

An Empty Life

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[0 : 0 0] I suppose one of the most common accusations that we find that is regularly brought against the Christian faith in our modern world is that the Christian faith is irrelevant, they say.

They say it's outdated, it's outmoded. I wonder how many hot dinners we would have if we'd heard people say, well it all happened 2,000 years ago and 2,000 miles away. It's just not relevant to where we are, to our time and to our age. Well how do we answer such an accusation?

Biblically, I would suggest. And coming to a passage just like this one, because this particular episode really demonstrates that Jesus is able to speak to the deepest needs of the person, and the person that he speaks to in this case, in many ways, I hope to demonstrate to you, would fit in very well to our modern world. Her life, her outlook would fit in very well with contemporary society. She may be, before this encounter, be somebody who considered the gospel and religion and all those things to be irrelevant to her. In actual fact, I think I've often thought to myself just in recent months, as I've been reading over this passage, that it might be a passage that's going to come more and more to the fore in our day and generation. Perhaps, may I suggest, even more to the fore than the chapter before, chapter 3. Don't get me wrong, while chapter 3 is always going to be cardinal because it speaks of the new birth. But contrast the two figures.

In John chapter 3, we read of Nicodemus, a man who was very religious, a man who was a teacher of Israel according to Jesus' own words, a man who knew his Bible, a man who lived an upright life in so many ways.

How many people do we encounter like that nowadays? Not very many. How many people do we encounter whose lives are a mess, like a Samaritan woman? Many more. Many more. She was an outsider. Her life was a mess.

[2 : 3 2] So she's far more typical of people that we encounter in contemporary society in Western culture. And that's why I believe it's vital that we meditate upon this undoubtedly very familiar passage to her and just try and relate it to our time and our culture.

I want you to consider the passage in three headings, just because some people really love three headings. They're not very even headings. The first one's rather brief. It's really just looking at the setting of this encounter.

The second one is the one where we're going to spend most of our time as we look at the encounter itself. And then thirdly, we'll briefly allude to the fruit of this encounter.

Now, the setting of the encounter is really given to us there in the first six verses. In verse 1 to 3, you'll have this note that might read strange if you're just reading John chapter 4 itself.

Why was it that the Pharisees talking about Jesus baptizing more people than John the Baptist was a cause for Jesus to leave Judea and go to Galilee?

[3 : 4 3] Well, the clue is perhaps just to maybe cast your eye back a little, because the same thing was being said at the end of chapter 3. Although in that case, if you look at verse 26, it's something that was said by the disciples of John the Baptist.

And I think the problem is that the statements seem to indicate, there seems to be a perception of there being some kind of competition between Jesus and his ministry and John the Baptist.

Now, I say it's a perception. It has nothing to do with John the Baptist or Jesus. Remember what John the Baptist said. They're working for the kingdom of God. He's preparing for Jesus' coming.

I'm not worthy to tie his sandals. Look at what Jesus said about John the Baptist. There is none born of woman greater than John the Baptist. So it didn't come from either Jesus or John the Baptist, but it is a perception.

And it seems that Jesus thinks that one of the ways to try and deal with such foolish talk is if at least they are ministering geographically separate places.

[4 : 55] And so he decides to withdraw to the north. So there might be less of this foolish talk about a competition taking place. But the key verse is actually verse 4 there.

Now he had to go through Samaria. Those who are skeptical and those who are critical of the Bible, they say, Ah, I see.

You can't trust the Bible. Because he didn't have to go through Samaria. That's only if he goes across lands. You go from Judea to the north of Galilee, you will go through Samaria.

But they will come along and say, but many people didn't do that. Many people went round Samaria. Such was their antipathy of the Jews towards the Samaritans.

So he didn't have to go through Samaria. The skeptics, I think, have rather missed the point. You see, when the text says to us Jesus had to go through Samaria, it's not a statement of geographical necessity.

[6 : 02] Instead, it's a statement of divine necessity. It was part of God's plan. Jesus had to go through Samaria in order to have this encounter with this woman.

He had to go through Samaria so that her life would be changed. He had to go through Samaria so that through her, the gospel would be taken to the people of Samaria.

Samaria. Samaria. This is a wonderful encounter, but it rather raises the stakes a little, doesn't it, when we realize that Jesus has taken the time to come and to have this encounter with this woman.

Well, let's then turn to consider the encounter that's so central to the chapter. Let's begin by spending a little time thinking about this woman.

It seems, I imagine, that she's someone like so many people today, searching for happiness. Maybe even expressed in modern terms, sorry, modest terms, a little bit of happiness.

