

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Places where Jesus was found: On the Well – John 4:6

The heading “On the Well” comes from John 4:6, where we read that Jesus being weary with His journey sat on the well. John 4:1-43 is the setting for this amazing story. John 2 has the story of the marriage in Cana of Galilee and the miracle of turning water into wine. This is followed in chapter 3 with the discussion between the Lord and Nicodemus on the necessity of new birth. This leads to the interview between Jesus and a woman at a well in chapter 4, where the topic of worship is introduced. However, we need to take a detailed look at this chapter 4 as there are a number of important issues to consider as they unfold in this amazing story. As the story unfolds, we are led to a revolutionary new consideration regarding the worship of God: that is, the worship of God as Father.

At the commencement of the chapter we have two lessons before we reach the event at the well. In verses 1-3 there is an issue concerning who has done more baptisms, John the Baptist or Jesus! When this issue is raised, the Lord Jesus decides to leave the controversy and unnecessary discussion. Such conflicts are unimportant. Maybe as Christians we can learn a lesson here?

However, the next point in verse 4 brings to our attention the divine workings of our Lord Jesus: “He needed to go through Samaria.” What was so important? There was a person who was in need of being brought into a relationship with the living God. The Lord’s journey led Him near to the city of Sychar. On the outskirts of the city there was a well, the city’s water supply.

In verse 6 we read, “Now Jacob’s well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.” This verse teaches about the true manhood of Jesus, “wearied with His journey”. Jesus sits there to wait the return of the disciples who had all gone off to the city to purchase provisions.

It is while Jesus was sitting at the well that a woman from the city comes to draw water. As the narrative of the story unfolds from verses 7 to 26, we have a wonderful example of the Lord’s graciousness as He introduces Himself and leads the woman to the climax regarding the worship of God the Father.

The background to this story is worth considering. Jews and Samaritans were socially, morally and spiritually at opposite ends of the spectrum. Yet immediately the woman arrives at the well, Jesus takes the initiative in the conversation and breaks all the accepted codes of contact. First He talks to the woman and in so doing asks a favour, “Give Me a drink”, verse 7. The response from the woman in verse 9 is predictable, “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.” The most interesting feature is the Lord putting Himself into the position of both being non-threatening and under an obligation to accept kindness from a Samaritan. So we can well understand the woman saying “How is it?” The woman understood quite well the complete lack of co-operation between the people of the two nations. However, the Lord has immediately captured her attention and interest, and has produced an opportunity for further conversation. The woman has asked a question and will, of course, expect an answer.

We who are involved in evangelism might do well to study this story. In a few verses, a conversation of just a few minutes brings the woman from the confused state of a religion which is a mixture of God’s truth and man’s error to the enlightened state of understanding what God the Father requires in terms of worship. Although the woman had some understanding of the coming of the Messiah, she needed to be brought to see that the Messiah was actually talking with her. But, I move on too fast and there is much more to discover in these verses.

The Lord then takes the matter of refreshment away from the natural and physical to that which is eternal and spiritual. So in verse 10, Jesus answers the woman’s question 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.” There are a number of points to be considered in the Lord’s answer. First, the Lord introduces the thought of gift and, as we all know, a gift comes free. Gifts are expressions of appreciation and love. Additionally the giver of the gift is God which raises the value of the gift considerably. Then the Lord draws attention to Himself, indicating to the woman that she was not appreciating who this stranger really was who talks with her at the well. The Lord then talks about the gift as being “living water” which is available for the asking. But, the woman is still mainly thinking in terms of the natural realm and so responds accordingly. Now, we should notice that the manner in which she addresses this stranger is

becoming a little more respectful, no longer “a Jew” but “Sir”. How much the woman realised I am not sure, but she was becoming captivated and with every statement from the Lord she is driven to ask another question.

The woman said to Him, “Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?” Notice the woman claims to be descended from Jacob one of the fathers of the nation of Israel. In fact the woman was not of Jewish origin. The full story can be read in 2 Kings 17 of how the ten tribes of the northern kingdom were removed and the land was forcibly repopulated by people from other nations.

