

LESSON 4

PAINFUL THIRST

John 4:16–26

What kind of a person does God like to save? That might sound like a funny question, but all of us have a profile in our minds of the kind of person God likes to save, or who is *likely* to be saved. Conversely, we also think of people who are *unlikely* to be saved.

Imagine this scene with me. People gather in a semicircle on the sofas and folding chairs. This church small group has been together for quite some time, and they love being together. Conversation flows easily, and laughter rolls as people cling to mugs of coffee. “Any prayer requests?” asks the leader. Julia pipes in quickly and says, “Pray for our neighbors. We’ve had some great chances to talk with them, and we recently invited them to church. I think they are going to come! They are such wonderful people and would make great Christians!”

1. Though this statement is made innocently, what is wrong with it?
2. Does God need people to be “cleaned up” to save them?

At some point we’ve probably all had thoughts like this: “Some people already seem to live like Christians, so it would be a small jump from death to life.” Right? Here’s the truth: dead is dead! No matter the spiritual corpse, it takes the same amount of resurrection power for the Holy Spirit to move someone from death to life, no matter how “great a Christian” we think he or she may become! Nobody is out of reach of God’s saving power. God’s love can reach *anybody*!

3. Can you think of someone who would seem to be “hard” to save?

John 4:1–15 introduced us to Jesus’ interaction with a scandalous woman at a well. She kept missing the spiritual meaning and could only think in terms of the physical. Jesus drove her to the spiritual level in verses 16–26 by pressing in on the area of her painful thirst. In these verses He made three statements that exposed her thirst and that led her to living water.

No True Satisfaction outside of Jesus

Review verse 15 again. One particular word in that sentence is tinged with pain. She said, “Give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come *hither* to draw.” In the previous chapter we discussed this woman’s social rejection and how that led to her being at the well alone. This well was a painful place for her. Jesus knew it.

Pain and idolatry

Jesus asked her a seemingly casual question, but in actuality, it was a hand grenade. “Go, call thy husband, and come hither.” Jesus knew this would be a painful subject, and He intentionally pushed on that bruise to press her toward spiritual realities.

He moved to the secret places of her life—the source of her unquenchable thirst. Deep down she knew she was thirsty, and she tried to quench that thirst with sexual relationships. Her thirst led to idolatry, and her idolatry left her wounded, broken, thirsty, and in deep emotional pain.

Jesus never changes, and though He doesn’t physically meet us at a well as He did in this account, He is still in the business of confronting us on the level of our pain. People often turn to Christ in moments and seasons of pain. Traumatic experiences and tragedies drive people to find answers in Christ. Some people come to the end of sin’s disastrous rope and in desperation turn to Jesus. God often uses painful circumstances to propel us to the One Who provides healing: Jesus Christ.

4. Talk about a time of pain or tragedy that drove you toward Jesus.

5. What are common idols people use as they attempt to quench the thirst of their souls?

6. All of us have had experiences trying to quench our spiritual thirst with sinful idols. What is the inevitable end of this futile exercise?

7. Jesus used this woman's pain to drive her to spiritual realities. Do you have a friend or acquaintance who is in pain? How can you leverage that toward a spiritual conversation?

Jesus goes for the jugular

Read John 4:16–18. The woman dodged Jesus' question by telling a half-truth. Her eyes probably dropped, and she hurriedly answered, "I have no husband," as if to say, "Next subject, please!" You can hear the pain in her voice as she desperately wants to change the subject. Jesus was knocking on a door in her heart, and she wished to keep it bolted shut.

This response did not deter the Savior. He blazed forward in the conversation and left her scrambling to divert His attention to another topic. "You're right! You don't have a husband! You're not married to the guy you're currently shacking up with. In fact, this guy is number six. You've been married five times before!"

Wow! How does a person respond to that? Now, to be fair, we don't know why she had been married five times. Perhaps some husbands died. Or she could have been divorced because of her immorality. The current man could be using her as a live-in harlot. There are lots of gaps to fill in. However, those aren't important to the story. The bottom line is that she had a spiritual thirst in her soul that she was trying to quench with sexual relationships with multiple men.

Jesus knew her soul was hurting and she was looking for something that would ultimately satisfy. By exposing her sin, Jesus wasn't being cruel. He was pointing

out the heavy toll sin was exacting on this woman. Sin was promising much but delivering little. Essentially Jesus was saying, “Has illicit sex with these partners satisfied the deep, insatiable thirst for love and acceptance in your soul, or do you still feel just as rejected and lonely as before?”

In that moment, Jesus prophetically spoke to all of us. This woman’s problem may not be your particular problem, but be it sex, substance abuse, material possessions, friendships, or consuming pornography, I can guarantee you this: you’re drinking salt water from the ocean of sinfulness. Have you noticed that your thirst is increasing?

8. What idols have you tried and found to leave you wanting?

9. What is the underlying desire people are trying to satisfy with an idol (e.g., the idol of sex is used to satisfy the desire of acceptance).

No True Religion outside of Jesus

10. When a person shares his or her faith, what are some of the rabbit trails people try to run down to avoid talking about spiritual things?

11. What are some disputed Biblical issues that people like to camp on to try to divert the attention from talking about their need for Jesus?

If you’ve ever talked with an unbeliever about spiritual things, you might be shocked at the random bits and pieces of Biblical trivia he or she knows. Someone may have

never heard John 3:16 but then wants to talk about the significance of 666! When the woman in the story realized Jesus was speaking about spiritual things, she jumped right in with a religious debate.

Which mountain?

Read John 4:19–24. Two things seemed to be going on. First, Jesus cut her heart wide open and exposed her sin. She preferred to move the conversation in a different direction. Second, her reference to religion was a way to say, “I’ve tried religion. Been there, done that.”

