

John 3:22-36, & John 4
The Gospel of John

Bible Study Session 4

At the end of Chapter 3, the scene returns to John the Baptist who has moved to another location where water is more plentiful. But before returning to the Baptist, John makes an observation unique in all the gospels, namely, that Jesus went into the Judean countryside with his disciples and “baptized.” In the next chapter, John clarifies by saying that it was the disciples, not Jesus, who were baptizing. This is the only reference in any of the four gospels that baptisms took place during Jesus’ ministry.

In any case, a discussion arose with the Baptist on the subject of “purification.” (This idea was associated with baptism.) A synopsis of John’s discussion would go something like this: First, purification can only come from “heaven” and is therefore a gift. No one who is from the earth has access to what comes from “heaven.” In order to have access to “heaven,” (God) the “one who comes from above” must bring it “down” to us. Therefore, purification can only come from one whose origin is transcendent (heaven). Only he, by definition, has it, and therefore only he can give it. (Grace)

The one whose origin is transcendent to all things created (the earth) is also the only one who knows God—again, by definition. He therefore is capable of giving testimony as to who God is. That is, he “...speaks the words of God.” But the “words of God” are not embodied in sound waves that pass through the air, enter our ears, and create sounds which, when taken together, make sentences that have meaning. This is what we do. We might call this “the word of man”. Moreover, the word of man can only convey information related to human experience. And, since all human experience is confined to “earthly things,” (the realm of our experience) it is incapable of conveying anything that is of “heavenly” origin, that is, transcendent to human experience. Therefore, any and all knowledge that humans can generate through experience and reason is limited by the confines of our lives. In other words, we are incapable of divine knowledge on our own. It must be given to us by one whose experience is “from above.” This we call “revelation”, and it is by definition the only possible source of divine knowledge—if there is such a thing.

But if the word of God is not like the word of men, then what is it? “He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.” That is to say, the words of God are conveyed by the Spirit instead of by sound waves that pass through the air. But what does the Spirit convey as “words from God”? The Spirit conveys its “being” and what its being produces in the heart of the person who receives it. (Here I am going beyond this particular text and referencing other biblical texts.)

The Spirit's being is "love". (God is love, 1 John 4) and love produces "the fruits of the Spirit: faith, peace, joy, generosity, self-control" etc. (Galatians 5). These are the words of God testified to by the one who came from God—Jesus. Moreover, because the Spirit of God, just as the Father and the Son are God, the Spirit gives "eternal life." All this is received by faith—an open heart. The mind can receive the word of man because it is the human mind that creates the meanings of human words, again based on our realm of experience. The word of God comes through the Spirit and is therefore received by the heart. Since the Spirit comes from the one whose origin is heavenly, namely, Jesus, "...Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life..." (John 3:36)

Most of Chapter 4 consists of the story of Jesus and the woman from Samaria. John sets the stage by observing that Jesus' potential enemies (the Pharisees) had heard that his disciples were baptizing. In order to avoid a possible conflict, Jesus and his disciples leave Judea (in the south) and head back to Galilee. But in order to get there, he needs to pass through Samaria. Due to the fact that Jews considered Samaritans "religiously unclean" (They were of mixed ethnic background and worshipped differently.), Jewish pilgrims tried to avoid going through Samaria by way of a detour up the Jordan River Valley. Jesus considered this unnecessary because as far as he was concerned, God's kingdom was for everyone.

In any case, since this journey was mostly through desert, and since the climate was very hot, it was necessary for them to stop and get water often. Their first stop was at a city called "Sychar." There Jesus stopped at the well Jacob had given to his son Joseph. John observes, "It was about noon." In other words, it was hot in the noonday sun. After his disciples depart to buy food, a Samaritan woman shows up at the well to get water.

This would have been very unusual. Women came to the local well early in the morning before it got to be too hot. Moreover, they came in groups, not in isolation, for safety purposes. The fact that this particular woman came at a time when she could avoid others indicated a problem of some kind. For whatever reason, she was not welcome in the company of others. With Jesus, however, she was more than welcome. Here it is again! Jesus was always in the habit of reaching out to the marginalized, the excluded, the stigmatized, and the rejected. Is this because he feels bad for them? I don't think so. I think he feels bad for everyone who doesn't know God. In fact, according to Luke, he offered to gather up the whole city of Jerusalem, "like a hen gathers her chicks, but you would not."

There is something more going on here. These folks are suffering because for a variety of reasons, they have been excluded as unworthy or normal human respect and inclusion. They are "brokenhearted" people—a class of folks Jesus said he came to "bind up." But how does a broken-hearted person find healing without becoming one of the "in-crowd"? How can a person who feels unworthy of others overcome feelings of alienation unless his/her detractors accept and respect him/her for who he/she is?

