

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER.

5. Samaritan Saga

John 4:1-42. We have already seen that Jesus graciously moved out of John's orbit so that their ministries would not overlap, but within a short time John was put in prison for daring to rebuke Herod for his immorality, giving Jesus another reason to move north. This was the beginning of his ministry, he knew his time was a short 3 years anyway, so it was commonsense, not cowardice, that prompted him to leave Judea: much later we will see the extraordinary courage he displayed when facing the cross.

Verse 4 says "he had to go through Samaria." In one sense he didn't need to at all. Jews travelling north would usually avoid the hated Samaritans by crossing the Jordan River and going up the eastern side, re-crossing it nearer the lake of Galilee. But Jesus "had to go" not only because it was the shorter route, but because he, as always, was acting under the compulsion of his Father's will.

It was a climb past the mountains through unfriendly territory. The Samaritans were descendants from foreigners brought to the region centuries earlier, replacing the 10 tribes of Israel who had been deported by the Assyrians. These foreigners had intermarried with the remaining Israelites and this mixed race worshipped God more according to their own traditions than the Old Testament laws: they set up a rival religious system, claiming God should be worshipped on Mount Gerizim in Samaritan territory rather than at Jerusalem's sacred temple. To Jews, the Samaritans represented the downfall of their nation, to be despised and rejected by "pure" Israelites.

Moving as he always did at the direction of his Father, Jesus came to the town of Sychar, right in the shadow of Mount Gerizim, for it was here he had a divine appointment. Yet this divine Jesus was also human – **verse 6** says that when they came to Jacob's well, Jesus in exhaustion sank down beside the well. It was noon, and the usual time for a siesta.

Some people think that the spiritual side of us is good and the physical is bad. But God created us as physical beings and He saw that it was good. Jesus came to show us the richness of the physical life if lived under the direction of God. It was his tiredness that caused him to pause at the well – a pause which was blessed beyond measure as many Samaritans of the town came to faith in him. If we are completely submitted to God's will, can we take our physical needs as part of His direction?

Verses 7-9. This woman's coming alone in the heat of the day suggests that she was a social outcast. By custom it was forbidden for a man to talk to a woman in the street: no rabbi would dream of so doing. On top of that, Jews did not condescend to speak to Samaritans, and they would become ceremonially unclean if they used a drinking vessel handled by a Samaritan. But Jesus overturned all these social barriers in one small request: he was more concerned to show this woman God's love than to preserve his reputation. No wonder the woman was astonished!

The supreme soul-winner.

In **verses 10-15** Jesus skilfully maintains the woman's interest by first arousing her curiosity and then making her an irresistible offer. She accepts, on her limited understanding of what this "living water" really is. **Jeremiah 2:13** is significant here: "My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken Me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." The woman had surely done that! In contrast we have **Revelation 7:17**: "For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Jesus stood in the middle of these 2 pronouncements and simply declared, in **John 7:37**, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink."

Now that he has her complete attention, Jesus proceeds, like a skilful surgeon, to put his finger on the trouble-spot in the woman's life. (**Verses 16-26.**) Where Satan often seeks to discourage us by a general condemnation – “You're just no good at anything!” – Jesus is specific, pointing out with love but no compromise, the particular sin that is keeping us away from him. A husband's presence would add respectability to the scene and prevent any malicious gossip. But the woman is not ready for any soul surgery yet: she tries to hide the truth from Jesus, and when He again astonishes her by his insight into her life, she tries to fend him off with a theological argument.

The authentic place for worship had long been a source of debate between Jews and Samaritans. Mount Gerizim was considered sacred by the Samaritans: Abraham and Jacob had built altars nearby and the people had been blessed from this mountain. Here the Samaritans had built a temple c. 400 B.C. to rival the temple in Jerusalem, only to be destroyed by the Jews c.128 B.C., both actions, of course, having the effect of increasing the hostility between the two groups.

But Jesus will not be sidetracked, and uses her argument to lead her back into the main subject of spiritual realities. He points her to the new age approaching, when worship will not be limited by time or space: with the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer, his/her life can become a continuous attitude of worship to God, wherever the place, whatever the activity. Again she tries to fob him off by saying these things are beyond the understanding of ordinary people and they should leave it to the Messiah to explain everything to them. Jesus counters that argument by simply declaring he is the Messiah she's been waiting for!

This must have been a mind-blowing thought for the woman. Samaritans only accepted the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Bible) and so were ignorant of the messianic prophecies scattered throughout the rest of the Scriptures. With limited understanding they did not try to fathom further mysteries. But Jesus' words had found an answering longing in her heart, and **verse 29** shows her growing conviction that what Jesus said of himself was true.

How often when speaking to friends about Jesus, have they fobbed you off with excuses such as “too many hypocrites in the church”, “why does God allow suffering?” etc.? Are you tempted then to argue their point with them? It doesn't work. No-one can be argued into the Kingdom of God: it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict of sin: our job is simply to state the case in love.

