

# ***John***

## ***Lesson #5***

### ***The Samaritan Woman***

**(4: 1 – 54)**

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# Review

Lesson #4 began John's "B Cycle" (2: 13 – 5: 47) with the story of Nicodemus, a prominent Jewish leader and a member of the Sanhedrin. On this 2<sup>nd</sup> Passover Jesus entered Jerusalem with a whip and he cleared the Temple, tossing tables and driving out the moneychangers. In John the "cleansing of the Temple" episode established Jesus' knowledge and authority, in sharp contrast to the ignorance of the crowds and to the lesser knowledge and authority of Nicodemus, "a ruler of the Jews" (3: 1).

We were told that *"while he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all"* (2: 23-24). We then moved directly to, *"[but] there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews . . ."* (3: 1).

# Review, cont.

**Nicodemus stood in sharp contrast to the crowds who believed in Jesus because of the “signs” he performed. Nicodemus needed more than “signs”; he needed understanding; hence, he came to Jesus at night for a private, intimate conversation.**

**Nicodemus was no ignorant buffoon, afraid of the crowds or of the authorities; he was a highly educated, deeply insightful man, and his conversation with Jesus sparkled with insight and verbal play. It also probed deeply into the very heart of Jesus’ identity and purpose.**

# Preview

**In Lesson #5 we leave the story of Nicodemus, a respected leader of the Jews, and we move directly to the story of the Samaritan woman, an outcast (as both a Samaritan and a marginalized woman) who has been married five times, and the man she is living with now is not her husband. She is the town whore, the polar opposite of Nicodemus: whereas, Nicodemus was knowledgeable but modest, the Samaritan woman is ignorant but brash; whereas, Nicodemus resides in Jerusalem, the center of piety and power, the Samaritan woman lives in Sychar, an anonymous, small village in “unclean” territory.**

**Unlike Jesus’ subtle and insightful exchange with Nicodemus, Jesus’ jousting with the Samaritan woman is startling, as they trade insults. Both the encounter with Nicodemus and the encounter with the Samaritan woman lead to truth, but they arrive by very different paths.**

“Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself was not baptizing, just his disciples), he left Judea and returned to Galilee. He had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about [six o’clock in the morning].”

(4: 1-6)

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Our story opens with a reference to Jesus baptizing, as the previous story of chapter 3 read:

*“After this Jesus and his disciples went into the region of Judea, where he spent some time with them baptizing.”*

(3: 22)

John tells us here in chapter 4, however, that *“Jesus himself was not baptizing, just his disciples”* (4: 2). So as not to mislead people or to compete with John, Jesus and his disciples leave Judea and head north to Galilee.

But he most certainly did NOT have to *“pass through Samaria”* (4: 4)!

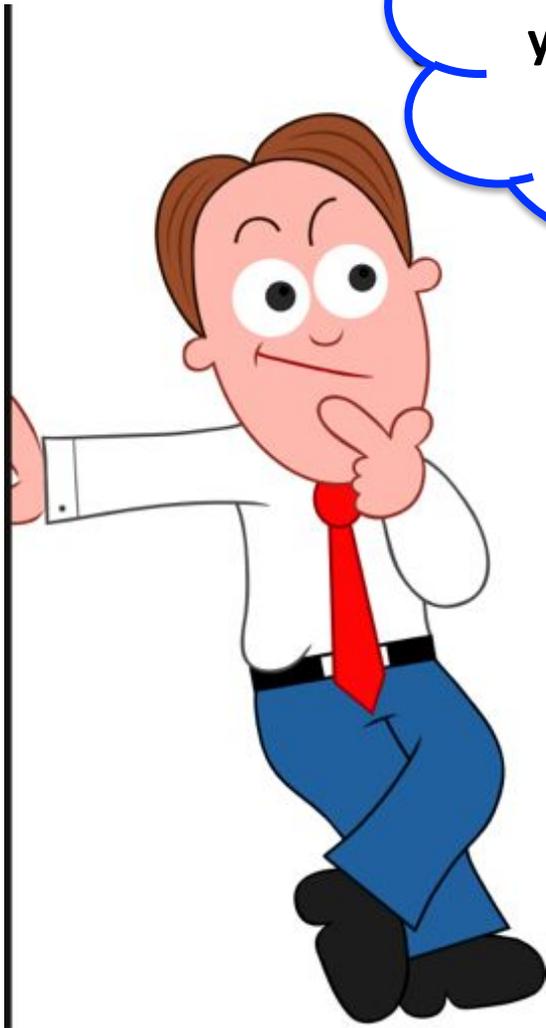
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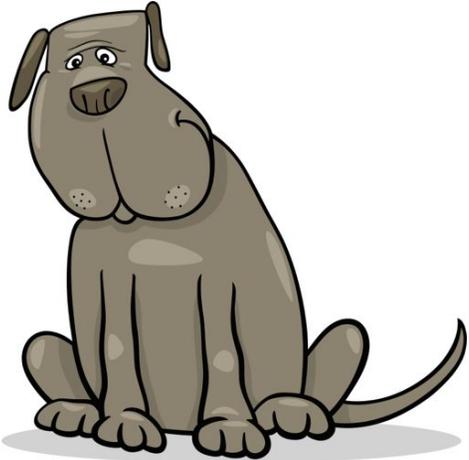


