

John 4:1-42

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[0 : 0 0] Paul just led us in prayer there for the situation in Ukraine and Russia as we've been praying! for, well, the length of the conflict really. But do you remember at the end of last year, towards the end of last year, Donald Trump commented that he thought that if he ended the war in Ukraine, it would help him get into heaven. He said this, and there's a bit of footage from Air Force One when a reporter sticks a microphone in his face and reminds him that he said that and said, do you really think that? Do you think that ending the war in Ukraine will get you into heaven? And he said this, I don't think there's anything that's going to get me into heaven.

I think I'm not maybe heaven bound. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to make heaven, but I've made life a lot better for a lot of people. Now, I know mention of Donald Trump divides the room. This is neither an endorsement nor a criticism. It is just to say that it is interesting how he thinks about the kind of people that God would accept. And it's an opinion that lots of people that we come across share. There are good people in the world. They go to heaven. They are heaven bound. And then there are the ones who missed the mark. As I say, Trump isn't alone in thinking like that. It's a very common way to think. I suspect that if you ask the proverbial man on the street about what kind of person God accepts, he would say a version of good people, upstanding people, moral people. They're the heaven bound ones. And by contrast, they're those who are, well, really, they're beyond the pale. And all of us have our list of people that we think would be beyond the pale, people who don't make the mark, either for religious reasons or moral reasons or other reasons that we could think of. They don't fit that category. They are not maybe heaven bound.

And that's certainly the case with this woman that Jesus meets in John chapter 4. And we get loads of reasons in the passage why that is the case. First, when we dive in at the beginning, did you notice the repeated mentions of the place Samaria? Jesus departed for Galilee, verse 3, and he had to go through Samaria, verse 4. He came to a town of Samaria, verse 5. 7, a woman from Samaria came to draw water. It's clear that her cultural background is important in the story. And the reason for that is that pious Jews usually went out of their way to avoid Samaria. Jews, verse 9, we're told, can you see, had no dealings with Samaritans. That's a polite way of saying that Samaritans and Jews were sworn enemies. They had nothing to do with one another. One commentator explains, he says this, centuries before, most of the Jews were exiled to Babylon by their conquerors. Some of the Jews who stayed behind intermarried with other Canaanites and essentially formed a new tribe, the Samaritans. They took parts of the Jewish religion and parts of the Canaanite religion and created a syncretistic religion. So, the Jews considered the Samaritans racially inferior and heretics." End quote. Racially inferior and heretics. The woman is from the wrong culture and the wrong religion when it comes to the things of God. But we're also made very clear that she's stuck in the wrong kind of life. We get the first hint of this in verse 6. We're told that Jesus meets her at the well in Sychar at the sixth hour. And you look at your footnote, it says that's around noon. No one came to the well at noon. It's the heat of the day. Everybody had come earlier when it was cooler. But she's there because she wants to avoid the other people who come earlier in the day. The reason for this becomes clear when we go down to verse 17. Look down at the bottom. Verse 17, Jesus tells her to call her husband, Go call your husband and come here. The woman answered him, I have no husband.

Jesus said to her, You're right in saying you have no husband. For you had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true. Jesus puts his finger right on the pain point of her life. Now, was she adulterous? Was she the victim of a system where men could walk on their wives, a kind of no fault, could walk out on their wives, a no fault divorce? We're not told.

[4 : 39] I favor the latter opinion. And therefore, the issue that defines this woman, I think ultimately, the way the passage is put together, the issue is shame. Because even in Samaritan culture, you were allowed to be married three times. That was considered okay. Three marriages, that was all right. After that, it was immoral. And whatever the reason, we're not told, she's on five.

Now, that surely means that while others would have looked down on her as a moral failure, she can't come to the well when the others are there. They would have looked down their nose at her. That is certainly the case. And she's so tainted that the current guy that she's with, he won't marry her. Others think that way about her. But the thing we need to see is that she feels that way about herself.

That shame runs very deep. Her life is a story of broken dreams, and therefore deep shame because of the way it has worked out. If you'd asked her, would she have made her way to heaven? She would have had her own version of, I think I'm not maybe heaven-bound.

