

## “I Who Speak to You Am He.”

### The Thirteenth in a series of sermons on the Gospel of John

*Texts: John 4:1-26; Isaiah 55:1-9*

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Jesus' encounter at Jacob's well with a woman from Samaria is the first indication in John's gospel that Jesus' messianic mission will extend beyond the Jewish people to the ends of the earth. Our Lord's mission will include people from every race, tribe, and tongue under heaven. Without any apparent regard for the long-standing cultural, political, and religious differences between Jews and Samaritans, Jesus speaks to this woman of the gift of eternal life, he informs her of a "living water" which takes away all human thirst, before explaining to her that the centuries old rift between Jews and Samaritans over the location of God's temple is about to be rendered moot, because in his very person a new age in redemptive history was dawning before her eyes.

When we left off last time (we wrapped-up our study of John chapter 3), Jesus and his disciples had left Jerusalem and were heading north back to Capernaum. On the way, they entered the hill country where John the Baptist was now baptizing. We saw that the Baptist once again affirmed to his followers that he is not the Messiah, but that he is the one whom God had sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. When a debate arose between an unnamed Jew and the followers of John the Baptist over the nature of purification and the baptism of John, as reported in John 3:25, it is certainly not an accident that John (the disciple and author of the Gospel) continues his account of Jesus' messianic mission with another incident involving water symbolism—this time with another unnamed person, a woman from Samaria.

The account of Jesus' encounter with this woman (running from verses 1-42 of John 4) ideally should be covered in one sermon because the account (like many of the discourses in John) is seamless and does not really lend itself to division. But the reality is that to do the passage justice we would need to spend an hour or more to do so, so out of necessity we will tackle this section of John in two sermons. We will cover Jesus' encounter and dialogue with this woman (the first 26 verses), and then next time we will take up the reaction of the disciples and the Samaritans to Jesus' words (vv. 27-42).

According to the opening verses of chapter 4, "*now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.*" The one thing that should jump out at us from this brief report is that at some point between the wedding in Cana (John 2) and Jesus leaving Jerusalem as recounted in the previous section of John 3, John the Baptist's ministry has already begun to diminish while Jesus' is increasing. This is exactly what John the Baptist said would happen (John 3:30).

No doubt, the Jewish religious leaders were increasingly worried about the popularity of John the Baptist as multitudes were flocking to him, first out in the wilderness east of the Jordan River, and now in the hill country just to the north of Jerusalem. But once Jesus made his first appearance in Jerusalem, cast the merchants and the money-changers from the Jerusalem Temple, all the while performing a number of unspecified miracles (signs which confirmed that the messianic age had dawned), Jesus was now on the Pharisees' radar as yet another possible threat to their sect's influence over the Jewish people. As we saw in John 3:1-15, even a well-known and respected member of the Sanhedrin (Nicodemus) had come to Jesus at night asking about the nature of his mission due to the miracles Jesus had been performing. Catching wind of the increasing scrutiny from the Pharisees, and knowing it was not yet time for his

mission to come to its climax, Jesus instead sought to return to Galilee to continue his mission.

According to verse 4, Jesus and the disciples, “*had to pass through Samaria,*” which was the normal route from Judea (where Jerusalem was located) to Galilee. This may not mean much to us, but this was no small thing given the nature of Jesus’ mission and the animosity which existed between Jews and the Samaritans. Many commentators have argued that the Jews hated the Samaritans so much that Jews would intentionally take the much longer route around Samaria (avoiding it altogether) when traveling to the north. But according to Josephus (the famous Jewish historian), despite the disgust the Jews felt toward the Samaritans, they would normally take the shorter route passing through Samaria along the same road Jesus was taking. This route saved several days of travel time and avoided desert heat.

To fully understand the significance of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman we need to know something about the Samaritans. When the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, the Assyrians deported many of the Jews living there and resettled the area with foreigners as a way of preventing the Israelites from ever returning to the area. The few Jews who remained in the area during this time eventually intermarried with these foreigners (Gentiles) and struggled to maintain their Jewish faith and heritage. About 400 BC, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerazim which was later destroyed by the Jews—who saw the Samaritan temple as a blasphemous rival to the true temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch as Scripture, but rejected all the writings of the Old Testament prophets. They believed that their own temple site on Mount Gerazim was the true mountain of the Lord. The Jews of Jesus’ day regarded the Samaritans as half-breeds (and as unclean Gentiles) and as heretics. There was great animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews, and both groups had as little to do with each other as possible.

