

Message #14

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John

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PASSING THROUGH SAMARIA (Part 2):

WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

I.

Rockie Naser was the Samaritan woman at the well. Her chances of having a positive encounter with Jesus Christ were remote. Her Muslim family was originally from Palestine, as they preferred to call the land of Israel, in the general vicinity of Samaria. They fled to Jordan in the forties when Israel fought and gained its independence in the face of opposition from several Arab armies.

So Rockie was born into a religious family in Jordan. When she was eight years old, her parents had the opportunity to move to the US. They settled in Chicago with the intention of making some money before they returned to Jordan. Dad was especially offended by the excesses that he witnessed in American culture. Rockie was sent back to Jordan before she entered her teen years so that she would avoid exposure to the worst of American culture.

Back in Jordan, Rockie adopted a religious lifestyle. She wore a veil and prayed five times a day. A few years later her dad allowed her to return to the US, as long as she lived with family and attended an Islamic school. At age 17 she began to be pressured by her parents to marry a good Arab young man. After turning down several proposals, her father insisted that she return home and marry her first cousin. In the face of a number of obstacles, Jesus sought Rockie out to have an encounter with her.

We have been studying the Gospel of the Apostle John. So far we have looked at the first of seven sign miracles that Jesus performed. We have also looked at the testimony of three primary witnesses that the author has provided. We have looked at the personal encounter that Jesus had with a top religious leader by the name of Nicodemus. Last Sunday we began looking at #4, where Jesus had a personal encounter with a woman at the opposite end of the economic and religious scale. For reasons not yet apparent in our text, Jesus was going out of his way to seek this woman out.

In His desire to connect this woman with the true God we saw last week that Jesus overcame three significant obstacles that could have prevented this encounter from ever happening. First, there was a geographical obstacle. (PROJECTOR ON--- SYCHAR MAP) It seems likely that Jesus and His disciples were baptizing along the Jordan River, which is that blue line running from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south. They were planning to return to their home territory of Galilee in the north.

Instead of taking the shortest route to Galilee along the Jordan River, they went west into the hills to Sychar, which meant a significant elevation gain and traveling through the hills to Galilee.

(SYCHAR MAP 3) So in the middle of the day Jesus encountered this Samaritan woman by a well near Sychar, which was also close to the ancient city of Shechem. This well had a connection with Jacob (JACOB'S WELL), whom the Samaritans claimed as their ancestor. There is general recognition that this is the actual well where this encounter happened two thousand years ago. The second obstacle that Jesus overcame was a gender obstacle. In that culture it was frowned upon for a man and a woman who were not related to have a conversation in public like this. But Jesus was seeking her out. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then there was also an ethnic obstacle that was overcome. The Samaritans were half Jewish and half Gentile. There was a history of animosity between the two groups. Yet Jesus overcame all three of these obstacles in order to show love for a spiritually lost individual who needed to know the true God. Today we shall find two more obstacles that Jesus overcame in order to reach this woman. In the process we will also discover what the true God is looking for in people who wish to be connected with Him.

II.

So in vv. 15-18 of John #4, which is on p. 889 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST JESUS OVERCOMES A MORAL OBSTACLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST...) The action leading up to today's text is described in vv. 13 & 14: **"Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'"**

Jesus is speaking in spiritual terms, but the Samaritan woman does not quite get it. Thus in v. 15 we read, **"The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.'"** She is apparently skeptical. She chooses to interpret what Jesus says in a literal sense. Just as Nicodemus responded to Jesus' statement about his need to be born again in a literal way, so also this woman chooses the option of understanding Jesus to be speaking about physical water. It would be nice not to make the daily trek to the well to get water.

Given this woman's history with men, which we will read about in a moment, it is possible that she was suspicious that this Jewish guy was just coming on to her. It was very bold and socially inappropriate for a man to talk to a strange woman like this.

The next verse, v. 16, could have been interpreted as going in this direction. **"Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come here.'"** Maybe this Jewish guy is just finding out if this woman is single. Or if

that is not his motivation, perhaps he is offering some kind of deal for which her husband should be present.