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That line crackles with sarcasm!  
I can just see John's face as he  
recalls the incident from 60  
years ago. The last thing Jesus'  
disciples wanted to do was  
"pass through Samaria!"

It's way off  
course!





Sychar is a small village outside of Shechem, near today's West Bank town of Nablus. Josephus notes that Sychar sits between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (*Antiquities* 4.8.44) and the Madaba mosaic map (that we saw in Lesson #4) locates it in the same place.

The Greek Orthodox church of St. Photini sits over the traditional "Jacob's Well," a 135-foot deep shaft, dug through alluvial soil and limestone to the ground-water below.

It is a very deep well!

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**“Jacob’s Well,” inside the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Photini, Nablus, Palestine.**

*Photography by Fr. Rob Waller*

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**David Roberts, *Jacob's Well* (lithograph), c. 1838-1840.  
Library of Congress, Washington D.C.**

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**Recall in Scripture that the village well is not only a meeting place for the women of the town when they come to draw water in the evening, it is also Scripture’s “singles’ bar.”**

**When Abraham sends his servant Eliezer to Haran to find a wife for his son, Isaac, Eliezer goes directly to the well at Haran, and there he meets Rebekah, who will become Isaac’s wife (Genesis 24: 11-27). Isaac’s son, Jacob, also meets his future wife, Rachel, at the very same well (Genesis 29: 1-11).**

**In Scripture, wells are associated with romance and marriage, and not coincidentally, Jesus—whom John the Baptist just called the “bridegroom” in the previous story (3: 29)—will also meet a woman at a well.**

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“A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her ‘Give me a drink.’ His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?’ (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who 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 do not even have a bucket and the well is deep; where then can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself with his children and flocks? Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again . . .

“but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give 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 may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’”

(4: 7-15)

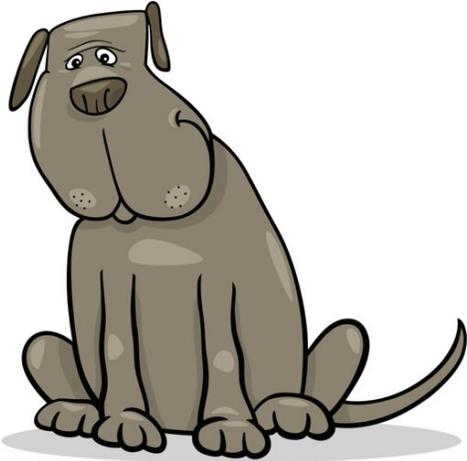
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Angelica Kauffman. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well* (oil on canvas), 1796.  
New Pinakothek, Munich.



It is 6:00 in the morning.  
Since his disciples are off  
getting breakfast, Jesus is  
alone at the well, where he  
meets this woman.



What's she  
doing there at  
6:00 AM?

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Good question! According to our “Roman timekeeping,” it is early in the morning, and women come to the well to draw water in the evening (Genesis 24: 11). Apparently, this woman is not welcome when the other women of the village are present. As we’ll learn, she is the village whore.

In the culturally conservative Middle East of Jesus’ day (and today), an unrelated man and a woman (especially this woman) would not meet alone. Indeed, when Jesus’ disciples return they “*were amazed that he was talking with a woman*” (4: 27)—and a Samaritan woman at that! Jews viewed Samaritan women as “unclean”; they would never speak to one, let alone receive a drink from such a woman’s hand.

