

3. What Truly Satisfies

When one has a famishing thirst for happiness, one is apt to gulp down diversions wherever they are offered.

-- Alice Hegan Rice

A minister decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon. He lined up four jars in front of the pulpit, and he placed a worm into each container:

- He put the first worm into a container of alcohol.
- He put the second worm into a container of cigarette smoke.
- The third worm went into a container of chocolate syrup.
- He gently placed the fourth worm into a container of good, clean soil.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the Minister reported the following results:

- The worm in alcohol - Dead.
- The worm in cigarette smoke - Dead.
- Third worm in chocolate syrup - Dead.
- Fourth worm in good clean soil - Alive.

So the Minister asked the congregation – “What can we learn from this demonstration?”

A woman in the back quickly raised her hand and said, "As long as you drink, smoke or eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

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Our Bible passage today is not about worms or soil, but it is about the lessons we can learn from Jesus. Lessons about life and meaning and happiness. And we'll see that as we explore the story of one woman's encounter with Jesus. For her, meeting Jesus changed everything she understood about finding satisfaction and fulfilment.

Why don't we pray that God will teach us the same lessons as we open his word now...

Our heavenly Father, thank you for the Bible, and for the record of Jesus' words and teachings. Help us now to hear and understand your words to us in this Bible passage. May it not go over our heads, but into our hearts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Well, we are in the middle of our sermon series called *Encounters with Jesus*. It is all about people who met Jesus, and how they were changed by it.

Our encounter today starts with Jesus on a journey. He's traveling from the south of Israel (Judea) back up north to his hometown of Galilee. That's a 70 mile journey that Jesus would have undertaken at least once every year as he travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem for the festivals and back. This time he was leaving the south because of tension with the Jewish religious authorities – Jesus was baptizing more people even than John the Baptist, and well, safe to say, Jesus decided it would be better to put some distance between himself and his critics.

Now the obvious route from Judea to Galilee is to go directly north. But there was a complication with that. Traveling directly north from Judea to Galilee meant going through Samaria. But Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. We know that from history, and we know it from this Bible passage in v9. In the brackets it says: *Jews do not associate with Samaritans*.

You see, Samaria had once been part of the promised land, and its people had been part of God's Old Testament people. But that changed about 700 years before Christ's birth, when the northern kingdom was invaded by the Assyrians, and most of its people were taken away into exile.

The way the Assyrians kept control over the lands they invaded was to take most of the native inhabitants away, and then replace them with people they had taken from other lands they had conquered. You can imagine how it worked. Samaria became this mish-mash of the cultures and religions of the people who were resettled there.

And that was the start of some very bad blood between the Jews and the Samaritans.

The animosity was so bad that many Jews would actually avoid Samaria altogether if they were travelling up north, by crossing the Jordan River and travelling through the eastern cities.

So keep that in the back of your mind as the story unfolds.

Jesus, he goes through Samaria. He **had** to, it says there in v4... (I wonder why? Perhaps we'll find the answer in the story.)

In v5, he arrives in Sychar, and he stops at Jacob's well.

This well had significance for the Jewish people – Jacob was one of the patriarchs of the Jewish people. He had given this plot of land to his son Joseph, and Joseph ended up being buried there... So this well was a landmark for Jews – a place to stop on the journey, to drink, and to remember the story of Jewish people and how the Lord had provided for them...

The Woman at the Well

Jesus is hot and tired and thirsty because it is the sixth hour – midday. He’s probably been travelling since dawn – about six hours. So he sits down by the well.

Soon a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. And Jesus says to her: *“Will you give me a drink.”*

To you and me, this scene looks like two people at a well.

To the audience at the time, when they see Jesus with a woman at a well, it would have raised all kinds of questions.

First, there’s an OT stereotype about men and women meeting at wells. It often leads to them getting married. Remember this was how Isaac found his wife in the Abraham story we just finished. And it’s also how Isaac’s son Jacob found his wife – at this very same well that Jesus is standing at...

So we wonder: is this going to end in marriage?

The **second** thing the original audience would have noticed is how this goes against social conventions.

In their culture at the time, men and women didn’t talk to strangers of the opposite sex. They wouldn’t even make eye contact. It wasn’t the done thing. It was seen as improper, and inappropriate.

To make things worse, Jesus is all alone – he has no chaperone. The disciples had gone to town to buy food (v8).

And the woman is all alone too. Normally the women would come together at dusk to get water. But this woman is here at midday, all alone, no other women are with her... Perhaps she’s the sort of woman who meets unaccompanied men at the well. Or maybe there’s another reason why she’s not with the other women. Let’s read on to find out.

