

JOHN — WEEK 5

LIVING WATER



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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After finding out that the Pharisees are aware of all His baptizing, Jesus takes off through Samaria and has His famous noontime encounter with the woman at the well. He keeps jumping the conversation to the next level and, amazingly, she keeps up.

She ends up being a brilliant apologist and evangelist.

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1 John 3:22–36

After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. For John had not yet been thrown into prison.

Then there arose a dispute between of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!"

John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

John is at Aenon, baptizing many people. All is well; they don't know that he'll be arrested.

But John's disciples get into a *dispute* with *the Jews* (many translations say "a Jew") *about purification*. Somehow this causes them to run to John and whine, "*He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!*" How could a *dispute about purification* lead to that?

It shouldn't. Baptism and purification are not the same. They're not the same word in Greek—baptism is "baptizo," purification is "katharismos"—and they aren't about the same kind of cleansing. How does this dispute then even make sense?

It doesn't; that's the point. John's disciples ask him a ridiculous question, and he has to straighten out their attitude by explaining the relationship between him and Jesus. It looks like they were triggered by some kind of insult or challenge by the Jews and reacted petulantly. We know they reacted petulantly; the only question is, "To what?"

The Jews must have told John's disciples that Jesus was baptizing more people than they were. How that has anything to do with purification is anyone's guess—it sounds more like a random put-down—but, in any case, it sent John's disciples running to him with their tails between their legs.

This is a great example of how our egos can get in the way of ministry. Our weaknesses and failings are at the heart of our relationship with the gospel. That should make us immune to insults, but it doesn't.

Never forget, it's not about you.

2 John 4:1–10

Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. But He needed to go through Samaria.

So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

A woman of 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.

Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

Jesus is, for the time being, avoiding the Pharisees. This takes Him through Samaria. There He has His famous midday encounter with the woman at the well. Right from the get-go, Jesus takes this conversation to levels the woman is not expecting.

In fact, the woman doesn't expect any conversation. The Samaritans are considered outcasts by the Jews, and any woman that shows up in the heat of the day must be considered an outcast by everyone. Jesus speaking to her is so bizarre that her immediate reply is to question His odd behavior.

Her defensiveness is understandable. She's used to being mistreated. She may even have been afraid, not knowing what this unexpected visitor with an unexpected attitude would do next.

So Jesus takes it up another notch with the line, "*If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.*"

This barely makes sense to us, and we have two thousand years of expert commentaries to draw on. This poor woman doesn't have a chance.

Except that she does. Jesus custom-designed this whole conversation for her, and He knows exactly what's in her head. She's in for quite a ride.

Our conversations with the Lord usually begin (and end) with us talking. We start with things like, "Dear Lord," or, "Our Father," or, "Holy God." The big difference between our typical prayers and today's passage is the back-and-forth. Our prayers usually end when we say, "Amen."

But prayers for guidance should "keep the line open." The Lord's guidance often comes in stages and can have many surprising twists and turns. You don't learn much from an on-off prayer.

3 John 4:11–15

The woman said to Him, “Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?”

Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

The woman said to Him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”

It’s worth noting here that this conversation is more friendly than it sounds in English. Terms like “please” (Bee-vak-a-shah in modern Hebrew) haven’t even been invented yet. Jesus can be super friendly when the situation warrants. That must be the case here, or this woman—who came in the heat of the day to avoid bumping into anyone—wouldn’t have continued the conversation.

And she asks good questions. *“Where then do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?”*

Notice that Jesus doesn’t answer her questions. His statement hints at the fact that *living water* doesn’t come from a well, but He doesn’t say that outright. Instead, Jesus explains what’s so great about living water.

This woman, who is desperate for many things in many ways, thinks she has found the answer to her prayers. So she says, *“Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”*

She’s hooked, though she’s still thinking about water that comes from a well. If Jesus was talking about that kind of water, He wouldn’t have asked her for a drink in the first place.

She doesn’t get it. That doesn’t matter though. Jesus will change the subject two more times.

The woman at the well has found the answer to her prayers, just not in the way she thinks.

The best answers to prayer are complicated. We pray for one thing and God gives us something else. Thus we get what we need and, if we’re paying attention, a lesson.

What was the difference between what we asked for and what we got? Why was what we got better? What did we miss? (Why were we wrong about what we needed?)

Answer these questions and you’ve gotten a lot more out of it than the direct benefit of the answered prayer.

More on this tomorrow.

4 John 4:16–20

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.”

The woman answered and said, “I have no husband.”

Jesus said to her, “You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly.”

The woman said to Him, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.”

Ya think? Understatement of the year—*“I perceive that You are a prophet.”*

The light just came on. Up to this point, Jesus hasn’t made all that much sense. The woman is intrigued and isn’t put off by Jesus’s rather puzzling responses because He’s so friendly.

But at the word, “five” Jesus suddenly makes perfect sense—too much sense. There’s no way Jesus could know her whole backstory; no one knows that.

Jesus is kicking this encounter into high gear. He wants to engage her soul. She picks up on this immediately and says, *“Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.”*

But it’s her next sentence that shows real wisdom. *“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.”*

She knows where Jesus is going with this, and she’s interested.

Every interaction with God is a potential soul engagement. This seems obvious with prayer, but we often ignore that angle. We ask for help with something and then don’t notice that we’re being schooled.

Answers to prayer are often slower and more intricate than we’d like. But if we pick up on where God is going with His answer, we act like the students He wants us to be. Remember, disciple means student.

It’s perfectly reasonable to pray a prayer like, “Really?” or, “Is there a point to this?” Anything sincere that a curious student would ask a teacher is not only okay; it’s excellent. For example:

So he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” ...

Then He said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” — John 20:25b, 27

Jesus doesn’t seem the least bit put off by Thomas’s need for proof. Thomas is making a sincere request. He isn’t pretending to be something he’s not. That’s good.

5 John 4:21–30

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

The woman said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When He comes, He will tell us all things.”

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

And at this point His disciples came, and they marveled that He talked with a woman; yet no one said, “What do You seek?” or, “Why are You talking with her?”

The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, “Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” Then they went out of the city and came to Him.

This is the point of the whole encounter. Jesus did go through Samaria to avoid the Pharisees—but mostly to deliver this message to the Samaritans.

The disciples figure that out instantly. That’s why, despite their amazement at Jesus talking to the woman, they don’t question it. They’re used to Jesus having an unexpected agenda.

But it’s the woman who displays amazing insight. She knows that Jesus is the Messiah—He proved it to her. His knowledge of her past showed that He’s a prophet; she gets that. Thus, she knows that His claim to be the Christ must be true.

Yet, notice her choice of words back in the city. *“Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”*

Why not just say that she found the Christ? Why phrase it as a possibility?

Because she’s smart, very smart. She knows she’s not exactly “Miss Credibility” in this town. By downplaying the situation, she gets people’s interest without sparking any skepticism.

So, they go and check it out.

Apologetics is a subtle art form. People are naturally skeptical, and the culture we live in is especially skeptical of Christianity. Sometimes it’s right to make your case straight up, but often it’s better to plant seeds of the gospel that will sprout later.

Remember, you’re part of a great team. Don’t rush it. It’s not all up to you.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When have you seen ego interfere with witness?

2. Have you had a run-on prayer series with God?

3. Ever had a confusing answer to prayer make sense later?

4. What has God taught you in response to prayer?

5. When has someone taught you by setting you up to find the answer yourself?

Items for prayer: