

John 25 – The River of Life

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Scripture 1: (Jn. 4:1-15 ESV)

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria.

So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman from Samaria came to draw water.

Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep¹. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Scripture 2: (Ezek. 47:1-12 ESV)

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.

Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through.

And he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" Then he led me back to the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other.

¹ <https://www.welcometopalestine.com/destinations/nablus/nablus-city/jacobs-well/>

And he said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."

Scripture 3: (Rev. 22:1-2 ESV)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Sermon:

While traveling from the area surrounding Jerusalem to go to Galilee, Jesus went through Samaria and stopped to rest at the town of Sychar: the modern day city of Nablus and the Old Testament city of Shechem. Following the chronology of John's Gospel, this was probably during the summer {between the Feast of Weeks (or Pentecost) and the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles); John 5:1} and “*so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well.*”.

Jesus stopped to rest because He was tired. He was on a route between Jerusalem and Galilee that should take about three days to traverse, likely hurrying along for His disciples' sake of conscience, because they were traveling through a territory very “unfriendly” towards Jews. So, Jesus took a seat and sent His disciples on into the city to buy supplies (4:8).

“*It was about the sixth hour.*” It was about 12 o'clock. It was “high noon”, the hottest part of the day in summertime in the Middle East. Jesus was hot, tired, and surely thirsty sitting besides a well, alone and without any means of drawing up water. Then, along came “*A woman from Samaria...to draw water.*”.

Jesus' presence there in that place, as a traveler resting by a well, though uncommon, was not unusual or unheard of; at least, if He was outside of Samaria. Cities in Israel typically had two principal water supplies: a large cistern or stone reservoir was kept within a walled city while a deep well was usually located outside the city gates, for easy use by travelers and merchants caring for their animals and by the local residents. This was just really a practical thing because no one want an influx of animals like: camels, horses, sheep, goats, etc; to be brought inside the city walls, navigating narrow streets trying to reach a water source, nor was it reasonable to expect a person to bring out enough water for them because animals tend to drink a lot {oftentimes more than people} and dry climate animals tend to drink and far more water than animals in cooler, wetter regions.

Thus with her appearance, Jesus' “problem” was solved, so “*Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."*”. Now I am confident that in His conversation with her, Jesus used all of the appropriate niceties and politeness which we should expect but which were not recorded verbatim. I am sure Jesus was raised to use the 1st century, Jewish equivalents of “please” and “thank you”, especially with women and strangers. Although the Greek verb used here is written as an “imperative”, I would tend to agree with the more dynamic sense of the NIV's “softer” rendition as, “*Will you give me a drink?*” (Jn. 4:7 NIV), than with this being an “imperious command”. Plus, even though a woman might have been ordinarily expected to serve a man, based on their cultural, social, and political context, I cannot expect that a Jewish man trying to command a Samaritan woman in Samaritan territory would be very well received, much less obeyed.

Jesus' request was certainly a shock to her, as “*The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?"*”. This just was not done. A 1st century Jew would not ask a Samaritan for a cup of water, probably not even if he were dying of thirst; that was the shocking premise of the “Good Samaritan” parable (Luke 10). The Jew would be spiteful and prideful, considering themselves to be superior and better, more righteous and chosen by the LORD. {John explains her response to his ethnic Gentile readers simply with his parenthetical, “*(For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)*”, likely expecting that they would read their Roman experience onto this similar ethnic relationship. Regardless, this serves as a reminder and evidence for the social, cultural, and religious separation between Jews and Samaritans.} Yet Jesus is Jesus and He is not like other Jews.

“*Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."*”. What a strange response! So strange that alone it would seem to be nonsense. How could she have understood what He meant?

His reply raises three questions that we are fortunate and better able to understand because we have all the rest of Scripture and we have everything written previously in John's Gospel.

- What is “*the gift of God*”?
- Who is Jesus?
- What is “*living water*”?

Coming from a Jew, even Jesus, to a Samaritan this “*gift of God*” could only really be understood to mean one thing: God's grace. This “gift” is the love and favor of God Almighty, YHVH. The “gift” was His divine election; meaning God's choice, His selection of the Chosen people, Israel.

But any other Jew saying something like this to her would sound pretentious and condescending; it would come across as more {Oh, if you only had and understood the “gift of God”, you poor unfortunate Samaritan...}. Yet, from Jesus the sense is more invitational, “*If you knew the gift of God...*” becoming something more like {“Let Me share the “gift of God” with you...}}.

Now, since we have read the first three chapters of John, hearing this in that literary context, we know and understand what this “gift” really meant from Jesus:

- the light of life (1:4); and,
- “the right to become the children of God (1:12); and,
- knowledge of, relational knowledge of the Father (1:18).

Namely, this “*gift of God*” is His electing grace: our covenantal adoption by the LORD. All of these things come to us through and in the person of Jesus, by God's grace alone. Yet, please also notice that Jesus says, “*If you knew...*”, {If you *oida*}, which really means, “If you recognized and understood”. He is not saying that she does not have it, but is more saying that she does not know whether she does, yet (if she does).