The Lord’s answer is going to raise further interest for the woman as He says, “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”, verses 13 -14. As the conversation proceeds the Lord seeks to draw the woman away from the natural realm of this world and give consideration to eternal matters. The water of this world only temporarily quenches thirst but the living water is entirely different; it satisfies a different kind of thirst, a spiritual thirst. Once the living water is given then it becomes a source within the person, a fountain that bubbles up to everlasting life. The Lord is speaking of new life that has its source in the Spirit of God producing eternal life in the believer.

However, once again the woman is only interested in the here and now. This attitude is so common with many people today; what can I get for instant happiness here and now? The woman says, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.” The Lord has led her as far as this subject can go and, in order to bring out her sinful condition, He changes the conversation to an issue much nearer home to the woman’s conscience. “Go, call your husband, and come here.” This change in the conversation is to start probing an area of her life, about which, as a stranger, Jesus should know nothing at all. The woman answers, “I have no husband.” To this the Lord responds, “You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly.” It is possible to imagine a number of reactions to the Lord’s statement, anger, going away and terminating the conversation, embarrassment, etc. Clearly the woman has not had an easy life. The woman has had marriage difficulties and is now living in a relationship outside of marriage. The Lord makes no accusation; He simply states the facts and the woman does not seek to justify her situation but accepts the Lord’s words. The woman calmly responds, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.” Now for the first time the conscience is being reached. The woman realises that this is no ordinary person and is prepared to consider this stranger as a prophet. A prophet is still a long way from the truth of who Jesus is but the woman had now been firmly moved onto the ground of moral issues.

The next part of the woman’s response is clearly to change the conversation to an issue which would return the conversation to a more general and national issue. The woman continues, “Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.” The Lord is now happy to continue the conversation on this particular point as it will lead not only to the revelation of the worship of God as Father but also to the revelation of Himself as the Christ. Initially the Lord makes known the fact that there will be a move away from a physical location as the only point at which worship could be offered to God. Verse 21, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.” However, the Lord must correct the error that the woman had grown up with. “You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews”, verse 22. Up till this point in time, the nation of Israel was still the recognised people to whom God had committed His word and the truth that salvation was available through faith to those who with a pure heart sought the God of Israel.

Now the Lord intends to lead the woman away from that which is old and about to be replaced. The move was from God as known through the Old Testament to knowing God as Father. So we read in verse 23, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.” The Son had come to make God known as Father a God who desired a more intimate relationship with His people, including those from other nations, than had been previously possible as the God of Israel. True worshippers were in contrast to both how the nation of Israel was worshipping and how the Samaritans worshipped. We see in this verse 23 how worship was to be moved out of the physical location to that which was spiritual. In reality worship has always been spiritual but in Old Testament times God’s people had a need of physical things to assist their concentration, to focus the thoughts, and reinforce the thought of unity.

There would be tremendous changes taking place as the whole way of worship was changed. Unity would no longer be a gathering together at Jerusalem but the Spirit of God who now lives in each believer would enable and maintain the unity. By giving the Spirit of God control in our lives, He directs and helps as we gather for worship. And so the Lord continues by saying, “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth”, verse 24.

It has often been said among Bible scholars that the discussion with Nicodemus about new birth should have been with this woman who morally needed a new start and the conversation on worship would have been better suited to a

biblical scholar like Nicodemus. But, as we know, God is never wrong. Nicodemus knew so much but the Lord had to tell him he needed to start again. Christianity was really a totally new concept and so radically different to how the Jews had been worshipping and approaching God. As for the woman, telling her that she needed a new start would have been simply telling her what was obvious. But her ideas on worship were out of date and Jesus was introducing worship in a revolutionary way, different to the Samaritan way of thinking. So we see that this discussion was not wasted but appreciated most by the person who came to see that the stranger at the well was none other than the Christ the Saviour of the world.