According to verses 5-6, while continuing to head north “[Jesus] *came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.*” Sychar is the modern village of Askal between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim. Jacob’s well is there, and nearby is the tomb of Joseph, who was re-buried here after the Israelites removed his bones from Egypt. Although several churches were built near the site, they were destroyed by Muslims. Remarkably the well still flows and is used down to the present day.

According to John’s account, Jesus, who was tired and thirsty (an indication of his true human nature) stopped there about noon (the sixth hour) to drink some water and rest. According to verse 7, an amazing encounter now takes place. We read that “*a woman from Samaria came to draw water.*” It was quite likely that women from the local villages would come in groups to draw water early in the morning. Not only was it cooler, but the water levels in the well would be higher making it easier to draw the water that would be needed in each household for the day. Yet, this woman comes alone at midday when (it seems) that no one else would be present. We will learn a bit later in the story why the woman may have been an outcast and shunned, explaining why she would have done her chores by herself at an odd time of day. In any case, she comes to the well at noon and finds Jesus resting there. She has no idea who he is.

“*Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)*” Although Jesus and his disciples were willing to purchase and eat food which had been handled by Samaritans (something many Jews would not do because the Samaritans were considered to be ceremonially unclean), it is remarkable that Jesus would ask her to give him a drink from the water she had just drawn. She is a Samaritan and he a Jew. This was just not done. The two groups interacted as little as possible. In fact, later on in the gospel, John will recount that the Jews called Jesus a

“Samaritan” before accusing him of being demon possessed (John 8:48).

The depth and long-standing nature of the animosity between Jew and Samaritan are apparent in verse 9. “*The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?’ (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)*” The woman is never named, and she is surprised by two things. For one thing, Jesus is obviously a Jew. What would prompt him to even speak to her? That never happened. For another thing, she knew that a Jew would have considered the water which she drew from the well to be ceremonially unclean because she (as a Samaritan) had drawn it using an unclean vessel. The parenthetical phrase “*for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans*” probably means something more specific—Jews would not use dishes or drinking vessels Samaritans had used.<sup>1</sup> What the Samaritan woman could not have yet known is that the one asking her for a drink sanctifies all things. As one commentator notes, when a Jew touched a leper, the Jew was thought to become unclean. But when Jesus touches a leper, the leper is made clean.<sup>2</sup> Jesus has no qualms about drinking water from a Samaritan water pot. He knows that the source of all human uncleanness is found in the heart.

According to verse 10, “*Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’*” The Samaritan woman sees a tired and weary Jew asking for a drink. She has no idea this is the Messiah. But Jesus knows that she would not understand this, which is why he answers her as he does. He phrases his answer so as to make clear that he is the gift of God in his incarnation, or even that he can dispense the gift of God (regeneration and new life). It is also possible that since the Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), Jesus is, in effect, saying to her, if you knew the gift of God (the Torah—the law) you should have known to whom you are speaking. If this is the case, this would be similar to the way Jesus addressed Nicodemus: “you are a teacher of Israel and yet you do not know this?” However we understand the “gift from God,” Jesus does promise her “living water.”

The meaning of living water is obvious on one level. In a dry arid region like Samaria, the water from the well provided that water necessary for life. But when considered against the Old Testament background for such a phrase it becomes clear that Scripture is the basis for Jesus’ reference. The most obvious biblical text is Jeremiah 2:13, where YHWH declares: “*my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.*” YHWH declares that he is the living water which Israel rejected. There is also an eschatological dimension to the phrase as well. Zechariah, for example, speaks of that future time associated with the coming of the Messiah. “*On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter*” (14:8). The same imagery can be found in Isaiah 1:16-18 and Ezekiel 36:25-27. In this sense, living water is something the prophets anticipated (along with the feasting and fine wine, as we have seen) as characteristic of the messianic age.

Upon hearing Jesus speak of this “living water” the Samaritan woman (who would not have been familiar with Israel’s prophetic writings, since the Samaritans rejected the writings of prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel) assumes the literal and not the symbolic meaning of Jesus’ words as clear from verses 11-12. “*The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep.*

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 218.

<sup>2</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 218.

*Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.*” The woman’s answer indicates that she has completely missed Jesus’ reference to the Old Testament prophets and refers to the local tradition that Jacob dug the well. Jesus has nothing with which to draw water and her answer seems to be either incredulous or a bit sarcastic. She is asking Jesus “how do you get living water if you’ve got nothing with which to draw water out of the well. Are you greater than Jacob?”

