

CHRIST AS A SOUL-WINNER

John 4:1-42

One of the most interesting and instructive stories in the life of Christ as a personal worker is recorded in the fourth chapter of the gospel according to John.

Because the success and growing popularity of Christ had aroused the jealousy and hostility of the Pharisees, He found it advisable and expedient to leave Judea and to go into Galilee.

For nearly six hundred years the Jews had held the Samaritans in contempt and would not have anything to do with them. They considered the Samaritans an outcast people because they were half Jew and half Gentile. In reality the Jews hated them worse than they did the full-blooded Gentiles. In order to express their prejudices against and contempt for the Samaritans, the Jews would make a long and circuitous detour around Samaria, thereby avoiding any contamination or defilement through contact with them. As we would expect, the enmity between them was mutual.

Christ was not an enslaved victim of any such prejudice. Prompted by an inner impulse to go through Samaria, our Lord set forth on the shortest and most direct route to Galilee. He went through Samaria because there were sin-sick and needy souls in that country to whom He could minister.

I. The Place.

Knowing the very place where a needy soul could be found, Christ journeyed to Jacob's well, which was about a ten minute's walk from ancient Sychar and the present town of Nablus. We first read about this famous well in the book of Genesis, but it exists to this day. From this well, which has never ceased to flow for these thousands of years, I drank water drawn with a bucket in 1955. By this well, which is one of the undisputed places associated with the life of our Lord, there took place one of the most interesting and memorable events recorded in the Scriptures.

It was about noon when Christ and His disciples arrived at Jacob's well. They were hot, tired, hungry and thirsty. Weary after traveling all morning on foot, Christ sat down on the parapet of the well to rest, while the disciples went into Sychar to buy food for the noonday meal. It was their intention for all to eat and drink together when they returned with the food. Even though He was tired, the Saviour was completely relaxed as He sat there and waited.

II. The Person.

It was not long until the reverie of Christ was disturbed by the sound of the footsteps of a degraded and sinful woman from Sychar who was coming to the well to draw water. She was carrying an earthen waterpot, gracefully poised on her head. Weary and depressed in spirit, upon her arrival at the well the woman reached up with her hand and took the vessel from her head and set it down on the stone parapet of the well, doubtless embarrassed because Christ Jesus was sitting there.

Clad in the cheap and soiled apparel of her class, this woman, with a stained and shameful past, had a look of disappointment, disillusionment

and sadness on her face. Her only so-called friends were those who had been party to her ruin and participants in her life as an outcast. She was no longer hoping for anything new or better or different.

Even though the women were the carriers of water, it was very unusual for a woman to go to the well at midday. It was customary for them to go to the well and get water early in the morning and in the evening. Why had this woman come at that hot and sultry hour of the day? The very fact that she had come alone in the heat of the day indicated that there was a very unhappy relationship between her and the other women in Sychar. They simply did not want to associate with her. She came at that unusual hour in the hope that she could avoid the slights, sneers and taunts which would have assailed her had she come in the early morning or in the cool of the evening. She was anxious to avoid contact with those who despised her on account of her sinful life.

This woman seemed to be a most unlikely prospect for personal work. Humanly speaking she was the last person one would have chosen as a prospect on account of her sinful record. But, in spite of her dense ignorance, racial prejudice and terrible sinfulness, the Lord Jesus was very anxious to save her. However, before the Saviour could meet her real need, there were numerous difficulties which had to be overcome.

III. The Procedure.

Note how tactfully Christ approached this woman and how tenderly He dealt with her. In dealing with people whom He was about to help, Christ frequently asked them to help Him. He found that to be a sure way of gaining attention and of winning a favorable response. Nothing has the effect upon another like taking the place of a suppliant. One of the ways to get close to another person is to render him a favor, but a still better way is to seek and to receive a kindness at his hand. Fully aware of this, Christ started His interview with the woman on the common basis of an interest between them, which was a drink of water. In His initial effort to gain her confidence our Lord asked a favor of her saying, "Give me to drink." He wanted her to help Him slake His physical thirst.

In view of the fact that the Jews refused to have any dealings with the Samaritans, the woman did not hesitate to express her surprise and astonishment that He, a Jew, would deign to put Himself on the level of a Samaritan by talking with her and asking her to give Him a drink of water. It was not surprising that His request got Him involved in answering questions, inasmuch as inquisitiveness and extended speech are feminine characteristics. His request not only awakened her surprise and broke down her prejudice, but it also aroused her curiosity. Not knowing that He was Christ the Son of God, half in astonishment and half in sarcasm the woman said, "How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria?"

The Lord Jesus declined to discuss the merits of that ancient dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans, or to say why He had disregarded the racial prejudice of His people. To them she was a hated Samaritan, but to Him she was a needy soul longing for the better life. He told the woman of her real and present opportunity. It was as if He had said, "Woman, I have asked you for a drink of water; but if you only knew who I am, and what I can do for you, you would ask of Me, and I would give you living water."