Finally, answering the question “Who is Jesus?”, should be easy for us by this point in John's Gospel.

- He is “the *Logos* who is *Theos* and *Andros*.”
- Jesus is God; God the Son; the Messiah.

But the third question of “What is “*living water*”?” is tougher, because “living water” is not something that has been mentioned in this Gospel yet. We should immediately recognize that Jesus is crafting a metaphor, that Jesus is speaking about something spiritual which He thinks ought to have already been understood (as He did when conversing with Nicodemus). But, I expect and hope that we, as 21st century Christians, already understand something about what Jesus spiritually means by “*living water*”.

So, what is “*living water*”?

Technically, it is a term used to describe naturally running or flowing water, such as: rivers, lakes, streams, wadis, springs, and oceans; and it is not used to describe things like: ponds, puddles, or cisterns. It is water that is not stagnant or “still”.

- “Living” water moves;
- “Dead” water does not move.

Spiritually, for 1st century Jews, “living water” was necessary for their purification rites. “Living water” filled their *mikvaot* and as they drained, their impurities and “uncleanness” were also carried away. But that was not a Samaritan emphasis. While they would be concerned with “ritual purity”, as commanded by Moses, I know of no evidence to suggest that they went to the same lengthy, exhaustive efforts in maintenance as the 1st century Jews.

So really, what this Samaritan woman was probably first thinking when Jesus seemed to offer her “living water”, was that Jesus knew about a nearby hidden spring that she was unaware of; that He was offering to show her where she could get water without needing to go through all the work, effort, and struggle which drawing it up from the public well required. But listen to her closely, “*The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep². Where do you get that living water?"*”.

- Do you hear the desperation in her voice?
- Can you hear her need?
- Might you be hearing a desire that she never knew she had before?

On the one hand, you may read sarcasm into her voice. Imagine her laughing at Jesus, {Ha ha! But, you have nothing to draw water with and this is a deep well. Where do you think you are going to get this water? If you could be giving me “living water”, then why are you asking me to give you a drink, Hmm?}. Yet if that were her true attitude, would she continue this conversation? Would you expect her to actually stick around and listen to Jesus? No, of course not, which is part of why we know that she was interested in Jesus and what He had to say.

- She was “thirsty” for more and she was becoming more curious about this “weird” Jew. So, if there was an element of sarcasm, then it was mixed with a curiosity and hope that she could not explain.

But, what was she really thirsty for?

The few details that John provides about her, which we will focus upon later, strongly imply that this woman was most concerned about the necessities of life, of her own survival, so in the heat of that particular moment with Jesus, she heard what her physical body wanted and needed most: fresh and clear water; some easy access water; but apart from her mind, her heart also heard Jesus speaking to its greatest need.

Samaritans were not concerned with ritual purity in the same way that the Jews were {to the same extent and degree, personal purity was still an important part of their religion}, so she would not instinctively think about this spiritually. She did not have or know the Prophets, because the Samaritans only had their version of the Torah as authoritative Scripture (like the Sadducees) therefore, she had no way to recognize the deeper spiritual meaning which Jesus was implying. However, it certainly seems as though the Holy Spirit was beginning to speak to her heart, opening it to consider Jesus' offer.

The rest of her response to Jesus also seems to carry both aspects of incredulity and hope, “*Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.*”. She asked Him, {Who are you? Who do you think you are? You are just a man, just a Jew. Do you really think that you are better than our ancestors? That you are greater than the holy patriarchs?} but it feels as if there are still some questions which she leaves unspoken, like {What have **you** done for us (“you” as in, 'you people', as in 'you Jews')? What have **you** or will **you** do for **me**?}; kept unspoken because her flesh instinctively answered, “Nothing!”.

2 <https://www.welcometopalestine.com/destinations/nablus/nablus-city/jacobs-well/>

Standing there beside the well, this woman possessed no positive expectations about Jesus, which is not unreasonable in light of how her people were being treated and had been treated in the recent past, by Jewish authority. She had a reasonable right to even speak accusingly towards Jesus, as a Samaritan to a Jew in a Samaritan place.

Even as a woman, although it would have been socially improper and scandalous for her to speak to a man this way, especially in public, we will soon see why she probably had little reason to care about what people thought about her; as her public reputation was likely already in the negative.

But still, even in some justifiable, “righteous anger” at all that she imagined Jesus represented, standing there before her, her heart was still opening itself up to the hope of something more; something greater than water. Perhaps it was a hope for acceptance, for equality; a hope that something good could come to her from a Jew.

“Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.””

- She wanted it. She wanted what Jesus had to offer her, but she did not know the fullness of her asking.
- But, she did not understand what Jesus was offering her.
- But she was still thinking that Jesus was talking about water; thinking that He really was offering her some “high quality H2O”! (Adam Sandler, The Waterboy)

But if Jesus was not offering her water, then what was He talking about? We should wonder, was this a new teaching from Jesus; new, as in innovative or different from the Old Testament?

Jesus told her, *“The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* Speaking spiritually and using metaphors, Jesus' words should prompt three questions for those who hear.

- What **is** “water”?;
- What **is** this “spring of water”?; and,
- What **does** He mean by “eternal life”?

