

# Living Water

## John 4:1-42

Jesus had spent a busy time in Jerusalem. He had gone there for the feast of Passover and had driven out the traders whom he found in the courts of the Temple. “Stop making my Father’s house a house of business!” (**John 2:13-16**)

While he had been there, he had performed some ‘signs’ and many people had started to believe in him (**John 2:17-22**). He made such an impression that one of the religious leaders came to Jesus and told him straight that he knew that he had come from God – the ‘signs’ clearly proved that (**John 3:1-21**).

A very useful conversation followed and, although Nicodemus had originally come to him secretly, under cover of darkness, it seems like he did eventually believe in Jesus, as he and another formerly secret disciple broke their cover several years later when they asked Pilate for Jesus’ body and buried it in Joseph’s brand new tomb (**John 19:38-42**).

Leaving Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples had spent some time nearby and the disciples had baptised some people there. We don’t know exactly where they were based, but John the Baptist had moved about 30 miles north, from ‘Bethany beyond Jordan’ to Aenon near Salim, where there was deeper water. People told John that everyone was now going to Jesus, thinking that he would be concerned, but John just took the opportunity to point them to trusting in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God (**John 3:22-36**).

The word was getting around that this Jesus from Nazareth was becoming even more popular than John the Baptist, so Jesus just quietly moves away, back to Galilee. It’s about 65 miles as the crow flies from Jerusalem to Galilee. Their route took them through Samaria, near the present-day town of Nablus in the West Bank, about halfway to Galilee, and Jesus and the Twelve were walking all the way. No wonder that he needed a rest and sat down at the well while the disciples went on into the town to get some food! It was about midday, too, so pretty warm. Not the usual time for people to come and get their water. That would have been in the cool of the morning or evening (**John 4:1-6**).

Jews at the time would have vigorously avoided any contact with Samaritans, and many Jews would have taken a much longer route to get to Galilee, avoiding Samaria completely by taking the road to the east of the River Jordan. Samaritans weren’t real Jews, in spite of the fact that some of them tried to follow the Jewish faith. They were the descendants of foreigners who, generations earlier, had been ethnically cleansed from their own countries by the king of Assyria. They had been imported into Samaria to take the place of all the people of the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of ‘Israel’ who used to live in Samaria, but whom the Assyrian king had taken away into exile, never to be seen again. The history of this judgement from God is told in **2 Kings 17:22-41**, where we can also read how these incomers were ‘taught to serve the LORD’, though they still went on worshipping their idols as well.

So this Samaritan woman comes out of the town at midday to get her water. Morning and evening were the normal times to draw water, not in the heat of the day.<sup>1</sup> Many people think that she came at this time (and not in the cooler times of morning or evening) because she was living with a man she was not married to, and so would have been shunned by the other women of the town. Jesus knows her situation but still he talks with her and even asks her for a drink!

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<sup>1</sup> **Genesis 29:7**

She is an outsider, for two reasons. Firstly, her irregular lifestyle has estranged her from her neighbours, and secondly, simply by being a Samaritan, she is excluded from all aspects of Jewish life, though she evidently has some belief in the God of the Jews.

She knows all too well that, normally, no Jewish man would even speak with her and certainly would not ask a favour from her. If they knew her immoral lifestyle, that would be even worse. So she asks this Jew why he is even talking to her, let alone asking for her help. And she gets a surprising reply!

“If you only knew who I am – the one whom God has given to the world – you would be asking me for water; **living** water!” Does he mean water that is actively bubbling up from a spring, not just sitting at the bottom of this deep well? He doesn’t have anything to collect water with, so he can’t even get any from here, let alone from a spring. What is he talking about? Is he claiming to be someone better than Jacob, who owned this well hundreds of years ago?<sup>1</sup>

She even refers to Jacob as ‘**our** father’! Was she trying to imply that she was really descended from him and not from some foreign parentage? There were a **few** Jews who had intermarried with Samaritans, so it was just about possible, but really she was pushing it to suggest that both she and Jesus had a common ancestor!

Jesus doesn’t answer her question but goes on to talk about the **real** living water that he can give her. Once someone starts to drink that water, they never get really thirsty again, because the water inside them becomes a well itself! And not just a well with water sitting at the bottom of it, but one that has a never-ending spring, continually supplying life!

This sounds too good to be true, so the woman says ‘Yes, please! I would love to never be thirsty, and never need to keep coming back all this way to the well every day.’ She hasn’t got the point yet, but Jesus moves gently on, suggesting that she calls her husband. In a few moments, she has to face the fact that this man knows things about her life that only God could have shown him. He must be a prophet!

Quickly trying to change the subject from her disorderly sexual relationships, she tries posing a ‘religious’ question to this ‘man of God’: ‘What’s the right place to worship God? Like our forefathers, we Samaritans have always worshipped at nearby Mount Gerizim, but you Jews say Jerusalem is the correct place.’

Jesus doesn’t condemn her, but turns her question around and opens up the really important truth: It’s not a matter of finding the right place to worship, not here, not in Jerusalem. And he gives her a promise: she really **will** worship God as Father, and not just she alone; the ‘you’ is plural (we miss that in English, but it’s clear in the Greek). Jesus seems to be saying ‘Yes, a time is coming when you Samaritans will really know God as your Father and will worship him. At the moment, although you don’t really know him, you go through the motions of worshipping the one true God. We Jews know him and worship him.’

That sounds a bit harsh, doesn’t it? But Jesus follows it up with the hint of another promise: ‘Salvation is from the Jews.’ Again, we miss it in English, but the Greek doesn’t just say ‘from’, it says ‘out from’. Not just reserved for Jews, to be kept to themselves, but that it will flow out from the Jewish people.

