

Finding satisfaction

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[0:00] So, I have never given birth, but I'm told that the closest a man can come to experiencing! I'm told this, I have no way to objectively measure it, but I'm told that the closest a man can come to experiencing the pain of childbirth is a kidney stone. So, maybe somebody out there has gone through both and you can tell me how comparable they are. I did have a kidney stone about three years ago. It was memorable. My wife had to drive me to the ER and I thought I was dying. But when I got there, you know, I talked to the doctor. Obviously, one of the more important questions from my perspective was, how do I make sure this never happens again? And the doctor said that the reason that I got the kidney stone was due to dehydration.

And when I say dehydration, I don't just mean I went a week or two not drinking enough water and being thirsty. I mean a lifestyle of dehydration. You know, years and years and years and years and years of living thirsty, of not drinking, and over time, that actually can cause things like that.

And that's really the danger and the problem with prolonged dehydration, with living a lifestyle where you're constantly thirsty, is that you can do that for years and years and not be aware of it until something goes really wrong. And then you look back and you say, oh, now I see how this led me to this crisis. And the same is true when we think about spiritual thirst or spiritual dehydration.

Most people, if you ask them, don't feel spiritually thirsty. And the idea of spiritual hydration, dehydration, doesn't make a lot of sense to most people. So we don't feel spiritually thirsty.

We feel other things. We feel restless. You know, we feel anxious. We feel lonely. We feel unsatisfied. We feel driven. You know, there's an acronym in the addiction recovery world, HALT.

[2:10] Hungry, angry, lonely, tired. Those are the things that you feel that can often lead you to use. So you need to be on guard when you feel those things. But why do we sometimes feel that we can't identify where it's coming from? Well, underneath it all, there's spiritual thirst. And this morning, we're going to meet a woman who is severely spiritually dehydrated. She doesn't know it until she meets Jesus. And then that changes everything about her life. So I want to look at this story with you. And then we're going to draw out some implications for those of us here this morning.

Let's pray. Our Lord, Heavenly Father, we thank you because even as we turn our hearts and minds to pray, you're already here. You, in fact, already know what we need better than we do. So, Lord, we simply ask that your will would be done in us and through us, that you would do your work through your Word. We pray that through your written Word, Lord, even as we come to understand it, Lord, that we might actually encounter your living Word. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen.

So, first of all, just to orient us to this story in John chapter 4, Jesus has decided and is now making his way from Judea to Galilee. And on his way, he passes through a region called Samaria.

And there was a lot of hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans over cultural and racial and religious differences. There was a lot of antipathy. Jesus passes through this region. And at noon, it's hot. And Jesus is hot and tired. And so he stops to rest by a well. He sends his disciples away to buy food. And by the way, if you're next time you're in the West Bank, this well is still standing. You can go see it in the town of Nablus. I think it's in an Eastern Orthodox church. And it's still, you can still draw water from it. So, Jesus is by this well. And a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. And Jesus strikes up a conversation with her by asking her for a drink. And this is a really odd encounter

for at least a couple of reasons. Number one, most people would come to draw water for the day, either in the early morning or in the late afternoon, early evening, when it was a lot cooler.

[4:39] This is the hottest part of the day. Nobody comes at this time of day. But this woman is here, happens to meet Jesus. Even more strange, though, is the fact that they even have a conversation at all.

Because as I said, a lot of hostility between Jews and Samaritans, they did not speak or interact. Men typically did not speak to or interact with women that they didn't know or weren't related to in settings like this. And yet, this is the longest private conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the entire New Testament. He has it with this woman. Now, they start out talking about well water, but Jesus very quickly pivots the conversation in a different direction to focus on a different kind of water, what he refers to as living water. It says in verse 10, 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. Now, at first, she's evasive in her response. She says, essentially, if we could put what she says into modern day, she says, who do you think you are? She's like, do you think you're better than our ancestor Jacob, who actually dug this well and drew water himself? Jacob, by the way, is the grandson of

Abraham. He's the one who gave birth to the 12 fathers, the 12 patriarchs of Israel. So she says, you think you're better than Jacob, who gave us this well? Jesus is not deterred. He presses gently forward, and he says this.

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. He's talking about the well water. 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. Now, when she hears this, this woman is intrigued, and you can tell by her response, she realizes that he's talking about something very different.