Following Jesus's line of argument with Nicodemus, the “water” He was offering to give her **is** the gift of God the Holy Spirit with the {*becoming*} as regeneration; being “born again”, “born from above”, *anthen* (3:5-8).

The “*spring*” to well up inside her **is** the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence within the regenerate Elect. He bubbles up inside of us, filling us, and spilling out of us, just as a spring of water will well up out of the ground and overflow the banks of a pool to pour out in every direction possible. This “*spring*” of the Spirit regenerates and sanctifies us, cleanses and purifies us, filling us with life and restoring our souls (Psalm 23); softening our stone hearts and transforming them into living hearts of flesh.

Previously, John explained in Jesus' teaching that “*eternal life*” is the consequence or result of our loving obedience to God, our Father in heaven; living for God's glory, worshiping and enjoying Him forever. Now Jesus expands His teaching about that “*life*” by drawing from the prophet Ezekiel.

“Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.

Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side.” Ezekiel saw a vision of the LORD's Temple and in that vision he saw water flowing out from under the Temple doors, filling the Temple courts to the south. Then he was taken outside the Temple precinct and shown the water flowing even further, flowing out of the courtyard to fill and cover the city and the lands beyond, until it reached the sea where he was told that, *“when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh.”* or as the King James more literally translates the Hebrew, *“... the waters shall be **healed**.”* (Ezek. 47:8 KJG).

Recall that the Apostle Paul described our body as being *“...a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...”* (1 Cor. 6:19 ESV) and remember that Ezekiel was not seeing a vision of a rebuilt or a restored physical Temple in Jerusalem, but an image or picture of the Church, elect Israel; so, this may start to help us begin to understand Jesus's *“spring”* of *“living water”*.

The flowing water in Ezekiel's vision was purifying the Temple of the wicked foulness and spiritual pollution that God's people had done there. Then, once the Temple was clean and purified, the waters flowed outward as a cleansing flood washing away sin to become a flood of restoration and wholeness, instead of destruction (as with Noah). He describes salt water becoming fresh, becoming healed; transforming water that was once deadly to drink into something sweet and clean which gives life to everyone who drinks.

Then, leaving no room for doubt as to the water's effectiveness, he sees *“And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”*

Ezekiel saw the same eschatological vision as which the Evangelist would see while exiled on Patmos and I do not think that was a coincidence, *“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”*. They both saw a “river of life” springing up from beneath the LORD's throne, flowing out to cleanse and heal the world and provide for all of God's good creation.

Together, what both describe is a vision of the restored world of Christ's eternal Kingdom; the world and Kingdom to which every believer, all the Elect in history (past, present, and future), belong as loyal citizens. A world cleansed of sin and wickedness or evil. A world filled with people whose sin has been washed away; a people living and loving one another while also worshiping, glorifying, and enjoy the LORD, forever.

That is the spring of *“living water”* which Jesus was offering to the Samaritan woman and which He offers to each of us. It is water that we may have “free of charge”, all it requires is our asking; yet, although He will give it to us freely, it still costs everything.

- It costs us all of our sin and sinfulness. Receiving this water, we must surrender and give up our sinful desires, thoughts, words, and deeds.
- It costs us our freedom to and desire sin. Receiving this water, we must strive to become obedient to Christ and His commands, for our love of God; even knowing that we will never obey perfectly in this life, on this side of glory, but now obedience becomes our earnest desire.

- It costs us our sovereignty of self. Receiving this water, we must be transformed into conformity with the perfect Image of God, Jesus Christ. His Will must become our command. His Love must become our love. His faithfulness is made into our faithfulness.

Receiving this water, what do we gain?

- We will be washed and made clean; pure and holy.
- Our pain will be soothed and all our sorrows comforted as our tears are wiped away.
- We will be loved by God and we shall love Him in return, as His chosen children of adoption.

Hearing these words from Jesus, yet without understanding them, the woman begs Him, "*Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.*", her response reminds me of Peter during the Last Supper, "*Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?"*"

Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward."

Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."" (Jn. 13:36-38 ESV); both persons asked Jesus for something without understanding or knowing what it was that they asked, however, I believe that both asked because the Spirit was working within their heart, in that moment.

Peter thought he could go with Jesus on a trip and this woman thought that Jesus was going to lead her to some secret source of water, but both were really asking Jesus for what their Spirit-awakening hearts most desired: life; eternal life lived forever in the presence of God.

I hope and pray that each of us are thirsty for what Jesus offers and that our thirst is never quenched; that we never stop wanting to drink deeply from the Holy Spirit's spring and experience His cool, clean, and fresh "*living water*".

I hope and pray that we are each and all being washed out, cleansed from the inside out, by the Spirit's sanctifying work in our hearts and lives.

So, let His water of life bubble up inside you.

Let it fill you and then overflow out of your heart into the world around you.

Let His water pour out of you and mingle with the water pouring out of your fellow believers, healing and cleansing us all.

Let our Spirit-filled waters mingle and unite, indivisible and indistinguishable as the one Body of Christ, His holy Church.

AMEN