

## The Woman at the Well: My Story

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John 4:1-42

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You've probably heard this story about Jesus meeting me at the well dozens of times. You may even know that Jewish people considered Samaritans heretics, foreigners, and unclean, and they avoided all contact with us. Your Bible even says that "Jesus had to go through Samaria."

The thing is, that's not true! The main route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria, but Jesus could have easily avoided it, as other Jewish people did. Perhaps the real reason he had to meet me was theological and not geographical.

You're probably thinking, "Those are some pretty heady thoughts for an unnamed Samaritan woman!" Yes, I suppose they are, and I didn't have them at the time, but years have passed, and I've had many hours to reflect.

What bothers me the most, though, is what people have said about me. Why do people do that? They gossip and talk behind your back without even checking out the facts. I've been called a difficult and disobedient wife, a prostitute and a loose woman with no morals! Three verses out of a total of 42 address my marital history, but this has been pulled out as the most important thing.

John Calvin even imagined that I must have been a difficult and disobedient wife who made my husbands divorce me. Not only that, he said that Jesus brought out my former and present life in order to keep me from talking so much!

When I met Jesus that day, I didn't know who he was. Many of us who met him didn't know who he was. I understand now, all of these years later, that you have four different stories about Jesus. I'm told that my conversation with him is the longest recorded conversation that he had with anyone.

Think about that for a minute. Jesus spoke to some pretty important people, yet my conversation with him is the longest one recorded! I could be wrong, but it seems to me, there's probably something folks can learn from this conversation.

But first, let's get past those three little verses everyone thinks of when they talk about me. I was caught in the custom of levirate marriage, and the last man in my family refused to marry me. You see, in my time, women needed men in order to survive. I was in a horrible situation, and I didn't know where to go. What was I supposed to do? But I'm not a floozy, which so many commentators seem to think.

So what can we learn from my long conversation with Jesus?

Jesus didn't avoid coming into Samaria like other Jewish people did. I think people tend to avoid things or other people with whom they're not comfortable. The thing is, avoiding people is easy. You see someone that you don't want to talk to coming down the hallway, so you take another hall.

I understand that you even have these things called telephones, where you push a few buttons and you can talk to anyone, anywhere, and you don't even have to be in the same room with them! They sure would save me some trouble.

I guess you even have a screen on the phone that tells you who is calling. If you want to avoid talking to them, you just let the phone ring.

So in your world it really is easy to avoid people who are different from you. Jesus wasn't like that, though. He came right through Samaria and ran into me. He even asked me for a drink. That's when he got kind of weird on me. He talked about living water and how if people drink this water, they'll never be thirsty again.

At the time, I thought this water was pretty special and I wanted it. Shoot, I wouldn't have to keep walking to the well over and over and over again if I had some. But now I realize that he wasn't talking about water that we drink every day. He was talking about the new life we have when we follow him.

When you read the next part of the story in your Bible, Jesus refers to my five husbands and the fact that I'm with someone now who isn't my husband. But the way he said it was so full of love. He saw the hurt deep inside of me, and I didn't even tell him!

This is what is so important to understand about Jesus. He sees past your fancy or your grubby clothes. He sees beyond your checking accounts or your homes. He knows all about your frustrations and disappointments, and he wants to give you strength to survive.

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I thought maybe he was a prophet. There was a huge disagreement between Jews and Samaritans about the proper place to worship God. Jewish people believed Jerusalem was the place, while we believed one must go to the mountain of Gerizim. Since he was a prophet, I wanted to know who he thought was right.

Unfortunately, some commentators view my question as a way to avoid talking about my sordid past. One scholar even asks, "Could a Samaritan woman be expected to understand even the most basic ideas of this conversation?" Come on! This disagreement had been going on for years! Since he was a prophet, of course I wanted to know his answer.

And he answered me in a completely unexpected way. He said that you could worship God anywhere. God is spirit. You don't have to go to Jerusalem, Gerizim, or even the basement of St. George's! Of course, we do need each other in this crazy world, and having a place where you can gather with other believers is important.

I look out at all of you and I know that each one of you has a lot of responsibilities and concerns. Many of you teach classes, write books and reports. Others of you fight fires, take care of children and help those who are sick. Some of you are simply trying to find a way to pay your bills.

I know you might be tempted to handle everything by yourselves, but you don't have to do this. You have this group. I understand that disagreements happen and sometimes you might feel it's easier just to keep your mouth closed and go about your business. You might even feel it's better to walk away and not say anything at all.

But you miss out on so much when you do this. Remember that guy who lived years after me? I think Paul was his name. He wrote about how we are all the body of Christ and each of us has a special part to play.

But we have to be willing to share our thoughts and feelings and listen to others as well. None of us has the exact answer. This new life isn't easy, and we need each other so we can change and grow. This is what it means to be community.

And, boy, do we ever need a community in this messed-up world. Don't lose this Circle. For you are a Circle of Mercy.

Jesus also told me that he was the Messiah! I was trying to understand exactly what this meant when his disciples returned. I could tell they were sort of surprised that he was talking to me, even though they didn't say anything. I'm not sure why they didn't. Jesus had some amazing things to say, but it was as if they didn't want to hear them.

When they arrived, I felt sort of uncomfortable. Jesus was so easy to talk to, but I wasn't sure about his friends. It was clear they wanted to give him the food they had brought and they wanted me to leave. In all of the commotion, I left my water jar behind.

Sometimes Jesus' friends are hard to talk to. I hope you're not that way. I hope you listen to other people and really try to understand what they are saying before you share your own thoughts. Or, worse yet, I hope you don't just ignore someone as the disciples ignored me.

As I went back to Sychar, I couldn't get Jesus out of my mind. I kept thinking about him, and even though I didn't understand everything he said, I began walking faster and faster. I wanted to tell people about this strange man and how he might be the Messiah.

Other people from Samaria heard me, and they wanted to meet him, so they asked him to stay for a couple of days. Afterwards, one woman even said to me that, at first, I wasn't making a whole lot of sense when I talked about Jesus. But after she heard him herself, she believed in him too.

I think sometimes folks believe they have to have everything clear in their own mind before they tell others about this life. But it's different from that. Sometimes a person who is full of questions about this new life, a person who hasn't figured it all out, can be the best messenger of all. At least that's how it was in my case.

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a person who hasn't figured it all out, can be the best messenger of all.***

But it even goes even beyond words. You can live with all the new life that he gives you. I know among you there's a person who makes clothes for children who cannot afford them. You collect food for Manna Food Bank. Some of you are warning undocumented immigrants about traffic checkpoints, as well as watching officers there just to make sure things go as they should.

People see this new life, this new water, and they want some, just as I did.

Now I hope you're realizing there's more to my story than simply Jesus' willingness to talk to a woman "with no morals." We spoke for a long time, and the water he offered me is amazing. And the best part is, he offers it to every single one of us.

Amen.