I. Introduction

During the 3 years of His ministry, Jesus met a variety of people—some were upstanding citizens like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea; others were not quite so upstanding--people like Zacchaeus the tax collector or this Samaritan woman. As John 20:31 says, John’s purpose in writing was “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The encounters that John included in his gospel carry out this purpose. In this story of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman, we see Jesus’ identity and the way of salvation.

The woman’s reaction to Jesus at the end of the story strongly suggests that she eventually accepted Him as her Lord and Savior. But her conversion is not the main point of these verses. The central truth of this section is found in Jesus’ revelation of Himself as the Messiah. It’s interesting that the first time Jesus reveals His identity isn’t to the members of Israel’s religious elite but to an immoral, Samaritan woman.

But before we consider this story, let’s review the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Orthodox Jews avoided Samaria because there was a long-standing, deep-seated hatred between them and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were a mixed race, part Jew and part Gentile, that dated back to Assyrian captivity of the ten northern tribes in 727 B.C. Rejected by the Jews because their genealogy wasn’t pure, the Samaritans established their own temple and religious services. They accepted only the 5 Books of Moses as true Scripture and worshiped God on Mt. Gerizim, instead of at Jerusalem.

When the Jews returned from captivity in Babylon to rebuild the temple around 400 B.C., the Samaritans offered to help, but their help was summarily refused. This began centuries of mistrust, animosity, and even violence between the Jews and Samaritans until Jesus’ day. In fact when the Jews wanted to insult Jesus, the worst they could come up with in John 8:48 was to call Him a “Samaritan.”

As well as announcing that He was the Messiah or the Christ, by going to the Samaritans, Jesus was showing that He did come for the whole world not just the Jews; as John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world.” Before we consider Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman, we need a little more background.

II. The Background
A. John tells us that, **Jesus had to leave Judea.** The Jewish authorities, in particular the Pharisees, were beginning to view Jesus with suspicion, just like they did John. Jesus knew that in His Father’s sovereign timetable, a public confrontation with the Jewish authorities at that time was premature. Also, as we saw last week, a competition between John’s followers and Jesus’ followers was beginning to develop, perhaps caused by the Pharisees, so to avoid both of these problems, Jesus “left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.”

As He led His disciples north to Galilee, Jesus had three possible routes to choose from: there was a route along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea; there was a route along the eastern side of the Jordan River; and there was a route that went straight north through Samaria. Although this last route was shorter by 3 days, so great was the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, that the Jews would avoid this 3rd route if at all possible. They would choose one of the other two less evil routes.

**B. Jesus had to go through Samaria.** Jesus was compelled to pass through Samaria and stop at a certain village, not to save time and steps, but because He had a divine appointment there. Jesus **had** to go to Samaria. He **had** to meet a woman there and lead her into saving faith which would lead to many of her village being saved as well. Jesus was no respecter of persons. Earlier, He counseled a moral Jewish man, and now He would witness to an immoral Samaritan woman.

**III. The Encounter**

Jesus and His disciples arrived at Jacob’s well outside Sychar in Samaria at noon. The disciples went to the nearby town for food while Jesus deliberately waited at the well. He was weary, hungry, and thirsty. John not only presents Jesus as the Son of God but also as true man. Jesus **entered** into all the normal experiences of our lives and is able to identify with them. He knows what it is to be tired and hungry and thirsty.

Mornings and evenings were the times when women normally would come to the village well to draw water. This woman, however, came at noon when the other women would not be present. For reasons that we can see from these verses, she would rather come this distance in the hottest time of the day rather than face the hostility and scorn of the other women.

In that world, men rarely spoke to women in public, even if married to them. Single men **never** spoke to or touched women at any time. And, of all people, a rabbi would observe these ideals to the max. So when Jesus initiated a conversation with this Samaritan woman, He crossed many cultural boundaries.
As this conversation progresses, we see the woman’s evaluation of Jesus’ identity change.

IV. The Conversation—Who is this man?

A. He is “a Jew.” When Jesus spoke to her, He set aside social customs because her soul’s salvation was at stake. It certainly surprised her when He asked for a drink of water. She surmised that He was a Jew, and Jews didn’t talk to Samaritans! Perhaps she tried to “read between the lines” to find another meaning to His request. What was He really seeking?

However, Jesus’ request was simply a way to open the conversation and share with her the truth about “living water.” In Jeremiah 2:13 God said, "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.” Jesus talked about this “living water” in other places—turn to John 7:37-38. The living water that Jesus offered was salvation in all its fullness, including forgiveness of sin and the ability and desire to live an obedient life that glorifies God.

B. He is “greater than Jacob.” In John 4:10, Jesus said to the woman, “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.” Jesus was pointing out to this woman that she was ignorant of 3 important facts: 1. Who He was; 2. What He had to offer; and 3. How she could receive it. Jesus spoke of giving her spiritual water—living water, but she interpreted His words to mean literal water. She was confused, but He had aroused her interest, so she continued the conversation.

