

## **The Soul-Hunter in Samaria**

Sharing your faith can be a scary thing. Most Christians know they should do it, but many Christians don't get very far in doing it. One of the best ways of learning evangelism is watching someone else do it. I remember as a teenager going with my church to knock on doors and share the faith with anyone who was willing to let us in and listen. And I learned by just watching someone more experienced. I learned how to introduce yourself, how to be a polite guest. I learnt how to drink Rooibos tea by subtly holding my nose every time I swallowed. I learned how the conversation can go from general to specific, from life in general to the gospel itself. I learned evangelism by watching it done.

But the ultimate evangelist was the Lord Jesus. He Himself was the good news; and He Himself was the ultimate preacher of the good news. There are few passages as powerful as John 4 to see the master evangelist at work in a conversation with a stranger.

This touching and amazing story of the Lord's pursuit of one soul breaks down into four sections: the circumstances, the casual conversation, the conviction, and the conversion. It is not hard to see our own evangelism and our own lives as we watch a master-class in sharing the gospel from the Messiah.

### **I. The Circumstances**

Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John <sup>2</sup> (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), <sup>3</sup> He left Judea and departed again to Galilee.

We saw last time that some of the Jewish leaders began disputing with John's disciples, and no doubt brought up the fact that Jesus now had more disciples and they were doing more baptising. Jesus knew that remaining this close to Jerusalem, the hub of Pharisees and Sadducees was likely to bring about premature conflict and controversy. He also didn't want to allow the Pharisees to polarising John's disciples and His own and pit them against each other. So Jesus will now head north back up to His home territory, Galilee. But to do that, verse 4 tells us what was in the way.

<sup>4</sup>But He needed to go through Samaria.

To get to Galilee, you needed to go north, and the straightest path led through the territory of Samaria. From a Roman point of view, this was still part of the province of Judea, but from a Jewish point of view, it may as well have been pagan Greece. The Samaritans were definitely not considered to be part of Israel.

The problem goes back to when the kingdom of Israel split into two under Solomon's son Rehoboam. Judah and Benjamin in the south, and ten tribes in the north. The northern kingdom went through a few kings, six in the time that the southern kingdom went through three. The sixth of those was a king named Omri. He bought a hill from a man named Shemer, and named the city he built there after him, Samaria. It became the capital city of the northern kingdom. Well, you remember the northern kingdom went from worshipping the true God in a false way to eventually worshipping false gods altogether under Ahab and Jezebel. Within 150 years, God judged Israel by allowing the Assyrians to defeat it and lead the rich and influential off into captivity. Faithful, God-fearing Israelites fled south to live under Hezekiah, the rest were captured and led off. Assyria left only the poor Israelites in the land, and then settled it with foreigners from all over. They intermarried with poor Israelites.

The Bible tells us that the land was ravaged by lions, and so the Assyrians ordered a few priests in

captivity to come back and teach the new people the old Israelite religion. The result was syncretism, a mixed religion that retained something of the law of Moses, plus some of their own traditions. By 400 B.C., they had built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim, which was later destroyed by one of the Jewish priest-kings John Hyrcanus.

So there was great hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans sold Jews into slavery during the persecution of Antiochus. Sometimes they would deliberately light beacon fires at the wrong time to confuse Jews as to when the month had began. Apparently they at least once tried to desecrate the Temple on the eve of Passover. Pilgrims to and from Jerusalem had even been killed. Jews responded by treating Samaritans with contempt, by disowning them as part of Israel, and referring to them as the Cuthim, the foreigners.

Now going through Samaria was the shortest, simplest way to go from Jerusalem north to Galilee. But you could avoid it, and some hyper-pious from Judea would avoid it. But Jesus did not do that, because His mission included all people.

<sup>5</sup> So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from *His* journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

Jesus arrives at this city which is close to Jacob's well. This is a town close to Mt Ebal, probably near modern-day Nablus, about halfway between Jerusalem and Nazareth. We don't know when Jacob dug this well. There was usually a stone wall around it, and a kind of parapet built over it for shade.

It's likely midday, the heat of the day, when most people are indoors. It's also harvest time, which means it is June or July in Israel, when temperatures reach their hottest.

The walk has been an extremely long one, and Jesus is exhausted. Once again, we clearly see the humanity of Jesus. He will rest here in the shade, while the disciples go into the town, buy food, drink, and possibly even a vessel to use to draw water out of the well. It's possible that John stayed with Jesus, since it could be dangerous to be anywhere alone, and also the ensuing conversation sounds like John was an eyewitness. These are the circumstances, that set up the evangelistic moment that was to follow.

## II. The Casual Conversation

<sup>7</sup> A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." <sup>8</sup> For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

Enter the great focus, target and goal of Messiah's love on this day: a Samaritan women. From the point of view of rabbinic Judaism, she had three strikes against her. First, she was a woman, and rabbinic Judaism saw that as inferior. Second, she was a Samaritan, which they saw as apostates. Third, as we'll find out, she was a sinner.

