

“For you have had five husbands,
and the one you have now is not your husband.”

Our story today is about how we know the truth, how we love the truth, and how we live the truth. The Lord wants us to understand Him, approach Him, and find joy and enlightenment in obeying Him. Using the themes of water, marriage, and formal worship, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well is a picture of our path to enlightenment and happiness. We are going to examine this conversation in three parts: the Lord’s offer of living water, His question about her husbands, and His answer about where to worship.

The Lord meets the woman at a well outside Sychar, also called Shechem, an important city in Samaria, what used to be the northern kingdom of Israel, and the encounter seems to start accidentally; He is sitting by a well and a woman comes to draw water. Notably, she is a Samaritan.

The Samaritans of the north were openly hated by the Jews of the south, largely due to Jewish perception of the origin of the Samaritans, as we read:

“But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the people of Samaria had made, every nation in the cities in which they lived...” (II Kings 17:24,29)

The Old Testament maintains that the Samaritans were placed in the land by the Assyrians hundreds of years prior to the New Testament in order to occupy the land. When they arrived, they adopted the worship of Jehovah – even though they were not descendants of Jacob – but did not abandon their previous gods from five different cults. The Samaritans insisted they were heirs of Jacob, but the Jews considered them idolaters and imposters.

In the internal sense, the first part of the conversation is about the Word: when He asks her to give Him a drink, this is the Lord asking us, “What do you know from the Word?” The well, being near Shechem, symbolizes a place of interior truth while ‘drinking’ symbolizes instruction (AC 680, 3069, 4430). Obviously we are not in a position to instruct the Lord in His Word, but this is the Lord asking us to think about what we know, what we have drawn from the Word, what truth we know. She does not answer His question, but considering Jewish hostility to Samaritans, wonders aloud why He asks.

He doesn’t answer her question either. Instead, He makes the amazing claim that she should ask Him for living water and never thirst again. She then challenges Him, pointing out the difficulty of drawing water. She even makes her own counter-claim to the well through her ancestor, Jacob. This depicts our reaction to the Lord’s question to us: “Are You talking to me? The Word is difficult to understand, but I have been taught what it says” (AC 2702). Think for a moment how much information from the Word we each have, and how we have gone to the Word, bucket in hand, and worked to understand what it is saying to us. Her point seems valid – and the Lord does not disagree.

Instead, he merely insists His water is superior because those drinking it will never thirst again. Now He has her attention! This promise, in its barest, natural sense, would be an amazing gift to a Samaritan woman who had to draw water from a well daily. But what is this living water? Simply put, it is Divine truth flowing as life into our minds producing enlightenment (AC 3424, SS 2). The difference between drawing normal water from the well of Jacob and drawing living water from the Lord is the difference between reading the Word for information or habit or curiosity and reading it reverently as Divine truth.

We may read the Word for information – and there is nothing wrong with this. We may have an interest in a story or read it because of a habit of daily reading. Perhaps we read it looking for answers. Perhaps we prefer stories to psalms, or psalms to prophecies. Our states vary greatly, and so will our appreciation of different parts of the Word. Anyone who has found themselves reading devotionally and coming into the book of, say, Jeremiah, has likely felt lost and confused. What does the Lord ask us to do?

To receive living water, we must read reverently. We must read as listening, believing the words and thoughts to be those of the One Living God, the Lord. This change of attitude may be subtle but is essential. When we read, are we listening? Perhaps we find ourselves evaluating the ideas we read in the Word, preferring some to others. Maybe we like the parts that speak about joy more than sorrow. He asks us to listen because the Word offers us Divine Truth. We are even promised that spiritual and celestial things are stored up secretly if we approach the Word reverently as Divine (TCR 239).

This attitude should bring us a new perspective. The goal is to think from the truth, not just about the truth. The truth becomes a fountain within us when it becomes our perspective, our point of view, our means of living a spiritual life (AR 956). This is what enlightenment is: seeing the world and our lives through the lens of the Lord's truth and finding eternal happiness by living according to this perspective. This enlightenment, this fountain of living water, is what the Lord offers to us.

