

The Bible in One Year Week 18: The Woman at the Well (John Pt. 3)

(John 4:1-30)

• Water is Life

- *When is the thirstiest you've ever been? Can you remember a time when you were so thirsty that all you could think about was getting that drink of water?* My friend Zach and I were in our junior year of college when we decided that we wanted to try and run a marathon. Do you know how far that is? *26.2 miles*. It takes *hours* of running to build up the endurance. Alas, finals season defeated us and we never actually did it. But we got pretty close in our training: I remember the farthest I've ever run, one Saturday morning with Zach, which also became the thirstiest I've ever been. We hit the road, each carrying a bottle of water, but it got unusually hot for fall and the blacktop really heated up as we ran mile after mile on those country roads. By hour three, we had run over *18 miles*, and our water had been gone a while. We had 3 miles and a couple hills to go before reaching campus and we hit that point where our bodies were just *depleted*, every spare calorie had been burned up, runner's high was long gone, and we felt like *human Jell-O in jogging shoes*. We were in rough shape. We finally had to wave the flag: I called Emily to pick us up—and bring Gatorade. We sprawled on the side of the road until she came in her '99 Oldsmobile Cutlass. *Do you know how good that first drink tasted? It was like the elixir of life!*
- If you're alive today, *you know that water is essential for life!* 60% of our bodies are made up of water: it's an essential ingredient of most organs and most bodily functions. They say you can live anywhere from *8 to 21 days* without food, but you've only got 3 days or less without water.
 - *Water is life*. We take this for granted in our modern, industrialized societies, but consider the fact that for most of human history, *indoor plumbing was not a thing*. For any kind of society to exist, you needed water: if you were going to settle a community, or herd livestock, or farm the land—you needed a reliable source of water. Water means security, it means prosperity. Water means life. *I'm getting thirsty just thinking about it!* Coincidentally, today's story is about *thirst*.

• Water in the Bible

- This story of Jesus and the Woman at the Well is *so rich* in meaning. But you can't fully appreciate unless you consider the bigger picture: when you think of how essential water is to life, it's no surprise that water is a *common theme* in the Bible. Scripture has many recurring images, but *water* is by far one of the most dominant: it's literally a key part of the first and last chapters of the whole Story. Have you ever thought about that? Let's trace this through briefly:
- In *Genesis 1*, you've got the Spirit of God *hovering over the waters*. Then, in Eden it says a huge river flowed through the Garden and split into four major rivers—it was a lush, flourishing land.
- In the stories of *the Patriarchs* water is important: Abraham digs new wells, Isaac *reopens* his father's wells, and Jacob, fleeing from Esau, ends up *at a well* where he meets his future wife.
- *Joseph's story* hinges on water: he interprets Pharaoh's dream and reveals seven-year draught is coming. By the grace of God, he helps them prepare and many lives are saved, including Israel.
- Then you get to *Exodus* and *Numbers*: as they wander in the Wilderness, they find bitter water that gets turned into drinkable water. Then twice, Moses brings water *from the rock*: God makes water *gushing out* from the rock. *Leviticus* talks about the uses of water for ritual cleansing.
- Then, *the Prophets* carry forward this image to mean something even greater. In *the Psalms*, King David wrote things like: *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul thirsts for you, my God,"* (Psalm 42). *"You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water,"* (Psalm 63).
- In *Jeremiah*, God declares, *"They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that can't hold water,"* (Jeremiah 2:13). But *Isiah* says, *"The LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places...and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail,"* (Isaiah 58:11).
- *Ezekiel* says: *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you,"* (36:25-26). Later, he sees *living water* flowing from God's Temple into the wilderness:

It starts as a stream, but the farther it goes, the deeper it gets, until it becomes this rushing river of life. And it says, “...wherever the river flows, everything will live,” (Ezekiel 47).

