



## “Freedom and Power”

*John 4:1–26, 39–42*

***Reaching across boundaries to “others” takes real courage.***

Why did Jesus have to go to Samaria (see v. 4)? That verse never caught my eye before. Why emphasize that Jesus *had* to go there? Perhaps because Samaria was “enemy territory,” people with whom devout Jews wouldn’t share a meal. When

Jews traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem, they traveled down the Jordan River valley so they could avoid the despised Samaritans.

We, like the ancient Jews and all peoples, tend to be quite skilled at erecting boundaries around groups of people. Like the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, the shock (at least to the Jews) in this story is built on the fact that it is the hated Samaritans, of all people, who are the first to flock to Jesus, proclaiming him “Savior of the world.” This story—the Woman at the Well—tears down such ethnic boundaries. It also tears down barriers between men and women. Jesus doesn’t care that he is speaking to a woman alone – or perhaps he has picked her for that very reason. In the gospels, you can always count on Jesus’ inviting in the people we’d think would be the last ones to be invited.

So, this is a story of courage. Jesus traveling through Samaria and talking with this unnamed woman. And the woman herself who introduced Jesus to her fellow Samaritans. Here is their story.

### ***At the well***

Traveling through Samaria, Jesus comes to a well in the middle of the day. A woman is there. At the well at noon? Alone? Something is wrong with this picture. Women went to the well in the cool of the morning or the evening, but not at noon—in the hottest part of the day. Yet, there she is.

Though no one outside the village would know why the woman is there at noon, Jesus knows. But he soon fills the woman’s head with questions of her own. Jesus asks her for water, though Jews avoided Samaritans and would never drink from their cup or eat from their plate. And he is a man. It was very improper for a Jewish man to be seen alone with any woman and unthinkable that he should speak with her. All this surely set her head spinning. We quickly see that there is something very odd going on. N. T. Wright elaborates on this:

For a start, Jesus was known already as a holy man, leading a movement to bring Israel back to God. (John’s readers know that he is more than that, but we must learn to think with the minds of his followers at the time.) In that culture, many devout Jewish men would not have allowed themselves to be alone with a woman. If it was unavoidable that they should be, they would certainly not have entered into conversation with her. The risk, they would have thought, was too high—risk of impurity, risk of gossip, risk ultimately of being drawn into immorality. And yet Jesus is talking to this woman. Later in the chapter John shows how startled the disciples were by this (4:27).

Second, the woman is of course a Samaritan. Ever since some of the Jewish exiles had come back from Babylon, to find that the central section of their ancient territory was occupied by a group who claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham, and who opposed their return, there had been constant trouble. Sometimes it had broken out into actual skirmishes, with bloodshed and murder. But mostly it was simply a matter of not mixing. The Jews wouldn’t have anything to do with the Samaritans. They would, especially, not share eating and drinking vessels with them. And yet Jesus is asking this woman for a drink.

Third, compounding both of these problems, the woman is obviously a bad character. The normal time for women to visit the well, set as it was at some distance from the town, would be at a cooler time of day, most likely first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. This woman has come at the time

when she is least likely to meet anyone—at least, anyone who knows her, her past and her immoral lifestyle. The last thing she would want would be to rub shoulders with the other women of the town, and they would feel the same about her. Jesus will presently show that he knows all about this. And yet he engages her in conversation—conversation with a teasing, double-meaning flavor to it.<sup>1</sup>

Then Jesus begins to talk with her about some kind of water that forever banishes thirst and has something to do with eternal life. Who could blame her for focusing on the straightforward possibility of never having to carry water from the well again.

Next, we learn why she is there at mid-day when no one else comes to the well. She has had five husbands and is currently living with a man to whom she is not even married. She comes at noon to avoid the smirks and snickers of the other women in the village. She lives a lonely life, socially cut-off in a world driven by family and community. She is, in a word, an outcast.

