

When a Thirsty Soul Found Love

Many of us are familiar with the story of the woman at the well, the Samaritan outcast whom Jesus encountered outside the city of Sychar (see John 4:1-42). Throughout our lives, we may have heard her mentioned in various anecdotes on God's grace.

A closer look at this story, however, reveals a detailed account of God's plan to restore broken lives and symbolically, the bride. There are four stages to this process described in John 4: (1) the invitation to accept living water; (2) embracing the past; (3) establishing a relationship through worship; and (4) being released for ministry.

By investigating how Jesus responds to the issues of this woman's life, we can learn a great deal about how He works with us. Her story offers hope and guidance for overcoming the past in order to enter into divine marriage with Christ.

Accepting the Invitation

At first the woman is suspicious of this stranger who offers to quench a thirst that nothing else has ever satisfied. She asks Him, "Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?" (vv. 11-12, NIV).

Something within us craves understanding. More aptly, we crave control.

We want the power of a completed calculation, thinking, OK, God, if I do this, then what will You do? If I yield here, then what will You ask of me next? Just what are You after, God?

God understands such questions. After all, we have been born and raised in a fallen world replete with hidden agendas and

broken promises.

Most of us have had a fair share of disappointment in our lives. God understands our suspicion, and He sympathizes with our pain (see Matt. 9:36).

In fact, He has designed a plan for our healing. This plan requires us to surrender personal effort and intellect.

When Jesus offers the Samaritan woman living water, He invites her to go beyond her natural intellect and abilities, to move past her previous experiences, and to exceed whatever her upbringing had prepared her to accept as God.

In short, He leaves it up to her to decide: Is Jesus greater than Jacob? Am I willing to take a leap of faith and see for myself?

Embracing the Past

The second step of restoration involves forgiveness. One of the most important “keys of the kingdom” (Matt. 16:19), it literally unlocks the past, removing mountains of painful memories and casting them into the sea (see Matt. 21:21; Mic. 7:19).

It was for this reason that Jesus took a seemingly abrupt detour in His dialogue with the Samaritan woman and said, “Go call your husband” (John 4:16).

Jesus told her to call her husband for the same reason God told both Hagar and Elijah to “go back” (see Gen. 16:9-10; 1 Kin. 19:15-18). Simply stated, we cannot enter into new relationships or seasons of life until we have been rightly released from the past.

Jesus stated that the woman had been married to five husbands and was now living with a sixth man. We are not told why she had so many husbands. But the bottom line is: This woman had experienced great tragedy and rejection in her life.

Now she was living with a man, unmarried, and therefore, subject to scorn. Like other women of her day, she needed a husband because she was unable to own property or get an education.

Throughout Scripture, the relationship between a husband and wife is compared to Christ's relationship with the church. Individually and corporately, we are called to the close communion of marital intimacy with Jesus Christ.

We are His bride (see Rev. 19:7). First Corinthians 13:12 states that when Christ returns, we shall "know" Him fully even as we are fully known.

The goal of Jesus' command, "Go call your husband," was not to shame or hurt her. Rather, the Lord intended to set her free from the rejection and pain of these past relationships.

Furthermore, He sought to prepare her to enter into a new covenant relationship with Him. After reconciling the issues of her past, she could be cleansed and purified, renewed as a bride "without stain or wrinkle" (Eph. 5:27). Then, and only then, would she be ready to enter fully into the most important marriage of her life, marriage to the Lamb of God.

Establishing an intimate Relationship

Jesus desires intimacy with us. He desires to be wed to us through worship and become a spiritual Husband.

In John 4:21, Jesus addresses the woman directly. In many translations, the Greek term used in this passage is rendered merely, "woman." However, in the original language the term Jesus uses, *gunee*, means "wife."

Look again at the number of husbands to which the Samaritan woman had previously been wed. She had five legal marriages plus one common-law relationship. For all practical purposes, she had been married six times to six different husbands.

Jesus becomes her seventh husband. Seven in the Bible signifies wholeness. Despite the failure of her youthful marriages, she finds completion in Christ. So it is with us.