According to the first part of v. 17, "**The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.'**" So now she is going to find out just what kind of guy this Jew is. What is going to be his next move? What is his agenda?

In the rest of v. 17 and in v. 18 we read, "**Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.'**" Whoa! I bet that she did not see that one coming. Again, would it not be priceless to see the look on her face at this moment? How could He know this? Who is this guy?

We might also wonder why Jesus did this. Was it just to embarrass her? Was He trying to exert some kind of power over her? And what do we make of her marital history? She has had five husbands. We don't know a great deal about Samaritan culture and practice. Their religion accepted the first five books of the Bible as being authoritative. The Book of Deuteronomy allowed men to divorce their wives. Among the Jews there were different views about what constituted legitimate grounds for divorce. Some were strict, and some were more liberal in their interpretation. Jewish rabbis generally said that two, or at the most three, divorces were acceptable.

The circumstances surrounding this woman's marriages are not detailed. At least some of the marriages could have ended as the result of death of the husbands. It seems hard to imagine that all five marriages were dissolved as the result of death of the husband, unless this woman was some kind of serial killer collecting insurance benefits from the deceased. Maybe the woman was physically attractive and was able to keep catching other men.

Then also Jesus points out that the woman is living with a man now who is not her husband. Do you get the idea that Jesus approves of that? It seems pretty clear that He does not. This God-man who is unchanging in His character and holiness does not approve of it today either. It also was not acceptable in either Samaritan or Jewish culture. It helps to explain why this woman was coming to this well in the middle of the day alone.

So why is Jesus pointing this situation out to her? He is the light, described by the Apostle John, who shines in the darkness. He reveals things the way that they really are before the God who is there. But He does this because He is also the Lamb of God, according to John the Baptist, who came to take away the sins of the world. He didn't come just to be a good example and to bring moral improvement. He came to be a Savior from sin. He came to rescue sinners who are heading for an eternity in hell. In order to provide that rescue, we need to have clearly in focus our lostness, our need for a Savior.

Lary Nassar is the doctor who has been much in the news of late for his abuse of female gymnasts over a long period of time. Two weeks ago he appeared in a Lansing, Michigan, courtroom where he faced 156 of his victims. The testimony of a woman by the name of Rachael Denhollander (RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER) is what you should remember. She was blunt in her assessment: **"You have damaged hundreds."** But she went on to add, **"The Bible [speaks of] a final judgment where all of God's wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you. Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you. I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt, so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me--- though I extend that to you as well."**

This is what Jesus was doing with the woman at the well. He wanted her to realize something of the weight of her sin. But this was for the purpose that she would be open to receiving the grace of God from Him. All sin is personal to the Son of God. For He is our Creator and our God. We likewise need to recognize the seriousness of our sin so that we see our need for the Savior.

Then like Jesus, then like Rachael Denhollander, we need to overcome moral obstacles to bring this gospel to others. We have to do that in our prison ministry, in our contact with mothers who have aborted their babies and with people in our own families who have perhaps hurt us deeply.

III.

In vv. 19-22 we encounter a fifth obstacle. We find that TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST JESUS OVERCOMES A RELIGIOUS OBSTACLE. (III. TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST...) Verse 19 says, **"The woman said to him, 'Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.'"**

In #3 Jesus came to the attention of Nicodemus because the Jewish leader saw Him perform miracles. He told Jesus that no one could do such things unless God was with him. The Samaritan woman has a similar reaction here. Jesus told the woman things that he could not have otherwise known about her, because He had never met her before. She concludes that Jesus must be a prophet.

She continues in v. 20, **"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."** The reason that the woman heads in this direction is not completely clear. It could be that she feels uncomfortable talking about her own moral situation. It is more comfortable talking about religion. Or it could be that she really wants to know from this man who clearly has divine power about the basis of her Samaritan religion.