### DOES JESUS SAY “I AM HE” OR “I AM”?

In verse 25 of the story of the Samaritan woman, you'll see that she ends the conversation about worship with a sort of “we'll see.” The Messiah will come someday, she says, and answer all these questions. In response, Jesus says, in the NRSV and NIV translations, “I am he,” staking claim to messiahship. Yet the Greek doesn't say, “I am he,” it says “I am” (*ego eimi*). The CEB translators chose to translate the Greek simply as “I am,” even going so far as to capitalize the “am.”

This phrase (*ego eimi*) comes up so often in John's gospel that it is hard to believe that John wants us to see nothing more than self-identification here. “I am” is the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. God is the great I AM. When Jesus responds, “*ego eimi*,” it is a bold connection with the divine name. Later in the gospel, when arresting officers ask Jesus whether he is Jesus of Nazareth, he again responds “*ego eimi*” – and everyone falls to the ground. They understand the larger meaning of Jesus' response.

Not surprisingly, she quickly gets over her astonishment that Jesus knows these things about her and tries to change the subject. Isn't that so like us all. When we get close to the heart of the matter, when we begin talking about something that makes us uncomfortable, we try to shift the conversation elsewhere.

The woman begins to talk about worship, especially the “where” of worship. I guess that shouldn't surprise us either. We can get pretty caught up in the importance of this spot of land or that one, in one building or another. Certainly, Jesus' fellow Jews were often so focused on the importance of “The Land,” that they failed to see God's working in all the world. So, Jesus tries to help her see that worship is not about the “where” but the “who.” What matters is not where the woman worships, on the mountain or in Jerusalem, but that she worship the one true God. And as we learn in John's gospel, that one true God is revealed fully only in Jesus Christ.

The obvious question is what or whom do you and I worship? N.T. Wright is on the mark when he says that we become like what we worship. Worship money and we become greedy. Worship sex and we become lustful. But worship the LORD God and we become Christlike. And as the story proceeds, the woman and many of her fellow Samaritans come to embrace Jesus as the “who.” Indeed, it is Samaritans, not Jews, who proclaim Jesus to be not merely the Messiah but to be the “Savior of the world” (4:42).

#### **Saved for?**

John's gospel is built on a series of encounters. Person after person meets Jesus and the questions are always the same: Who is Jesus and what is their response? Some believe<sup>2</sup> and some don't.

<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (40–41). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> The word “believe (believed/believing)” is used in John nearly 100 times! It translates the Greek verb form of the word “faith/*pistis*.” It would be better if we said “faithing,” but we've lost the verb form of “faith” in the English language, so we use “believing” instead. In John, the noun “faith” is never used, the emphasis is completely on the action – trusting in, believing in, Jesus—*faithing*.

The Samaritan woman believes. We don't really know why. Is it Jesus' knowing things he can't know? Or does she see in Jesus, the Word? Regardless, she goes and tells others her good news, and they believe. Her salvation is not merely for her sake, but for the sake of her neighbors, even the whole world.

Indeed, these Samaritans are so excited that they ask Jesus to stick around and he does, for two days, during which time "many more believed because of his word" (4:41). No longer is their believing the result of the woman's testimony, but because of what they hear for themselves. Bear in mind that the woman has saved no one; that is God's work, using her testimony.

Because these people were Samaritans, despised by the Jews, it is easy for us to grasp that when Jesus offers this woman new life, he is offering it to all. Though Jesus is a Jew, his vocation is for the whole world. This story echoes John the Baptist's exclamation when he sees Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). In Christ, we discover the God whom we are to worship. And it is in Jesus that some Samaritans discovered the God they worshipped.

### ***The fruits of courage***

One of the most striking features of today's story is that it is Samaritans who are the first to really "get it." They believe his word; they believe him. Not his astounding feats, to which the Jewish crowds have been drawn, but to Jesus' words.

The Samaritans have heard and believed and, hence, understood that Jesus is not merely a Jewish Messiah, but the "Savior of the world," echoing Jesus' own words to Nicodemus: "For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (3:17).

Though so many in John's gospel can't see the truth about Jesus, some do. Unbelief need not be a permanent disease. There is a cure. But embracing the cure inevitably is an act of faith, of having the courage to trust.