This conversation had now run its course to the desired end. The woman's soul had been opened up and, I believe for the very first time, the hidden question in her heart now comes to the surface. How long had this question been in her heart, waiting to be answered? Maybe she despaired of ever finding the answer. This must raise the question in our hearts, "How many people in the world today have this question hidden in their hearts?" People waiting for someone to point them to Jesus! The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things", verse 25. Jesus the Christ has come and Christians have the wonderful privilege and surely the responsibility to be out there "by the well", as it were, to bring the answer to the deep needs of a world in despair.

As this heartfelt question is spoken the Lord responds, "I who speak to you am He." Now at this point the disciples return and bring back to our attention that the Lord in conversation with the woman was cutting across all the accepted norms of the society in both talking to a woman but also a woman who was a Samaritan: in a sense, a double "no go" area. Unnecessary barriers needed to be breached. In our politically correct society, it just might be that Christians need to breach some barriers!

Upon hearing the news that this man was the Christ, the woman leaves her water pot. The reason for coming to the well has been put firmly into second place. She returns, we imagine, with haste to the city to spread the great news. The woman became a Gospel preacher, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" verse 29. Notice that the woman does not talk about worship but the fact that her life had been laid bare. The woman seeks help from others to come and confirm what she has been told: the expected Christ had come! Notice the immediate response to her simple and straight forward message. "Then they went out of the city and came to Him", verse 30.

There were some who received and believed her message concerning Jesus. "And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all that I ever did.'" How the word of Scripture needs to be proclaimed to those who are lost and in their sins. We read in Isaiah 55:11, "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it." In addition to those who immediately believed, there were some who needed to meet Jesus face to face and hear for themselves. "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 Saviour of the world'" verse 42. We have not the opportunity to meet the Saviour face to face but we can be like those who, upon hearing the message, accept Jesus for who He is, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world.

What is most interesting is the collective response from the Samaritans, "They urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days" verse 40. As mentioned before, we today do not have the opportunity to have the Saviour stay with us as the Samaritans had, but we know that by the power of the Spirit of God living in a believer, we can have the reality of having Jesus in our lives, see John 17:20-23.

When the woman left Jesus to go into the city with her wonderful message, the disciples had returned, and were possibly stunned, as they witnessed the closing stages of the conversation. They began to urge the Lord to have something to eat. But the Lord uses the occasion to teach the disciples another lesson in opportunity and commitment. "Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.'" The Lord brings before them the spiritual food of being involved in carrying out the will of the Father. Have you ever been so caught up in service for the Master that even the natural things of food and time are forgotten?

In verse 4 the Lord needed to go through Samaria. As God, Jesus knew about the meeting with this particular woman, her life story, in fact everything. Nothing is hidden from God. But the story does illustrate how we too can take opportunities with those we meet each day. Have you ever asked yourself, why did I meet and spend a few moments of conversation with that stranger today? Was God giving you an opportunity to share simply your faith in Christ? The Lord told the disciples that the fields were white ready for the harvest. The Lord was talking about people who needed to hear of the Saviour. One short conversation with a woman resulted in many Samaritans believing. Let us major on short conversations!

There is a well known hymn which very succinctly brings home the message in chapter 4.

*Little thought Samaria's daughter,
On that ne'er-forgotten day,
That the tender Shepherd sought her,
As a sheep astray;*

*That from sin He longed to win her
Knowing more than she could tell
Of the wretchedness within her,
Waiting at the well.*

*'Neath the stately palm-tree swaying,
Listened she to words of truth:
While each thought was backward straying
O'er her wasted youth.*

*Hastening homeward, with desire
All His wondrous speech to tell,
Asked she, "Is not this Messiah
Waiting at the well?"*

*Living waters still are flowing,
Full and free for all mankind,
Blessing sweet on all bestowing;
All a welcome find.*

*All the world may come and prove Him;
Every doubt will Christ dispel,
When each heart shall truly love Him
Waiting at the well.*

*Chorus: Hear, oh hear, the wondrous story!
Let the winds and waters tell -
'Tis the Christ, the King of glory,
Waiting at the well.*

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