Jesus called out her sin. Sin demanded a sacrifice. However, it wasn’t that easy because the Jews and the Samaritans debated the *place* of sacrifice. In essence she was saying, “What good is religion if the religious leaders can’t even decide on basic interpretation?”

In verse 20 she articulated the religious debate. The Samaritans set up their syncretized worship on Mount Gerizim. The Jews accepted no alternate site of worship besides Jerusalem. This conversation probably took place close to Mount Gerizim, and she may have pointed to it as she asked the question. How can she worship and sacrifice when the religious experts can’t agree on the right place?

12. What are some other religious debates or cultural issues that people use to divert attention from the important matters?

13. Have you ever been faced with this question: How could a loving God allow pain and death in the world? How do we answer that while still keeping the focus on Jesus?

Jesus wasn’t derailed by this question, because His goal was to point the woman to Himself. He essentially said, “It’s a moot point.” Soon *neither* place will be relevant to

worship because the location of worship will no longer be a *place* but instead a *person*. He turned the conversation away from the place of worship to the essence of worship.

Fake religion?

14. Read John 4:22 and 23. These words almost sound insulting. Why do you think Jesus said this to her?

15. What do you think Jesus meant by “true worshippers”?

Jesus sided with the Jewish interpretation momentarily, but then He exploded it. After His death, the location of worship would be insignificant because He would be the new temple. The Samaritans claimed to know God, but they rejected most of the Old Testament Scriptures. You cannot get to know God outside of the Scriptures. So Jesus was right. She didn't really know who she was worshiping. However, all of that could change if she believed in Him and worshiped Him.

If there are “true” worshippers, that means there must also be “fake” worshippers. What is a fake worshiper? These verses define it for us by describing a true worshiper. A true worshiper worships in spirit and in truth. It's someone who seeks to worship God on the basis of *knowledge* and not experience. Jesus pushed her away from experience and toward the truth, and that truth is found in Him.

16. In our world today, how do people fail to worship based on knowledge and instead replace it with experience?

17. How should we prioritize the ministry of the Word (which informs us about God) in our worship?

No True Worship outside of Jesus

18. Read verse 24. How have you heard this verse used or interpreted?

19. What do you think it means to worship in “spirit and in truth”?

God’s nature

John 4:24 is a foundational verse for the nature of God. This verse is not saying God is *a* spirit; rather it’s talking about His essence. Since God’s substance is spirit, then we need to be connected in a spiritual sense to God. Therefore, worship is not about structures, postures, rituals, or religion.

Since Jesus was driving this woman toward Himself as the new location of worship, that means true worshipers must be connected to Jesus. The means by which we are connected to Jesus is by the indwelling Holy Spirit, Whom we receive at the moment of salvation. The bottom line is this: only those who know Jesus and have trusted Him as Savior can worship Him. The connection we have to God in worship comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

20. Some churches design worship services to appeal to unbelievers. What does verse 24 say about that practice?

21. Jerusalem used to be the only legitimate place of worship. Where are we allowed to worship now and why?

God's truth

Jesus was also teaching us that this new worship would be more than a mystical experience. "In spirit" does not mean some kind of out-of-body, ecstatic experience. The words "in truth" balance the phrase. Through the Word we gain an understanding of God revealed to us in Jesus. As we gain knowledge of Jesus, the Spirit uses that knowledge to conform us to the image of Christ.

True worship is not a matter of geography. It's not physical posture. It's not having the right religious ritual. It's not about taking Communion or getting baptized. It's a matter of focusing on the Father by means of the Son through the power of the indwelling Spirit.

As Jesus was talking to this woman, He wasn't trying to drive her to religion. He was driving her to Himself. God's love can reach anybody. No exceptions. However, that love is mediated through Jesus. We must know Jesus personally. We must believe in Jesus. We must be joined to Christ through the Spirit and continue to grow in our knowledge of Jesus in order to worship Him.

22. When we talk to people about Jesus, how can we separate pointing them to *Him* versus pointing them to a church?

Blown away

23. Read John 4:25 and 26. What do you think may have gone through the woman's mind when Jesus identified Himself with the Messiah?

Evidently, the woman liked what Jesus said. She responded affirmatively, "I know that we'll learn all about this when the Messiah comes." This is the climax of the entire chapter. I wonder if Jesus let her words hang for a moment. Can you imagine being present for that scene? I wonder what her face looked like. In the next study we'll see what she did after finding out the truth about Jesus.

Jesus gives us a great pattern to follow when we approach people about Him. First, keep in mind that every person is currently experiencing pain resulting from the curse of sin. We all have this pain and are attempting to salve the pain in some way. We need to be alert to the pain in people's lives and show them that nothing except Jesus will alleviate the pain and thirst in their souls.

Second, remember when people are confronted with sin, they attempt to approach God on their own terms. The woman essentially told Jesus, "I'm fine! I do God stuff my own way." That is a common theme. People will justify themselves with religion and works, or they'll justify why they don't need religion. Push them to Christ . . . over and over again.

All around us are desperately thirsty people. Many of these people attend church and act religious. Many of them are using sinful idols to quench the thirst in their souls, only to find themselves thirstier than before. Only the water that Jesus provides will satisfy. Those who worship Jesus worship Him in spirit and in truth. He's not to be found in religion or rituals. We know Him through the Word of God and the Spirit of God. God's love can reach anyone. Have you accepted and experienced Jesus' love?

24. What was most impactful statement to you in verses 16–26?

Verse to memorize: John 4:24

Prayer: Thank You, Heavenly Father, for pursuing me while I was still a sinner. Help me to realize that Jesus quenches the thirst of my soul, and make me a faithful witness to other people who are desperately thirsty for Christ.