And the Samaritan woman wants this living water. We want this guide to spiritual happiness. Imagine for a moment if our view of our daily lives was first and easily and joyfully "What would bring the neighbor happiness?" Imagine if this was not merely a question we remembered to ask ourselves, but our constant disposition? Whether you are ordering tea at a café, taking the garbage out, or getting out of your car after a fender-bender, imagine if we greeted all of these as opportunities for love and learning. This is how angels live. This requires seeing the Word as entirely Divine.

It is at this point that the conversation takes a baffling turn. The Lord does not explain how to get the living water, nor does He explain further what it is. Instead, He suggests she go call her husband and then return.

This would be baffling to any of us, perhaps even offensive. Why does He presume she has a husband or that a husband is required for the living water? To the ancient audience, however, this reminds them of something specific: betrothal

This encounter mirrors the semi-formal ritual for a couple arranging a marriage. The bridegroom arrives; the bride comes to draw water; the bride then brings the

bridegroom to her people; her people invite the bridegroom to stay with them. This is how Abraham's servant found Rebekah for Isaac, it is how Jacob and Rachel met, and it is how Moses and Zipporah met. This is exactly what we see in John 4: Jesus arrives; the woman comes to draw water; later she brings her people to meet Jesus; they invite Jesus to stay with them. This is a story about the Lord-as-bridegroom beckoning His church-as-bride to return to Him.

And 'return' is the idea. This brings us to the most baffling part of the conversation. When she claims not to have a husband, Jesus agrees – and says she has had five husbands! Jewish and Samaritan women of this time were forbidden, by law, to marry a fourth time for any reason. A woman who married five times would have been unheard of, let alone accepted in any Samaritan town. It would not matter whether she had been put away in divorce or whether her husbands had perished; no such woman would be welcome in society nor be able to convince anyone of anything.

She does not seem offended, and He does not call her to repentance or otherwise address her state of matrimony. Perhaps, both Jesus and the woman know He isn't talking about her marriages, but Israel's marriages. Our reading from II Kings points out that the Samaritans, when brought to the land, kept their five cults to other gods and tried to add worship of Jehovah to their existing religions. Remember, this is the central claim against the Samaritans, both in the prophets and from Jews in the New Testament. Perhaps her 'five husbands' are these five cults, cults Israel and Samaria had previously. Jesus is not criticizing her for having married so many men; he is pointing out that Israel and Samaria have been polytheistic and idolatrous.

"And the one you have now is not your husband." Is the Lord asking her to consider whom she is talking to at the well? She has claimed Jacob as her ancestor and acknowledges later that she believes in the Messiah. Perhaps this symbolizes the Lord asking the church to formalize its marriage to Him.

What can all this mean for us? Remember that the Lord has asked us to consider His Word as Divine, not just informational. If we have sincerely considered what we know, the Lord is now asking us to consider what we love. When the Lord asks her about her husband, He is asking us: 'What do you love most?'

Throughout the Word the imagery of marriage is used to describe the relationship of God to His people. We participate in the heavenly marriage of God and His church when we take the Lord's truth and live it in our lives. This is what He was offering as living water. When we see His truth as living truth, it will convict us, it will ask us to change our ways and repent. Anyone who has read the Word can see it does not agree much with our default or natural inclinations, and it challenges us to consider what we love and value the most.

Our response is: 'I don't know what I love most.' This is not having a husband. The Heavenly Doctrines tell us that discovering or cataloging our loves and affections is largely beyond us, but this is no excuse for consciously valuing anything more than the Lord. Just like the cults of Israel and Samaria, we commit idolatry if we put anything

above the Lord in our hearts. We are all guilty of this. The Lord points out that we have had five husbands: empty gods, shallow goals, false loves, and mixed-up priorities. As the Bridegroom comes to the well, He wants to know if His bride is ready for marriage. The Lord is asking us to re-commit to a life of repentance and proper priorities, to change who we are regardless of who we have been.

Have we shaped our days around petty victories or eternal principles? Does our satisfaction and behavior depend upon being liked or being kind? Do we offer sacrifices to power, security, and leisure or to the Lord and the joy of serving Him?

