Jews were often so focused on the importance of "The Land," that they failed to see God's working in all the world. So, Jesus tries to help her see that worship is not about the "where" but the "who." What matters is not where the woman worships, on the mountain or in Jerusalem, but that she worship the one true God. And as we learn in John's gospel, that one true God is revealed fully only in Jesus Christ.

The obvious question is what or whom do you and I worship? N.T. Wright is on the mark when he says that we become like what we worship. Worship money and we become

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (40–41). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

greedy. Worship sex and we become lustful. But worship the LORD God and we become Christlike. And as the story proceeds, the woman and many of her fellow Samaritans come to embrace Jesus as the “who.” Indeed, it is Samaritans, not Jews, who proclaim Jesus to be not merely the Messiah but to be the “Savior of the world” (4:42).

#### *Saved for?*

John’s gospel is built on a series of encounters. Person after person meets Jesus and the questions are always the same: Who is Jesus and what is their response? Some believe<sup>2</sup> and some don’t.

The Samaritan woman believes. We don’t really know why. Is it Jesus’ knowing things he can’t know? Or does she see in Jesus, the Word? Regardless, she goes and tells others her good news, and they believe. Her salvation is not merely for her sake, but for the sake of her neighbors, even the whole world.

Indeed, these Samaritans are so excited that they ask Jesus to stick around and he does, for two days, during which time “many more believed because of his word” (4:41). No longer is their believing the result of the woman’s testimony, but because of what they hear for themselves. Bear in mind that the woman has saved no one; that is God’s work, using her testimony.

Because these people were Samaritans, despised by the Jews, it is easy for us to grasp that when Jesus offers this woman new life, he is offering it to all. Though Jesus is a Jew, his vocation is for the whole world. This story echoes John the Baptist’s exclamation when he sees Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29). In Christ,

we discover the God whom we are to worship. And it is in Jesus that some Samaritans discovered the God they worshipped.

#### Does Jesus say “I am he” or “I am”?

In verse 25 of the story of the Samaritan woman, you’ll see that she ends the conversation about worship with a sort of “we’ll see.” The Messiah will come someday, she says, and answer all these questions. In response, Jesus says, in the NRSV and NIV translations, “I am he,” staking claim to messiahship. Yet the Greek doesn’t say, “I am he,” it says “I am” (*ego eimi*). The CEB translators chose to translate the Greek simply as “I am,” even going so far as to capitalize the “am.”

This phrase (*ego eimi*) comes up so often in John’s gospel that it is hard to believe that John wants us to see nothing more than self-identification here. “I am” is the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. God is the great I AM. When Jesus responds, “*ego eimi*,” it is a bold connection with the divine name. Later in the gospel, when arresting officers ask Jesus whether he is Jesus of Nazareth, he again responds “*ego eimi*” – and everyone falls to the ground. They understand the larger meaning of Jesus’ response.

#### *Saved for what?*

One of the most striking features of today’s story is that it is Samaritans who are the first to really “get it”.

They believe his word; they believe him. Not his astounding feats, to which the Jewish crowds have been drawn, but to Jesus’ words.

The Samaritans have heard and believed and, hence, understood that Jesus is not merely a Jewish Messiah, but the “Savior of the world,” echoing Jesus’ own words to Nicodemus: “For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (3:17).

Though so many in John’s gospel can’t see the truth about Jesus, some do. Unbelief need not be a permanent disease. There is a cure.

As Paul wrote to the Romans, “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile [or Samaritan!] – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ (Romans 10:12-13).

<sup>2</sup>The word “believe (believed/believing)” is used in John nearly 100 times! It translates the Greek verb form of the word “faith/*pistis*.” It would be better if we said “faithing,” but we’ve lost the verb form of “faith” in the English language, so we use “believing” instead. In John, the noun “faith” is never used, the emphasis is completely on the action – trusting in, believing in, Jesus.

