

# John 4:25-42

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 20 November 2018

Preacher: Chris Roberts

[ 0 : 0 0 ] John Newton was a slave trader who met the Lord Jesus in the Bible and he became a Christian. He went on to write the famous hymn Amazing Grace.

! John Owen was a kind of questioning, sceptical Christian, I guess. He went to a service in a church with a preacher that nobody knows whose name he was.

And he heard the gospel and was converted and was fully assured of his Christian faith. There's a story, it goes, of a guy who went to a Christian meeting strapped with an explosive jacket to explode and blow up the Christians in the meeting.

He heard the gospel preached and he left the meeting as a Christian. It is very powerful, isn't it, to hear stories like that. There is something quite persuasive about hearing personal stories of God doing tangible things in people's lives.

And in our passage today, we see the powerful effects of one person's story on the belief of others. Jesus has revealed his identity to this woman as the Messiah, to this woman who is from Samaria.

[ 1 : 3 0 ] We didn't read the whole conversation in the interest of time, but I want to concentrate on the aftermath in verses 39 to 42 at the bottom of your sheets there. Where we see there, don't we, that her story is the means that others come to believe.

By the end of that section at the end, we see that the woman's story actually moves into the background as Jesus himself becomes the basis of their faith in him.

But I want to spend time this afternoon thinking about how that works. We're looking at the subject of belief, what belief is in John's Gospel.

So I want to ask the question, what is the role of the Christian story and Christian testimony? How important is your journey of faith for others looking in to Christianity?

And if you are one of those people looking in, how important are the stories of other Christians? How much notice should you take of them? Just a couple of things to think about.

[ 2 : 3 9 ] First of all, the power of the woman's story. The power of the woman's story. We come, don't we, at the end of this encounter that this woman at the well has with Jesus Christ.

You can go back and read the rest of it in John 4. It's been an intense, transformative encounter for her with him. Jesus has exposed her needs as he has scrutinised her past.

The woman who's had five husbands. And by the end of it, she leaves with a clear claim that Jesus is the Messiah. That's what he says, isn't it? The basic point here is that she has met with Jesus.

She has been with him. He's put his finger on a number of issues in her life. And given her hope again. He has cleared things up that have been confusing for her.

We know that this woman was likely to have been a bit of an outcast. Jesus meets her at this well, we're told, at a time when everyone else was at home. At the hottest part of the day.

[ 3 : 5 1 ] She's a bit of a loner, isn't she? Perhaps because of her sexual history. She's a shameful character, a little bit. But she leaves the well with a totally different outlook.

And a totally different feeling in her life. Look down to verse 28. So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, Come see a man who told me all that I ever did.

It's a great little detail, isn't it? She leaves her water jar. She leaves the well forgetting why she was there in the first place. She leaves the well with a totally new agenda.

To tell people about Jesus. To tell her story. It's not at all what she was planning to do that day, is it? But it was real.

It was a real encounter. It wasn't a made-up story. Notice how the response is in verse 30. In response to her story, the towns start coming to Jesus, don't they?

[ 5 : 0 0 ] It's not that this woman is just a mad, crazy lady shouting things on the street. She's not known for sensationalism. She's not known for naivety in this way.

There's a kind of authenticity in her voice, in her demeanour. She's changed. Because the encounter was real. She was a sceptic.

She was confused about worship. But now she's seriously considering Christ's claims and telling other people about him. And the townspeople see her, don't they?

And they hear her story and are attracted to Jesus. Despite, or even because of her notorious past, it is powerful.

There is great power in the words that she uses. Come see. A man who told me everything that I ever did.

[ 5 : 59 ] Come and see. They're the words that Jesus uses himself back in chapter 1 with his first disciples. Philip says, come and see. To his friend Nathaniel.

There's great power in personal story, in personal invitation. Isn't there? Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did.

Come and see a man who has worked me out. Who knows me and who knows all of my needs.

And could he be the one that we've all been waiting for?

Could he be the Christ? There is great power in the come and see. Some Bible commentators, as they look at this passage, they want to discount the power of personal stories.

Personal testimony. Because in the end, what happens is the people of the town, verse 42, they say, It's no longer because of what you said, woman, that we believe.

[ 7 : 01 ] And the word in verse 42, the word said, in the original Greek, can be used to kind of mean prattle. Or just talk.

It's just chit-chat. And maybe that's true. Maybe that word does have that kind of sense about it. So there's this suggestion at the end that the woman's story is not important at all.