Whatever we make of her reply, in verses 13-14 Jesus answers her and begins to explain what he meant. *“Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’* The first thing Jesus tells her is that whoever drinks the living water to which he is referring will never be thirsty again. The second thing is that this water is taken from a well which secures eternal life. This is language which comes directly from Israel’s prophets. In Isaiah 12:3, we read, that one day *“with joy you [Israel] will draw water from the wells of salvation.”* In Isaiah 49:10, the prophet foretold of a time when God’s people *“shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.”* The Old Testament prophets anticipate a day when God’s people will draw near to him, incline their hearts to YHWH, and in turn, receive his protection and blessings.

But the one passage from Isaiah which jumps out from Jesus’ words is Isaiah 55:1-3 (part of our Old Testament lesson). YHWH speaking through the prophet declares, *“come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.”* Here again, the messianic age is depicted in feasting and celebration with fine wine, a time when God will provide relief for the spiritual thirst (the longing for God) on the part of his people.

Much of the specifics of the biblical imagery used by Jesus seems beyond the Samaritan woman’s grasp because, likely, she would not have known the writings of the Old Testament prophets. But Jesus is clearly revealing that he is the long-anticipated Messiah and that he can give her the living water which Israel’s prophets had promised. But just as we saw with Nicodemus (the learned Old Testament scholar) the Samaritan woman still does not understand what Jesus means. In verse 15, she responds to Jesus. *“The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.’”* She seeks the living water of which Jesus speaks so that she can be relieved of the daily burden of hauling water in the heat of the day while avoiding the other woman in her village.

But Jesus will not let her remain under such a burden and the misconception that hauling water in the midday heat is her biggest problem. She seems willing enough to accept Jesus’ gift, but is not yet at the point of understanding that Jesus is addressing her spiritual condition—her true need. Jesus will not let this point pass. In verse 16, *“Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here.’”* Jesus does this not to embarrass her (for as we will see, her marital status is the source of her shame), but to reveal his true identity to her. Although we have already seen Jesus’ true humanity in the passage (his fatigue and thirst) we now see Jesus supernatural knowledge of people and their circumstances—just as we saw back in John 1:48 when Jesus encountered Nathaniel. As we will see, the woman’s marital status is germane to her real need. Jesus knows all about her, even though he has just met her.

According to verses 17-18, “*the woman answered [Jesus] ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.’*” The woman did not lie to Jesus when she said that she had no husband. But she did not give Jesus the whole story, nor should we have expected her to. Jesus is a stranger to her after all. But to make his point about the gift he could give her (eternal life and a complete forgiveness of sin—the meaning of the metaphor of the living water), Jesus presses her and reveals that even though she has just encountered him, he knows her whole marital history, which was, no doubt, a great source of personal shame for her and very likely the reason why she went to the well alone at noon. She is a woman with a past and it is implied that she is an outcast among her people.

No hint of her emotional state is given, but she again responds politely if not curtly. “*The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.’*” The Greek text allows for the translation that Jesus is “the” prophet, and that may indeed have been the point of her answer. Since Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch as divinely inspired, it is even possible that the woman has Deuteronomy 18:15 in mind where Moses told the Israelites, “*the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.*” At the very least she has perceived that Jesus is “a” prophet who knows her past, and perhaps even “the” prophet, the coming one foretold by Moses. No doubt, she is struggling in her own mind to figure out just who this is who would dare speak to her (even though he was a Jew and she a Samaritan), who spoke with her despite knowing her shame and outcast status, and who even promised her “living water” which would take away her thirst.

In verse 20, she explains why her own people were still separated from the Jews. We don’t know if she was being contentious (because even though Jesus is the prophet, he was still a Jew) or if she is making nervous small talk because she did not know what else to say. “*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.*” She knew enough of the Old Testament to understand the point set out in Deuteronomy 12:5. “*But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go.*” The Samaritans mistakenly thought the temple belonged on Mount Gerazim. Because they rejected the rest of Israel’s prophetic revelation, the Samaritans did not have the benefit of God’s revelation to David that the temple was to be built in Jerusalem. Whether the woman wants to debate the matter with Jesus, or is just stating the obvious (the Jews and Samaritans disagree) we do not know. But Jesus uses her statement to teach her yet another important theological truth.

“*Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.’*” Now that Jesus’ messianic mission is fully underway (and even though he has just been in Jerusalem where he called the temple “his father’s house”), Jesus informs her that a new phase in redemptive history is unfolding—one in which the Jerusalem temple will have no future role because the true Israel and the true temple is the one speaking to her. The moment Jesus will die on the cross for our sins (the coming hour), the veil in the Jerusalem temple will be torn from top to bottom and the temple itself is immediately and permanently rendered obsolete. The temple will become *ichabod* because the glory of God will forever depart.

