

John 26 – Five Husbands?

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Scripture 1: (Jn. 4:15-19 ESV)

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

The woman answered him, "I have no husband."

Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."

Scripture 2: (Deut. 24:1-4 ESV)

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance."

Scripture 3: (Matt. 22:23-30 ESV)

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.'"

Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her."

But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."

Sermon:

Who is this unnamed Samaritan woman, really?

She is featured prominently in the Evangelist's narrative, but actually we know very little about her as a person; instead, we make a lot of assumptions about her and few of them are charitable.

John clearly included her in his Gospel for a reason because she is not mentioned by the other Gospel writers. Clearly John thought that both she and her interaction with Jesus was important for us to know about since at the end of the Gospel, he admits to have picked and chosen the stories about Jesus He told, writing “*Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*” (Jn. 21:25 ESV); abridging the story of Jesus' life and ministry because he could not have written everything.

Yet if she was so important, then why did he not tell us more about her, specifically? He does not even give us her name. Was she merely “window dressing”; just someone for Jesus to talk to as a “place-holder”; just an opportunistic way to convey His teaching?

I do not think so. I believe John thought she was important in her own right. Despite her anonymity, I believe John told her story because he valued her as a person; as a woman.

John told us her story because Jesus though she was important enough to talk to. She is certainly “somebody” now, because really, she was a nobody; because she was a nobody who can be anybody! Any of us could be her. So, who was she? Let's examine what we know. What does John tell us about her specifically.

- She's a Samaritan woman, telling us: ethnicity, gender, and religion (John 4).
- She came to draw water from the well outside of town, at noon during the hottest part of the day, at an uncommon time; yet, he does not say that this was her habitual practice (4:6-7).
- She had had five husbands and was presently involved with a man not her husband; but, John does not explain why she has been married so many times nor does he clearly define her present relationship status (4:17-18).
- She believed, along with her fellow Samaritans, that “...*Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ).*” and that “*When he comes, he will tell us all things.*” (Jn. 4:25 ESV); however, what 21st century Christians do not immediately understand is that the Samaritans did not have the same expectations as the Jews about What or Who the Messiah would be.
- She was convinced that Jesus and what He had to say was more important than her water jar, particularly on this hot summer day (4:28).
- Lastly, she was a believable and credible person {and women were not usually considered as being “reliable” or valid witnesses}. Her word was trusted by the townsfolk of Sychar, since they followed her to come meet Jesus and then they confessed, “*It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves...*” (Jn. 4:42 ESV). They believed her and the they believed Jesus for themselves.

Now those details are helpful pieces of information, but they are not enough to give us a clear picture of her. They do not tell us who she is but, knowing what we know about her context, we can make some educated assumptions.

First, the Samaritans were a minority group in 1st century Israel, and she was a part of the local majority culture in Samaria, yet John's narrative seems to present her as a marginalized member of the community.

People are social creatures by nature. Drawing water was a necessary chore for every household. It is reasonable to suppose that because everyone needed to draw water from the well for their daily use, then people gathering around the city well is the perfect occasion and location for the easy spread of news (and gossip); much like we today do around the coffee pot (since few places have or need an actual “water cooler” now).

The best time to draw water in the Middle East is either at the beginning of the day before it gets hot, or in the evening after things cool down. Generally, evening was better so that you could draw enough water for your morning and daily needs since it makes more sense to refill your water supply when it is low from use, rather than filling it immediately before use; instead of waiting to go get it when you need it.

Now Jesus was alone until she came along (4:8) which prompts the questions, “Why was she getting water then? Why was she not getting it at the same time as everyone else?”. This is where the negative assumptions begin to creep into our story.

We have been taught to think that she was getting water then because she wanted to avoid people because she was a “social outcast”; that she was a woman of “morally questionable character”. However, I want us to give her more “benefit of doubt” because Scripture does not clearly say that, and there are other possibilities.

The reason many interpreters think this about her, is this exchange with Jesus.

“Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.”

The woman answered him, “I have no husband.”

Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.”

Remember, John was not present to hear this. He was off in town with the other disciples buying lunch. Yes, even though the Holy Spirit inspired his writing, ensuring that he conveyed the truth of the conversation, we do not believe that the Spirit downloaded a transcript into his mind. We cannot assume that this was the whole conversation. John even alludes to the fact that there was more, recording her testimony to the townsfolk as, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (Jn. 4:29 ESV), implying things far beyond the scope of their recorded conversation.