Whether we have had as many literal marriages as the Samaritan woman or not, we can all relate to past experiences whereby we have wed ourselves to various individuals and things apart from God. Such relationships served as idols of security and significance to help us cope with certain seasons of our lives.

These relationships may or may not have been sexual. The important thing is that we placed our trust in people, things and even ideas rather than God.

In some of those relationships, we may not have had a conscious choice. It may be that while still children we were sold out to ideologies and circumstances that opposed the truth of God in our lives.

Whatever the case, these experiences represent binding relationships which, if not properly broken, inhibit our maturity (or marriage) in Christ. God has great plans for us in the intimacy of true worship (see John 4:21-24).

However, our intimacy with God corresponds to our intimacy with one another. We may only hope to love God to the extent we love one another. Likewise, we are able to love one another only to the extent that we have experienced the transforming love of God.

Outstanding issues from broken relationships in our lives will inhibit us from drawing closer to God. So it was with the woman at the well.

How could she hope to draw near to Christ in the intimacy of worship (which means "to kiss"), if all her past experiences of intimacy had left behind scars of unmet needs, unhealed hurts and fear of repetition? Similarly, how can we hope to

love God if our hearts are still bleeding from the past wounds of those who claimed to, or should have, loved us?

These issues must be resolved; we must be released from them before we can fully enter into new phases of life. I believe there are four main ways we may be bound to past relationships:

1. *Unforgiveness.* Once again, the majority of our bondages to the past result from unforgiveness. Jesus said if we refuse to forgive our offenders, God will not forgive us (see Matt. 6:15).

2. *Unhealed hurts or needs.* Sometimes it is difficult to forgive when our lives have been deprived or seriously affected because of an offense. We may have to seek God's healing for emotional and spiritual wounds and surrender to Him unfulfilled expectations connected to persons or events. Healing and forgiveness often go hand in hand.

3. *Wrong habits or thinking patterns.* Some of us need reprogramming because our lives are dominated by deeply rooted patterns of thinking and behaving that perpetuate cycles of defeat. Being released from the past may involve disciplining ourselves to form new hobbies or perspectives more conducive to supporting our identity in Christ.

4. *Natural debt or unbroken contracts.* Believers should exercise discipline and restraint in the avoidance of indebtedness and prayerfully scrutinize those with whom they enter into binding agreements.

We are repeatedly warned to avoid intimate affiliation with those who do not belong to Christ (see 2 Cor. 6:14). If you are weighed down by the responsibilities of excessive financial debt or legal entanglements with ungodly people or practices, union with Christ and availability for His service may require your willingness to address those issues and look for honorable ways to resolve them.

Released for Ministry

At the close of their discussion, Christ revealed Himself fully to the Samaritan woman (see John 4:25-26). In fact, she represents one of only a handful of individuals to whom He entrusted His identity before the cross.

In a moment of intense intimacy, He tells her, "I who speak to you am He" (v. 26). In other words, I am everything for which you've been hoping.

When the disciples returned, the woman left her water jar and ran back to town. Without realizing it, she was empowered by Christ to evangelize her village. As a result of her witness, many of the Samaritans from that town believed (see v. 39).

The story of the woman at the well offers great hope to women who long for restoration and greater release in ministry. She embodies the brokenness and despair of many in the church and among the lost who are hopelessly plodding through life feeling alone.

Jesus transformed this woman by lovingly engaging her, leading her through deliverance from her past and helping her establish a marital walk with God. Truly, who is like our Lord? What greater love can we ever know than His?

Today, be encouraged because our God still journeys to Samaria and wherever else His beloved calls to Him (see Ps. 61:2). There is no one beyond His reach and ability to fully redeem.

To receive that restoration, however, we must be prepared to accept His invitation and confront the issues of our past. Like the woman at the well, we must be willing to embrace the pain and forgive. Then and only then, can we truly enter into the intimacy Jesus desires to have with us and experience His power for ministry.

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