

## The Samaritan Woman

Part I

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This article was a radio message delivered on January 9, 1989 on the "Banner of Truth Radio Broadcast", sponsored by the Free Reformed Church of North America. Rev. Cornelis Pronk is an ordained minister with that denomination.

On His way from Judea to Galilee the Lord Jesus had to travel through the district of Samaria. The Saviour felt He had to go that way, not because it was the shortest way — it was that — but for a Jew this was not a good reason to choose this route. Jews preferred to take the longer route around Samaria, because of the deep-seated hatred that existed between themselves and the Samaritans.

That hatred went all the way back to the time of Israel's captivity by Assyria some seven hundred years before. At that time strangers had settled in the central region of Palestine and had produced a mongrel religion made up of elements of Judaism and local heathen beliefs.

For this reason Jews would not associate with Samaritans. They had to keep themselves pure and undefiled, and Samaritans were viewed as ceremonially unclean because they did not keep the law as prescribed by Moses and the best Jewish teachers. Samaritans worshipped at the ruins of an imitation temple on Mount Gerizim, while they, the Jews, worshipped at the divinely appointed place: the temple at Jerusalem.

There was, of course, an element of truth to this Jewish claim. Jesus would soon remind the woman of Samaria, "Ye worship ye know not what; we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews" (v. 22). But while the Jews were the only nation on earth that had been entrusted with the oracles of God, they had turned their religion into an outward form of legalistic observances and rituals. So actually both the Samaritans and the Jews had a false religion. The Samaritans had *perverted* the truth, and the Jews had *hollowed out* the truth.

Now look at Jesus. He must go through Samaria. That means He feels constrained to break through the Jewish prejudice with the liberating power of His Gospel, a Gospel which is not limited to Jews only, but is destined for all peoples, even for Samaritans.

Jesus knows there is work for Him in that city. He is here on business, His Father's business. He has come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Having arrived at Sychar, one of the chief towns of Samaria, the Saviour sits down at the well of Jacob. He is tired and thirsty and would like very much a drink of cold water, but having no bucket to let down into the deep well, He waits for someone to come along who may wish to share some water with Him.

Jesus does not have to wait long. A woman appears to draw water for her household chores. Ignoring the Stranger sitting there, because she recognizes Him as a Jew, she lets down her bucket.

Jesus then asks her for a drink, but the woman refuses. "How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me who am a woman of Samaria," she replies, rather startled at this unheard of request.

Then Jesus explains, "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water" (v. 10).

If thou knewest. Ah, this woman, like all unsaved persons, was spiritually ignorant. Not that she did not know anything about religion. In that respect she was different from the heathens. She knew something about sacred history. She could speak of "our father Jacob," who, she claimed, "gave us this well" (v. 12). She was quite well versed in the tenets of her Samaritan sect. She even knew that the Messiah was to come and that He would tell them all things (v. 25).

Whatever knowledge she possessed though, one thing she did not know. Or rather there was one Person she did not know and that was Christ the Gift of God.

We may know much about religion, even about Christ, but unless we know Him as the Gift of God to us, that is Christ as the only Saviour and Redeemer who came to save us from our sins, we remain in darkness.

Jesus offers Himself here to this woman as living water. He has asked her for a drink of ordinary water. She has refused to give this to Him. But He offers her a drink of spiritual water. The woman, however, does not understand. Taking His words literally, she questions the Stranger's ability to provide such living water, that is, water flowing from a river or stream as opposed to water from a cistern or well.

Yet she could have known what Jesus meant. She must have been familiar with the Old Testament description of God as the One who alone can supply living water to satisfy man's thirst for God.

This woman was thirsty, very thirsty. So far she had always tried to quench her thirst at the wells of sin. She had married and divorced five husbands, and now she was living

with another man. But here is this Stranger, this Jew, who claims to have living water for her. It is hers for the asking. But she does not understand. Or is it perhaps that she doesn't want to understand. I'm inclined to think the latter is true. This woman is spiritually blind, certainly, but it is a wilful blindness. There is an element of deliberate suppression of the truth here as there is in all sinners.