So, Jesus now abruptly changes the subject from something “spiritual”, with His “river of life”, to something more down to earth: relationships. Why would Jesus command her to go fetch her husband and bring him back? There are three good reasons and the best answer is likely “all of the above”:

- Culturally, Jewish and Samaritan women were not educated in religion and matters of the faith, publicly. It was the responsibility, duty, and privilege of their husband to teach her. This practice is what Paul alludes to in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, “For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” (1 Cor. 14:33-35 ESV).

- Culturally, it was not proper for a woman to be alone with a man who was not her husband or other near relation {the ancient “Billy Graham Rule”}. This command was for social propriety; to prevent allegations of immorality against either of them.
- Lastly, it seems that Jesus wanted to bring up specific facts about her relationship status.

This surely made her uncomfortable, I imagine it would make any one of us uncomfortable too. We cannot blame her for answering Jesus with, *"I have no husband."* It was short, sweet, matter of fact and the truth...from a certain point of view. It was meant to be a clear end to the conversation. It was a polite way to say, “I do not want to talk about that because it is none of your business.” It was also a safe answer to give because a stranger should not know anything about her or her circumstances. Her answer was ambiguous and could mean several different things initially, since John does not provide her age.

- She could have been a virgin youth, like Rebekah (Gen 24:15) or Rachel (Gen 29:6-10) were when they met Isaac and Jacob, respectively.
- She could have been a virgin “spinster”, a woman who was never married for any number of reasons {including because she was considered impure as a victim of rape, like Jacob's daughter Dinah (Genesis 34)}.
- She might be a widow.
- Or, she might be divorced.

But Jesus wanted to have this conversation with her and He was not going to let her avoid it. So, He commended her honesty! *"You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."* This is where the negative interpretation manifests itself.

Interpreters think this was a revelation of some “great sinfulness”, but to reach that conclusion so **firmly**, requires that we ignore her 1st century context and judge her according to “modern sensibilities” {which if they were honestly using the standards of “modern morality”, five plus 1 husbands would not be considered shocking, they would be “par for the course”.}. The evidence they use to build their case is the simple fact that she has been married five times and was presently in a non-married relationship, but only the last might be morally negative.

Now there are only three reasonable probabilities for her relational status:

- She had been widowed 5 times.
- She had been divorced 5 times.
- Or, had experienced some combination of divorce and widowhood.

People want to load her down with an excess of personal guilt and shame, something which the text does not actually burden her with. Few are willing to consider the less scandalous option of her being a widow: something exceedingly tragic and unfortunate; something beyond her control; something grievous and pitiable, but not a cause for shame.

When the Sadducees tested Jesus, they offered Him the hypothetical situation of a woman who had married seven brothers in succession {in accord with levirite law (Deuteronomy 25:5)} trying to preserve the family line. But their example suggests two things:

- 1) that such a situation was not unheard of; that it was known to happen and,
- 2) that it was not scandalous. It was unfortunate, but it was not scandalous.

However, if she were widowed five times, then we would expect John to mention that tragic detail. So, I rather doubt that was her story. Which leaves us with divorce.

- Matthew Henry¹ assumes she was guilty and sinful, suggesting that she was an adulteress and divorcee (or even more improperly a “divorcer”, because women were not permitted to initiate a divorce), and that she was now someone’s “mistress”. According to Moses, divorce was not a valid option in the case of adultery. So, we must rule out that accusation because someone was only considered an adulterer if they were caught {whether caught in the act (Deuteronomy 22:22) or caught after the fact, by virtue of the natural consequences (Numbers 5)}, and if they were caught, then there was only one prescribed penalty, “...both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.” (Lev. 20:10b ESV).
 - Similarly, if her first husband were to have accused her of not being a virgin on their wedding night, then either she would have been proven true by the wedding bedclothes and he would have been whipped, fined, and unable to divorce her, or she would have been stoned.
- Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce agrees that “scandalous divorcee” was a possible reason, but he refused to definitively state a reason.
- Likewise, Baptist pastor, D. A. Carson, assumes that her present relationship is evidence for a “morally messy past”².

So, the suggest that she was a social outcast merely because she drew water at noon instead of later in the day with everyone else; assuming that she was on the fringe of society because of a terrible, moral shame and guilt is very thin circumstantial evidence. Then, thinking that and knowing that the “man” she has now: her present protector and provider; is not her “husband”, leads us to assume the worst of her. We connect those two dots with a big, broad, black Sharpie; making a thick, heavy line to what we think is the best explanation for who she is. We forget, or ignore, her humanity and her person-hood, and we treat her worse than the people of Sychar ever might have.