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**That is scandalous!**







**Listen closely to what they say, and to the dynamic of the exchange.**

Jesus says to her: Δός μοι πείν.  
***“Give me to drink.”***

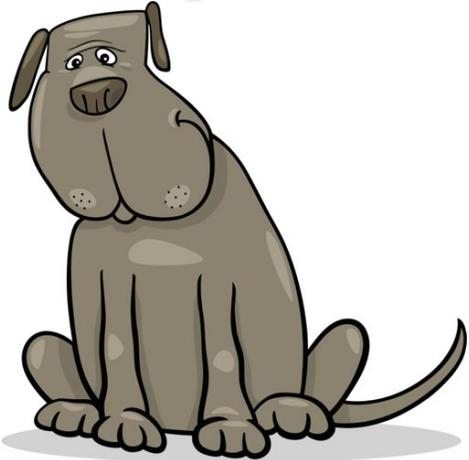
She replies: ***“How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?”***

**We could read this in two ways: one, as Jesus asking the woman politely for a drink, and she replying humbly, as an outcast speaking to a superior; or, as Jesus asking her curtly for a drink, and she replying haughtily, with a tone of contempt.**

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Recall the history  
between the Jews  
and the Samaritans.  
They loathed each  
other!



Humm! That  
gives us a clue.

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**After King Solomon's death in 930 B.C. civil war broke out between the 10 northern tribes and the 2 southern tribes. The united monarchy established by David split into the northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem. Civil war raged on for over 80 years, crippling both kingdoms.**

**In 722 B.C. the Assyrian Empire swept out of the north and obliterated the northern kingdom of Israel, taking the survivors captive to Assyria. Then, in 586 B.C. the Babylonian Empire attacked and destroyed the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, taking captive its survivors.**

**Finally, in 539 B.C. Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, defeated Babylon (and what had been Assyria), and allowed ALL the captives to go home.**

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**When people resettled, however, those who had been in Assyria for nearly 200 years brought back with them an adulterated form of Judaism, corrupted by Assyrian beliefs, customs and traditions.**

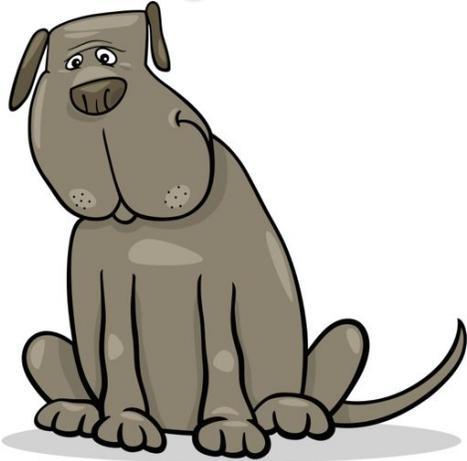
**The Babylonian captives, however, had only been gone for a little over a generation, and they returned more fervent than ever to reestablish temple worship in Jerusalem.**

**The animosity between Samaritans and Jews begins here, and it marinates for the next 500 years. That's what makes Jesus' parable of the "good Samaritan" so engaging: there is no such thing as a "good Samaritan": they're ALL bad! And Samaritans felt the same way about Jews.**

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So, when we read this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we should be keenly aware of the conversation's tone and sharp edges.



Listen to the exchange read this way!

