

Leader Guide

Week 5: Woman at the Well

John 4: 1-45

Story Synopsis:

While journeying through Samaria, Jesus encountered a woman at the well. Jesus broke the socio-cultural norms of this day by conversing with this woman. Not only was it unheard of for a man to speak to a woman in public, but there was also racial hatred between Jews and Samaritans. This woman, who had five husbands and was now living with a man who was not her husband, was most likely also known in the community as a ‘promiscuous’ woman (much the same way we refer to women in the commercial sex industry). Yet Jesus not only spoke to her, but discussed a deep theological truth with her. In her encounter with Jesus, the woman found acceptance, forgiveness, grace, and a new beginning. Through our study of this passage, we will discover that our past mistakes don’t have to determine our futures: God always offers us forgiveness and the chance for new beginnings.

The Story:

Jesus often had the habit of being in the right place at the right time to meet the ‘wrong’ people—at least the sort of people that the religious elite didn’t think a holy man should associate with: tax collectors, Roman soldiers, prostitutes, and lepers. What they all had in common was a spiritual hunger Jesus alone could satisfy. In John chapter 4, Jesus does it again—breaking societal and cultural norms to seek out someone lost in sin.

John tells us that Jesus “had” to go through Samaria (vs.4). The road from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north led most directly through Samaria. This presented a problem for Jewish travelers. There was a deep-seated ethnic conflict between Jews and Samaritans. Jewish tradition dated the roots of the conflict back to the return from the Babylonian exile, when the returning Jewish refugees found their land already occupied by a group of people claiming to be the true descendants of Abraham. Though the Samaritans professed to follow the Torah, Jews regarded them as unclean. Many Jews would go around Samaria to travel between Judea and Galilee, preferring the longer route to coming in contact with Samaritans. Jews’ hatred for these “half-breeds” was so intense they would walk days out of their way to avoid contact.

As Jesus and the disciples passed through Samaria, Jesus sat down at a well to rest. It was about noon when Jesus came to the well, the hottest part of the day. At that time Jesus and

his disciples would most likely have been traveling about four hours. Jesus stayed at the well to rest while his followers went into the nearby town of Sychar to buy food (4:5-6).

John notes that the well was “Jacob’s well” (4:6). Part of the background John’s first readers would have known was that the Old Testament patriarchs had a habit of meeting their wives at wells. Rebekah, wife of Isaac, Rachel, wife of Jacob, and Zipporah, wife of Moses, all made their entrances at wells. Jesus would also meet a woman at this well—not to find a wife, but to find a woman who would become the spiritual mother of a new family of faith. When we meet her, though, we find that she is not the woman we might expect.

As Jesus sat resting by the well, a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus asked her for a drink (4:7). A first-century Jewish reader would have noticed that there are a few things wrong with this picture. First of all, as the woman herself noted (4:9), Jesus was a man and she was a Samaritan woman. Jewish men—especially teachers or holy men—did not speak to women in public. Additionally, Jews did not normally speak to Samaritans, or accept food or drink from them. Finally, it is odd that the woman came to draw water at noon. Most women would have come to draw water from the well in the cool of the day, early in the morning or later in the evening. That the woman came alone in the heat of the noon sun suggests that she was not accepted in town, most likely because of her reputation (4:17-18).

In asking her for a drink, Jesus violated several religious and cultural norms. He violated one more by engaging in a theological discussion with her (4:10). As he so often did with people, Jesus began speaking with the woman on a spiritual level that she did not immediately grasp. “Living water” commonly referred to running, spring-fed water—and this was what the woman plainly understood. But Jesus was speaking on a spiritual level of the abundant life with God only Jesus can offer—the kind of water that quenches a thirsty soul.

The woman didn’t fully understand but she was intrigued enough to want a taste (4:15). What she didn’t realize is that to fully take in Jesus’ living water, you have to first get rid of whatever sludge you’ve been drinking. As theologians believe, in the woman’s case it was her sexual past. Jesus told her to go get her husband and come back. The woman’s reply “I have no husband” (4:17) managed to be both technically truthful and partially misleading. True, she was not married to the man she was currently with, but her statement could also have meant that she was unattached and available—something that was not fully true. Jesus’ next words removed all ambiguity: “You have had five husbands and the man you now have is not your husband” (4:18). Divorce was not an excepted practice so having had five husbands (even if some left her widowed) would have been very unacceptable. Since the Greek word used here could mean “man” or “husband,” it is possible the woman had lived with five men but not been married to all (or any) of them. Since the “your” in “your

husband” is in the emphatic position in Greek, it is also possible that her current man was not *her* husband, but that he *was* somebody else’s.¹

Confronted with this kind of specific knowledge about her life from a total stranger, the woman concluded that Jesus must be a prophet (4:19). As people often do when confronted with their sin, she cast about for a distraction. She tried to divert Jesus from the subject of morality to the more comfortable subject of religion (4:20). The issue she picked had the advantage of being both a religious question and one rooted in the Jewish/Samaritan ethnic conflict. The Samaritans worshipped God on Mt. Gerazim, but the Jews viewed Jerusalem as the central location for worship. But Jesus refused to be drawn into the discussion. Instead, he responded prophetically (4:21-24). There would come a day—and come soon—when worship would not be focused around a physical location, but around the person of the resurrected Christ.