But the point of the story is that Jesus seeks her out. And as we consider what this exchange between Jesus and this woman, who is from the wrong side of the tracks and stuck in the wrong kind of life, what does this exchange tell us about what it means to meet God? Well, there are two things I want us to see this evening. And the first is this, you are not disqualified. You are not disqualified. Jesus has come for the outsider.

And it is all by his design. It is no accident. It starts in verse 4. Do you see? We're told he had to go through Samaria. Geographically, he didn't have to go through Samaria. He could have taken another route. But theologically, he has to meet this woman in order to show the scope of the salvation that he has come to bring. The narrative is supposed to shock us as we read it. We're supposed to read and think, Samaria, Jesus, among the Samaritans, no, this wouldn't happen. We're supposed to read it and think, a woman talking to Jesus, that would not happen. A woman from Samaria talking to Jesus, no, no, no. A woman from Samaria with all of those broken marriages, definitely not.

[7 : 01] The woman herself is clearly shocked. Look at verse 9. How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria? No devout Jewish man would have allowed himself to be seen with a woman in this way, let alone a Samaritan woman. Jesus is deliberately crossing every significant barrier there is.

We put barriers up around all kinds of things. Culture, gender, morality. Jesus smashes through all of those barriers in order to meet with this woman and turn her life around.

And don't miss as well that he asks her for a drink. He didn't keep her at a distance. He could have said to her, if you put your faith in me over there, if you put your faith in me, I will accept you.

He gets close. And he asks her for a drink. He didn't insist on any of the purity regulations he drew near. He wanted to have fellowship with this woman. It is all very shocking.

But it is designed to point us to the climax of the chapter. Look down. We didn't get down to the end of it. Verse 42, chapter 4, verse 42. Jesus is the Savior of the whole world.

[8 : 26] We saw last week that he came into the world not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved, might be saved. And here is a woman who epitomizes disqualification from the things of God on every level, and she is drawn in. Son of God left the glories of heaven, and he crossed not just cultural boundaries, but cosmic barriers in order to reconcile anyone who believes to God. You are not disqualified. Whatever your culture, whatever your religion, whatever your life has looked like, up to this point now this evening, Jesus has come that you might be saved.

Because your background can't save you, whether you were born in a palace or a pub car park, because your behavior doesn't save you. Whether you're upstanding or you're disreputable, you are not disqualified. And one other thing that this woman shows us, how others have treated you doesn't disqualify you from coming to Jesus either. He seeks out those who are shackled by shame.

Is that you this evening? He seeks you out. He draws near. He welcomes you. He welcomes you. You are not defined by your past.

I was with someone this week who I've been talking to about Jesus for many years, and he said to me, he said that he believed that Jesus was who he said he was. And he said to me that he believed that if he was to be forgiven, Jesus was the only answer. And I'm sitting there thinking, wonderful. This is going to be great news. He's going to put his faith in Jesus.

And then he said this, I just think if I was to give my life to him, I'd be on some kind of B list, because he's really interested in the bright and the beautiful. Do you think like that? Is that the way you think

about the Lord Jesus? This guy, his experience of life had taught him that he was a B list kind of person. Well, there was nothing bright and beautiful about the Samaritan woman.

[10:48] And yet, Jesus sought her out, and he made her a promise, which takes us to the second thing that this exchange teaches us about meeting God. Here's the thing. Our sin disqualifies us from heaven.

Our sin disqualifies us in ourselves from the God of heaven and earth. But coming to Jesus, anyone can do that. And he is the one who brings us in. None of us are disqualified on the basis of what our lives are like, on the basis of where we're from, on the basis of who we know or who we belong to. You are not disqualified. But here's the second thing. If you come to Jesus, you will be satisfied. You will be satisfied. Jesus asked the woman for a drink, and when she expresses her surprise at this, he says, look at verse 10, 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 woman said to him, sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. 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. 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. Jesus is claiming to be able to provide living water, which is a kind of water that he equates with eternal life. Because we can have it at the end of the tap, we take water for granted.

But in hot countries where this isn't the case, getting clean water can be the difference between life and death. Without water, your body dries up, shrivels up, and you die. And here Jesus is using that same metaphor to say that he's offering something that's just as important to our soul as water is to our body. Verse 11, the woman thinks he's talking about H₂O. You've nothing to draw water with. You don't have a bucket. The thing's deep. How are you going to get the water out of the well?