These folks, precisely because they have been cast aside, (They are called “sinners and tax collectors” in the synoptic gospels.), are needy and therefore open to receiving a source of healing that comes from someplace else. They are like a person in need of food who has been barred from the local grocery store. They need to look for food elsewhere. And then, along comes someone who says, “I am the bread of life. He who eats this bread will live forever.” By and large, people who don’t feel the need for an alternative source of nourishment aren’t going to be looking for it. Moreover, even when they are offered something different, chances are they will decide they don’t need it. “I’m not hungry. Why would I want what you have to offer?”

Elsewhere, Jesus said that in order to receive him, a person had to take up his cross and follow him. In other words, persons are not going to be willing to receive God unless and until they suffer a need for God. We don’t seek food unless we’re hungry. We don’t seek God unless we hunger for God. That hunger is a cross. People like this rejected, isolated, and despised woman are in need, and are therefore open to receive. Jesus knows this and so it is to them that he offers himself. “Has the sweet nectar of human love and acceptance been taken away from you? Who is going to fill that abysmal spiritual void now?” “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden. I will give you rest.” It’s not that we must go through some horrible experience of rejection before we will be motivated to seek the love of God. But we do, however slowly, need to shed our complacency, and come to an awareness of our heart’s desire for God’s love. While this woman knew nothing about God, she did feel the pain of having been deprived of human love and acceptance. And what does Jesus say when people who suffer in this way came to him? “Your faith has made you well.”

In any case, when she arrives at the well where Jesus is resting, he engages her in one of those conversations that confuse everyone who hears them. Why? Because the subject matter is treated as a symbol for something about which his hearers know nothing. They are speaking of “earthly” things. He is speaking of “heavenly” things.

Unexpectedly, Jesus initiates the conversation. “Give me a drink.” This is not what it seems. His intention is to bring the conversation around to him so that he can use water as a symbol for the life-giving spiritual “water” he can provide. This works out well because, as he would expect, she is much taken aback by his request. It is totally out of bounds for a Jewish male to ask anything of a Samaritan female. In fact, it would have been a violation of normal social interactions for him to speak to her publically. This being the case, she turns the conversation back on him. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (4:9)

It is at this point that Jesus begins to speak to her on a whole other level, one, which she, like Nicodemus, does not understand. He offers her “living water.” Jesus is referring to the Spirit. It is the Spirit of God, living in us, that gives us eternal life. We are not immortal by nature. If we were, we would already have eternal life. In

fact, if we possessed an immortal spirit or soul or mind or whatever, we would already be little “gods”. Only the divine nature is immortal. One of the most fundamental conflicts of being human is that we have a limitless vision and a limitless thirst for life while at the same time being conscious of the fact that we will die. We are aware of eternity but unable to extend our lives into eternity. We have an unending desire for life but no means of attaining life by our own power.

This being the case, we do our best to extend our lives through healthy living and medical intervention. We do our best to leave behind some kind of legacy that will outlive our short lives. But we can’t overcome this “existential” conflict. This is the point of the Genesis 3 creation text. If we disobey God—if we separate ourselves from God—we will “surely die.” Why? Because we have eternal life only insofar as we have the divine Spirit living in us. It is only God who can give life and eternal life to a creature who is otherwise made of the dust of the earth. “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

All this means that we need a savior who has the power to give us divine life. This is what Jesus means by “living water.” And so, had this woman known who he is, namely, the Son of God who is human and at the same time divine, she would have asked him for this “living water.”

Unfortunately, she doesn’t get it. She is still thinking water from the well. So she wonders where Jesus might get this limitless source of water. His response is one of the clearest descriptions of how the gift of the Spirit conveys life to believers in the whole of scripture. First, Jesus points out the obvious. The water from the well provides only temporary relief from thirst. The water he provides, in the form of the spirit, “...will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (4:14) In other words, the Spirit is poured into our hearts and is life a never-ending spring of new life.

The woman again doesn’t get it. She thinks he is proposing to provide a never-ending source of well water. That would be great for her. No more arduous trips to the well. No more heavy lifting of pails of water. It is no wonder she is confused. How could she possibly know what Jesus is talking about?

This being the case, Jesus tries a new strategy. He wants to help her recognize that he is someone other than just another Jewish male on a pilgrimage. So, by asking her to get her husband, he puts her in the position of needing to admit to the fact that her life has been a disaster. She has had five husbands and now lives with the man who is not her husband. After Jesus prophetically points that out, she comes to realize that he has prophetic powers. “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” (4:19) Moreover, she feels the need to admit to one of the significant differences between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans worship on a mountain in Samaria while Jews worship in Jerusalem.