All this talk of spirit and truth was too much for the woman, and she tried another tactic. “When Messiah comes . . . He will explain all things.” In other words, “When Messiah comes he will explain all this to us—and I’m fine with waiting until then.” But Jesus stopped her with a simple reply: “That’s me” (4:26).²

At this, the disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. The woman swiftly returned to the town, leaving her water jar behind her. Her original task paled in comparison with the urgency of telling the people about Jesus. She urged the townspeople to “come meet this man who told me everything I ever did” (4:29). The townspeople did, and soon believed—not only on account of the woman’s testimony, but because they themselves had encountered the Savior of the world (4:39-42)

Points of Application:

- Jesus did not judge the woman, but neither did he excuse her sin. Jesus lovingly confronted the woman’s past and offered her a chance for a new beginning.
- Jesus broke social codes to reach the woman. If Jesus had stayed within the bounds of what society considered acceptable, he would not have spoken to her—or possibly even gone through Samaria in the first place. Likewise, we also have to be willing to reach outside our comfort zones.
- Jesus took the initiative in his relationship with the woman. God always takes the initiative in his relationship with us. It is not that we first loved him, but that God first loved us. None of us come to God without God first drawing us to Him. God is always one who seeks after the lost.

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 604-606.

² Tom Wright, *John for Everyone Part One* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 46.

Group Guide

Week 5: Woman at the Well

John 4: 1-45

Opener:

Create a mask that represents a hidden emotion. Think about emotions that trafficking victims might experience. After you spend a few minutes making the masks, have each person describe what they have made.

Or

Ask members to act out different emotions and have the group try and guess which it is – like emotional charades. Then discuss why they chose those emotions and how that emotion might cloud their view of God.

Study the Scripture:

As a group read John chapter 4, 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Revelations 21:1-6.

Less time? Read the synopsis in the leader guide.

Questions for Reflection:

- Where were you when God first found you? How did God take the initiative in his relationship with you?
- Think of the lost people in your community. What social rules might you have to break to reach them?
- How can you reach out to those caught in sexual sin? How can you do that while still protecting yourself against temptation?
- People may judge you for reaching out to those openly struggling in sexual sin. Does that bother you? If so, how will you handle it?
- How has God offered you chances for a new beginning? What was it like to begin again?
- Think of instances in your own life when you experienced grace – when you shouldn't have succeeded, but you did. Understanding that you have received grace, how can you apply that in your dealings with other people?

The story and trafficking:

Jesus valued the woman enough to go find her. This was a woman so looked down on by her community that she preferred to face the noonday sun over the other women at the well. Yet Jesus cared enough to go find her. Let us not assume that it was a coincidence Jesus showed up at that particular well at that particular time. Jesus knew the woman would be coming, and he went there to meet her. Today, trafficking victims also face prejudice and social stigmas. They need to know that God values them and searches for them even before they knew to look for him.

Jesus helped the woman come to a better understanding of who God is. The woman's conversation reveals a few clues to her beliefs about God. She thought of God as confined to a place—this mountain or in Jerusalem. She thought of the Messiah as someone that might perhaps show up one day—not someone that could impact her present reality. Perhaps, given her background, she thought of God as being for other people—not for someone like her. Jesus reveals truth to her: that God cares more about the hearts of his worshippers than the place they worship; that salvation was immediately available; that God cared enough about her to sit down on a dusty well in the heat of the day and have a conversation. It changed her life. Today, trafficking victims may also need to understand truths about God. That he is trustworthy. That he is a rescuer. That he seeks after the lost. That no one is beyond the reach of his love. That no sin is too big for the cross. Like the woman, trafficking victims today need to find spiritual healing made possible only in Jesus Christ.

Jesus gave her a chance for a new beginning. Jesus' disciples went into the town to buy food and returned to Jesus apparently without mentioning him to the townspeople. Yet the woman abandoned her original purpose of drawing water, left the jar at the well, and ran into town to tell all the people about this man who just might be the Messiah. Before meeting Jesus, her past condemned her. She had few options but to go from one man to another in a bid to survive. In Jesus she found a way to begin again. Today, trafficking victims need that same opportunity to begin again.

Going beyond prevention. Prevention is so important. We hope you've taken strides in safeguarding the children around you these last 5 weeks. Still, prevention is only half the battle. Survivors of trafficking need healing and help. Jesus offers them grace and hope.