She's talking about something that seems to be able to satisfy all thirst, right? Not just physical thirst. Some eternal source of life that might be able to be put inside her somehow. And there's something in her that clearly responds to that. This is something that she desperately wants. And so she immediately responds, right? No longer evasive. And she says, sir, give me this water so that I won't have to get thirsty and come back to draw water again and again and again. And then Jesus says a very calculated response. Okay. Why don't you go and get your husband, and then the two of you come back here. And he knows exactly what he's doing. And as a result of him saying that, you can imagine her face going from lighting up to, oh no. And her secret comes out. And it's all laid bare. And we find out that this woman has been with five different men, and that the man that she's currently living with and cohabiting with is not her husband. Now, I want to be clear on what this means and what's going on in this woman's life. Bible teachers sometimes portray this woman as a kind of notorious sexual center and temptress.

[8:01] I would say if you understand the first century Jewish culture, that's probably not the whole story. In the first century, Jewish men were, the divorce laws were fairly permissive. If you were a man, and so Jewish men could divorce their wife for practically any reason, right? You burn dinner, divorce, right? The house is messy, divorce. You're just not pleasing me, divorce, right? It was fairly easy. It was a lot harder for a woman to divorce her husband. It happened, but it was a lot more rare, and it was a lot more difficult to pull off. And so it's much more likely that this woman had given herself to these men looking for the things that most of us look for when we become romantically involved with someone, looking for not just pleasure and gratification, but intimacy and love and acceptance and wholeness. And not to mention, in this society, if you're a woman, you really couldn't survive very well not being married. And so, you know, looking for safety and looking for provision and looking for security and all of the things that many of us would look for in relationships.

And what we can surmise is that she had given herself to these men and that one by one, these men had discarded her for whatever reason. The reason that she's most likely living with a man who is not her husband is probably because everybody in town believes that she is too defiled to be married.

She's damaged goods. And so nobody will marry her. So no wonder she comes to the well at noon, the hottest, most miserable part of the day. This is the time when she would be least likely to encounter anyone else from town. So you see what this means. She would rather endure the scorching heat of the noonday sun than risk being shamed by one of her neighbors. This is the reality of this woman's life.

This is the pain that she's living in. She's a pariah. She's an outcast. So this is not, I would say, just a story about a temptress, about sexual immorality.

I think this is a story about misdirected longing, about social isolation, about shame, about rejection. And here she is talking to a Jewish rabbi of all things. And somehow this Jewish rabbi knows all of her secrets before she even shares them.

[10:55] So under normal circumstances, this would be this woman's absolute worst nightmare. It's like somebody is shining a spotlight on the most painful, shameful, awful parts of her life.

Her worst, most desperately held secrets have been laid bare. But these are not normal circumstances.

And the rabbi she's talking to is Jesus. And it is striking. All the commentators say there's not the slightest hint of condemnation in anything Jesus says.

He's simply naming what is true. But then he's offering and extending an invitation. There's an invitation.

And Jesus invites her to understand the true source of her thirst. And he does that when he uses the phrase, very intentionally, living water. The phrase, living water, you may have picked up on it when Ellen was reading a moment ago.

[11:57] The phrase, living water, points us back to the Old Testament, and particularly passages like Jeremiah, chapter 2, verse 13. This is a place where God is not just talking about Israel.

He's stating the truth of the human condition. He's speaking about all of us. And he says this, 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.

Now, this is extremely important. A spring, by definition, taps into an underground water source and flows continuously. So there's a spring near our cabin in West Virginia, and the water is just constantly pouring out.

And the local people who know where the spring is will go with big jugs and everything, and you just fill up the spring. But no matter what time of day you go, day or night, the water is always flowing.

That's a spring, because it's tapped into a vast underground water source.

A cistern is a man-made tank. It's not connected to any water source. It's essentially just a large tank that collects runoff and rainwater.

[13:09] So, you know, it collects water, you drink out of it, but it gets empty, and it has to constantly be filled from somewhere else. And so this is essentially, you know, that's an essential difference.

And then God goes a step further. He says not just cisterns, but broken cisterns. Right? So a cistern doesn't have any water source feeding it. You just have to collect what you can.

But then God says we've actually dug for ourselves broken cisterns, meaning there's a big crack in the bottom. So even what we gather, even when it does rain, that water just drains out the bottom. So a broken cistern is completely useless.

It has one job, and it can't do it. It can't even hold water. And this is God's diagnosis, friends, of the human condition. He's saying there's a deep thirst in every human soul.

There's a deep thirst. There's a longing for God. Because God designed us to draw life directly from the source. He designed us to draw life from him like a spring, this vast source of life under all reality.

[14:13] But instead of doing that, he says we deny our need for God. And so inside each one of us, instead of a spring, we have a broken cistern in our soul.

And what we do is we go around to different wells trying to fill up that cistern, trying to kind of fill it and quench that thirst. But no sooner do we draw water into it than it begins to leak out the bottom.

