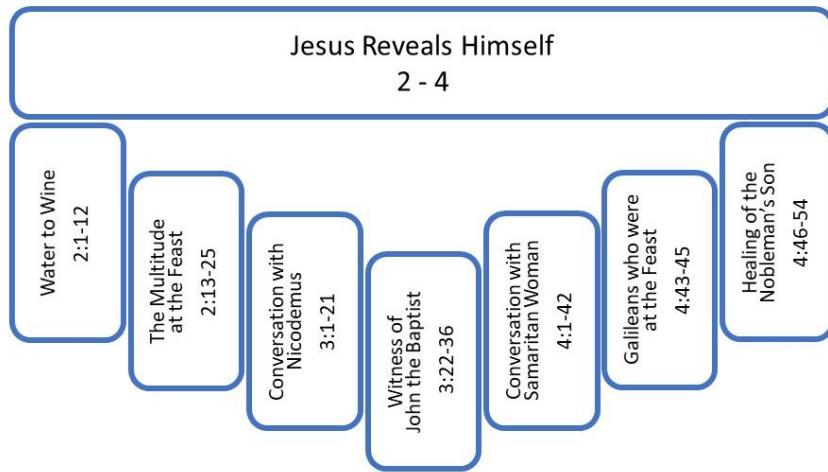


## Lesson 8: John 4:27-42 Conversation with a Samaritan Woman, part 2

### Introduction



The conversation in John 4 between Jesus and the Samaritan woman ends this way.

The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when that one comes, he will declare all things to us.”

Jesus said to her, “I am, I who speak to you.”

With those who believed at the Passover feast in chapter 2, Jesus held himself back. He did not entrust himself to them. With Nicodemus in chapter 3, Jesus gave him an opportunity, but Nicodemus could not follow. Jesus entrusted himself somewhat, but not fully, speaking in third person when he said,

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.

But here with this non-Jewish, morally suspect woman, Jesus reveals himself more directly than he has to anyone so far in the Gospel story, even more than we have yet seen him reveal himself to his disciples. He declares to her in first person, “I am,” meaning, “I am the Christ you are expecting.”

True faith is a spiritual reality. We are not yet told that this woman sees truly with spiritual eyes. But it appears that Jesus sees something real in her and so, he chooses to entrust something of his identity to her. He affirms that he is the Christ.

Before we can learn more about the state of the woman’s heart, the disciples turn up. It seems to be terrible timing, though we have to be glad they did not show up any earlier than they did. With their appearance the conversation with the woman stops.

The presence of the disciples does allow for a teachable moment by Jesus. The text for this lesson describes for us the effects of the gospel conversation. We will consider the effect on the woman first, then come back to the teachable moment for the disciples, and finish with the effect on the Samaritan villagers.

Let’s read the text, John 4:27-42.

<sup>27</sup> At this point His disciples came, and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, “What do You seek?” or, “Why do You speak with her?” <sup>28</sup> So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men, <sup>29</sup> “Come, see a man who told me all the things that I *have* done; this is not the Christ, is it?” <sup>30</sup> They went out of the city, and were coming to Him. <sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” <sup>32</sup> But He said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” <sup>33</sup> So the disciples were saying to one another, “No one brought Him *anything* to eat, did he?” <sup>34</sup> Jesus

said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.<sup>35</sup> “Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, and *then* comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest.<sup>36</sup> “Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.<sup>37</sup> “For in this *case* the saying is true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’<sup>38</sup> “I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor.”<sup>39</sup> From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all the things that I *have* done.”<sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days.<sup>41</sup> Many more believed because of His word;<sup>42</sup> and they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”

### Effect on the Samaritan woman

The Samaritan woman’s life is changed forever. That’s the effect of the gospel conversation on her. There is a visible immediate effect. She had come to the well for water. But at the end of her conversation with Jesus, she turns back to the village, leaving her water jar by the well. She is not interested in what she was doing. She is on a new mission. She wants to announce the good news. She thinks she has met the Christ, and she wants to let the other villagers know. It says specifically, “she invites the men.” She speaks to the men and says, “[Could this be the Christ?] Come, see a man who told me all the things that I *have* done; this is not the Christ, is it?”