In any event, she is introducing an issue that separates Samaritans from Jews. It is a religious issue. Nine hundred years earlier the northern kingdom of Israel had split from the southern kingdom of Judah. The leaders of Samaria set up a separate place of worship in an effort to keep Jews from going to Jerusalem. A few centuries after that the Assyrians came in and wiped out the northern kingdom. They took away many Jews to the other parts of their empire. They brought in Gentiles from other parts of their empire to live in the former kingdom of Israel. Many of the mixed race of people that resulted adopted a religion that accepted parts of traditional Judaism. They accepted the first five books of the Bible.

(SYCHAR MAP 2) The Samaritans made Mt. Gerezim the site of their worship center. This was very close to Jacob's well and the towns of Sychar and Shechem. So it is to Mt. Gerezim that the Samaritan woman is referring in v. 20.

As a Biblical basis for making Mt. Gerezim their worship center, they referred to Genesis #33. (GENESIS 33:18,20) There the Bible says, "**And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem... There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.**" The Samaritans decided that the reference was to Mt. Gerezim.

The Samaritans also pointed to Deuteronomy #11. (DEUTERONOMY 11:29) There in v. 29 Moses is reported as saying, "**And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal.**" It makes a certain sense to build a worship site there on Mt. Gerizim.

Then in the next chapter of Deuteronomy (DEUTERONOMY 12:5) there is this additional instruction from Moses: "**But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go...**" They concluded that Mt. Gerezim must be the spot that Moses described.

Now the Samaritans conveniently decided that only the first five books of the Old Testament were valid, because later on, the Hebrew Bible makes it clear that Jerusalem is the place where God determined that His temple should be built. The Samaritans could not accept it. Thus there was a religious divide between the Jews and the Samaritans. (PROJECTOR OFF) This Jewish guy at the well has told remarkable things to the woman that he could not have naturally known. For some reason, he has come to Samaria. Perhaps he is a prophet. So she wants to hear his take on this key issue of religion dividing Jews and Samaritans.

Verse 21: "**Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.'**" The Samaritan woman spoke of the tradition of her

fathers. Jesus says that the main issue is not earthly fathers but rather connecting with the Father. That answers the "who" question. Who are we worshipping?

The woman has asked the "where" question. Where is the right place to worship? Jesus indicates that the "where" question will soon be irrelevant. There is a more important "when" question. When will this new worship of the Father occur?

Jesus speaks of "the hour." This is a term that is used a number of times in John's Gospel to refer to the time of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 13:1) In #13 v. 1 the Apostle John writes, **"Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved them to the end."**

Jesus Himself used this terminology a bit later. (JOHN 17:1) In His prayer the night before His crucifixion we find this: **"When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you..."** The reference is to His coming death and resurrection and ascension into heaven. These events will make the "when" question irrelevant. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 22 back in our passage Jesus says, **"You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."** The "you" in the original Greek is plural. You Samaritans have some connection to the true God. You accept the first five books of the Bible. You have a belief in a coming Messiah. But your understanding is very weak. You have strayed from the main stream of salvation. You have been caught up in a little pool, an eddy, which brings you nowhere spiritually.

Salvation is from the Jews. That does not mean that all Jews are saved spiritually. As we saw with Nicodemus, even an educated religious rabbi is not necessarily part of God's kingdom. But the people of Israel have been used by God to communicate the message of salvation. The Jewish prophets have provided divine revelation. The Lord has made covenants with the descendants of Abraham, some of which were unconditional. The unconditional covenants have included promises regarding salvation and the coming of a future kingdom. They have included promises concerning a coming Jewish Messiah.

Religion was a potential obstacle that could have kept Jesus from reaching this woman. Religion is an obstacle that keeps some today from understanding the true gospel. There are many religions today which have ties to the Bible and to the God of the Bible. Even Islam claims to respect the Bible. The Arabs claim Ishmael as their ancestor. But Islam and other religions have strayed from the mainstream and have been caught up in eddies that bring them nowhere. They have been caught up with false prophets like Joseph Smith and Mary Baker Eddy and Ellen White. They have lost their focus on Jesus Christ, who is the Savior and Messiah who provides eternal salvation on the basis of grace through faith.