And so it's never enough. It always leaks away, and so we always need more. As Jesus says to this woman, everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again.

Obviously, he's talking about way more than the well water. He's not talking about that at all. He's talking about the men in her life. If you keep going to these men, if you keep thinking it's going to be different this time, right, you're going to get the same result.

And I think if we're honest, this is something that we all know on some level deep down. It's interesting. This, for whatever reason, reminded me of the TV show *Mad Men*. If you know anything about that show, Don Draper, the main character, sort of is the guy who has everything.

[15:30] He has everything that our culture says should make a person happy and fulfilled. He's really good looking. He's got status. He is very successful.

He's very socially desirable. He has the ability to have sex with people when he wants to. He's sort of, a lot of times, the smartest guy in the room, the one person who knows what's going on more than anybody else.

And he has all the things that you would think would make you happy. And yet, I would say he's probably one of the most miserable characters ever created. And at one point, he says, in one of the episodes, he says, what is happiness?

What is happiness? It's a moment before you need more happiness. That's all it is. And that really sums up his life. That's what it's like trying to fill a broken sister.

No sooner do you feel that little hit, that little bump, that little high, than you're chasing the next time. The comedian, Louis C.K., was being interviewed on a late night show.

[16:33] And he talks about, they're talking about our smartphone addiction. And why are we constantly on our devices? And why are we constantly scrolling on, you know, Zillow or TikTok or Instagram or whatever your particular poison might be?

Why are we always doing that all the time? And he says, well, clearly we're distracting ourselves to escape the fact that, as he says, quote, underneath everything in your life, there's that thing.

What he calls that forever empty. There's that forever empty. And so he says, we're constantly trying to distract ourselves because, and he says, if we were just to set down our phones and sit in our car in silence for five minutes, half of us would probably break down into tears.

Because that thing starts to creep up, right? That broken cistern emptiness comes into our conscious awareness. So here's the thing.

Here's the question. I think I'm sort of, this is, I think we're mostly agreed on that. I think we're all kind of seeing some heads nod. If this is something that we know deep down, why do we keep doing it?

[17:39] Why do we keep going back to the same wells? And I think the reason, at least as I reflect on my own life, is because all these things work for a while.

They work for a while until they don't anymore. So why do we chase sex or status or achievement? Because these things work for a while.

You know, so a new romantic relationship is thrilling. You know, that's sort of that adrenaline rush of serotonin and oxytocin and norepinephrine and all of that is just surging through your system, right? And it's like all you can think about. That rush is amazing. But it doesn't last. And then the novelty wears off.

And then you see the flaws and the imperfections. And then, you know, and then you have a really bad fight. And you don't get along as well as you thought you did. And hopefully all that happens before you get married. So you know what you're really getting into, right?

[18:42] And, but it doesn't last, right? And if, by the way, and if we treat people in our lives like wells, it will not go well for us and it will not go well for them.

It's actually going to do damage. If you turn your spouse into a well, if you say this is where I'm going to draw meaning and this is where I'm going to draw fulfillment and this is where I'm going to draw satisfaction from you from this relationship.

Or if that's the way you see your kids. If you're like, my kids, that's really, that's how I justify my life. That's how I justify my career choices. That's how I give myself meaning.

This is what I'm aiming at is just having kids who are successful. And if my kids are successful, it'll justify the sacrifices I've made. It'll justify the rest of me and make me feel good about myself. Right? If we turn the people in our lives into wells, it's going to do harm. The problem is you can't really love and accept somebody as they are if you're simultaneously trying to draw meaning and satisfaction from that person.

[19:42] What ends up happening is you end up being chronically disappointed in them. They feel like it's never good enough. You hold them to expectations they're never going to be able to live up to. To give another example, some people turn their work into wells.

We try to suck self-worth and fulfillment out of our jobs. And that works for a while until it doesn't. You know, a big professional accomplishment makes you feel amazing. Amazing. For maybe a night. You know, you go out and celebrate, have fun.

Congratulations, Welda, you've worked so hard for this. You wake up the next morning, what do you feel? Do you feel full? No. You've got to start hustling. Chasing the next accomplishment. Chasing the next big goal. People say, what are you going to do next? You know, my wife's a creative, works in the film world. And that's the hard thing. Say you have a film and it goes to Sundance and it wins all the awards.

[20:46] What's everybody talking to you about at Sundance when you're winning your award? What's your next project? That's the main number one question everybody asks. What's your next project? It's like, can't I just enjoy this?

No, what's your next project? How are you going to continue to justify your existence? That's the way it is. So it works for a while. So that's why some of us overwork.