The conversation shifts surprisingly again. Rather than protest or agree or be offended or ask for forgiveness, the Samaritan woman declares Jesus to be a prophet. Remember that a prophet is not merely one who knows the future – they speak the words of the Divine. By naming him a prophet, she compares Jesus to Hosea and Amos and other prophets who have criticized Samaria. She seems to understand the conversation was not about her particular marriages, and so she knows now that she speaks to a prophet who can answer her question. She asks this prophet, Jesus, whether the Lord wants people to worship in Jerusalem or on the nearby mountain. This is the central conflict, again, between Jews and Samaritans. North or south? City or mountain? Foreign or local site? It is amazing for a Samaritan woman to ask a Jewish prophet this question, and it symbolizes the third part of our opportunity to return to the Lord: worship and what we do.

We move from water to marriage and from marriage to worship. Having considered our intellectual relationship with Divine truth, and then our values and loves compared to the Lord, we now turn to what to do, how to worship, and the need for humility. The Heavenly Doctrines tell us that worship is affection and acknowledgment of the truth (AC 1326). If we have read the Word reverently and changed our priorities to love truth, what does worship – that affection and acknowledgment – look like?

For us, the choice she highlights seems to be between our own acquired and well-used but general truths (symbolized by the mountain at Shechem) (AC 4388, 4707) and a more formal but artificial doctrinal system of the church (symbolized by the city Jerusalem) (AC 402).

Does the Lord care whether we rely on our own general understanding that already informs our life, or whether we rely on the informed opinion outside ourselves, the perspective of our church and doctrine?

Here is another way to put the question, perhaps: once we see a living truth that prompts us to change our priorities and behavior, do we obey it the way it makes sense to us, or do we obey it the way the church explains it? Do we put it into practice immediately, or do we read and study further?

Imagine you have re-dedicated yourself to not bearing false witness. This is living water to you and you are resolved to return to the Lord and make this a priority because He says so. Worship is about life. How do you live this? Do ‘white lies’ count?

How about sharing our opinions – is that what honesty means? We can see this commandment as vital to our lives, we can feel passionate and convicted to follow it, and we can be confused as to how. Do you understand this commandment enough to live it, or should you ask someone else how?

The answer the Lord offers is surprising. Jesus does not give her a simple answer either exonerating the Samaritans or supporting the Jews. He insists that she worships what she doesn't know and that 'salvation is from the Jews' (John 4:22). Does He favor Jerusalem?

When we ask the Lord whether we should obey Him through our own perspective or through a more rigorous though artificial understanding, the Lord points out two surprising things: first, everything comes through doctrine and the church, and second, it doesn't matter. The best perspective is the one that will soon come from obeying.

Let's look at this again. We fool ourselves if we insist that our thoughts and perspective are shaped apart from the world and people around us. This is why Jesus tells her 'You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know.' The Word is only ever understood according to doctrine (SS 51) and we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking we have our own, unique insights that sprang up in us apart from what we have learned and been taught. We approach the Lord through His Word – and doctrine – not through our own isolated perspective and intuition.

But please do not miss the second, larger, message. It doesn't matter. True worship is in spirit and truth. The best way to understand, worship and live is the way that comes from a life of obedience putting good and truth together, and we can't start with that. The best perspective will be shaped by the truth after you do it.

In our example, if you want to understand 'bearing false witness' spiritually, interiorly, specifically, you have to try following it. (AC 9818, Lord 49) Yes, it will be a blend at first of our own perspective and that of the church, and yes, it will be imperfect, and perhaps you will change your approach every other day, but this is how we accept the living water and return to the Bridegroom.

After hearing this, the Samaritan woman remarks that this requires the Messiah. Jesus responds, 'I am He, the one speaking to you.' She returns to her village and tells them about the prophet she met, clearly inspired. They believe her and come out and accept Jesus as the savior of the world. This shows us the only thing the woman does, and it is what we should do. We should tell people about the amazing prophet. The Lord asks us to tell people what we have heard and seen. This week, find a way to tell someone about the prophet you have met and how His truth convicts and inspires you.

This conversation between the Lord and a Samaritan woman involves three topics: how we know the truth, how we love the truth, and how we live the truth. First, we need to see the Word as Divine truth and accept it because it is Divine. Second, we need to acknowledge that we have strayed from our God and come back to Him in our loves and priorities. Third, we need to let go of whether we are doing it right or doing

it on our own and let Him create a new spirit within us that sees His truth from humble enlightenment. Finally, we need to tell others about what we have discovered and why it matters to us.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hosea
11:8)
Amen

Adult Service Readings
II Kings 17:24, 27-34
John 4:5-43
AC 2702