But who is going to listen to her? What kind of witness is she? Why doesn’t Jesus shush her as he so famously does in other cases, telling people not to say anything about what they have experienced? Even if she was not morally suspect or religiously suspect as a Samaritan, she still has to deal with significant cultural prejudice against her as a woman. Women were not officially recognized as credible witnesses.

Josephus, a Jewish writer working for the Romans in the first century AD writes in his *Antiquities*.

But let not a single witness be credited; but three, or two at the least, and those such whose testimony is confirmed by their good lives. But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex, nor let servants be admitted to give testimony on account of the ignobility of their soul; since it is probable that they may not speak truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment.<sup>1</sup>

This prejudice against women in the ancient world was not limited to Jewish culture. In his work *Politics*, Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote, “As regards the relationship between male and female, the former is naturally superior, the latter inferior, the former rules and the latter is subject.”<sup>2</sup>

This legal and philosophical prejudice may not fully apply in a Samaritan village where men and women interact with one another through daily life and where people have history with each other. Prejudices do not always fully apply in day to day life. Men still might listen. A strong or unique woman may lead her family or gain social position in a prejudiced society.

But this woman does not strike us as having any credibility that would overcome the cultural gender discrimination. Quite the opposite. From a cultural standpoint, she has no credibility in her social status.

None of that seems to bother John the Gospel writer. He had the opportunity while composing his narrative to choose to leave in the testimony of the woman. It would not have been hard. It is only two verses. John could have just left out her witness and reported the Samaritans coming without giving credit to the woman. He does not do that. He says that some of the Samaritans believed

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<sup>1</sup> W. Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987) 117-118.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Wiedemann. *Greek and Roman Slavery*. (New York: Routledge, 1981) 19.

because of the woman. This fits John's practice. Only three people specifically call Jesus "Christ". Andrew does when he goes to get Peter. This woman here asks, "Could this be the Christ?" But it is clear she thinks he is the Christ. And then Martha declares Jesus as the Christ. So, out of the three two are women. John also reports Mary's anointing of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene being the first to witness the resurrection and proclaim it to the disciples. Like Jesus did when he spoke to this woman, John ignores cultural discrimination against women as witnesses. He includes them as credible in his narrative. For him, man or woman, it makes no difference.

So, what did make this woman credible? First, I would say that eternal fruit from witnessing does not depend on our credibility but on the work of the Holy Spirit. God opens the eyes of the heart to see. So, it is not fully a matter of human or social credibility. But then I would also add that this woman did have the credibility of a changed life. Or at least she was beginning to. We would think the Samaritan woman's moral situation, living with a man she is not married to, would discredit her as a trusted witness. And I imagine it would among the self-righteous religious who have already made up their mind about what is proper. They would not have listened to anything she was saying. But others would notice that something odd is going on. This woman who goes to the well in the heat of the day to avoid people out of shame, is now talking to everybody without shame about something she has just experienced. This is noticeable. Something is different about her. Something is going on. The villagers see something, and they connect it to her words, and they decide to go and see firsthand for themselves.

### **Effect on the disciples**

In his telling of the story, John has created an interesting effect in the way he ends the conversation with the Samaritan woman, just as the disciples come up, then he tells us what is going on with the woman in the village, before returning to tell us about the conversation Jesus has with the disciples. John makes us aware of significant spiritual reality swirling around the scene while the disciples remain clueless. We know something is going on in the life of the woman and something is going on in the village while they are having this conversation. But when we ask, "What was the effect of the gospel conversation on them?" The answer appears to be, "None whatsoever." They did not get that anything special had taken place or was going on.

When they first came up to the well, "They were amazed that [Jesus] had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, 'What do You seek?' or, 'Why do You speak with her?'" I remember more than once planning to meet my brother Charlie somewhere on the campus of N. C. State University when we were students and coming to that spot and seeing him engaged in a serious looking conversation. And I knew Charlie well enough to know that he was probably sharing the gospel. So, I would find a seat and just wait until he was done.