[7 : 10] Unfortunately, the narrative seems to suggest that this happiness kept eluding her grasp. She sought her happiness in male company, always searching for Mr. Right.

How many of our population are just like that today? And this pursuit carries with it a heavy cost in terms of the woman's reputation.

We're told the encounter takes place at the sixth hour, which is high noon, 12 o'clock. And this is not the time, we know, when people drawing water would go and gather water.

That was a heavy task. They did that in the cool of the day, the early part of the day. There is a reason why this woman is gathering water at the middle of the day, at the sixth hour.

And the reason is because she wants to be alone. She doesn't want to encounter anybody else. She's been shunned by the people in her village.

[8 : 22] She's like the kid who's dodging school, trying to stay out of sight. She doesn't want the tut-tutting.

She doesn't want that, oh, here comes Mrs. Five Husbands here. The woman is at well because she's ashamed to be seen.

In a strange sense, also, the very task of having the jar or the vessel that is empty speaks eloquently about our life.

There's an emptiness in our life. One psychologist of our own day said that modern lives of men and women could be summarized in one word.

Emptiness. That's why this woman fits in very well with 21st century culture. Do you not find in your conversations with people who are not Christians that their heart cry is that they're bored?

[9 : 30] They're looking to fill their time. They try to find, fill that time and that emptiness in various ways. Some turn, like this woman, to relationships and expect them to fill the void.

Others turn to alcohol, to drugs, to gambling. Others plunge themselves into their careers. Others are pursuit of a sport or a pastime. And it never fills.

And it never fulfills. It never satisfies. The old Hollywood actor, Kirk Douglas. Depending on your age, you'll know who I'm talking about.

He once likened his own life as a film star to a script of a second-rate movie. If Simpson says, if somebody came to me with a script of my life, I would turn the role down flat.

A British author, Jack Higgins, was once asked if he could speak to his 21-year-old self, what would he say? And his answer was that when you get to the mountaintop, you'll find there's nothing there.

[10 : 44] Nothing there. Sophia Loren said that she in her life had everything. She had a happy marriage at the time of this quote. She had received all kinds of awards and acclaim.

And she said, in my life, there is an emptiness that is impossible to fulfill. That's like so many people. It's like the Samaritan woman.

And since the outlook and position of the woman is so similar to that of modern mankind, it's really very instructive then to see how Jesus ministers to that.

What is his message to this woman? Well, you notice he begins with a very simple way. A very simple approach. There are a well. He asks the woman, will you give me a drink?

Now, it's very often that Christians fail at this first hurdle. Because, you see, when we're trying to share the gospel, we're usually quite on edge or we're quite nervous.

[11 : 41] And we try and jump in and give some spiritual message immediately. Do you know how you stand before God? Are you saved? A really bad turn or burn.

Something like that. We could learn something from Jesus' down-to-earth approach. I remember a number of years ago at the Scottish Reformed Conference, there was a visiting preacher.

And he talked about a young man who came down from the Highlands to work in the Glasgow shipyards. And he worked for some time. He was a Christian fellow. And he became very worried about the plight of his fellow workers.

They just didn't seem to have any knowledge of the gospel or know anything about faith. And so, like I was just building up trying to find something to say. And he came to the tea break.

And he turned to them and said, hey, fellas, have you ever heard of Irresistible Grace? There wasn't a good opening in a Glasgow shipyard. You can imagine the response he might have got.

[12 : 42] His desire was great. He wanted to share the gospel. But he could work a little more in his opening, trying to begin to speak it. Something of the simplicity of Jesus. Something natural.

Now, the initial response of the woman is very interesting. She says, you are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? Her question indicates that she knows that Jesus is breaking at least three social taboos of his own day.

Number one, she was a Samaritan. He was a Jew. The division here is great. The modern equivalent would be to go to the modern Middle East and see the antipathy between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

That's what it's like here. Or go back to the 70s through to whenever it finished, the troubles in Northern Ireland. There is that kind of antipathy. So it was unexpected.

And this dates, of course, a way back, if you know your Bibles at all, to just after the death of Solomon. And there was a splitting of the two kingdoms. Ten tribes to the north, usually called Israel or Samaria. And two tribes to the south, called Judah.

[13 : 59] She was a woman. You're not, men are not, supposed to speak to women in public, especially when they were alone. The rabbis in Jesus' day used to say, one shouldn't talk with a woman on the street, nor even one's own wife.

I've often wondered about that. What did they do? Did they play charades or something like that to try and communicate? The third taboo was that he was speaking with somebody of dubious moral character.