There is much we don't know about the woman's story. Where did she sleep that night? What new skills did she need to learn to survive? What physical or emotional scars did she carry? How did her past affect her relationships and her ability to trust? Did she stay in that village or find a new place where her past was not so well known? Likewise, for trafficking victims today escaping "the life" is only the beginning. They need treatment for

physical or mental disorders. They need to learn new job or social skills. They need to learn how—and who—to trust. But the woman’s story gives us hope that it is possible. Now, as then, God is still in the restoration business.

Group Activity

Watch these videos as a group, and discuss how you – as a person, a group and a church – can be a conduit for grace to people like this:

- <http://www.iamsecond.com/seconds/annie-lobert/>
- <http://www.iamsecond.com/seconds/karen-green/>
- <http://www.iamsecond.com/seconds/nate-larkin/>

Closing Prayer: “Litany of Prayer for the City at Night”

Leader: We pray for all the men and women who will put makeup and lipstick on to please different men tonight, needing to look colorful and pretty on the outside, needing to dull themselves to not feel ugliness on the inside.

All: In Your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for all the men and women whose hearts are hurt, broken, angry and confused today, because the men in their lives who say “I love you” have sold, bought, pimped and used them.

Leader: We pray for all the fathers and mothers who are naïve and ignorant—or desperate, uninvolved and uncaring—who allow or encourage their sons and daughters to leave home for the streets and bars.

Leader: We pray for the children who will be left by their mothers tonight, alone or with others—children who will grow up being whispered about in school and community, who are now too young to understand but later will be ashamed and confused, who will be tempted to explain away their mother’s stolen beauty and dignity, as well as their own lost childhood, with reasons and euphemisms.

Leader: We pray for the girls who, because they are vulnerable and unprotected, have had to become hard and tough, and deny their hurt and disappointment.

Leader: We pray for the women who are getting older and tired, and realize that the hardness of the work they have been doing is sapping them of life—the women who know that they will soon be replaced by girls younger and fresher, the women who don’t even know where to begin.

Leader: We pray for the women who attempt to abort babies that they can't take care of, the women who have become addicted to meth and marijuana and sniffing glue, the women who are too scared to report and get checked up after being brutalized, the women who are at a high risk for infection with STDs and HIV/AIDS.

Leader: We pray for the women whose boyfriends, brothers, husbands, fathers and sons sneak out of the house to be with other women who are being cheated on, lied to and betrayed, for those who know it and for those who don't.

Leader: We pray for the individuals and groups who have a burden and concern for the women—for those who want to help the women and those who want to change the women, for those who want to love the women and those who want to heal the women and those who want to reform the women. We pray that You would raise more of this kind of men and women in our Church and society.

Leader: We likewise pray for our fellowships and churches, whose apathy, fear and complacency have deprived many of these women the opportunity to understand the love of Jesus in concrete ways. We are sorry because we are often neighbors to bars, clubs and discos, but we haven't loved our neighbors well—and we aren't sure how to. We are sorry because we are usually safe, warm and secure inside our churches on Sundays, not really interested in sharing our safety, warmth and security in the dark parts of the city at night.

Leader: We pray for us who are gathered together now, that we might have hearts that honestly seek to understand and know how we can respond in faith to the challenge of following Jesus' example in loving and caring for the modern-day Samaritan women in our midst. We rededicate ourselves to the path of friendship, compassion, witness and transformation in our city at night.

All: In Your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer, and mold our hearts, and grant us wisdom, power, love and courage to walk alongside our sisters who work to sell their bodies in order to live. Amen.

“Litany of Prayer for the City at Night.” Jonathan Nambu, executive director of [Samaritana Transformation Ministries](#)

Taking it home

No one is too broken, too abuse or too anything for Christ. Behold, He is making all things new³! Christ is the redeemer of all things. What in your children's lives needs redeeming? Often when we feel Christ's love and forgiveness we are more willing to give that forgiveness to others.

³ Revelations 21:5

Now that this Bible study is drawing to an end: what next? How can you be a part of preventing human trafficking and restoring survivors? Ask your children about ordering the Change Agents Action Kit. They get a cool T-shirt and book of 10 things they can do to stop human trafficking (faastinternational.org). Also, think about volunteering with vulnerable populations in your community, get trained to be a foster family, or commit yourselves to supporting others. Everyone has a part in Christ's redeeming work.

Family Night Activity

Ask your children what God loves about them. Are those things based on what you do or who you are—a beloved child of God? Make a list of what you and God love about them. God's love is unconditional. No matter what you do or what has been done to you God still loves you.

Watch these music videos together, and talk about how they describe God's love:

- How He Loves – David Crowder Band - <http://youtu.be/p7CQ96uohcM>
- One Thing Remains – Passion - http://youtu.be/NTv2B_0Vkn8
- Beautiful Things – Gungor - <http://youtu.be/oyPBtExE4W0>

These are inspirational videos. Watch them and talk about how you and your family will move to impact this world for Christ.

- Do Something – Matthew West - http://youtu.be/b_RjndG0IX8
- A Thousand Questions - <http://youtu.be/YiNBmNl88Pk>