She would not have been married five times if she were a “wicked woman” because she would have already paid the penalty for it. Nor was she likely quarrelsome or difficult to live with, because that would have been well known and undesirable, unless the third, fourth, and fifth men were utter and absolute fools.

So, in this case, I tend to agree that she was serially divorced. However, that does not address her present circumstance, which is the only opportunity to lay any charge of moral guilt upon her, “...you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.”.

Since her present relationship is not clearly defined, only implied, we jump to the conclusion that she was “shacking up” with some guy, forgetting {or ignorant of the fact} that that would not have been tolerated in either a Jewish or Samaritan town of the 1st century {since they both shared the same ethical code and religious

1 Matthew Henry's Commentary

2 DA Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary, *The Gospel According to John* p. 220

laws found in the Pentateuch}, because that was considered immoral and a form of adultery, something punishable by death; which leaves us with four other legitimate relationship possibilities. Perhaps she was:

- living with a male family member, like a brother or uncle, but that is the least likely option based on the sense of the words used.
- a concubine; a legitimate, legally recognized type of mistress but not a wife {as Hagar was to Sarah and of which Solomon had many}.
- working as a servant in a household and perhaps she was being taken advantage of and therefore, was being abused in that relationship.
- or, a prostitute; a “professional woman” of ill repute; an occupation taken in desperation, not by desire or even choice.

Unfortunately, that last option is what most people uncharitably choose to assume, but Scripture does not say that is what she was. I believe that is unfair, unkind, and unwarranted.

So, if we assume that she probably was divorced five times, we must then look at what Jesus said about divorce {remember also that within the context Jesus speaking, the default assumption would have been marriage between believing Jews, yet His same reasoning applies to the Samaritans}.

Jesus answered the Pharisees who were “testing” Him, “*Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.*” (Matt. 19:8-9 ESV). Legally, only men were allowed to initiate a divorce, enjoying the “privilege” of what amounted to “Her Fault” divorce. Technically, a guy could divorce their wife for any reason they wanted, “...if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house...”. She just had to become somehow “unfavorable” in his opinion; considering her “indecent” or otherwise unsuitable as a wife. I have often heard this described flippantly, giving possible excuses for divorce like:

- her being a bad cook; or,
- maybe she broke a dish; or,
- maybe she refused to immediately submit and cater to all of his wants; or,
- maybe she was just not pretty enough.

Any excuse at all would suffice since, as Moses continued when discussing a second potential husband, “...and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house...”. A man must really **hate** his wife to divorce her because, by divorcing her, he was utterly destroying her life. He would remove all security, social standing, and hope of provision from her. Her only acceptable choice would be to return to her father's home or go live with some other family member and hope to be married off again. Few men would want as wife, a woman that another man had rejected; much less a woman who had been rejected by two, three, four, or five men, even if for frivolous reasons.

- Who would want someone as their wife, if five men had found some fault with her already?

A woman in such a state would surely have had a very low social reputation among everyone who knew her. Yet if she were truly guilty of so many terrible faults, then we would not expect her to be very welcome anywhere.

However, there is one probable “fault” that explains why five men might have been willing to try with her, but then cruelly discard her and still preserve her an upstanding place in society: she was likely unable to have children.

Remember, 1st century marriage did not necessarily begin with love, they were often arranged for practical reasons. Their primary purpose and function was to build and grow families for the good of the clan, tribe, and nation; fulfilling God's first command to humanity **{and the only one we have not broken}** “*And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."*” (Gen. 1:28 ESV). Children are the greatest of blessings, and a male heir was important to most men.

- If having a son was the most important thing to a man and his wife was incapable of giving him one, casting her off and divorcing her made a cruel form of logic; just ask Henry VIII.

So, this is my answer to the question of “Who was this Samaritan woman”: I propose that she was a victim. She was a victim of her circumstances, culture, community, and every man she had called “husband”.

- She was a victim of the cruelty of men who valued her for only one thing and when she could not provide it, they discarded her.
- She was the victim of a culture that taught that valuation.
- She was the victim of a society that limited her opportunities and denied her self-reliance; effectively forcing her to depend on a man.
- She was the victim of a society that shamed her and caused her to feel guilty for something beyond her control; for an ability which the LORD, in His wisdom, had not providentially granted to her, but which He could now turn towards the good by drawing her to Himself and removing the pain and shame with his love.

I do not believe that this woman went to the well at noon that day because she was a scorned or despised woman. I think she went there then because she did not want to be around her neighbors and experience their pity; increasing her unwarranted shame for something beyond her control.