## The Samaritans

(from the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*)

The name "Samaritans" originally was identified with the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 17:29). When the Assyrians conquered Israel and exiled 27,290 Israelites, a "remnant of Israel" remained in the land. Assyrian captives from distant places also settled there (2 Kings 17:24). This led to the intermarriage of some, though not all, Jews with Gentiles and to widespread worship of foreign gods. By the time the Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, Ezra and Nehemiah refused to let the Samaritans share in the experience (Ezra 4:1-3; Neh. 4:7). The old antagonism between Israel to the north and Judah to the south intensified the quarrel.

The Jewish inhabitants of Samaria identified Mount Gerizim as the chosen place of God and the only center of worship, calling it the "navel of the earth" because of a tradition that Adam sacrificed there. Their Scriptures were limited to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Moses was regarded as the only prophet and intercessor in the final judgment. They also believed that 6,000 years after creation, a Restorer would arise and would live on earth for 110 years. On the judgment day the righteous would be resurrected in paradise and the wicked roasted in eternal fire.

In the days of Christ, the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was greatly strained (Luke 9:52-54; 10:25-37; 17:11-19; John 8:48). The animosity was so great that the Jews bypassed Samaria as they traveled between Galilee and Judea. They went an extra distance through the barren land of Perea on the eastern side of the Jordan to avoid going through Samaria. Yet Jesus rebuked His disciples for their hostility to the Samaritans (Luke 9:55-56), healed a Samaritan leper (Luke 17:16), honored a Samaritan for his neighborliness (Luke 10:30-37), praised a Samaritan for his gratitude (Luke 17:11-18), asked a drink of a Samaritan woman (John 4:7), and preached to the Samaritans (John 4:40-42). Then in Acts 1:8 Jesus challenged His disciples to witness in Samaria. Philip, a deacon, opened a mission in Samaria (Acts 8:5).

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In her commentary in *The New Interpreters Bible*, Gail O'Day points out that the story of the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus is a lengthy and skillfully written narrative. We are drawn into the story. We are surprised when we learn of the five husbands. We can imagine ourselves having trouble understanding Jesus. We can ask ourselves whether we would respond as she did – by believing. You might read the entire story again, 4:1-42. Where can you find yourself in this story? Try to imagine yourself as the woman or even the disciples, who seem blind to what is happening. What if someone came to your home telling you stories about a man who knows things he can't possibly know? Would you respond like the Samaritan villagers? God has given us these richly textured stories so that we can step within them, not try to reduce them to a teaching point or a few timeless nuggets. What does this story say to you about salvation?
2. We tend to be quite skilled at erecting boundaries around groups of people. Like the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, the shock (at least to the Jews) in this story is built on the fact that it is the hated Samaritans, of all people, who are the first to flock to Jesus, proclaiming him "Savior of the world." This story tears down such ethnic boundaries. It also tears down barriers between men and women. Jesus doesn't care that he is speaking to a woman alone – or perhaps he has picked her for that very reason. In the gospels, you can always count on Jesus' inviting in the people we'd think would be the last ones to be invited. What lines do we draw? What lines have you seen taken down in your lifetime? What lines have you seen erected? Has there been a time when you were on the outside, part of the out-group rather than the in-group? What do you think Jesus would say about our unending need to put people in groups?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, John 5:1-18</b> Jesus heals a crippled man on the Sabbath. What does this story reveal about Jesus? About God? Note that “the Jews” is John’s way of referring to the Jewish leaders, not to all Jews. After all, Jesus was Jewish.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, John 6:22-71</b> Jesus takes the OT imagery of God’s feeding his people and reshapes it around himself. It will be helpful to read Exodus 16. Why do people reject Jesus? He is even abandoned by some of his followers!</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Luke 10:25-37</b> Jesus tells a parable about a good Samaritan.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Luke 17:11-18</b> Jesus heals a Samaritan leper.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Romans 15:7-13</b> The Christ whom we worship is the hope of all the nations.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

