

10. Jesus Talks with a Samaritan Woman

In our last lesson, we saw Jesus alone with a man named Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, a man respected among the chosen people of God. Today we will see Jesus, a little while later, having a conversation with an unknown woman, a despised woman among a despised people.

Jesus had made Nicodemus to understand that he would not automatically receive the blessings of the Kingdom of God despite his Jewish birth, his practice of the Jewish religion and his position among the Jewish people. He had to be born again, like anyone else in the world. As we will see, Jesus lets this immoral and despised woman know that she is not excluded from the blessings he brings. She, too, can be reborn.

WHO WERE THE SAMARITANS?

Our text is found in the fourth chapter of the gospel of John from the third verse:

“He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. But He needed to go through Samaria. So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.”

At the time of Jesus, Palestine was divided into three regions. In Judea, in the south, we find Jerusalem and a large Jewish population. To the north was the region of Galilee, where Jesus grew up. There was also a large Jewish population there. Between Judea and Galilee, we find Samaria. Yet, as John says in verse 9, the Jews did not have relations with the Samaritans. They had been enemies for centuries. Here is the story of that enmity:

About 720 years before Jesus, the Assyrians had invaded the kingdom of Israel to the north and had seized the city of Samaria, its capital. They transported practically the entire population to the cities of the Medes and brought in other people to take their place (2 Kings). Some of the Israelites were left in the country, and they intermarried with the foreigners that the Assyrians had settled there. They committed that which the Jews considered to be an

unpardonable crime: they lost their racial purity. The people who came from this interbreeding were the Samaritan people. Even today, in an orthodox Jewish family, if a son or daughter marries a non-Jew, the family may hold a funeral. Such a person would be declared dead.

Much later, the Babylonians put an end to the kingdom of Judah, in the south. Its inhabitants were also taken into captivity, but a large number among them did not lose their identity. They remained staunchly Jewish. Under the Persian Empire they were given the opportunity to return to Jerusalem. Their first task was that of reconstructing the temple of God. The Samaritans came to offer their help for this holy work. The Jews returning from exile made it clear to them that they did not want their assistance. They had lost their Jewish heritage and did not have the right to participate in the rebuilding of the temple. Deeply hurt, the Samaritans turned against the Jews. The conflict was aggravated when they built a rival temple on Mount Gerazim, in the middle of Samaritan territory. Four hundred years later, John Hyrcanus, a Jewish general, attacked Samaria, pillaged the temple on Mount Gerazim, and destroyed it.

The hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans had not diminished by the time of Jesus. Due to the conflict, Jews who wanted to travel between Judea and Galilee completely avoided Samaria. If they had passed through Samaria, they could have made this journey in three days, but they usually preferred to extend the time required to six days in order to avoid this territory and people they considered “cursed.”

JESUS REMOVES BARRIERS

When John says in verse 4 that Jesus had to pass through Samaria, he did not mean that there was no other way. Probably he means that Jesus “must” pass by there because he wanted to begin to take away the barrier between the Jews and the Samaritans. He wanted to make it understood that he did not accept the prejudices between the Jews against their neighbors.

Arriving in the city of Sychar, Jesus, who was weary, sat at the edge of a well. The sixth hour, from the rising of the sun, was noon. The text continues:

“A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘Give Me a drink.’ For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, ‘How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?’ For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.” (John 4:7-9)

While the disciples searched for food in the city, Jesus waited at the well. A woman came to draw water. This was remarkable for two reasons. First, women normally came to draw water early in the morning or in the evening—not in the middle of the day. Also, there were wells in the city where a woman could draw water without having to walk nearly a kilometer to the crossroads to find the well in question. In view of what would later be revealed about the morality of this woman, it seems likely that she came to this well at this time because she was not welcome among the other women. She avoided or was excluded from contact with them.

When Jesus spoke to this woman, she was very surprised, primarily because Jesus, contrary to Jewish customs, dared to speak to a Samaritan, but also because a respectable Jewish man did not permit himself to speak to a woman in public, whether or not she was a Samaritan. Some rabbis did not even greet their own wives, daughters or sisters in public, much less a stranger. No decent man would allow himself to be seen with a woman like this Samaritan. Nevertheless, Jesus spoke to her. He had no respect for prejudices which cause men to reject one another simply because they are not of the same tribe or because their ancestors had been enemies. He saw this woman, not as a Samaritan, but as a human being, created in the image of God.

THE “WATER” WHICH JESUS GAVE

The woman was surprised when Jesus asked her for water.

“Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.’ She

said to Him, ‘Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?’ Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.’ The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.’” (John 4:10-15)

In this conversation, we see the same pattern that we noticed in the story of Nicodemus. Jesus says something. The other person does not understand. Jesus responds with another difficult sentence. The other person still does not understand, and then Jesus begins to explain what he means.

Jesus said to the woman that he could give her living water, which means a pure, flowing water from a natural source, not from a well or cistern. The woman interpreted his words literally and asked how Jesus could do such a thing. Jesus then made a more astonishing statement: he could give her water that would quench her thirst forever. Again, the woman took this in a literal sense. But Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah himself, Christ, the one who could give salvation, compared by the prophets to fresh water. For example, the prophet Isaiah had promised:

“Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation... Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come... I will make an everlasting covenant with you—the sure mercies of David... Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” (Isaiah 12:3; 55:1,3,7)

Although she continues to think only of physical water, the woman asks Jesus to give her what he promised.

As what Jesus offered could be shared, he told her to first find her husband. This immediately revealed the woman's moral situation. She denied

having a husband. Jesus then showed that he already knew that she was not married and that he knew about her past life. She had been married five times but at this moment she was living with a man who was not her husband. (By the way, this example shows clearly that it is not enough to be living with a man or woman to be considered married. Co-habitation does not constitute marriage. Five times this woman had done what social custom required for marriage but with the sixth man, she was living in an immoral relationship. It seems unlikely that all five husbands died natural deaths. Surely she had been divorced more than once.) This was a woman whose past and present brought shame.

When she learned with astonishment that Jesus knew all about her life, she said, "Lord, I see that you are a prophet." Their conversation continued on the subject of worshipping God. Jesus taught her that the old law about the manner of worshipping God would be removed, that it would be necessary to worship God in spirit, that is, in sincerity with the whole heart, and in accordance with the Word of God which is truth. The place of worship would not have any particular importance. The barriers were falling. What would matter from now on would be the way of worshipping according to a new covenant that God would make with people of all nations. At this point the woman said: "I know that

Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When He comes, He will tell us all things.' Jesus said to her, 'I who speak to you am He'" (John 4:25,26).

When Jesus' disciples returned, the woman went into the city and told the people: "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" The people came out to Jesus and asked him to stay with them, which he did for two days. "And many more believed because of His own word. Then they said to the woman, 'Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.'" (John 4:41,42)

CONCLUSION

For centuries the Jewish people and the Samaritans detested one another. But Jesus came for all people. He loves all people and offers to all the forgiveness that is like a pure and fresh water that quenches thirst. He wants to save all people from the sin that separates them from God. As the apostle Paul said in Ephesians 2:14,17,18:

"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation... And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father."