But, what those commentators do is miss out verse 39 in this. If you just look at verse 39. John shows us that in God's plan, what she said wasn't actually just prattle.

Verse 39. Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. The word used for testimony in the language that John wrote in is the word logos.

Word. It's the same word that he used in the prologue. The logos, who was God and who was with God in the beginning. The logos, who became flesh.

[ 8 : 07 ] And so, the word testimony is actually a really helpful English word. Because it implies something that holds great value, doesn't it? A power.

Like a testimony or a witness in court. It is a word. It is a logos that can sway a jury. It has power.

And the woman's testimony, the woman's word, moves the whole town towards Jesus. We do need to note that something spectacular is happening in John 4.

This is not normal, is it? In that this is a Samaritan town. It's not an ordinary testimony. It's not an ordinary day. This event, where all these people come out to Jesus, marks a moment in the work of God where Jesus will bring the nations to himself.

This passage is here as the disciples get their heads around that. It's a watershed moment in the life of God's people. But it will be a ministry to non-Jews as well as the Jews.

[ 9 : 15 ] But I do think we learn in her story that there is power in the come and see. Most of the people that I know, at least, who have been in our church recently, who have come and they've been converted to Christianity or they've just started visiting, have come as a result of personal invitation.

Not all of them, but many of them have. A lady who came because a work colleague got into a conversation with her about Jesus in the staff room at school.

Come and see. Next door neighbours of a couple in church who invited them along. Come and see. A mum whose kid goes to the same toddler group in Hanwell as some of the other church mum's kids.

Come and see. It happens, doesn't it? It happens. And it's the power of the come and see. And we underestimate it. The whole town probably won't come.

But sometimes all it takes is a simple invitation. The come and see of one Christian who has been impacted with Jesus is where belief starts for many other people, isn't it?

[ 10 : 29 ] There is power in the woman's story. But secondly, I think we need to be really careful. We need to be cautious here.

Because we also see the limits of the woman's story. In comparison to meeting Jesus himself, it is right actually that her talk was just that talk.

John says the people believed because of the woman's testimony. But if you've been here over the last few weeks, what we've seen in John's Gospel is the word belief, the word believe, has a lot of different sides to it.

There's genuine belief. There's false belief. There's beginner's belief. Sceptic's belief. Outward belief.

Mature belief. And whilst the Samaritans believe at this point, there are definitely two stages of belief going on here.

[ 11 : 34 ] Because later on, after they've spent time with Jesus himself, the belief seems to graduate. It seems to be filled out more.

It seems to be consolidated and strengthened. And drop your eye down to verse 42 again. No longer do we believe because of what you said, for we've heard for ourselves.

There's been a shift there, hasn't there? From what was before to no longer and to what is now. From something that was powerful to something that is conclusive and personal to them.

Listen to what they confess at the end of verse 42. And we know that this is indeed the saviour of the world.

I just want you to realise that is a massive confession of faith. So early on in John's Gospel, it's actually pretty incredible. And I don't use that word lightly.

[ 12 : 42 ] Because that description of the Messiah, certainly in the Old Testament, is never explicitly there as a saviour, believe it or not.

Those two things aren't connected. It's there in between the lines all over the Old Testament, of course. But it doesn't become explicit until the New Testament. And here they are, these Samaritans, these outsiders who see that about him.

Something that many have missed about Jesus. This universal access for all types of people, Samaritans included, are of a saviour in Jesus the Messiah.

It's a much more solid confession of faith, isn't it, at this point, than what the woman said in the first place. She went out saying, could this be the Christ?

It's a hopeful, excited proposal, isn't it? Could it be true? And that faith has graduated now to them saying, we know he is indeed the saviour of the world.

[ 13 : 51 ] John isn't saying, on the one hand, the woman's testimony was useless. But it had its place. It had its limits in God's work.

The belief they had hearing her was like a kind of beginner's belief, wasn't it? Their minds were being prepared to receive Jesus.

They were being primed. They were being given a desire to meet with Jesus Christ. They wanted him to come and stay in their town for a couple of days. John is showing us here, isn't he, that it is not enough, whilst it is good, what they believe in in the first place, but it's not enough to believe only on the basis of what somebody else believes.

It is powerful. If you come to our church, if you go to many churches, you can come and listen to over 100 personal testimonies of what God has done in their lives.

Personal stories of belief. There's a moment in our church when, and lots of churches do it, where we say the Apostles' Creed or some kind of confession of faith together.

[ 15 : 08 ] And in that moment, if you think about it, you are hearing 100 or so people simultaneously, unanimously saying, come and see.