She was skeptical of this stranger’s ability to provide the “living water” He offered. She was concerned about the how instead of simply asking Him to give her a drink of it. The patriarch Jacob had to exert effort to dig this well. Was Jesus “greater than Jacob” in His ability to supply this water?

Jesus pointed out that those who drank water from Jacob’s well would be thirsty again, but those who drank from the water Jesus could give would never thirst. Jesus was talking about satisfying a spiritual thirst—a thirst for a relationship with God, a transformation and filling of the Holy Spirit and the promise of eternal life. Jesus was more than “just a Jew”; He is “greater than Jacob.”

The woman’s response was to ask for this gift, but, I don’t think that she really knew what she was asking for. She had made progress, but she still was thinking of physical water and she had a long way to go. But Jesus didn’t give up, he dealt patiently with her.
Since the woman failed to understand the nature of the water He spoke of, Jesus directed the conversation to her need for repentance and salvation from sin. His command to “Go, call your husband and come back” exposed the heart of the issue—her sin. To receive this “living water” there had to be a change in heart. Those who truly thirst for the righteousness God provides in salvation must confess their sins and forsake their wicked ways. Turn to Isaiah 55:6-7.

C. He is a prophet. The woman’s answer, “I have no husband” is the shortest statement she made in this whole conversation. Although she wasn’t lying, she was not telling the whole truth. Jesus commends her for telling the truth, as far as it went. And then He opened up her whole confused situation. She had had five husbands, and now she lived with a 6th man. With this answer, she determined that Jesus is “a prophet.”

However, instead of listening to Jesus, she tried to get Him to go off on a wild goose chase by discussing the differences between the Jewish and the Samaritan religions. Like many people, rather than face the issue of her sins and salvation, she tried to sidetrack the conversation.

But Jesus’ reply was that the issue would soon be irrelevant. In the near future, true worship would take place “neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” The new covenant that He had come to establish did away with all external ceremonies and rituals. Jesus went on to say that because God is spirit, those who would truly worship God must worship in spirit and in truth. True worship doesn’t consist of outward conformity to religious standards and duties. Jesus told some Pharisees the same thing—turn to Matthew 15:7-9. True worship comes from the inner spirit—the heart—based on the truth God has revealed about Himself in His Word, that’s why Paul wrote in Romans 12:1-2, “I urge you . . . to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God . . . Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

D. He is the Messiah. In spite of her ignorance, there was one truth this woman did know: she knew that the Messiah was coming and would reveal the secrets of hearts. We don’t know where she learned this truth, but she was expressing her hope that one day the Messiah would come and clarify all these difficult religious questions.

When Jesus responded with, “I am who speak to you,” He was identifying Himself as the promised Messiah. He hadn’t identified Himself to the Jews because of their expectations of a warrior Messiah—someone who would lead a revolt to throw off the rule of the hated Romans. But the faith
of the Samaritan woman was not warped by such incorrect misconceptions, so Jesus identified Himself with the name of God: “I AM.”

Jesus’ words must have shocked this Samaritan woman. The man who just a few minutes earlier had made a simple request for a drink of water now claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah. Unlike Nicodemus, she knew nothing of any signs and miracles Jesus had performed earlier. But merely because of what He knew about her, this woman did not doubt the truth of His claim. She believed in Him. She then went and proclaimed it in her village.

V. Conclusion

There are several things we can learn from this story. First, regarding dealing with people. Jesus is no respecter of persons, as 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord . . . is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Second, when He witnessed to people, Jesus didn’t use a “canned—prepared—sales talk”—He adapted His conversation to meet each individual situation. To Nicodemus, He spoke about new birth; but to this woman, He spoke about living water. Third, when this woman didn’t come to faith in Jesus immediately, He didn’t give up. He was patient with her. She may have appeared to be an unlikely prospect for salvation, but God would use her to win almost the entire village of Sychar.

Similarly, when the Spirit moves us to witness, we need to act regardless of who that person may be. We need to speak to every person. Secondly, when we talk to others about salvation, we need to share from our hearts. Third, we need to be patient with the one we are trying to reach; it may be days, even years of witnessing before that one comes to Christ.

Finally, in this story we are also shown some truths about salvation. Salvation only comes to those who recognize their need for a spiritual life they do not have. Living water will be received only by those who realize that they are spiritually thirsty. Second, salvation comes only to those who confess and repent of their sin and desire forgiveness. Before this promiscuous woman could come to the Savior, she had to acknowledge the full weight of her sins. Third, salvation comes only to those who embrace Jesus Christ as their Messiah and sin bearer—after all, as Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” As children of God, we need to patiently tell others what they must do to be saved.