That's why some of us never take a day off. That's why some of us spend more time with our work colleagues than we do our kids. That's why some of us never feel satisfied in our jobs. Why we're constantly kind of got one eye, one ear to the ground, kind of wondering if there's something better out there that will fulfill us a little more.

That's why, friends, some of us, our emotional well-being hinges on our performance. So when you're successful, it goes to your head. You get puffed up.

You start feeling like, I really am amazing. When you fail, it feels like death. It feels like you haven't just failed to succeed.

[21:47] You're crushed. Right? And some of us actually don't actually try as hard as we could or should because we're so afraid of failing. So we settle for mediocrity because we can't bear the idea of failing.

In all of these ways, right, we're having to go back to the well. I remember an interview years ago on NPR with Paul McCartney. Hopefully everybody knows who he is.

One of the greatest musicians of our era. And in this interview, I remember it because he admits that he feels threatened when another musician comes out with a great album.

And if you listen to the interview, the interviewer is kind of like completely shocked by this. And he's like, you've had success in so many dimensions of music. You really feel competitive insecurity with somebody else that's coming out with a record?

And there's this pause. And then McCartney says, unfortunately, yeah. He says, I should be able to look at my accolades and go, come on, Paul, that's enough. But there's this little voice in the back of my brain that goes, no, no, no.

[22:56] You could do better. This person over here is excelling. Try harder. That is the sound of a broken cistern leaking.

That is the drip, drip, drip of a cistern in your soul that can't hold water. I wonder if you ever have that little voice in your own head.

And I've thought about that quite a bit this week. When do I hear that voice? You know, when is the little dial on my cistern on E?

You know, and I'm aware of it. There's only one way to satisfy spiritual thirst. There's only one way to sate that longing.

And that's the entire reason that Jesus has come. It's the entire reason. Jesus tells this woman, the water that I offer becomes a spring of water inside you, welling up to eternal life.

[24:02] What he's saying is, no more broken cisterns. No more dripping away. No more forever empty. A fountain of spiritual life inside you that flows directly from the source, from God himself.

And she clearly begins to realize that he's talking about much more than water. He's talking about spiritual renewal. That's why it's odd if you follow the conversation, why does she all of a sudden bring up where to worship?

It's because that's one of the biggest differences between Jews and Samaritans was which mountain, where do you go in order to meet and encounter God and have a spiritual experience? And they had a huge disagreement over that. Where do you go to meet and worship God?

And Jesus essentially says this, very soon, none of that's going to matter. You won't have to go anywhere. You don't have to go to a temple. You don't have to go to a mountain.

None of it's going to matter. People will be able to worship God wherever they are because they will have God's truth and God's spirit inside them. He doesn't come out and say it, but what he's really saying is, you're not going to need to go to a temple because one day you're going to be a temple.

[25:10] Your body, your very presence, wherever you go, you're going to carry around the power and the presence and the life of God inside you. This is a radical claim.

So she begins to realize all of this and it sinks in, right? And she says, we do believe and we're waiting for the Messiah. And this is the clearest place anywhere in scripture when Jesus responds and he says, I am him.

I am that Messiah you've been waiting for. People say, well, Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah right here in John chapter 4. Jesus says, I'm the one you've been waiting for. She's so compelled by this and so transformed by this that she leaves the jar by the well, very symbolic, and she turns and she runs into town, the very people that she mostly tries to avoid, no longer caring because she no longer needs their approval.

She's found something infinitely better. She's left the jar behind and she goes and she begins to tell everybody she encounters, you've got to come see this guy. You've got to come hear what he's saying. She becomes one of the most effective, maybe the first evangelist in John's gospel.

It's incredible, this transformation, right? This woman is, I think, in many ways, all of us. And she realizes what we need to realize, that Jesus did not come, Lord have mercy, he did not come merely to give advice.

[26:36] He did not come to set a good example. He did not come simply to bring about some social reform. Jesus Christ came to satisfy spiritual thirst.

That is the entire reason he came, to offer living water. No more broken cisterns. And what we figure, what we see here is that when you come to Jesus in faith and repentance, God not only offers forgiveness, but he offers the gift of the Holy Spirit.

God's life in us, right? The spring of living water. God's life in us, right? God's life in us, right? So I want to apply this in a couple of ways. I want to talk a little bit about us as a church, as a community, for those of us who are part of Church of the Advent.

And then I want to talk to us as individuals. The first question I want to ask is simply this. Imagine a woman like this coming into our church. How would she be received?