This is a perfect setup for Jesus. For now he can talk about what will happen because of his ministry. “The days are coming,” he says, when everyone will worship God “in spirit and truth.” That is, because “God is Spirit” (4:24), there is no particular location where God can be found. Rather, God is everywhere and always. Therefore, worship of God takes place wherever a human being and the Spirit of God come together. In fact, there can be no worship of God apart from this. There is no such thing as a sacred space where we have to go to have access to God. Access to God comes through the spirit who dwells in the hearts of believers. As the Spirit’s influence in a person’s life becomes more and more intense over time by growing in faith, we in turn are inspired to adore and worship God. The Spirit gives us love, peace, hope, strength, generosity, and so forth. The Spirit gives us life. This results in a thankful and devoted heart. That is, we worship God by giving our hearts to God in the power of the Spirit. This is what it means to worship God in spirit and truth.

This brings the conversation to the level Jesus intended. The woman mentions that “Messiah” is coming. Jesus responds, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

The disciples arrive and are astonished that he is speaking to a woman. However, they lack the nerve to ask him why. After all, his behavior has tended to be inexplicable to them. They don’t yet understand where he’s coming from, and they wait until after his resurrection and the event of Pentecost. What they do know is that they have food for him. But once again, he defies understanding by using the food as a symbol. “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” (4:32) Misunderstanding his statement, they wonder who may have given him food while they were away. He then clarifies his meaning. His food is to do the will “of him who sent me and to complete his work.”

Meanwhile, the Samaritan woman, in a bout of hysteria, tells the villagers that she met a man who told her everything about herself--everything she has ever done. Not exactly. But her enthusiastic witness and her question to them--“Might this be the Messiah?” --aroused curiosity on their part and some of them “believe” on account of her witness. However, after Jesus spends some time with them and they hear the word of God directly from him, their faith was based on her witness. This is only a first step. It is the same thing as children who believe because their parents believe. It is a dependent faith. After hearing Jesus for themselves, they make an independent decision to believe. Their faith comes from their interaction with Jesus himself. This is the beginning of a mature faith.

Similarly, when we outgrow our childhood faith, a faith that is based on some authority figure, and even we seek out the word of God in a self-motivated way, then our faith becomes our own. We believe because we have been confronted by the word of God apart from any authority figure. We don’t believe because someone we depend on believes. We believe because we chose to believe. Over time, the decision to believe has to be made over and over again. Our lives evolve. We have new experiences, new questions, and new challenges, not to mention more self-

knowledge. This requires growth in faith, and it results in a faith that endures over time and in the midst of new challenges. The parable of the sower and the seeds in the gospel of Mark describes what can happen to our faith as we need to deal with difficulties and influences that deny the truth of the Gospel. (Mark 4) Faith is never a finished product. It is never perfect or complete. It is a pathway through life in all its ups and downs. As Luther said, it is not “being,” it is “becoming!” That is, it is always in the process of coming into being. The “new self” is always in the process of being born. Complete new birth only happens at the end of time.

Jesus then returns to his home region of Galilee to the north. For reasons unstated, he came again to Cana where he had turned water into wine. In my humble opinion, the point is that Jesus always goes to where he feels called by his Father because there is always some task to perform no matter where it is. This time a “royal official” from Capernaum had a son who was dying from some fever. He begged Jesus to heal him. At first, Jesus rebuffs him by pointing out that people need “signs and wonders” in order to believe. However, the official indicates the sincerity of his faith by demonstrating confidence that Jesus can heal his son. He is not looking for a sign as proof that Jesus is the Messiah. He already believes it. Because of this, Jesus heals his son, and the text indicates that this was Jesus “second sign.”

There is a point being made here concerning faith and the promises of God. In the Large Catechism, Luther points out that faith and God’s promises are two sides of one coin. They are part of a piece. When we come to believe in the promise, the promise is fulfilled. When we believe in the promise of forgiveness, we experience forgiveness. When we come to believe that Jesus gives us peace, we experience peace. This is true because faith comes from the heart, not the head. It is possible to believe something intellectually and not experience it as true because the promises of God pertain to conflicts that reside in the heart. Anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, hatred, jealousy, envy, and lust—all these spiritual sources of dis-ease come from the heart. Believing that God can heal using these things in an intellectual way does not take them away. It gives us the impression that they will be resolved sometime in the future when heart and head are together. This is not faith in a biblical sense because it doesn’t engage the whole person. Recall the greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength.” That is, with your whole being.

This is also true of faith. Faith means to trust with one’s whole being. When that happens, when we trust in God’s promise with our whole being, that promise is fulfilled. It heals us. It restores us. Again, as Jesus said to those who believed in his power to heal them, “Your faith has made you well.”

This is what happened here in the story of the official’s son. When he believed, the healing took place. This is a metaphor for the spiritual healing that takes place through faith.

Thus endeth Chapter four.