Thinking back to those times makes the lack of interest by the disciples really stand out to me. Didn't they know Jesus? Why wouldn't they assume something significant was going on when they see Jesus talking to the woman?

I'd like to give the disciples credit that they hesitate to speak to Jesus, so as to not interrupt that significant thing that was happening. But the disciples do not suggest to us that kind of spiritual awareness. In fact, Jesus is getting ready to point out the exact opposite. Their amazement is simply shock that Jesus would be talking to a Samaritan woman. She is a Samaritan and a woman, both strong prohibitions for a Jewish Rabbi. He should not be speaking to her. Maybe Jesus wanted something from her, which would raise the suggested question, "What do you seek?" They could have asked that. In fact, that is how Jesus initiated the conversation. He asked for water. The disciples could have assumed he wanted something. Or they could have just made no assumption and just asked the second suggested question, "Why do you speak with her?"

But they don't ask either question. They just don't seem to be that interested. They had been given a task to get food. And they got the food. And now they urge Jesus to eat, "Rabbi, eat." They are so caught up in the logistical tasks of their ministry that they miss out on the truly amazing event that

has just happen, and that, in fact, is still going on. As they are urging Jesus to eat, the woman is hurrying off to tell the villagers all about Jesus.

When Jesus says, “I have food to eat that you do not know about,” the disciples start asking, who slipped him a sandwich? Just like Nicodemus and just like the Samaritan woman did initially, the disciples miss that Jesus is speaking metaphorically about spiritual truth. They take him concretely, literally. So, Jesus explains. This is in 34-38,

<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. <sup>35</sup> Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, and *then* comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. <sup>36</sup> Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup> For in this *case* the saying is true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ <sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor.”

Jesus is not saying that he has no literal need for food. He is saying that he has a strong desire. And the desire is like the desire for food, and it is a desire to do God’s work. And he experiences satisfaction, like when you eat, satisfaction of that desire when he does the work of God. Jesus willingly, eagerly put aside his own physical thirst to draw the Samaritan woman into a conversation about her spiritual thirst. Jesus is attentive to the spiritual dimension of reality, and he is also attentive to God’s leading. Jesus will take time to eat, and he will take time to drink, but not right now. Not if it means missing this present opportunity with this woman.

Jesus words highlight the disciples lack of spiritual awareness. Even if they miss on their own the opportunity to speak into the life of this Samaritan woman, they should have at least assumed that Jesus was doing something significant, and they should have asked him about it. But they were too focused on the task that they had been given to give any thought to the Samaritan woman.

Everyone in this agrarian society knew about the harvest of grain. Each generation before them had sown and reaped at the same time of year with the same expectations. You plant the seed, and you say to yourself, “Yet four months, and then comes the harvest.” That’s common knowledge.

The disciples are like the farmers who have planted and then turn to other things, with no expectation of harvest any time soon. They have got four months to do other stuff. They are busy about that. So, in this case, the disciples are busying themselves to secure food and drink, or to get from Judea to Galilee where they can then pick up ministry later. This is not harvest time. This is Samaria. There is no expectation of harvest at all.

Essentially, Jesus is saying, “The harvest is now. Are you not paying attention? If you will do the work of reaping this spiritual harvest, which is already ready, will produce eternal fruit. Men and women will enter into eternity. I have just sown. Get ready to reap.” Jesus has done the sowing in the heart of the Samaritan woman. She then took that seed to the village. And she planted the seed there. And the harvest has quickly ripened. The villagers are on their way. They are ripe for the harvest ready to be reaped by Jesus and his disciples.

The spiritual awakening going on among the villagers shows us again that true faith is a spiritual reality that can come in a moment with very limited knowledge or preparation. Time with the spiritual harvest is not consistent. We cannot plan it like a literal harvest. Ministry strategies must be developed with a readiness to adapt, a willingness to be spontaneous, according to the spiritual reality of the situation. There might be immediate fruit, but there also might need to be a long and patient wait. Spiritual sowing and reaping can happen in a moment’s conversation as with the Samaritan woman or over months or years like with Nicodemus, or even over generations among hard soiled peoples. There might be along wait for the fruit, a lot of sowing before there comes reaping.