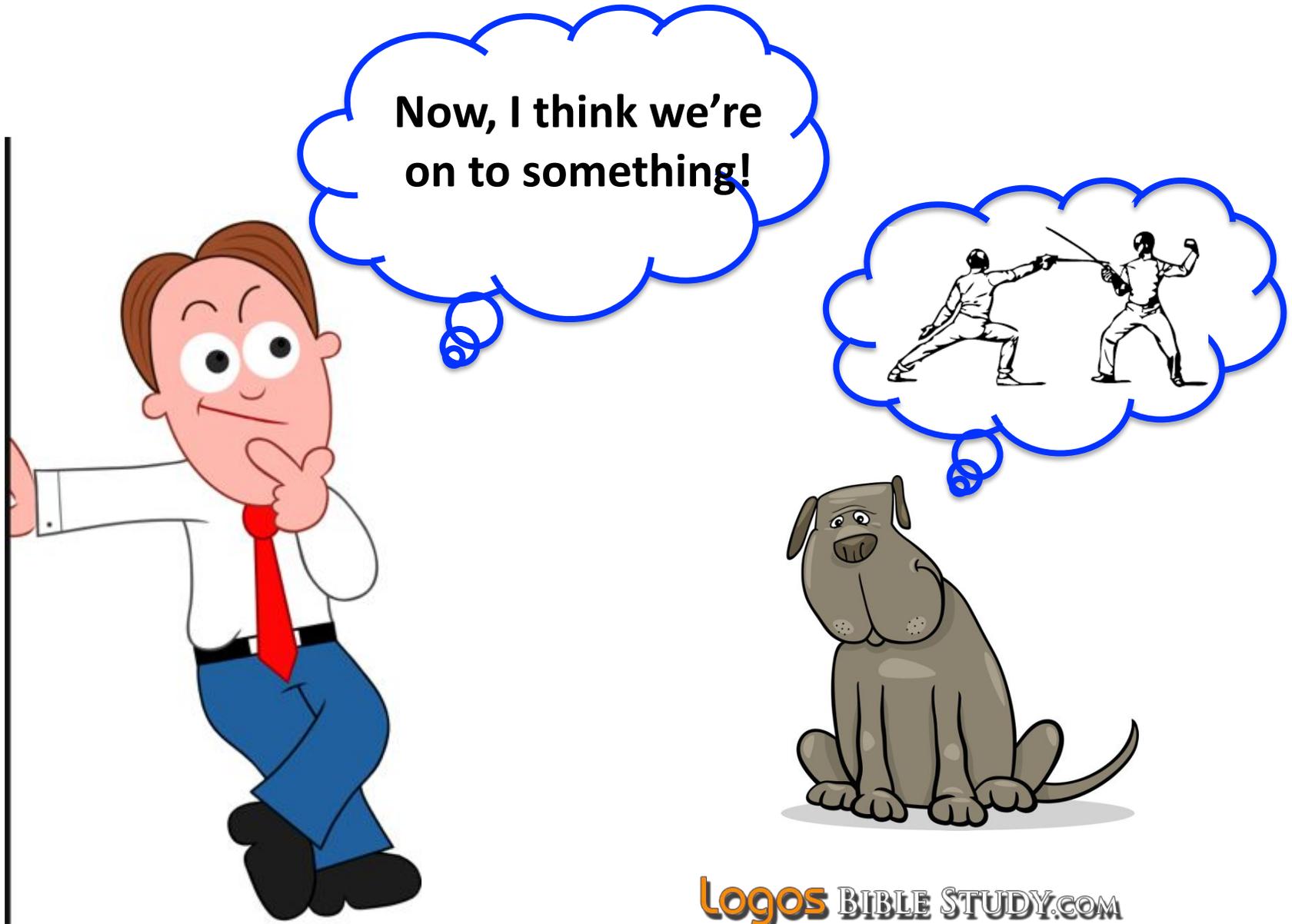
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“A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her ‘Give me a drink.’ His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?’ (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who 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 do not even have a bucket and the well is deep; where then can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself with his children and flocks? Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; . . .

“but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give 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 may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’”

(4: 7-15)

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“Jesus said to her, ‘Go call your husband and come back.’ The woman answered and said to him, ‘I do not have a husband.’ Jesus answered her, ‘You are right in saying, ‘I do not have a husband.’ For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; . . .

“. . . and indeed the Father seeks such people 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 the Messiah is coming, the one called the Anointed; when he comes, he will tell us everything.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking with you.’”

(4: 16-26)



**Notice how both Jesus and the woman attack and parry, with Jesus scoring the winning point in his final statement: *“I am he, the one who is speaking with you”* (4: 26).**



To this point, Jesus has had three exchanges in John's gospel: 1) Nathanael; 2) Nicodemus; and 3) the Samaritan woman at the well.

With Nathanael, we saw gaps in the story that we had to fill, if we were to understand the story: What was Nathanael doing—and thinking—that prompted Jesus to say, *“Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him”* (1: 47).

With Nicodemus, we had to overcome his indirection and uncover Nicodemus' underlying question, the real reason he came to Jesus at night for a private conversation.

And with the Samaritan woman at the well, we had to understand the animosity between Samaritans and Jews in order to hear the tone of the conversation and to discern Jesus' approach to this very marginalized woman.