And you come across this all the time in the Gospels. Jesus is constantly being reproached for this. Because he had encounters with, he had relationship with people of dubious moral character.

People you are not supposed to associate with. Not even in Samaria. But of course, the Lord deliberately broke every single one of these taboos.

He's doing this quite intentionally. Because he's seeking to get across that this message, this Gospel, is a universal message. It's for everybody.

[15 : 15] No matter what race you belong to. No matter what sex you are. No matter what your social status or your background or your history. This is a message for you.

And all these things are not to be barriers to the saving good news of God's grace in the Gospel. The Gospel is for all nations. For all tribes.

All cultures. And all peoples. So Jesus goes on. He's beginning to address her spiritual needs. He says here 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.

You see, he speaks with a knowledge of this woman's thirst. And of course, it's a metaphor we find in the Bible. We've got to work hard and think about it.

You know, we don't live in a culture where we don't have enough water. We're sick of the blooming stuff. Spoils of summer. But if you live in the Middle East, especially in ancient times, there are times when your life is at threat because of a lack of water.

[16 : 29] It is that basic. And so Jesus is saying to this woman, I have got something for you that is as basic and necessary to you spiritually as water is to you physically.

Something without which you are absolutely lost. And he's saying, I'm going to speak to this void in your life, this emptiness in your life.

God alone can fill. Blaise Pascal once said that there is a God-shaped hole in everyone's life and only God can fill it.

We said earlier, people try and shove all kinds of other things to fit and they're like square pegs in round holes. They will never satisfy. They will never fit.

Because the Lord alone can fill that void. Now in this little section, the woman misunderstands what Jesus is offering.

[17 : 30] She seems to see it as some kind of labor-saving advice because she understands him too literally. I wonder if you've ever noticed that about John as a writer of the gospel. He's very keen and he picks up things where people misunderstand Jesus by taking him literally.

In John chapter 2, he talks about the temple being destroyed after three days. They take it to be the temple literally. The text tells us it's his body. In John chapter 3, when he says to Nicodemus, you must be born again, he says, I've got to climb into my mother's womb a second time.

He understands him literally. And so here, he thinks, you know, I'm going to give you a free pass, an everlasting jar of water or something like that. But no, he's not doing that.

He's saying he's going to do something very, very different. Because I know your need. I know your need. And everyone, this is the fact that we need to grasp, everyone has that need, whether they acknowledge or not.

Characteristically, many try to suppress it. That's what Paul teaches in Romans chapter 1. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, I remember in a sermon in Ephesians 2, I can't remember which one, but he talked about the fact that people used to make themselves busy, occupy their diaries, so they don't have to stop and think.

[18 : 57] They don't want to ponder eternal questions about their destiny. They busy their time away. This becomes clear when Jesus goes on to speak about this in verses 13 and 14, if you look with me.

Jesus answered, everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. 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.

Do you see what Jesus is saying? You're looking to satisfy the thirst that you have, your spiritual thirst, by looking for things external to yourself.

But I'm going to do a work within you that is going to quench that thirst. The water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

Now, the next step in the dialogue is very different because Jesus does challenge the woman's morality.

[20 : 06] Some people say that Jesus here is providing us a model for evangelism. Well, there are lessons we can learn, but we're not Jesus. We have a long, long time in our relationship with people before we get to find out about the five husbands.

Jesus has omniscience. He knows. Go and call your husband. I have no husband. You're right when you say you have no husband. You have the five husbands, and the man you're with now does not live with you.

Jesus, in a sense, is not so much focusing on divorce, although we know from elsewhere that with one exception, he is against divorce. There are two schools of rabbis, the liberal school of Hillel, who said that you could be divorced three times, but no more.

Shammai says you shouldn't be divorced at all. Jesus clearly more on the Shammai side. But he's really focusing on the man you're living with now. That's the big issue.

The woman's response is interesting. She says, Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. There are some who suggest that this is the old red herring trying to change the direction of the conversation.

[21 : 26] You know, but like when you're having a conversation about Jesus and people want to start talking about the problem of evil and so forth. They try and take it away from the subject.

It's getting too uncomfortable. But I'm not sure about that. I think this is a bit of an awakening. Someone beginning to genuinely seek after God.

She senses that God is speaking to her through Jesus. And so she asks about a worship, an issue to see, well, you know, there's this big issue about where we ought to worship.

Should it be on Mount Gerizim or should it be on Jerusalem? Can you answer that, old chestnut for me? Because you seem to be very wise in the ways of the Lord and the ways of the Scripture.