- Then we get to the *New Testament*. In all four Gospels, we meet a man named *John* who prepares the way for the Messiah—and what does he do? He baptizes in... *water*. And how does Jesus launch into his public ministry? He gets baptized in... *water*. We come to John’s Gospel, and what’s the very first miracle he reports? Jesus turns *water* into the finest wine. After that, he has a conversation with Nicodemus (we covered this story last week) and what does Jesus say? “...no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” Where have we heard that before? Ezekiel 36: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean...I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...I will put my Spirit in you...” *Water and the Spirit*. It’s happening now, it’s fulfilled in Jesus.
- Finally, what comes right after Nicodemus? *Yup. John 4*. The Samaritan woman at the well, which is all about...*living water*. You heard Jesus tell her about these “living waters” that he gives, which well up into a spring of eternal life. Later, in John 7, Jesus stands up and says point-blank, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within...”
- At the climax of the story, when Jesus dies on the cross, there’s an interesting detail: a soldier pierces Jesus’ side to check if he’s dead and what flows out? Blood and...*water*. Now, there may be some scientific, physiological reasons for this—it proved Jesus was actually dead. But it means something deeper: John is showing us that Jesus’ *death* is a *life-giving stream* that flows into the world. And after he rises, Jesus gives his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit—he gives each one of them the river of life that flows from him to them, and from them into the world.
- Finally, fast-forward to the very end, the last chapter of Revelation. Do you remember how it all ends? “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” And in the final verses it says, “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.”
- From the first to the last chapter of the Bible: Water is life. And here, in John 4, you have Jesus, right in the middle of the Story, talking to the unlikeliest of people—this colorful character, the Samaritan Woman—about...*water*. And, as Jesus often does, he speaks with riddles and double meanings, and she starts to catch on—faster than Nicodemus, actually. Are you starting to catch on to the significance of this conversation now? Here, between the rushing rivers flowing from Eden and the River of Life flowing from God’s Throne in the New Creation, Jesus comes into the Story and says to us: *the time has come. I Am here and I bring living water. If you drink, you’ll never thirst again, it will flow within you as a spring, gushing up into eternal life.*
- The Water flows from the Father, to the Son, through the Spirit, *into us*. It’s *the Life of God*, it’s the presence of God’s Spirit *in us*. It’s like Ezekiel’s vision: Jesus is the Temple, and now we are his temple, and the water flows from him to us and from us to the world.
- **Everyone’s Thirsty**
 - You see, everyone is thirsty. Our bodies, fortunately, tell us when we need to drink—and if we don’t listen, it becomes so painful we can’t ignore it! And all of our souls are telling us *we’re thirsty*, we need something that we can seem to find. If water is life to our bodies, God’s Presence is life to our souls. But we keep coming back to empty wells, broken cisterns that leave thirsty. We’ve lost this connection with God, but Jesus came to restore it so we could drink the *water of life*—not just drink it, but become a *spring*, like water from the rock, and be born anew.
 - C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* that all of our desires—*our thirsts*—are meant to point to something *greater*. Sooner or later, we find that the new romances, the new adventures, the new hobbies excite us, but don’t fully satisfy: *we keep getting thirsty*. Some people keep searching from one thing to another: *if I find another marriage, another job, another identity—I can finally be satisfied*. Some become disillusioned:

Don't be naïve, the universe is one big disappointment and the sooner you accept it, the better. But Lewis says there's another way. He writes: *"If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world...earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of...echo. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country...I must make it the main object of life...and help others do the same."*

- What did Jesus say? *"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty."*
- **The Scandal of Grace**
 - This is the incredible meaning that's wrapped up in this conversation at the Well. But there's one more thing we can't afford to miss if we want to really hear the story: it's about the *scandal of grace*. For the first disciples, this was *scandalous*. Jesus, a Jewish man, a Rabbi, the Messiah, having an conversation with a woman. Alone. Not just any woman, but a *Samaritan woman*. Not just *any Samaritan woman*, but a Samaritan woman *who had been divorced 5 times—and wasn't even married to the current dude*. She was likely a victim of abuse, because at that time only men could initiate divorce, but she probably had her rough edges, too. *All of this was major taboo*. So, the razor-sharp tension of gender, race, sexuality, and socio-economic disparity is the *context* of this Gospel conversation. *Do you think, maybe, there's some relevance for our day!?*
 - We might not be able to feel the *scandal* it was to them, but I can give you a sense of how it might have felt by changing the characters. It all depends on where you draw the lines, which one of these examples might be scandalous to you—I'm not going to assume, I'm just going to give you some options to give you an idea of how the disciples felt when they rolled up from town with lunch and saw Jesus—*"He's talking to who?!"*
 - If we wanted to bring this scandalous encounter into 2021, it could be something like this: *"Jacob's Well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a transgender woman came to draw water...Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' (His disciples had gone into town to buy Chipotle.)"* Or, *"It was about noon. When a registered sex offender came to draw water...Jesus said to him, 'Will you give me a drink?'"* Or, *"It was about noon. When an ultra-progressive social activist came to draw water..."* Or, *"an uber-conservative right-wing evangelical,"* or, *"an adult entertainment worker..."* came to draw water, and Jesus said, *"Will you give me a drink?"*
 - I am *not* trying to say that all of those things are the same—*please don't go saying I said that in church today!* I'm just helping you see: where do you draw the lines? What pushes that button for you? Who is it that you go, *"Anyone but him! Anyone but her! Anything but that!"* We all have these lines, it's just a matter of whether we're *aware of them* and *dealing with them*—whether we're dealing with the fact that Jesus has invited *everyone*. *"Let all who are thirsty come and drink!"* I see a lot of church signs that say, "All are welcome," but sometimes the people inside say something different.
 - Now, it's clear from the message of Jesus that by offering this gift of scandalous grace, Jesus doesn't condone everything in a person's life—in fact, the gift itself implies that *something needs to change, to be transformed*. But that's the point! *We all need to be changed! We all need to be healed! We all need his grace! We all his forgiveness! We all need to forsake the broken cisterns we go to again and again! We all need the Living Water!*
 - And Jesus says we can all have it, if we want. Are you Thirsty? Do you want that *living water* to not only flow *to you*, but *through you* into this barren world? Do you long for our church to be a source of that water, for us to be like that Temple here in this community where the Life of God flows right into the streets, to show everyone there's a better way, a better world coming? *Are you Thirsty?!* Trust Jesus. Turn away from the old life, and come, and drink. Amen.