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Session 1 - The Saviour of the World

Bible Passages:

- John 4:1-54

Brief Notes:

All the passages we are looking at this term are long, and because of the way John writes they are often dense and tricky. Keep in mind that the aim should not be to cover every verse, chew on every morsel and solve every puzzle; the purpose is simply that as a group you feed together on God's Word. I suspect for nearly all groups it would be enough to stop at verse 42, rather than going to the end of the chapter, and even that is a lot of ground to cover and the key will be to see the main thing John is trying to show us. Look for that and then think how that should impact us.

1-9 : The setting

The characters: the contrast between this Samaritan woman and Nicodemus in the previous chapter is striking. He was male, religious, respectable and Jewish, everything she is not. Nicodemus came to enquire of Jesus, but here Jesus takes the initiative and, breaking the taboos of the day, engages her in conversation.

The place: the mention of the historical significance of the well perhaps is a reminder that though Samaria was treated with contempt by Jews, it was part of God's story; his promise of blessing in

the Old Testament was for all Israel, and through them for all nations.

The time: the fact that this woman has come to draw water at the hottest time of the day suggests that she was viewed even by her own people as shameful.

10-26 : The Gift and the Giver

There are the two things in verse 10 that Jesus says she has not grasped, the nature of the gift and the identity of the giver, and he proceeds to explain both. In vv.10-14 the focus is on the gift he offers, which he describes as “living water”: water that can permanently satisfy our deepest thirst and bring eternal life. In Jeremiah (2:13 and 17:13) God himself is the “spring of living water”, and in a few chapters time this living water is identified clearly as the Spirit (see John 7:37-39). As those who have received the Spirit, when Jesus says we “will never thirst”, he can’t be suggesting we will never feel any dissatisfaction because that is clearly not the case, but our most profound and essential need – ie for relationship with God – has been perfectly met.

From verse 15 the focus is on bringing her to see who Jesus is that he can give such a gift. In telling her to call her husband in part his intention seems to be exposing the thirst within her which she has so failed to satisfy through intimate relationships, but he is also revealing his supernatural knowledge which prompts her to recognise that he is special – “I can see you are a prophet” – rather as Nathaniel had done (1:47-50). Verse 20 may not be simply a red herring to change the subject, but in recognising that that he speaks with real spiritual insight and authority she wants to know the answer to what for her would be a real question: who’s right, the Jews or the Samaritans, as to where one should approach God (and where she should go to find forgiveness)? Jesus says the place is no longer important. Worshipping God rightly is a matter of having the Spirit and having the truth. Where are such to be found? “The Messiah will tell us”, she says; to which Jesus replies “I am he.”

27-42 : The Harvest

The woman rushes off to bear witness – “Here’s a man who truly knows me; might he not be the one who can help us know God?”. Bearing testimony was an important theme in chapter 1, and we should notice it again. Lots of useful lessons can be drawn from this chapter about our witness, both from Jesus’ approach to her and from her response and from Jesus’ teaching here.

As the woman was once interested in the wrong kind of water, the disciples now show themselves to be concerned about the wrong kind of food. For Jesus, the food he is concerned about is doing the Father’s will: namely gathering in the harvest, a work we as disciples are called to share in. The Samaritans who are brought to faith are part of this harvest, a harvest which they rightly perceive to include the world (v.42).

[43-54 : The Second Sign]

I doubt there is time to look at this. Though it begins by suggesting that there might be little harvest from among the Jews themselves, this official and his family show that there will be some who believe, and the official is an instructive example of faith – taking Jesus at his word.

Discussion Questions:

- How does this Samaritan woman make a striking contrast with Nicodemus?
- In v.10 Jesus says she would be asking him for a drink if she understood two things. What are they?
- What is the gift that Jesus offers?
- What is this living water? How is it later identified in John 7:37-39?
- Is it really true that those who have received the Spirit never thirst again? How so?
- How does Jesus expose this woman's deep-seated thirst?
- How had she been trying to satisfy it, and with what success?
- In what other ways do people often seek to satisfy the thirst within them?
- How would you help a fellow Christian, feeling dissatisfied with their life, see that their thirst actually is perfectly satisfied through Christ?
- Jesus is also revealing his identity. How does she begin to grasp that he is someone special?
- Do you think v.20 is a red herring? Why might it be a genuine question?
- What does Jesus teach about true worship? What does he mean?
- What has Jesus taught here about where the Spirit and truth are found?
- What does this mean for us?
- Jesus has been speaking of a different kind of water, now he speaks of a different kind of food. What is it? What is the Father's will?
- How does what happened amongst those Samaritans show that?
- Does this talk of a harvest have anything to say to us? How so?
- What lessons might we take from this chapter about sharing in this task of harvesting?

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