The effect on the Samaritan villagers is immediate. Let’s read that again. This is verses 39-42.

### Effect on the Samaritan villagers

<sup>39</sup> From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all the things that I *have done*.” <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup> Many more believed because of His word; <sup>42</sup> and they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”

Verse 39 is an incredible statement to me, that many Samaritans believed, “because of the word of the woman.” In light of how impossible it seems for some people to accept Jesus Christ, how can it be that simply on the testimony of this one, discredited woman during an afternoon’s conversation, “Many Samaritans believed in [Jesus].”

Why did they believe? What did they believe? How much did they really understand?

We can’t know the facts of their internal state. John does point out a transition in their faith. Many believed something based on the testimony of the woman, and after two days under the teaching of Jesus they said to her, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”

There is a point there about the nature of faith and a point about the nature of Jesus. So, concerning faith, the Samaritans were reinforced in their belief by the word of Jesus. We could wonder whether they had true faith from the testimony of the Samaritan woman. For example, maybe they believed she had truly met the Messiah, expected by Samaritans, but had not yet understood enough to believe in Jesus as their Savior until they heard him teach. The initial belief may not have been saving faith, but a step towards true belief.

John does not make that clarification. So another option would be that some of these Samaritans had their hearts opened by the Spirit of God even through the very limited testimony of the Samaritan woman, and then when they heard more from Jesus himself, his word found a home in hearts and minds already opened to see. I can see either option as being valid.

And this is always a question in evangelistic ministry. It is possible for an initial claim of belief, an initial prayer to receive Christ, to be a move in the right direction, though not yet a true yielding to Jesus. It is also possible for faith to come in a moment and then be confirmed and strengthened later by the Word of God.

We do expect true faith to understand and submit to Jesus according to his own self-revelation. Content of faith regarding the nature of Jesus is evident here among the Samaritans who have believed. They don’t just believe anything. They believe something specific. John tells us they acknowledged Jesus as the Savior of the World.

That is the first time we have heard that title in this Gospel. And it is very appropriate for this occasion. Nathanael calls Jesus “King of Israel” in chapter 1. He is. And he is more. He is also Savior of the World. He did not just come for Israel. He came for everyone, including these non-Jewish Samaritans.

Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 49:6,

It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Reference to the world in John typically distinguishes between Jesus as the one who has come from heaven and the world that which he has entered into. The world is the present state of human experience. And it is usually resistant to Jesus. There are a few times when world is used in this sense of scope, as in all people in the world. This is the sense in 1:29 when John the Baptist cried out, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus makes atonement for all the people of the

whole world. Also, God's motive declared in 3:16 applies not just to Israel but to all people, "For God so love the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." And so also here, Jesus reveals to the Samaritans that he has not come only to provide salvation for Israel but to provide salvation for all peoples of the world.

### Conclusion

John has used this encounter with the Samaritans to teach us some important truths about the nature of faith in Jesus. Let me sum up some of the key ideas John is showing us.

1. First, saving faith is available to all people regardless of racial, cultural, or social differences, regardless of religion or class, moral standing or education. Jesus is Savor of the World and all people have the potential ability to believe in him and experience eternal life.
2. Second, saving faith is a spiritual reality that can happen in the life of a person in a single moment.
3. Third, there are marks of saving faith that help us recognize when a person truly believes. As Jesus told Nicodemus, the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about new birth in the heart is unseen, like the wind. Even so, there are marks in a person's life that suggest that the person has come alive internally to God. Two marks of faith are described in this passage.

- a. Mark number one is responsiveness to the word of God.

True belief wants to hear the word of God. The Samaritans implored Jesus to stay with them and teach them. Jesus did. And they responded positively to his teaching. They received Jesus' own self-witness.

We will see further examples in this Gospel both of people who turn away when Jesus reveals more truth about himself and people who respond when he reveals more truth about himself. The desire to hear more and the acceptance of what is heard is a mark of true faith, of eyes that see and a heart that receives. Resistance or rejection of Jesus' own self-witness suggests that the original belief of that person was not true belief, but a belief based on what the person wanted Jesus to be. That kind of belief wants to define Jesus, does not want to be defined by Jesus, and does not want Jesus to make demands on their behavior. That kind of belief becomes frustrated when Jesus turns out to be something different or something more than what the person first bargained for.