Other Christian religions have become caught up with formalism and ritual. Like the first century Jews, they think that because of their religious heritage, salvation is theirs. But they miss the gospel. Religion is an obstacle that keeps them from grasping true salvation. Religion was an obstacle that Jesus overcame to bring the gospel to a needy woman. We likewise need to overcome religious obstacles to present the gospel to people in our sphere of influence.

IV.

In vv. 23-26 we find that TO REACH GOD OUR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO COME TO HIM IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH THROUGH JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. TO REACH GOD OUR RESPONSIBILITY...) In vv. 23 & 24 Jesus tells the woman, "**But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.**" If "the hour" refers to the time of Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension, then that event is apparently near.

The issue here is worship. Worship involves giving our first loyalty, and expression of that loyalty, to the God who is there. Foundational to this understanding of the God who is there is that He is spirit. He is not a spirit, like an angel. Rather His constitution is spirit. He is non-material. He is not physical. He is invisible and omnipresent.

So true worship, Jesus says, must be in spirit and truth. It is difficult to wrap our heads around this concept to understand exactly what Jesus meant. There are slightly different conclusions that commentators come to about the meaning of this. In the original Greek text there is one preposition that precedes spirit and truth. Normally this construction is used to describe one concept. But it is difficult to look at spirit and truth without seeing two somewhat different concepts.

If God is spirit, then our worship must also be in spirit. In other words, it cannot just be physical. It cannot just be physical forms and rituals, though that may be part of genuine worship. But the Jews such as Nicodemus were very religious and followed prescribed rituals and forms that found a basis in God's law. They observed the feasts and offered sacrifices. Yet Nicodemus and most of his fellow Pharisees had missed genuine worship. Jesus said that Nicodemus was not part of the kingdom of God. Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed a spiritual rebirth.

The Holy Spirit was involved in that spiritual rebirth, but His role was not yet clear to the true followers of God. The problem was that the spirit of Nicodemus had not really connected with the true God. That was also a problem with the Samaritan woman. She may have been religious. She knew the Samaritan religious tradition. She had some interest in the correct place of worship. But Jesus reveals that she was

a sinner. Her spirit was not right with God. She was violating the most basic of moral laws concerning sex and marriage. Her spirit was not right.

The Samaritan woman was also off in regard to truth. The Samaritan religion taught wrong doctrine. It did not accept the teaching of the rest of the Hebrew Bible. The Samaritans refused to listen to the teaching of the prophets and of the writings of David and Solomon. Most importantly, they were not able to accept the notion of a Jewish Messiah who came from the tribe of Judah.

Most of us here are straight on the truth. We recognize that salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus. We believe the Bible. We accept our church's statement of faith, based on the Bible. The key challenge and ongoing issue has to do with our spirit. Is our spirit right with God. We will always be sinners this side of heaven, but are we dealing with that sin? Are we acknowledging it and not trying to cover it up and hide it, like the Samaritan woman was?

Verse 25: "**The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.'**" Because the Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, they believed in some kind of coming deliverer.

In Deuteronomy (DEUTERONOMY 18:15) Moses described this coming individual in these terms: "**The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers--- it is to him you shall listen...**" Since the Samaritans did not accept the rest of the Old Testament, including the later Old Testament prophets, they saw no other person in history who fit this description. The Samaritans were looking for one they called the "Taheb." This translates roughly as the "Restorer," or the "One Who Returns." The Apostle John uses the more familiar term "Messiah," which he translates in a parenthetical note as "Christ." So the Samaritans were looking for an ultimate prophet and deliverer who had some similarities to Moses. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So in v. 26 we read, "**Jesus said to her, 'I who speak to you am he.'**" This is another scene which would have been great to have on video. Literally, Jesus says, "**I who speak to you, I am.**" Readers of John's Gospel who knew the Old Testament would recognize that this was the terminology that God used when Moses in Exodus 3 asked the Lord whom he should say was sending him to the Hebrew people in Egypt. God said to Moses to tell them, "**I am has sent me to you.**"

One of the fascinating things here is that this is the first time in the Gospel accounts that Jesus has declared Himself directly to be the Messiah. He has not done that to Nicodemus or to the other Jewish religious leaders or even to His own disciples. He does it here to this immoral, Samaritan woman who was on the lowest rung of the religious and social scale.