**In each of these three stories we witness John's remarkable creativity and rhetorical dexterity in how he portrays Jesus engaging three very different people: 1) a potential disciple; 2) a respected and highly educated member of the Sanhedrin; and 3) a marginalized social outcast.**



**Now, with the final point scored against the Samaritan woman and the match won, Jesus' disciples return with breakfast, and they are shocked to find him talking with a woman—alone.**

“At that moment [Jesus’] disciples returned and were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said [to the woman], ‘What are you looking for?’ or [to Jesus] ‘Why are you talking with her?’ . . . [Once the woman left] the disciples urged him, ‘Rabbi, eat.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat of which you do not know.’ So the disciples said to one another, ‘Could someone have brought him something to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, ‘In four months the harvest will be here’? I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest. The reaper is already receiving his payment and gathering crops for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper can rejoice together . . .

“. . . for here the saying is verified that ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work.

(4: 27, 31-38)

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**When Jesus' disciples return with breakfast they feel like they have intruded into a private—and somewhat embarrassing—situation; hence, they hesitate to ask the woman why she is there or to ask Jesus why he is talking to her!**

**We can only imagine their shock, as they look furtively at one another, no one knowing what to say or what to do; and we can only imagine the expression on the woman's face, as she is caught in a rather awkward situation.**

**As the woman abruptly leaves, one of Jesus' disciples, not knowing what else to do, holds out the food they've brought and says "Rabbi, eat!"**



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It's a "teaching moment."

As Nathanael didn't understand Jesus (*"Can anything good come from Nazareth,"* 1: 46); as Nicodemus didn't understand how he could enter the kingdom of God; as the Samaritan woman didn't understand that salvation is from the Jews, in the person of Christ; so do Jesus' disciples not understand why they are in Samaria, of all places (Jesus just had to go to there!).

Now, he enlightens them.

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“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, ‘In four months the harvest will be here’? I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest. The reaper is already receiving his payment and gathering crops for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper can rejoice together. For here the saying is verified that ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work.”

(4: 34-38)

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**The fields are indeed “ripe for the harvest,” and the fields are not limited to those in Judea and Galilee; they include Samaria, and as we shall learn, the very ends of the earth.**



**During the very awkward moment of the disciples' arrival, the Samaritan woman quickly leaves Jesus and goes back to Sychar, her small village. The scene that takes place in Sychar parallels that of Jesus' conversation with his disciples: as Jesus tells his disciples about the "harvest," the Samaritan woman is telling the villagers about Jesus.**

**John seamlessly weaves the two together.**

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“The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, ‘Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possible be the Messiah?’ They went out of the town and came to him . . . . Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, ‘He told me everything I have done.’ When the Samaritans came to him, they invited him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. Many more began to believe in him because of his word, and they said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.’”

(4: 28-30; 39-42)

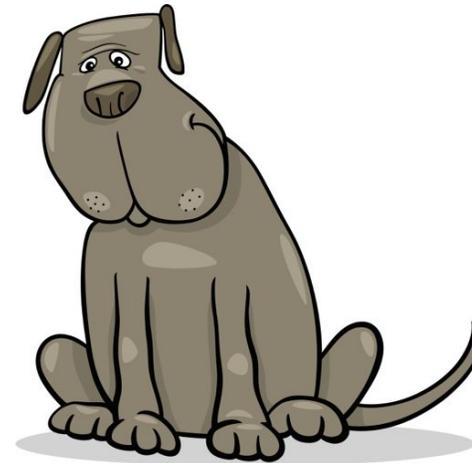
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Given the Samaritan woman's reputation as the town whore, when she reported that she met a man who told her "everything I have done," the entire male population of the village thought they better go have a look!



Ha, ha, ha!



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**That's not funny!**



Many of the Samaritans “began to believe in him” (4: 39) because of the woman’s testimony, just as many in the crowds “began to believe in his name” (2: 23) because of the “signs.” As that was not enough for Nicodemus, who needed understanding; so the woman’s testimony was not enough for the Samaritans: they needed to encounter Jesus, themselves.

Once they do, they no longer “began to believe in him”; rather, once Jesus spends two days with them they say: “[W]e *have heard for ourselves, and we know* [εἶδω (eidó)] *that this is truly the savior of the world*” (4: 42).

“After the two days, he left there for Galilee. For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his native place. When he came into Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all he had done in Jerusalem at the feast; for they themselves had gone to the feast. Then he returned to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine.”

(4: 43-46a)

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When Jesus leaves Samaria and heads north into Galilee, presumably passing through Nazareth on his way to Cana, he notes that *“a prophet has no honor in his native place”* (4: 44 ).