[13:06] How are we going to drink? That kind of thing. Jesus says, no, it's not about this water. This water will only work for a while. This water will only do something to your physical thirst.

But then you'll dry up again. Verse 14, I am talking about something that will ultimately satisfy. Ultimately, contentment, deep satisfaction. Isn't that what we're all looking for? Isn't it?

In our minds, that's what our hearts desire. And in our minds, we think that success is the answer. If we can get success, whatever our chosen field might be, whatever it is we think success looks like, if we can get that, well, then that will be the answer to any lack of satisfaction that we have.

Yeah, we know there are dissatisfied people out there, but that's because they failed in some way. They didn't get into the right university. They couldn't get the right job. Their relationships hit the skids. It's obvious why they're not satisfied, but the answer to that is simple.

Just don't fail. And some of you are still young enough to think that that plan will work for you. But here's the thing. What do you do with a long line of really successful people who have never found satisfaction? You think it'll work for you? Why did it not work for everybody else that has been really successful and yet deeply dissatisfied? Do you remember the actor Philip Seymour Hoffman?

[14:41] He died about 10 years ago of a drug overdose. Now, I mention him, talk about him all the time, actually, because of an article that I read after his death that has stayed with me.

Philip Seymour Hoffman was professionally and personally very successful, which is rare in Hollywood. He had been an actor in successful films. He directed successful films. He had a successful personal life by any standard, and he was very rich. And Hugo Rifkind wrote the article that had this line in it that has stuck with me. He asked the question, in light of all of that success, where was the hole in his life that led to the hole in his arm? Do you know, if I could just write one line as good as that in my life, I'd retire. See, Philip Seymour Hoffman didn't fail. He had all the money, he had all the fame, he had all the success, and yet satisfaction still eluded him. Because these things—money, fame, success—everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. Seen it all over the news this week—the beautiful Beckham family. All the success, all the money, all the family strife. And we don't need to be famous to know this. We all know this at some level in our own lives, our own ordinary ways. We pass our exams.

Well, there are more exams. We get the job, we need a better role. We get a promotion, we want more money. We need to be in a bigger company. And so it goes on. It's like a treadmill, and we just keep going, we keep going, and it gets steeper and steeper and faster and faster.

I spoke to somebody one time who, by any metric in our lives, we would say was a successful person. And he said, success is like a drug. You get hooked, and you need more the next time for

the same hit.

We are wired for satisfaction. We long for it, but it eludes us. It always just runs out beyond our grasp. We live with what you could call a satisfaction void.

[16:56] So, what do we do? What do we do? Well, one solution is that you lock up your heart. Some people do this. They've been looking to things out there. Those things haven't brought that satisfaction, so they become cynical. They make fun of everything, make fun of everyone, keep that thing at a distance all the time. Cynical people can be very funny, but it's no way to live your life. It's not a satisfying way to live your life, being cynical about everything all the time, making a joke of everything all the time.

A better option is this. It is to recognize that we can't create satisfaction from below, you could say. We can't create it from within ourselves or from anything that is out there.

The void is too big. It's so big that you can pour in fame and fortune, and as much success is out there, and it just vanishes. It just disappears. If satisfaction is to be found, we need it to come to us from the outside, but with the power to transform us on the inside.

And Jesus comes to this woman. He knows the issue that is most painful in her life. He puts his finger on it, and he says, I can satisfy your thirst. Look at verse 14. 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. Like a spring that bubbles up from beneath the earth's surface, regardless of what is going on at ground level, the spring that bubbles up, it is unstoppable. Springs are unstoppable. It doesn't matter what you build on top of them. They'll get their way up through there. And Jesus is offering something that provides a satisfaction from deep within that bubbles up, regardless of our external circumstances. Now, I'm not saying that you come to Jesus and your problems dissolve. This woman, she still had to face the disapproving looks of the townspeople when she made her trip to the well. She still felt the pain of the shame and the sadness and the brokenness of her life. But the offer here that Jesus extends is that even through those trials, Jesus is enough.

[19:16] He's enough. And a relationship with Him is the source of deep heart satisfaction in the good times and the bad. We all need this living water, and Jesus says, I can give it. This is eternal life. Your soul quenched for eternity. The thirst of your soul slaked for eternity.