It's worth thinking about. Some communities might be inclined to respond more with a tone of condemnation. You know, you look at this woman's choices and her lifestyle and the immorality that's clearly there.

[27:55] And now, they probably wouldn't do this to her face, but certainly some people would do it behind her back. You know, there'd be a lot of things that would be happening socially in the church, and she would just be quietly never invited to those things, right?

She might want to, like, work with the youth ministry, and people would say, she's not the kind of person we want around our kids. Now, other communities might go in a very different direction. They might respond by pouring on unconditional affirmation, right? We're going to affirm you in all of your choices. And if anything, this woman is a victim of unjust social structures.

She is a victim of oppressive and outdated moral standards. Notice that Jesus does neither. No one had a higher view of sex and marriage and sexual fidelity and faithfulness than Jesus.

I mean, Jesus very clearly challenged the liberal views around divorce in the first century, and he held up the sacredness of marriage.

[29:02] And yet, there's not a hint of condemnation in anything Jesus says. And at the same time, Jesus doesn't affirm this woman's lifestyle. He clearly knows that she needs to be transformed, and actually, much more importantly, she knows that she needs to be transformed.

She clearly wants that. So Jesus responds with neither condemnation nor affirmation. He responds with invitation. Invitation. He accepts her.

He loves her. And then he opens the way for her to be renewed. But she's the one who has to walk down that path. And she does. The core need of every human being is not moral.

It is relational. It is reconnection to God. God doesn't wait for us to become righteous and then love us.

God loves us first. And loves us into righteousness and into holiness. This woman's core need, our core need, is relational.

[30:11] And for that reason, I believe and desire that the culture of our church should be a culture of invitation. We're not going to condemn you. We're not going to affirm you.

I don't even affirm most of what I do. But it's a place where you can come, no matter who you are, no matter what you believe, no matter what you've done, where you can come into a community like this.

And you know you're going to be loved. You know you're going to be accepted. And yet there is always going to be an invitation extended. An invitation for you to come and experience the renewal offered by Jesus.

An invitation to come further up and further in. And that will always be on the table. So that's what I want to say about the church. Just a comment for us as individuals.

I think it is highly likely that there are many of us here this morning who inside are very much like this woman.

[31:17] Maybe you're here and you're not a Christian and you're trying to figure all of this out. Maybe you're here and you are a Christian, but you feel spiritually dry and you feel spiritually desiccated.

Maybe, and I think this is more true than we realize, maybe you carry around a kind of secret shame. Maybe there are parts of you that feel so shameful, that feel so, there's such sources of pain for you.

And maybe there's this thing in you that thinks if anybody ever really knew that about me, they would run the other way. So maybe like this woman, you sort of go to the well at noon. You know, you don't really ever get close to people.

You don't really ever let people in to see who you really are because you're afraid of what they might say or what they might do. Maybe you're isolated like she is. The answer is not going to be found out there.

You're never going to find it out there. It's not going to be found by chasing the next high from wells that leave you thirsty and unfulfilled. The answer is we all, we all need to come to Jesus.

[32:30] Come to him in prayer. Come to him by opening his word. Make worship your highest priority. Be reminded, as I need to be reminded every day, every single day, that nothing compares to his love.

One final detail on that note from this story. Verse 4 says that Jesus had to go through Samaria on his way to Galilee. That's actually not, strictly speaking, true.

The vast majority of Jews, and particularly religious Jews, rabbis like Jesus, had a route that they would use to travel that, to take that trip that intentionally skirted around Samaria.

So it was rare for anyone to go through Samaria. Any Jew hearing that he was going on a journey would assume that he was going to go a different route. So it raises the question, if you know that, why did Jesus have to go to Samaria?

It has nothing to do with geography. It's because he had a divine appointment. The entire reason Jesus goes is this woman.

[33:36] He goes to that well at that time of day to find this woman. If Jesus would do that for her, imagine what he does for you.

Imagine what he would do for you. Don't you understand? This is what he has done for you. Right? This is why Jesus has come. This is why Jesus is here. It's because he loves you. It's because he wants to change your life. Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, may this be true. Lord, there comes a time when words, we feel their limits and we need spirit. And Lord, you promise that we who come to you will be able to worship in truth and in spirit. And so now that we've heard your truth, Lord, we need but to be silent and we need your spirit. And we need your spirit in us. And we here long for that spring of living water. Lord, we thirst. And we think of you on the cross in one of your last phrases before you died saying, I thirst. [34:54] And we think about your thirst on that cross so that one day we would never thirst again. And Lord, it's in that love and that sacrifice and that hope that we place ourselves. Lord, would you fill us with your spirit? In Jesus' holy name. Amen. Amen.