In the new covenant, God does not bind himself to a particular place (Jerusalem or Gerazim) nor is he present with his people in a building (the tabernacle or the temple). In fact, it is the assembled people of God (the church) as the living body of Christ, which constitutes the true temple of God. Once Jesus fulfills his mission (when his hour comes) there will be no difference at all between Gerazim and Jerusalem. For at that time God’s people are identified by what and in whom they believe not where they worship. This becomes clear as Jesus continues his response in verse 22. “*You [i.e., the Samaritans]*

*worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.*” By rejecting much of the Old Testament (the historical books and the prophets) the Samaritans have cut themselves off from the full revelation given by God in and through his word. As a result, “they don’t know” all that God has revealed. This is why, says Jesus, salvation is from the Jews, because they are the guardians of God’s word, and the chosen people through whom God’s messiah would come.

But in verses 23-24, Jesus goes on to say that because a new era in redemptive history is coming her point about where to worship will be rendered moot. Says Jesus, *“but the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”* For one thing, Jesus had just spoken of the coming hour as future, yet now he says it has already arrived. The hour has come, because Jesus has come and begun his messianic mission. Second, true worshipers (i.e., those who believe God’s promise that he will provide a redeemer from sin) will worship God in spirit and in truth. God’s people will be devoted to him as he reveals himself in his word, and they will come to understand that God is not bound to a temple in Jerusalem or to a mountain in Samaria. God will visit his people with his promised salvation (eternal life and living water) whenever and wherever they assemble to hear his word and receive his sacraments (i.e., we will soon take up Jesus’ discussion the living bread which comes down from heaven in John 6).

The key to Jesus’ answer to the woman, however, is his simple statement in verse 24, *“God is spirit.”* Simply put, God is not human, nor like us (i.e., that he is bound as we are to both time and space). God is eternal, invisible, omniscient, omnipresent, he is the creator of all things and the source of all life, and completely unknowable to sinful humans except as he reveals himself to us in his word, and more specifically, as he reveals himself to us in the person of his eternal son (Jesus) who has veiled his glory in human flesh. Because God has revealed himself to us in his word, we must worship him as he has commanded (i.e., in spirit and in truth). We cannot bind him to holy places, holy buildings, or to holy people. God comes to us in and through the person of Jesus, that one speaking to the woman at the well.

The woman gets (understands) some of what Jesus says based upon her response to him in verse 25. *“The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.’”* Jesus has not only told her of the gift of eternal life and the springs of living water (heavenly things) he has also told her of earthly things (about her marital status). She knows that a Messiah is coming, and she knows that what Jesus has just told her about the nature of God and how he is to be worshiped may even be true. Remarkably, it falls to a Samaritan woman (outside the covenant people—the visible church) and not a Jew, and someone who is a social outcast among her own people (and a sinner) to hear from his own lips that Jesus is the promised one. It is equally remarkable that Jesus reveals himself to a Samaritan (in a Gentile region) and not to his own people who would reject him.

Jesus’ answer in verse 26 to her declaration that a Messiah is coming is short and powerful. *“Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he.’”* The woman has heard the truth. The ramifications of this declaration that Jesus is the Messiah become clear in verses 27-42, but alas, we must take that up next time. What is important for us to see is that Jesus thinks nothing of ethnic and cultural divisions. It matters not that he is a Jew and she a Samaritan whose people worship on a different mountain. Jesus also knows that this woman is a sinner and a social outcast. But it is to her that he reveals himself, and Jesus offers her the living water which will take away her thirst.

Jesus loves people with a past—not because he condones their sin or their overlooks conduct—but because such people often see their need and do not hide behind self-righteousness. By revealing himself to this

unnamed woman (and not, say, to the high priest or Herod), Jesus exposes the pride and sinfulness which characterized his own people. A Samaritan outcast hears his declaration that he is the Messiah because his own people will not receive him. Indeed, the false shepherds of Israel are already concerned about his growing influence upon the Jewish people.

Yet an hour is coming and has now come, says Jesus, when God's people will be known by whom they worship (the true and living God as revealed in Jesus Christ), not where they worship. God's people will confess that Jesus is God's promised Messiah, that he alone can save them from their sin through his obedient life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection, as revealed through his word and sacraments. For it is here that the same Jesus Christ says to us "*I who speak to you am he.*"