This is a proverbial saying, the ancient equivalent of our modern-day “familiarity breeds contempt.” Both are often accurate. Recall that the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, Elijah and Elisha, were not appreciated by those who knew them best: the widow who took care of Elijah (1 Kings 17: 8-24) and the Syrian leper healed by Elisha (2 Kings 5: 1-27) were both Gentiles.

The same saying occurs in all three synoptic gospels, as well as in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, 4: 31.

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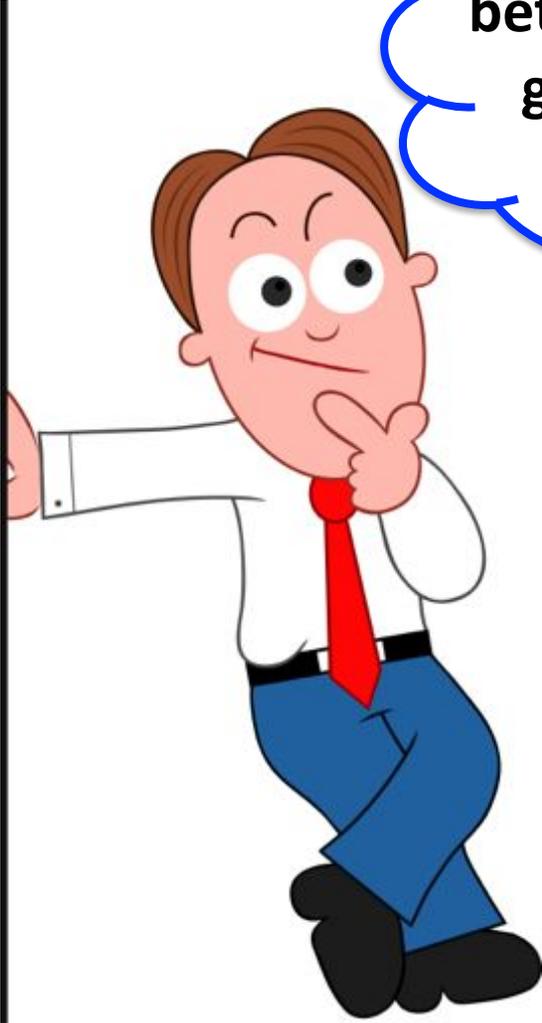


**Cana was the site of Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> "sign," changing water into wine; in the story that follows, Jesus performs his 2<sup>nd</sup> "sign," healing the son of a royal official.**

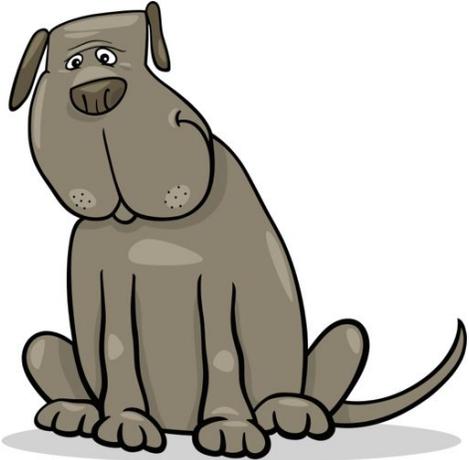
**The word "sign" σημεῖον (*sémeion*) is a symbolic term in John's gospel for Jesus' "miracles" and "wondrous deeds."**

**The 1<sup>st</sup> sign, changing the water into wine, signifies the transformative nature of God's intervention in humanity; the 2<sup>nd</sup> sign, healing the royal official's son, signifies the life-giving word of Jesus.**

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Cana is a very nice link  
between the first 2 of (you  
guessed it) 7 “signs” in  
John’s gospel.



Funny how that  
works!

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“Now there was a royal official whose son was ill in Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, who was near death. Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe.’ The royal official said to him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You may go; your son will live.’ The man believed what Jesus said to him and left. While he was on his way back, his slaves met him and told him that his boy would live. He asked them when he began to recover. They told him, ‘the fever left him yesterday about [the seventh hour]. The father realized that just at that time Jesus had said to him, ‘Your son will live,’ and he and his whole household came to believe. [Now] this was the second sign Jesus did when he came to Galilee from Judea. (4: 46b-54)

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Joseph-Marie Vien. *The Centurion Kneeling at the Feet of Jesus* (oil on canvas), 1752.  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseilles.

# Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why did Jesus have to go to Samaria?
2. Why was the Samaritan woman at the well so early in the morning?
3. Where else in Scripture do you find men meeting women at a well?
4. How would you characterize the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman?
5. Why did John insert this story in this place in his gospel?

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