And that's indicative of perhaps since she's just been drawn into the conversation. Our Sanhedrin is worshipped on this mountain.

[22 : 26] You Jews claim the place we must worship is in Jerusalem. As I say, a hot potato at the time. You'll notice that Jesus is very straightforward.

He doesn't mince his words at all. You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know. For salvation is from the Jews. Well, that's not very ecumenical, is it?

The Samaritans are on the side of the argument, he's saying. It's very strange from the man who taught the parable of the Good Samaritan. But Jesus tells it as it is.

Woman, he says, believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. And he's saying this is going to be a redundant debate because both centers of worship are going to be obsolete in the very near future.

God is spirit and his worshippers must worship the spirit worship in the spirit and in truth. The point, the real emphasis there is not that God does not have a body although clearly he does not.

[23 : 43] But he's emphasizing a time when God will come in and enter and inhabit the lives of men and women. Going to do something within within him the springs of living water.

our bodies are going to become temples of the Holy Spirit. Now the climax of the conversation comes in verses 25 and 26.

The woman said, I know that Messiah called Christ is coming. When he comes he will explain everything to us. Jesus then declared, I, the one speaking to you, I am he.

I have to tell you that phrase that Jesus uses there, most translations don't translate it as straightforwardly as it really should be.

Because in Greek it is two words. Ego, I am he. It should be translated as it is later in the gospel, I am.

[24 : 49] Do you remember that big long dialogue you'll come to in a couple of weeks between Jesus and the Jews in John chapter 8. And you remember at the end you know, they talk about, well, how can you say these things you're not yet 50 years old.

And Jesus said to them, before Abraham was born, I am. That's exactly the same two words. Now in our translation we really shouldn't be changing from place to place what we are saying.

I think the translators are trying to make this have a better flow in English. But in actual fact, they miss out on a very important aspect here.

Because, you see, Jesus is being asked an implied question by the woman. She clearly has in mind he might be the Messiah. She's going to say that later.

When Messiah comes, he'll tell us everything. So he doesn't come right out and ask the question. But she hints at it. Our translations tend to indicate that Jesus says, I am the Messiah.

[26 : 03] But in actual fact, he's saying much more. You see, I am is a name of God. This woman is a Samaritan.

The Samaritans tend to focus on the books of a law rather than the writings that came later because it tells them bad news for their own culture. And the story she would know from earliest days of Sunday school is Moses at the burning bush.

And Moses says to God, if I go, who will I say sent me? I am who I am. God says to him, tell them, I am sent you. So let's go back to the conversation.

I know that when the Messiah comes, he will explain everything to him. Jesus said, I am. He's not merely saying that he's the Messiah.

He is saying, I am God incarnate. I possess fullness of deity inwardly and outwardly.

[27 : 07] It's an incredible revelation she's given. Very doubtful whether she really grasps it at all. What a revelation.

What a privilege for this woman who we've been told of a dubious moral character. Yes, she's been given this wonderful truth given to her. That Jesus is a son of God.

The encounter proves incredibly fruitful. Look at verse 26 as we come to a close. It changed her life, didn't it?

Here is a woman who's drawing the well, the water from the well in the middle of the day so she doesn't encounter other people. She's forgotten all about that. She's going back into the town. She's telling people about who she's met.

Could this be the Christ? She asked. Could this be the Messiah? And it is so persuasive that people in the town who would normally shun her are prepared to take the trouble then to go and to meet with Jesus.

[28 : 24] There's a massive change in this woman's life. And it's a challenge to us, you know. I think sometimes we think we're awful wise as to who's going to come to faith and who's not.

We might have a visitor come into church and we think, oh, that person's never going to come to faith. Look at her life or his life. They're a million miles away.

And then we see other people who come and say, oh yes, they're close, they're ripe for conversion. Amazing how often the Lord teaches us about proving his wrong.

And the person who comes to faith is the one we don't expect. What a powerful testimony of this woman. Look at verses 39 to the end of the chapter as we close.

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. He told me everything I ever did. So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them.

[29 : 26] He stayed two days. And because of his words, more, many more became believers. They said to the woman, I love this, we are no longer believe just because of what you have said.

Now we have heard for ourselves. And we know that this man really is the savior of the world. What an encouragement.

God can do surprising things. What an extraordinary way to bring his word to his people. What an extraordinary way to bring his word to his people. when someone who etiquette will talk about ■■ the woman is in this job that will shelters that might be broken to them.

However, who allows him to process anyone to ■■■■■, and help her to your people. And to his people get to the journey here, apparently, as we how to pursue thiscape text that affectus as we celebrate la of those