And Jesus showed such love to this woman. Divorce in that culture could only be initiated by the husband, who had to state publicly that his wife was unclean, unloving or incapable of fulfilling her wifely duties. Five men had therefore publicly shamed this woman and now she was most likely living with her current partner simply to avoid starvation. By contrast, Jesus did not shame her. If she had felt rejected or condemned by Him the rest of the story would never have happened. Jesus knew her sin, but he also knew the longings of her heart, and knew that through him she could at last find the answer to her deepest need.

Here we see the purpose of Jesus' ministry: to replace the old, dried-up ritualistic religion with a vital, living relationship. The “broken cisterns” are to be exchanged for the “living water” and the self-righteous (Jewish) or the uninformed, adulterated (Samaritan) worship must give way to true worship of God as a spiritual Being.

Worship can be so enjoyable as we sing with gusto our favourite songs. But is that all there is to worship? I cringe when the time for taking up the offering is used for idle chatter, when our giving a gift to God should be worship! What about prayer-time? Ushers usually prevent late-comers from entering during this time when the congregation is talking to God, yet people wander in during the Bible reading – the time when God is talking to the congregation! Surely that demands more reverence! And what about the sermon? It is not a time to let our minds wander or even have a kip. Again it is God speaking to us. To worship God in a way pleasing to Him, demands our whole heart and soul and mind – otherwise it is not worship at all.

A double-take for the disciples!

In **verse 27** the disciples returned from their excursion into the town to buy some food: this itself is surprising, as some Jews would never eat food that had been handled by a Samaritan. Those few early disciples had learnt something from the teaching of their Master! Still, they were surprised to see Jesus talking to a woman – a Samaritan woman at that! – but had learnt enough about him to keep their misgivings to themselves! They had a lot to learn about the extent and purpose of Jesus’ ministry.

It is significant that the woman left her water jar at the well, **verse 28**. She had much more important things on her mind now – and the jar gave her a good excuse to come back to talk to Jesus again! One wonders when he eventually got his drink?! Like quicksilver the woman spread the glad word and a crowd of eager townsfolk came out to see for themselves.

Concerned for their weary Master the disciples urged him to eat, and in response were treated to a demonstration of the unequalled joy that fills someone who has been telling another about God. His fatigue forgotten, Jesus rejoiced that he had been doing the will of God his Father and playing a part in the work of salvation initiated by God Himself. (**Verses 31-38.**) “He has sent me to finish His work,” Jesus told them – and later, on the Cross, he echoed the words with that great triumphant cry of **John 19:30** - “It is finished!” (which can also be translated, “It is accomplished!”)

Jesus refers in **verse 35** to the common saying, “Four months and then the harvest” - meaning that grain would take its own time to grow and could not be hurried. But he went on to tell them to open their eyes and see that the harvest was already ripe and there was no time to be lost in telling the world about God’s way of salvation. The thought of the sower and the reaper (**verses 36-38**) sharing in the joy of this work is developed by Paul in **1 Corinthians 3:6-9**. We all have different jobs in the field of God’s kingdom, but it is God alone Who produces the harvest. In the case of the disciples, others – i.e. prophets throughout the Old Testament days – had sowed the seed of God’s Word, and the disciples would build on this with the message of Christ’s salvation and the establishment of His Church.

We see some great evangelist reaping a harvest as he gives an invitation from the platform and people stream out to signify their decision to follow Christ. Does that make you feel ineffective in your own attempts to witness? Evangelisation is so much more than that. Without a great deal of “nuts and bolts” work behind the scenes the evangelist would have no harvest. We each have different talents, different personalities, different roles in serving God. True, there will be times when we are called upon to voice our faith as clearly as we can, but we can be true witnesses simply with our life, our attitudes, our underlying love for God and man. Perhaps you will sow and never see another reaping from that grounding. Sometimes you may reap from another’s sowing. Leave the results to God and get on joyfully with the job!

The Harvest Begins.

Verses 39-42 give us the heart-warming end to this story. In contrast to the Scripture-savvy Jews who were so sceptical about Jesus, the deprived and twisted Samaritans come out from Sychar in droves in eager response to the word of the woman. Her social stigma seems to have been set aside as they followed her to the well, and with quick acceptance they begged him to stay and tell them more about God. **Verse 41** records “many more became believers.” Interesting fact that Jesus and his disciples stayed for 2 days – meaning that they would have accepted Samaritan hospitality – food, beds, social interaction – as a foretaste of the breaking down of the taboos separating the 2 groups. Perhaps Jesus’ attitude to them spoke as loudly as his words!

The happy climax comes in **verse 42** – in this new fellowship of believers the woman was at last accepted, but most important of all was their realisation, ahead of that of any of the Jews – that “we know this man really is the Saviour of the world.”

