

Explore the Bible: But Whoever Drinks

December 26, 2022

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Jan. 8 focuses on John 4:11-26.*

The Gospel of John includes a group of personal encounters of individuals with Jesus not found in Matthew, Mark or Luke. The conversation Jesus has with the Samaritan woman at the well is one such story; Nicodemus is another. The scene in John 4 portrays Jesus and the woman going back and forth in questioning and requesting dialogue. The conversation not only addresses several theological topics important to the day, but progressively enlightens the woman's understanding of Jesus' identity. Whether one is a student of the Scriptures like Nicodemus or an outcast like the Samaritan woman, who Jesus is and what he is about becomes the most important issue of life.

A context worth noting

The location for Jesus' conversation with the woman differs greatly than that of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus. The former sparred over theology in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious life. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman occurs in the often-avoided region of Samaria. The contrast, however, goes beyond location. While Nicodemus finds Jesus in John 3, Jesus intentionally goes to find the Samaritan woman just a chapter later. He arrives in what John calls Sychar, a site referred to in the Old Testament as Shechem.

That Samaritans were hated by Jews goes without saying, but on top of this is the fact that Jesus is a man speaking to a woman. Jesus clearly

disregards social norms for the purpose of the mission he sees himself on.

One other note is the time of day in which this conversation takes place. John states that this occurs at the well (a gathering place for women in the morning and evening) in the middle of the day (John 4:6), a sign that the woman is not only an outcast to Jews, but even to her own people.

Jesus—Greater than Jacob

The statement made by Jesus that “he would give you living water” sparks a series of questions by the woman whose interest is piqued. She responds with “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?” (John 4:11). The question turns to another and with it the first important issue of Jesus identity: “are you greater than our father Jacob?”

The woman’s question is not an investigation into Jesus’ power. Rather, it is meant to expose Jesus as the presumed charlatan the woman thinks him to be. John’s reader catches the irony of the question because Jesus is not only far greater than Jacob but existed before Jacob ever dreamed of digging the well (John 1). The question also serves as an attempt of the woman to circumvent the familial connection this Jewish man held with the patriarch. While this man might consider himself as superior because of his “pure” lineage to Jacob (aka Israel), the woman appeals to her own claim to Jacob through the well.

Jesus, however, is not concerned with such things and reroutes the conversation back to what he alone can offer. The end result of what Jesus offers is the gift of “eternal life,” certainly something not even Jacob could provide. This first back and forth dialogue provides the woman with the foundational concept of Jesus’ identity: he is greater than Jacob and the presumed provider of eternal life.

Jesus—A Prophet

The woman concedes in verse 15, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” Jesus retorts with a request for her husband. When the woman declares that she has no husband, Jesus reveals his seemingly supernatural knowledge of her situation. She notes such with the declaration, “I can see that you are a prophet” in verse 19.

With the opportunity to engage this “prophet” about a sore subject for her and most Samaritans, she asks about the location of true worship.

It is at this point that Jesus provides the second evidence of his authoritative knowledge. He suggests what John’s readers already know to be true, seeing that John was written well after the destruction of the Temple: a day is coming when worship in Jerusalem will not matter. This is more than a historical point, but a theological one: location is not the issue for appropriate worship, but rather the heart of the worshipper.

Jesus—The Messiah

On the heels of the worship discussion is the final comment made by the woman. The conversation has moved from water to worship and now to the issue of Messiah. At every turn the main point shifts to the issue of Jesus’ identity. The conversation has established that Jesus is (1) one greater than Jacob, (2) a prophet and (3) now possibly the Messiah. What is dangled in front of Jesus by the woman, “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us,” (John 4:25) is met with the answer she is waiting to hear. Jesus responds in the affirmative that, “I, the one speaking to you— I am he” (John 4:26). The progression of revealing Jesus’ identity is now complete. And with it is the realization by the woman that the Messiah has not only come, but come to visit even her. The realization

thrusts her into a new life direction—becoming a witness to her community about the coming of Messiah.

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