Which is exactly what happened, of course! A few years later, after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and when the Holy Spirit was working in the early Church, the good news of the Kingdom of God went out from Jerusalem and started to reach the whole world.

<sup>1</sup> **Genesis 33:18-20, 48:21-22**

The province of Samaria was first in line and, sure enough, there were many there who believed in Jesus the Messiah when the message reached them. See **Acts 8**, especially **verses 1-17**, and then **verse 25**. Many of the towns and villages in the area heard and received the good news, but this town of Sychar, where this woman met Jesus at the well, was one of the main towns of the area and had a ‘head start’ on the others. They had already started to put their trust in him, as we read later in this chapter (**John 4:39-42**).

Getting back to the time at the well . . . Jesus begins to explain to the woman about the sort of worship that really counts with the Father. The ‘but’ at the beginning of **v.23** is significant: It’s not a case of **where** you worship, in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim! On the contrary, he says, right now the Father is actively looking for those who will worship him in spirit and in truth. *“An hour is coming and now is . . .”* In other words, it is just starting now, and she can be part of it, she too can worship the Father.

Just a moment, though! Throughout their conversation so far, Jesus has gone on referring to God as ‘the Father’. We may be accustomed to that name for him, but it was completely new for this Samaritan woman, and not just for Samaritans, either. The Jews worshipped God as the LORD, and there is no record in the Old Testament of anyone praying to God and addressing him as ‘Father’! Jesus knows him as his own Father and opens up the way for all (Jews, Samaritans – and everybody else!) to enter that same close relationship. As he is talking to her there, that ‘opening up’ still lies a little way in the future, through his own death and resurrection,<sup>1</sup> but he says, *“an hour is coming and now is . . .”*, inviting her to start now.

‘In spirit’ – in other words, from the depths of who she really is, not just in some form of religious observance, and that immediately means that it has to be genuine and real – ‘in truth’. There really is no other option, says Jesus, because God himself is spirit, not an idol!

Light begins to dawn for this woman! She only came to get some water, and now she is beginning to guess who this stranger might be, who has looked right into her life and has begun to open up the way for her to know God as her Father. Could this man possibly be the promised Anointed One, the Messiah? When he comes, he will tell us absolutely everything, just as this man is doing . . .

And Jesus makes a very simple statement: ‘That’s me, the one who is talking with you.’ Wow!

At this point, the disciples return from their shopping trip and the woman dashes back into the town, even leaving her water pot behind. She has some amazing news to share with everyone she knows – she thinks she may have met the Messiah! ‘Come and see him; he told me everything I ever did!’ And they don’t hang about; some of them start walking back to the well with her straight away . . .

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Meanwhile, the disciples try to persuade Jesus to eat. But he is so fulfilled by having had this conversation with the woman that he doesn’t feel hungry. Doing what the Father sent him to do, and completing it, has really sustained him. (We don’t even know whether he got that drink which he asked for!) But the disciples are mystified; they don’t understand yet.

This is still quite early in Jesus’s ministry, but already in the previous chapter he showed a learned theologian how God wants to re-write his spiritual DNA and then went on to drawing

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<sup>1</sup> See **Hebrews 10:19-22, 4:15-16**

large crowds who came to be baptised. Now he has told this woman about real spiritual worship of God as her own Father and how the Holy Spirit will satisfy her inner thirst and flow out through her. In a short while, she will be coming back with a crowd from the town who all want to know more from this Messiah whom she has met.

He tells his disciples: 'Don't think you have to wait for the 'right time' to see results, the time is **now**! The 'harvest' is ready! You have been reaping a 'harvest' that others have prepared.' What does he mean? What 'reaping' have they been doing? Perhaps he means the large numbers of people whom they have been baptising? It was John the Baptist and Jesus himself who had taught them; the disciples simply baptised them! (**John 3:22 & 4:1-2**)

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When the Samaritans from the town had come back to the well with the woman and listened to Jesus, they did something really unusual: they invited this Jewish Rabbi and his followers to stay with them – and they did! Completely unheard of for Jews and Samaritans to mix like this! It will have been a totally new experience for the disciples, too.

All of their lives had been disrupted: The woman had only followed her usual routine to go and get some water. The townspeople were certainly not expecting a Jewish Rabbi to come and teach them for two whole days. But the message was compelling – and they responded!

I would love to know what Jesus taught them in those two days! We have just a small clue: They started off by believing in him because of what the woman had told them, and that was the reason they asked him to stay. But after those two days, they told her that now they believed, not just because of what she had said but because they had heard him for themselves and now they **knew** that he really was the Messiah, the Rescuer, the One who would bring in the Kingdom of God (**John 4:39-42**).

And perhaps she and they began to understand what he had meant by the water which he gave becoming a spring of life-giving water? It had already started to overflow from the woman and out to the rest of the townspeople. Jesus used the same picture again on a later occasion in the Temple in Jerusalem, and again it is clear that he was speaking about the Holy Spirit living **in** those who trust in him, and overflowing out to others (**John 7:37-39**).

I wonder what those people of Sychar thought when the news reached them a few years later, that this Messiah who had visited them and taught them about 'living water' had been arrested and executed? Confusion? Hopelessness?

But, not long after that, Philip and Peter came to the town, bringing the full message of the same Messiah who, since he had come there himself, had not only died but had been raised from death and had given the same Holy Spirit to those who trusted in him. More reasons for the people of Sychar to put their trust in him and discover more of the power of this 'living water'! (**Acts 8:4-17**)

*"Whoever drinks the water I give him  
will never thirst.  
Indeed, the water I give him  
will become in him a spring of water  
welling up to eternal life."*

Dave Taylor March 2025

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