She stands in stark contrast to the previous conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus.

He was a man, she was a woman. He was a Jew; she was a Samaritan. He was a prominent teacher and member of the Sanhedrin; she was an unnamed nobody. He knew the Scriptures; she knew only the folklore and tradition of Samaritan folk religion. He was outwardly moral; she was publicly and notoriously a sinner. He comes by night; she comes to this well at midday.

The fact that she came alone, instead of in a group of women shows she was probably an outcast. The fact that she came at this time of day, when she expected there to be no one, showed she was

likely derided and shunned, and didn't want to be at the well when there were other women there. Apparently, there was another well on the east side of this town that was nearer, which is likely where the women of Sychar went. Again, she was either forcibly isolated, or seeking isolation.

Now just imagine how Jesus could have 'minded his own business'. All these contrasts between Himself and her is the perfect reason to just maybe nod politely when she arrived, and then look distracted and remain silent while she silently drew water. Jesus could have had 100 reasons not to talk to her, "We have nothing in common." "What will people think?" "I am so exhausted and I have done enough ministry today." He could have let her draw water, let her go her way and never have said a word to her. If this was the 21st-century, Jesus could have taken out a phone and started checking and scrolling to look busy.

Like so many people we meet, people we are given a few moments with, in a car, a plane, a queue, a gym, an event, we can tell ourselves that it is not our role to give them the gospel, not this moment, not this time. Evangelism is about initiating a friendly conversation.

But Jesus breaks the silence, and speaks to her, asking her for a favour. "Could you give me a drink?"

<sup>9</sup> Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

She knew Jesus was a Jew because His clothing would have had tassels on the corners, with a blue thread in those tassels. His own accent would have made it very clear that He was Jewish.

When she saw Him, she likely expected Him to sneeringly look the other way, if not even get up and increase the distance between them. For Jesus to be speaking to her is breaking all the social taboos. He is talking to a woman, a Samaritan, and a sinner. She expected Him to think that any social contact with her would be defiling to Him.

Further, He'd be borrowing her jars or utensils and drinking from them. "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" even has an idea connected to meals and sharing dishes. But Jesus touches the untouchable. He is not made unclean by what He touches; instead, whatever He touches becomes clean.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

The next step is that Jesus tries to move the conversation in a spiritual direction, to create interest or curiosity. Jesus swings it around. "Actually, the unusual thing is not that I'm talking to you and asking for a drink. The unusual thing is that you are not asking me for a drink. If you understood who I am, and if you understood God's gift of love and life and light to the world, you'd be doing the asking, and I'd be doing the giving."

Now here is a great secret of evangelism. Jesus always sees in the physical some illustration of the spiritual; in the visible there is a lesson about the invisible, nature teaches something about supernature. Whether it is human birth, or bread, or water, or sheep, or harvest fields, Jesus takes these things to teach ultimate things. But it is a great technique to learn. Whatever physical or natural thing might be part of your circumstance or initial conversation, it can often illustrate spiritual things. It can be a bridge to get the conversation to the gospel.

Usually He is misunderstood, and a discussion ensues.

Now the words “living water” were easily misunderstood, because in Hebrew they meant the same as running water. Water from a river, a stream, a pool with water pumped in and out, the ocean, a lake were all living water. That was the water you needed for ritual cleansing. Water from a well, a reservoir, a standing pond was not living water. Remember in Jeremiah, God had rebuked Israel for their idolatry by saying: <sup>13</sup> “For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, *And* hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:13)

But Jesus means that He is the living water, or as in chapter 7, the Holy Spirit is the living water, which He gives. But she cannot see the spiritual meaning behind His words, and thinks He is referring to some hidden spring or fountain.

<sup>11</sup> The woman said to Him, “Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? <sup>12</sup> Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?”

She is very sceptical of this man. The well is over 100 feet deep. Jacob dug it at great cost and with much manpower. She suspects Jesus is a charlatan, if He is making claims to be a well-digger.

<sup>13</sup> Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, <sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

Here Jesus is trying to get her to cross the bridge from physical to spiritual, from temporal to eternal. “The kind of water I give satisfies your thirst permanently. The water I give generates more water, continuing into life beyond death.” The prophets of Israel were full of this imagery.

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. (Is 55:1)

<sup>25</sup> Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:25–26)

Jesus has sought to get the conversation on spiritual terms, but she may not yet be getting it.

<sup>15</sup> The woman said to Him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”

More than likely, she just wants water that will make her life easier. Maybe she is even challenging Jesus to just prove Himself. So now Jesus moves to the next major moment in evangelism.

### **III. The Conviction of Need**

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.”

Of course, Jesus knows this woman as the Creator knows His creatures. He knows her through the omniscience He has as God-man. In this moment, Jesus employs His knowledge of her that will alert her to the kind of water she needs.