Then there’s the other problem we raised – the ethnic tension between Jews and Samaritans (4:9).

The woman (v9) brings it up straight away.

"You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (John 4:9)

If this were a movie scene, we'd certainly wonder what was about to happen...

Are you ready to find out?

PAUSE

Well... they have a conversation... about water.

Living Water

She says (v9) *How can you ask me for a drink?*

And Jesus says (v10):

"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10)

For a tired, thirsty guy, Jesus was a pretty clear thinker. (I'm terrible when I'm dehydrated!) Jesus turns the question back on the woman – if you knew who I was, you'd be asking me for a drink. And I would have given you living water...

She's confused.

11 "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? (John 9:11)

She's thinking physical water. Living water is another way of saying spring water, water which bubbles up from underground, always fresh and cool, as opposed to stagnant water which sits on the surface getting fouled by birds and animals...

Jacob's well was a spring, a deep one. Apparently you can go there today and it's still a hundred feet deep. It was a reliable source of water.

So the woman makes fun of Jesus (v12):

¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

She doesn't think Jesus can do better than the water from the well.

But Jesus wasn't talking about physical water (v13):

¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14)

She's still thinking physical water:

"Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

A few years ago, Jo and I were in Tanzania, headed to the Serengeti for a safari. One of the stops on the itinerary was this incredible volcanic crater called Ngorogoro Crater. It's almost 12 miles wide, and 2000 feet deep. You drop into the crater and it is this lush paradise full of wildlife – lions, zebra, wildebeest, black rhinos, and hippos. It's truly incredible when you're down in the floor of the crater, looking up at the walls.

What's also amazing about Ngorogoro is that it is surrounded by a landscape that is a wasteland – it's this bone dry desert that looks like the surface of the moon, due to overgrazing by the cattle of the local tribesmen. It's this stark contrast – dry, red dust giving away to the green undergrowth of the volcano...

Ngorogoro is very important to the tribesmen, because it is the water source for their cattle.

And so everyday, the tribesmen are allowed to walk their herds down into the crater to drink... Just for an hour at a time, and then they have to leave again.

Can you imagine for them, the idea of water that you could drink and never be thirsty again? Never again having to walk down the steep track for such a short drink...

Water is so crucial in a dry environment like Tanzania, and it was the same in Israel...

But Jesus wasn't talking about physical water, was he? The metaphor went straight over the Samaritan woman's head. Jesus was talking about something spiritual, water to quench your soul's thirst. A gift from God that satisfies your soul, because it's the gift of eternal life (v14). Spiritual water that makes you alive spiritually.

We can ask God for all sorts of physical needs in our prayers. And that's OK. But Jesus reminds us here that there is more to life than the physical. You may not see God, but he is there. Filling Jacob's well with spring water, just like he has for 4000 years. But more importantly, filling souls with the living water of eternal life, as people hear and respond to Jesus. If you knew who *he* was, and if you knew the gift that this living water is, you would ask *him* and he would give *you* living water...

So I have to ask today, do you know Jesus as the giver of eternal life, the giver of living water, Jesus who quenches your soul's thirst?

Do you know him?

Because people drink at so many other wells and fountains, trying to find satisfaction.

- Fountain of wealth.
 - o Promises so much, but costs you every waking moment to pursue it, and keeps you awake at night worrying. And when do you get to enjoy it? However much you have, you always want more. Wealth will never satisfy.
- Fountain of other peoples' approval
 - o where you find your value and worth from people affirming your work or personality or your physique, your social media account... But you can't please everybody all the time. Trying to find your satisfaction from other peoples' approval will always disappoint.
- There are other fountains that people are drinking from to try and find satisfaction and meaning –
 - o the fountain of happiness
 - o the fountain of health
 - o the fountain of youth
 - o the fountain of sex...
- They're all fickle, they're all elusive. They can never satisfy.

(v16) Jesus says to the woman, *"Go, call your husband and come back."*

Turns out she doesn't have a husband. Actually she's had 5 husbands and she's not married to the man she's with now. This is a woman with a thirst to be loved, but it never seems to work out...

Perhaps she's embarrassed. Perhaps she doesn't want to be caught out in the sin of adultery – the Samaritans were religious, they followed part of the Jewish scriptures. She tries to keep it a secret, but Jesus knows all about her. Even though they've never met.

Press pause on the story for a moment – what do we expect to come next?

Judgment? Or moralising, at least? Surely Jesus will say something to her about the 5 husbands, if they were even husbands. Surely he'll tell her to stop sinning.