We believe. That is powerful. Really powerful. And you could sit there, couldn't you? You should sit there and think, I want to know this Christ as well.

But it's not enough to stop there. You probably remember Gethin, most of you. And Gethin used to speak in these talks and he went to work in Paris.

And many of the people that he ministers to come from a Roman Catholic background. And he was telling me that a lot of these folk are just not used to asking questions.

They're less used to getting answers from him about doctrine and things in the Bible. Because faith in the Roman Catholic Church is about subscribing to the doctrine of the church.

[ 16 : 16 ] It doesn't matter what, on one level, you believe. As long as you agree and you sign up with church doctrine. I know I've probably offended some of you there, but I'll probably offend all of you at some point.

That's okay. That's my job. You can't piggyback though, can you, on the faith of others. Or on somebody else's belief. Or on an institutional doctrine.

And you should never encourage others to do the same. You shouldn't encourage others to believe because of your story alone. Personal testimony can be a powerful tool.

But beware. Because the temptation is we don't know when to stop. We don't know what the limits are. And our stories could end up being more about me than they are about the gospel.

And about Jesus Christ. And maybe we hear this kind of thing, don't we? My life was a shambles. I was a wreck. I was into drugs. You know, sex and all of that.

[17:24] But I found meaning though in Jesus Christ. And he died for me on the cross. He changed my life. And I'm now not like the people I used to hang around with. And you can have this changed life too.

That's the good news. Of course, that is part of the good news, isn't it? But the problem with personal testimony is that the focus can often be on the wrong person.

Come and see. But who do you really want to come and see? And actually, changed lives, changed lives generally are a penny to the dozen.

Many religions and philosophies and lifestyles and crazes, diets, mindfulness techniques, exercise regimes, offer just that, don't they? A changed life.

You can go down to Ealing, can't you? And go to the health food shop and get a changed life if you want. You can get a changed life at the gym. You can have a personal testimony about that.

[18:29] You can write a blog about it. Personal testimonies of a changed life are a penny to the dozen. And often they just focus on getting through whatever barriers we perceive to be the problems in life.

But so often they're nothing to do with the gospel at all. And they're nothing to do with the person of Jesus. The personal testimony is powerful when it knows who to point to and where to stop, where the limits are.

I think this passage gives us something really crucial about the nature of saving belief. It is that God uses means to reveal his son to the world.

When a person comes to believe, as the Samaritans end up doing, the reason they give though is not that they hang off the words of the woman. They were powerful in their place.

But it's no longer her words that count. God uses means. He uses ministers. He uses preachers.

[19:43] He uses personal stories. He uses the witness of his people, doesn't he? But it's not actually for any of those reasons that the Samaritans believe in the end.

They believe because of Jesus himself. They believe because of the truth itself, himself.

They too realise they've had an encounter with him. They've not had an encounter with a preacher or with a church. True belief is not believing in a preacher.

Believe it or not. It is not believing in a Christian friend. Or even what the church says. The Apostles' Creed.

It's really well written. It says, doesn't it, I believe in the church. Not, I believe the church.

[20:43] There's a massive difference there. Believing here is in Christ himself. Even though he speaks through those other things.

It is as Abraham did, isn't it? Who believed God. And it was counted to him as righteousness. As we close, we should be aware that there is something very unique about the woman's testimony.

She was, after all, an eyewitness to the physical, Jesus Christ, in bodily form. And we can't say, come and see, in the same way that she did, can we?

We can't show people Christ physically. But there is still power in the come and see. Sounds just really basic, doesn't it?

Saying to someone, do you fancy coming to church on Sunday? Do you want to read the Bible with me? It might get a really weird look. But there is power in the come and see.

[21:52] There is power in your story. And in your witness. And so it is worth reflecting on what that story is, isn't it? If you are a Christian.

However normal it may seem to you. It doesn't have to be a rags to riches story, does it? Because every Christian story is miraculous. And it is amazing that God speaks through means through these talks, even, every Tuesday.

But if any of you ever leave this room on a Tuesday afternoon, thinking about what the guy at the front said more than what Jesus is saying to you, then we have failed.

Because these are means to lead you to Christ Jesus. Speaking to you and to hang off of his words. Not mine.

Not anyone else who speaks here. And as we all share and witness in different ways, we want to, in a way, do ourselves out of a job, don't we? We don't want people hanging off of our words, but rather to meet with Jesus himself.

[ 23 : 05 ] We want people to say, it's no longer because of what you said that I believe. For I've heard for myself that he is the saviour of the world.

Let's pray.