Why did He do that to her? Because she was ready to receive it and believe it. The Jews had a whole lot of baggage and wrong ideas about the Messiah in their understanding. A formal declaration to the religious establishment of His Messiahship would also have precipitated a confrontation that Jesus was not yet ready to have.

But such is the nature of the gospel. The message of the gospel with its focus on Jesus often finds a better reception among the outcasts of society, among sinners, among many people like us. Our responsibility is not only to receive and embrace this message, to come to God in spirit and truth through faith in Jesus, but also to spread that message to both the high and the low of society. We are to overcome moral obstacles and spiritual obstacles in doing that.

Rockie Nasser was delivered to O'Hare Airport along with her younger sister by their brother. The family plan for Rockie was that she was to go back to Jordan to marry her first cousin. When the plane arrived in Jordan sixteen hours later, Rockie and her sister were not on it. The two girls decided that they could not do it. It was a shame to their family. So the father from Jordan gave orders to the brother to track the girls down and kill them.

Rockie moved in with a friend and sent her younger sister back home, afraid that she would be charged with kidnapping. The brother got closer to finding Rockie. After a couple of close calls, she decided to join the Illinois National Guard. She was accepted and wrote a letter to her family soon afterward, saying, **"I'm a soldier of the United States Army, and if you try to hurt me in any way, shape, or form, that's going to be considered a federal offense for you."** So the family stopped looking for her.

Rockie got a job as a sales representative for a company in Dallas. She continued to try to live as a devout Muslim, doing good deeds and trying to earn her way to heaven. In Dallas she moved into an apartment and began furnishing it. When a delivery man offered to assemble the furniture that she had bought, she panicked. It did not seem right to have a strange man in her house. So she ran outside and stopped the first woman that she saw, a woman walking a dog, and there she encountered Jesus.

Actually it was a Christian woman who reached out to this stranger and began to overcome a significant religious obstacle to get to know Rockie. This woman brought Rockie to church, and she began to consider the God of Christianity and the God of the Bible. With her Islamic background, it was a struggle to figure it all out.

I'll let Rockie (PROJECTOR ON--- ROCKIE NASER) tell the rest of her story: **"...in August of 1998, God sent an Iranian Christian pastor to me.** [That sounds like a significant geographical obstacle that was

involved, right?] He sat me down and asked me to share my years-long search. I said, 'I've studied the Bible, and I believe the Bible hasn't been changed. I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for humanity's sins. I've studied the life of Muhammad and the life of Jesus, and I want someone like Jesus to be my father, my brother, my judge in the court of law, and the king of my country, because no one in history compares to Him.'

"Then he said, 'If you think He's really that wonderful and that He died on the cross for your sins, will you at least confess that before God?' So I prayed and I accepted Christ as my Savior. The pastor shook my hand and said, 'I want to be the first to welcome you into the kingdom of God.'

"I had no idea what he was talking about. It wasn't until I sat in my car that I realized Christ was saying, 'Just accept what you can accept about Me, and everything else will make sense to you.' I soon enrolled at a Christian college in Dallas because I desired to understand the Bible even more. I continued my work as a full-time sales representative until my company changed hands. I then went to school full-time, but after I graduated with a bachelor's degree God shut the doors on secular employment and opened the door at Dallas Seminary. And this May I graduated with my Th.M. degree.

"I am passionate about reaching out to Muslims and reaching out to the lost, because I believe Satan has been defeated and he wants to take down many people with him. But I have been redeemed, and I want to take as many people with me as I possibly can." (*Kindred Spirit*, 2009) (PROJECTOR OFF)
Maybe there is a Samaritan woman in your life. Maybe you will encounter one tomorrow. Don't let obstacles stand in the way of sharing the greatest news that anyone could ever discover.