But he doesn't.

Read all the way to the end of the chapter, he never judges her. It's perplexing. It's certainly unexpected...

Jesus says nothing, and actually the conversation switches to worship.

She says to Jesus (v19),

¹⁹ "Sir, [...] I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Maybe it's just her way of changing the subject. Or maybe she wants to engage Jesus in a more spiritual conversation. But she says they have some things in common – they both worship the same God, although the Samaritans worship in one place, where the Jews say that true worship can only happen in Jerusalem. That was one of the sticking points between Jews and Samaritans.

But Jesus says, actually, the time is coming when neither of those ways of worshiping will be relevant anymore. This mountain, that mountain, they won't matter. The Jerusalem temple, Jesus had already spoken of its destruction in ch2. The new way of worship, Jesus says in v23 and 24, is to worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

What did Jesus mean when he said: worship in the Spirit and in truth?

I did a google image search for this verse, and pretty much every internet picture with this verse on it had worship hands in the air. Clearly the internet thinks true worship is singing with your hands up...

But that's not what Jesus meant... See he says in v24 that God is spirit – God doesn't have a physical body, he's a spiritual being rather than material. And so the material place of worship is irrelevant – Jerusalem, Mount Gerizim, a cathedral, a chapel – it doesn't matter. Worship is a matter of spirit.

Of course as we read on in John, Jesus will make this idea even clearer, when he says that he will give the gift of the Holy Spirit to believers. So that God dwells in us by faith. It means we can worship God wherever we are, from the heart, and not just when we're in a certain place, or doing certain things. And so worship is not about music or liturgy or religious ceremonies, it's about connecting with our Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Spirit and truth.

And this woman by the well, she grasps the truth – she tells Jesus that she is waiting for the Messiah or the Christ to explain it to her. And Jesus says – I am he.

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Some huge ideas there in the passage! It'd be easy for them to go over our heads. So I want to bring it down to earth to finish with two ideas.

I think there are two times in life when you don't want to meet Jesus.

The **first** time in life when you don't want to meet Jesus, it's when you're caught out in sin like this woman... You might have something going on in your life right now, something hidden. And if it was exposed, it would be devastating. The last thing you want is for Jesus to do is tap you on the shoulder and say, I know everything...

PAUSE

Here's the thing. Jesus didn't respond to the woman with judgment, did he? Instead he responds with love, compassion, understanding, forgiveness.

And Jesus does that because he is his Father's Son. Jesus is just like his heavenly Father. And God is loving, compassionate, merciful, forgiving.

In John 3:17 – we read that *God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn, but to save!*

God wants to save us! He wants to save *you*.

In the media at the moment, God is often painted as judgmental and hateful and immoral and unloving.

But here, God shows his true disposition towards people – LOVE.

So you may not want to meet Jesus right now because of sin in your life. But this passage teaches us that this is exactly the time you need to meet Jesus. *Because* you are weighed down with sin, because you *need* Jesus for salvation. Because you are thirsty spiritually, needing relief. Only God can soothe your thirst with the cool water of forgiveness that wells up into eternal life.

What about the **second** time in life you don't want to meet Jesus? I think the second time in life you don't want to meet Jesus is when you don't feel thirsty...

Many of us don't feel thirsty.

We feel satisfied already – with life, with family, with friends, with the comfort of church attendance, the rhythm of church life.

So satisfied, that maybe you don't really need God to quench your thirst anymore.

I say this very carefully, and with love, and because it's a tendency even I could fall into. You see, Jesus says true worshippers will worship in spirit and in truth. And only you know if your worship is true.

But just say I'm right, and somehow along the way Jesus has dropped out of the picture. Somehow God has shrunk and shrunk and shrunk out of your daily life so much that he's not really part of it, if you're honest with yourself.

Brother, sister, you might not want Jesus, but you need him. You might not want him standing over your shoulder, but if you're not worshipping Jesus then you're worshipping something else. Family, fitness, status, wealth, happiness, experiences. They can't save you. And they won't satisfy. Only Jesus can quench your soul's thirst. Only Jesus can give you life to the full.

If you go to the very last chapter of the Bible, it closes with an image of heaven. And heaven is portrayed as this city, with the throne of God and the throne of Jesus at its center. And flowing out from the throne is the river of life. On either side of the river, the tree of life grows, bearing fruit all year round. It's an image of life, and abundance all because of that living water.

And in the midst of it, Jesus speaks. He says:

Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life. (Revelation 22:17 NLT)

Are you thirsty? Then come to Jesus, and encounter the living water for yourself...

Let's pray