Jesus offers her water that truly satisfies. As He explains, "Whosoever drinketh of this well-water shall thirst again. But whosoever shall drink of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (v. 13-14).

This woman's going to Jacob's well every day or several times a day was an illustration of her sinful life. She had been going to the well of her lust again and again and still she was not satisfied.

This is true of all who live without God. How many there are who live only for pleasure! They try to fill their empty lives with material things. You too? What are you thirsting for? The world offers many attractions, especially today. Newspaper ads, TV commercials, and billboards all seek to create a thirst for things. Most of them appeal to the lusts of the flesh. Yes, this woman of Samaria is very contemporary. She has many sisters and brothers in Hollywood, in New York, but also in our cities. But even if, by the grace of God, these carnal things do not attract you, are there not other sins in your life, unlawful desires and aspirations which, though not so obvious, are still just as dangerous? It may be that for all your outward respectability, you are not so different from the Samaritan woman in that you too are drinking well water instead of living water from the true Fountain Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus was trying to show this woman — in a very tactful way — what her problem was.

O, how He seeks her salvation, and yours too! He thirsts for the souls of all who are lost in sin. And He freely offers Himself as the only One who can satisfy the deepest longings of your heart. But this offer will be received only by those who know and feel their need of what He offers.

At this point the woman of Samaria did not know her need yet. Sure, she was vaguely aware that something was missing in her life, but what it was exactly she did not fully grasp. That's why she did not feel her need of Christ either.

Jesus says: "If thou knewest." So she did not know, and therefore she did not ask for that living water. She did not ask for grace and for pardon. Oh, this woman was so ignorant. Not only did she not know the Person sitting there was the only Saviour, but she was also ignorant of the way of salvation.

This is implied by Jesus' words: "If thou knewest the gift of God." Salvation is a free gift. She did not know that. She had been brought up under a system of legalism. This becomes clear from what she says in vv. 20ff. about the proper place to worship God, in Samaria or in Jerusalem.

How many people are still caught in that trap! They do not see that true religion is a matter of the heart, not outward observances. Legalism is in our blood. We think we have to do something to earn salvation and we forget that God saves sinners freely. It is God's gift to us. Are you still in that bind too? Maybe you realize that you are a sinner and that you need a Saviour. Yet you cannot get it through your head that all God asks from you is to receive salvation from Him as a gift. "If you knew this," Jesus says to this woman, "you would ask." He says the same to you. If you knew how gracious God is then you would ask for this Gift, too. That's what Christ says to the woman of Samaria. If you knew that I am God's Gift to sinners like you, you would ask me to be your Saviour.

Do you know this? That Christ is God's gift to you? That He alone can fill your empty heart with peace and happiness? You know? Great. But have you received this Gift by faith? Can you say with the apostle Paul, "thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift"? Is Christ the Fountain of living water for you so you go to Him daily for fresh supplies?

Some of you know the way of salvation quite well, having been brought up in Christian homes, but you still don't know Christ as your personal Saviour. Why is that? Because you apparently are not asking for that living water which only Christ can give you. You say, "I do ask. I do pray for forgiveness and so on." Is that so? But how do you pray? Occasionally, half-heartedly? Just before going to bed with a yawn with your mind wandering all over?

It will take more than that! This is what the Lord says: "Ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart."

The Saviour says the same thing here. "Thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee." But maybe you don't really want what Jesus offers to you. So you ask without any urgency, like St. Augustine, who before his conversion often prayed, "Lord, convert me, but not just yet." Why did he pray like that? Because, fool that he was, he still had a thirst for sinful pleasures and was not all that thrilled with the living water that Christ wanted to give him. He did not know his real need at that time. It is only when the Holy Spirit brings you to that point that you understand your real plight as a sinner that you will pray in earnest. And then you will receive God's great Gift. So maybe you should pray first for the Holy Spirit to show you your true need.

"If thou knewest the gift of God." Once more, do you know this Gift? Has Christ become yours by faith? Thank God then for this double gift. For not only is Christ the Gift of God to poor thirsty sinners, but the faith whereby we receive Him is also His gift. "For by grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast."

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