This was not a “chance” encounter. It was not a coincidence because Jesus never did anything without purpose. I think Jesus “...*had to pass through Samaria...*” (Jn. 4:4 ESV) so He could be there sitting beside that well, on that day, at that time, just so He could ask her for a drink of water. I believe that He went there **for her**, with great intention, because she was a “one” for whom He left a “ninety-nine” of Israel to go rescue (Matthew 18:12-13; Luke 15:4-7); because she was a sheep not of Israel's “fold”, yet one who belonged to His flock. He knew that she would listen to His voice (John 10:16).

Jesus did this to show us the effort and the length that God will go to redeem His beloved, elect children.

- Jesus loved this woman, so much.
- Jesus wanted this woman, so much.

- Jesus desired this woman; but, unlike all the other men she had ever known, Jesus did not want her for what she could give Him. He wanted her because the Father had given her to Him. Therefore, He wanted to give her everything!
- Jesus wanted her in His Kingdom; so, He went into Samaria to get her and bring her to the Father.

Sometimes we get so familiar with our Bible stories that we stop wondering at them.

This Samaritan woman met Jesus, had a conversation with Him, and could suddenly see what the Jews: the religious elite, the guys whose job was to know and recognize these things; could not, "*Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.*". Her eyes were opened while theirs were kept closed, just like Isaiah prophesied, "*Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.*" (Isa. 6:9-10 ESV). She did not know what her true need was (it was not just water), but after she encountered Jesus, her life was surely changed.

Unlike everyone else she knew, Jesus did not speak to her with condemnation. Jesus did not judge her. Jesus did not reject her. Nor did Jesus offer her His pity. Instead, Jesus offered her the hope of God's promises. Jesus wanted her merely because she was, herself, and because she was His.

Although John does not tell us that Jesus called her to repent of her sins and be changed, her response shows us that that is what Jesus, God the Son, did; regardless of whatever He may or may not have expressly said.

That is love! Jesus searched and sought for the lost, wherever they were, to lead them out of the world's darkness into the light God. Please understand that:

- Jesus' love is different from that of the world.
- Jesus's values are different from the world's values.
- Jesus saw her as a woman; as a person of worth and great value.
- Jesus did not see her as a victim, as someone to be pitied for their misfortune; but as someone beloved by God but who did not know it yet.

How did she respond to Jesus? She abandoned her water jug and immediately went into town telling everyone the good news about Jesus!

"...the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" They went out of the town and were coming to him." (Jn. 4:28-30 ESV) This unnamed woman responded to Jesus with faith and excited proclamation!

Although John never mentions her again, I think we should be encouraged thinking of her, asking, "Where is she now?", because just after she left Jesus, He explained to the disciples, "*Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. **Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.***" (Jn. 4:35-36 ESV); implying that she had been "reaped" and "gathered" by the Holy Spirit for eternal life. **Even moreso, looking ahead beyond the Gospel to the Acts of the Apostles, here we have a body of people in Sychar, a community already believing Jesus, ready and waiting to hear the news about His death and resurrection; primed for saving faith when Philip the Evangelist came to the region of Samaria.**

We may be encouraged because this unnamed “nobody”, this Samaritan woman living on the fringe of society, victimized by the world, was so loved and valuable enough to Jesus that He went to her. He went where she was, meeting her deep within the pain of her circumstances. So we can believe and know that Jesus will do the same, or more, for all that our Father in heaven gives Him.

- If God calls someone, there is no one beyond the reach of Jesus or His Holy Spirit.

While our personal circumstances are different, each of us are like that anonymous woman. We are all rejected by others. We all feel shame and guilt, not only for the wrongs that we have done (as we ought) but, we also often feel it for the wrongs that are done to us: wrongly blaming ourselves; assuming that we deserve the cruelty others do to us; falsely believing that we are to blame; trapping ourselves in a “hell” of our own devising; falsely believing that we are beyond saving. But no one is beyond the power of God and the redemption of Jesus Christ if they truly believe in Him.

While life remains, there is hope for all of us. So, I urge you to come meet Jesus for yourself.

Open your Bible to read and hear Him speak to you.

Open your heart, and pray that He will enter in.

Turn to Him in faith and ask Him for the “living water” that He stands ready to give you. Do not let your past stand in the way of a future with Jesus Christ. Repent and believe!

Remember, since this Samaritan woman was so important to Jesus, although no one else thought her of any worth, then you may know that you are just as loved and desired by Him. Know and believe that if you ask Him, then He will give you all that He has promised, here in His Holy Word, because “...*everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” (Acts 2:21 ESV).

AMEN