<sup>17</sup> The woman answered and said, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ <sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly.”

This is not Jesus being sarcastic. This is Jesus seeking to commend whatever He can in this broken woman's life. Jesus commends the formal truthfulness of her statement. It is true that you don't have

a husband. You are not actually married to the man you are living with now. And it is true that you are no longer married to the five husbands you have had. And had He wanted to, Jesus could have told her their names, and why they divorced, or if one or more of them died.

Jesus is trying to show her her need. What she needs is not physical water. She needs the spiritual water of forgiveness, an inner cleansing, a new heart, a new life. This is why she comes to the well alone at midday. Her life is one of shame, and pain, and regret.

We don't know things about people like Jesus did. But we do know everyone is a sinner. We know everyone is alienated from God. Everyone lives in a fallen world and is part of that fallenness. We can confront people with their brokenness.

But there is no way that Jesus could have come by this information without revelation from God. Just as when He told Nathanael that He had seen him under the fig tree, and Nathanael recognised Jesus as Messiah, so this piece of information could only come from God. The conversation is now firmly turned towards spiritual matters: towards God, sin, worship, eternity.

<sup>19</sup> The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you *Jews* say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."

Here is the understatement of the century. She knows she is talking to someone who has access to divine knowledge. Now why is she bringing up the dispute between Jews and Samaritans about where the Temple is supposed to be?

Well, on the one hand, she is doing what every sinner does once their sin is exposed: deflect attention from me, change the subject, turn down the heat by raising some objection to the faith, something that lessens the intensity of conviction.

In a second way, she is doing what people do when confronted with their sin. She brings up some item of controversy, some nagging question or lingering doubt that is some kind of obstacle. She knows she is in the presence of a Jewish prophet with real power, but everyone in her life has always told her that the Jews are wrong and the Samaritans are right. So she wants it settled. What does Jesus do? What should we do with distractions, diversions and objections?

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. <sup>24</sup> God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Surprisingly, Jesus is willing to follow His prey into the bush. He'll go with her, give her a short answer, and get the conversation back to ultimate things. We'll return to this section on worship in a future message, but here is the short version. Jesus says, in terms of the debate between Samaritans and Jews, you are wrong, and the Jewish people are right, no ifs and buts about it. But salvation is bigger than the dispute between Jews and Samaritans. The new covenant is going to de-localise worship from places. It is going to be about genuine, inner worship based on truth.

There's a place to clear away a genuine objection decisively, and get the conversation back to God.

That is as good an answer as she is going to get, but she is still unsure. So she has one more escape card.

<sup>25</sup> The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things."

I can't adjudicate all these religious squabbles. Everyone says they're right. Messiah will solve the disputes.

<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am *He*."

What is amazing about this direct statement is that Jesus never speaks so directly about Himself when in Judea, and in front of the Pharisees. He knows how they would respond. But here, with a simple Samaritan woman, He makes it absolutely clear. He is the Messiah, so He can settle the dispute for her right now.

You and I don't can't do that in our evangelism. But we can do something similar. When confronted with endless objections, we can say, "Well here's what Jesus said about that. Jesus claimed to be God and Messiah. And Jesus rose from the dead." If Jesus rose from the dead, then whatever He said on any issue settles that issue.

#### **IV. The Conversions**

<sup>28</sup> The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, <sup>29</sup> "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" <sup>30</sup> Then they went out of the city and came to Him...<sup>9</sup> And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all that I ever did." <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of His own word. <sup>42</sup> Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard *Him* and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world."

She calls the city. She has a testimony of someone who has shown her to herself, someone with truth and grace. People come, people believe. And then something unheard of: they urge a Jewish man and his disciples to stay in their city and lodge under their roofs. And he does – for two days. We don't know what He taught in those two days, but the result was more conversions. One Samaritan woman became two people, four, eight, and multiplied. You do not know how that one conversation may open many others, bring many others, reach many others.

Evangelism can seem difficult, and the less you do it, the more difficult it seems.

First, your circumstances and who you meet are no accident, but are ordained by God. It was necessary for Jesus to go through Samaria, and the same necessity is part of where you find yourself and who you end up talking to. Pay attention to them.

Second, Jesus was friendly and kind to strangers, willing to initiate conversations. We should likewise try to open up friendly, casual conversations, and see where they lead.

Third, natural, everyday situations can provide bridges to spiritual conversations. Children, sports, weather, news items, the economy, a world of evil can open up ways to talk about ultimate things.

Fourth, everyone is a sinner in need of forgiveness. They may not know it, or they may know it very well. It's our job to help them to see their need.

Fifth, whatever their objections, they are answered in Jesus, the man who rose from the dead. We point people to Him.

Sixth, the goal is not "success" every time. Sometimes you will sow, and sometimes you will harvest. Be ready to do either. The fields are ripe.