In the course of their conversation Christ told the woman that those who drank water from Jacob's well would thirst again, which fact she had learned already by experience, but that there was something far better than the water from the well beside which He sat. He told her that the water which He gave possessed the quality of satisfying completely all who drank it. Suggesting to her that the thirst of her soul might be satisfied in this manner, He aroused her desire for the living water.

Becoming interested in obtaining this living water, the woman said, "Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw." Aware that a knowledge of one's sinful condition must precede salvation, our Lord probed into her sinful life for the purpose of teaching her the necessity of repentance by saying, "Call thy husband, and come hither." Christ said that to awaken her conscience and to reveal to her that she was a sinner. After reminding her that sin was the cause of her soul's unrest, Christ sought to convince her that she could not drink of the living water until she had repented of and forsaken her sin. He declared that she had been the wife of five men, but that the one with whom she was living at the time was not her husband.

Without expressing any indignation at the way in which our Lord probed into her past sinful life, and without a word of denial, the woman said, "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet." To call one a prophet was the highest compliment to be paid another in those days. However, this woman was like most people today in that she tried to change the subject when He began to talk with her about her sin.

When people are brought face to face with their sins, they immediately say, "Let's talk about something else!" This woman tried to make Christ think that her manner of life was due to the fact that she was confused. She suggested that she had not been able to decide where she ought to worship, there at Mount Gerizim or yonder on Mount Zion at Jerusalem. Pointing to the mountain where the Samaritans had their temple, she said, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." She was like many today in wanting to talk about the religion of their fathers and mothers, but that was unavailing. If you were to ask some people the question, "Are you a Christian?", you would likely hear something like this, "My mother was a good Christian, and my father was a deacon in the church." That will never save the soul of their child because salvation is a matter of personal relationship with Christ.

Christ was not thrown off by the woman's attempt to change the subject. He refused to be sidetracked or to be drawn into an argument with a woman. He did make it plain that spiritual worship is not a question of physical location or bodily position, but rather of heart condition. He taught that the worship of God must be spiritual and scriptural. He said, "They that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." The true approach to God is neither by Mount Gerizim nor by Mount Zion, but by repentance and faith.

Stirred in heart and perplexed in mind the woman said, "I know that Messiah cometh which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things." By that she meant that He would answer all perplexing questions and settle all controversial problems. As soon as she had thus expressed the longing of her heart to see the Messiah, Christ immediately revealed Himself to her, saying, "I that speak unto thee am he."

The disciples returned from Sychar, whither they had gone to buy food, and they were astonished to find their Lord engaged in conversation with this solitary Samaritan woman, but they did not ask Him why He was talking with her. Neither did they inquire as to what she wanted. The amazement of the disciples was understandable in the light of the social standards of their day.

It was very unusual for any rabbi to be engaged in conversation on public with a woman, but more especially with a Samaritan. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus talked naturally, seriously and lengthily with her without a thought of doing anything sensational or out of the ordinary. He refused to turn His back on a sinful and lost woman, who was bound for eternal destruction, simply to conform to the social standards of that day. In fact, He had come into the world for the specific purpose of saving sinners, and here was one such person who might not have another opportunity to be saved.

Having declared Himself to be the Messiah for Whom both Jews and Samaritans were looking, this unsaved woman accepted Him as her personal Saviour, whereupon He saved her soul and transformed her life. The longing of her heart was completely satisfied. In her joyous excitement she forgot her waterpot and the water for which she had come and hastened back to Sychar to tell her friends and townspeople what Christ had done for her. She wanted them to know the joy that was hers. She shared her great joy with all who would listen to her, which was and is the natural result of salvation. When souls come to know and to love Christ, they want others to know Him too, so they tell them about Him.

When those who had known her as a sinner heard her glowing testimony about the saving power of Christ, they realized that there was a reality to it. As soon as they were convinced that she was living a new and transformed life, her partners in sin did not sneer at her, but they listened attentively to her as she related her experience of salvation. She counted it a great joy to tell her experience of grace. As a result of her loving and enthusiastic testimony, many of the Samaritans went out to Jacob's well to see and to hear the One Who had done so much for this woman. She fearlessly and faithfully urged them to receive Him as their Saviour, and assured them that, if they would do so, He would give them salvation and complete satisfaction.

After she had persuaded the people to go to the well and hear Christ for themselves, many of them believed on Christ and were saved. Those who were saved besought Him to remain in their midst a while longer. In response to their urgent request, Christ tarried for a couple of days. During that time many others listened attentively to Christ and to those who were witnessing for Him and they, too, accepted Him as their Saviour. He then completely satisfied their thirst for light, for life and for love. Christ still stands ready to save any and all who will trust Him as a personal Saviour. Only Christ can save and satisfy your soul. Therefore, receive Him now.

"I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
The living water; thirsty one,
Stoop down, and drink, and live.'
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him."