The question is, how is this possible? How is it possible that the perfectly holy Jesus can grant this to people who would otherwise be disqualified, sinful people like you and me? Well, if we step back for a moment, why did Jesus need to speak to this woman? He was thirsty. The God of all glory took on flesh. He became human in a body that would get tired and thirsty and need a drink. When you boil it down, humanly speaking, this woman found living water because Jesus was thirsty.

And of course, we know this isn't the only time in John's gospel that Jesus says, I am thirsty. When He hung on the cross, as the searing heat of God's justice at sin burned against Him, among His last words, He said, I thirst. And it is because of this, because Jesus experienced a cosmic thirst under the judgment of God in our place, that you and I are free to drink and be satisfied. He went thirsty so that you and I might drink the living water of eternal life.

So, go to Him. Go to Him. Put your faith in Him.

What that means is, shift the object of your worship. That's how Jesus puts it to the woman. Did you see that? He's just told her about her inner life. She talks about Him being a prophet and about worship. Verse 20, the Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerizim, the Jews in Jerusalem. What does Jesus say? Woman, believe me. Verse 21, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know. We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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.

[22:04] God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. We all, all of us, every single one of us here this evening, we worship something. For the Samaritans, it was their syncretistic worship of different gods. For us, it could be absolutely anything. You want to know what you worship? Look at the thing that controls your life. Look at the thing that absorbs your time and your money and your energy, the thing that you are devoted to. You bow at the altar of your career, or of your family, or of your reputation, or your wealth, or your success, whatever it is.

But here's the thing. As long as you do this, you're signing up for being thirsty again. That's what Jesus tells us. We were all of us built for God. We were wired towards this kind of satisfaction, but

as long as we pursue it apart from Him, things don't work. Augustine said in his confessions famously, Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O God.

And Jesus says, until we do this, until we find our rest in God, we are worshiping what we do not know. But if we will receive the eternal life that He promises, we must set aside those many gods and give our worship to the one true God. It is a worship, a devotion, a ordering of our desires, our affections directed to God the Father. That is enabled by God the Son, and it is done in the power of God the Spirit.

True worship is utterly God-centered, and that starts with repentance for our sin, acknowledging that we have been seeking satisfaction in other things, acknowledging that we have been wired for a relationship with God, and we've turned our backs on Him, and we've sought to go our own way. And He says to you this evening, you say, I don't have a husband, and He says, I know you've had five husbands. He puts His finger on the point of pain in your life, and He says to you, I know everything about you, and I'm the only one who can satisfy the deep restlessness of your soul. And we have to say, you know, you're right. I am sorry that I have lived my way in your world. Forgive me and receive me, and He will do that. That is what it means to change the object of your worship. Take your heart off yourself or off the things that you're using to serve yourself, and position it towards God. Devote yourself to Him.

[24 : 44] Turn from your sins and commit your life to a life fully surrendered to Him. And here's the thing. We talk about surrendering ourselves to another. It is a frightful thing for us. We get anxious.

But here's the thing. When you know that God has sought you, and He has given you eternal life, this surrender is actually freedom. You're set free. You can be ambitious without the crushing need to prove yourself. You can enjoy relationships without the fear that they will one day let you down. You can have much or you can have little without resenting others who have more.

That is why a life of true worship is satisfying. But it's important to see as well the way the conversation is framed here. Our worship doesn't stop there. It's not about us taking our hearts off a false God, whatever that might be, and directing it towards the true God. There's more to say here. You see, it's often said that Jesus does that. He moves worship away here from a particular location. Gerizim, Samaritans, or Jerusalem, the Jews.

And he says, worship is now all about your heart. But true worship that is enabled by the body of Christ, that is, true worship that is enabled by the death of Christ on the cross for you, is rightly offered in the body of Christ. That is, the gathering of the local church.

The church is the real body of Christ, after all. So, to worship as we are called to here in Spirit and truth is to gather with the church. It is to do what we're doing now. It is to come to the place of the real presence of the Holy Spirit and the real proclamation of God's truth. The worshipers that God is seeking, those who drink from Christ and are satisfied, are those who turn from the idols of this world that only leave you empty and thirsty and who come before God, Lord's day by Lord's day, in spirit and truth. And he says to you, you are not disqualified and you will be satisfied.

[26 : 57] Let's pray.