This aspect of true faith, that there is something in the person who believes that desires the word of God, motivates me to invite people to get into the Word, whether they are still seeking God or whether they have proclaimed faith in Jesus, the way to confirm that faith and grow in Christ is to interact with the Scripture, just as the Samaritans interact with Jesus' teaching. We all start out with fuzzy theology and questionable behavior. But are we open to the instruction from the Lord? Is our heart drawn to the truths of his Word? The Word of God affirms something real going on in our hearts and enables us to think rightly about God, about ourselves, about the world. The word is a spiritual sword that pierces into our hearts. It is a surgeon's tool in the hand of the healer to transform us. And if we truly believe, something in us will draw us to God's word.

- b. Mark number two of true faith is a desire to tell other people about Jesus.

True belief wants to testify to that which has been believed and experienced.

John has been making this emphasis. John the Baptist witnessed and pointed others to Jesus. The small group of first disciples in chapter one went out to share their discovery and bring others to Jesus, Andrew brought Peter, Phillip brought Nathanael. Here the first response of the Samaritan woman is to leave her water jar and run off to the village to share the good news she had just learned about Jesus.

The text does not tell us her inner thoughts after Jesus said to her, "I am, I who am speaking to you." Instead, it describes for us the fruit of her faith as a desire to witness.

The gospel conversation Jesus had with this one woman made an effect on her, an effect on the disciples, and an effect on the whole village. And that effect challenges us to live in the present with our spiritual eyes open to the people we come in contact with. These three things are eternal: God, His Word, and people.

We easily get caught up in the pressing needs and desires of everyday life, just like the disciples did. It is not as though they were never spiritually aware. Several of them had followed John the Baptist. They were early witnesses for Jesus. But here at this moment they lost sight of the realness of eternity in the heat of the day after a long morning's walk stopped here at some out of the way Samaritan village at lunch time. And we understand that. We understand what that feels like, and we understand that focus. We understand that they don't see the woman. We understand this, because we do this all the time. They don't really see her. They don't see her spiritual need and eternal soul. And we don't see the people around us. We don't see their spiritual need and their eternal soul, not when we are tired and hungry and somewhere we don't really want to be.

Jesus sees. He is not thrown off by his own real thirst. He remains aware of the even more real thirst of the woman. He sees the spiritual harvest because his eyes are open. He never stops thinking about God as he goes through his day. He processes everything according to his thoughts of God.

John brings his challenge to the disciples to us to us. He rewrites it for us. He is asking this, he is challenging us, "Are you looking? Do you believe that every single human being you will meet today is an eternal being of great worth to God? Would Jesus stop and talk to that person? Do you believe that they are thirsting? And do you believe that Jesus is the solution to their thirst? Do you accept from the example of this woman that anyone can be a witness for Jesus? If she can, you can. If we say yes to these things, if we accept the challenge, then let's keep our eyes open to the harvest field, and let's take opportunity and let's seek to create opportunity to share the good news, the good news that we have found the Christ, the Savior of the World!

### Reflection questions

1. Read John 4:27-42. What are some things that stand out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing?
  2. What concerns do you have about sharing your faith in Jesus with someone else? What worries do you have or what holds you back?
  3. How does the fact that God used this Samaritan woman as a fruitful witness addresses many of the barriers people feel against sharing their faith?
  4. Does it surprise you that the disciples were so out of tune with what was happening around them spiritually with the woman and the villagers? Why or why not?
  5. What main message do you take away from Jesus' teaching that the harvest is white?
  6. John highlights the reality that there are those who believe without believing and receive without receiving. This will be a theme in the next lesson. How do we know when a person has that true belief that has brought about new birth? This passage suggests two marks of new birth seen in the Samaritans, a desire to share the good news about Jesus and a desire to learn the word of God.
- Agree or disagree with the following statement: Everyone who has truly believed will desire to witness for Jesus and will desire to know the word of God.
7. How have these marks of new birth worked in your own experience?