

THE CRY OF NEW LIFE

John 4:27-30

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So 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?" (Jn. 4:28-29).

The Samaritan woman is the first person in the Gospel of John to be clearly born again. She had come to the well a worldly woman, ignorant of saving truth and thinking only of her material need for water. But she went back to her village transformed, with truth and life to share. What made the change? She had met Jesus and had seen his divine glory. The result was living water welling up in her heart unto eternal life.

But the Samaritan woman's heart was not the only one that needed to be taught by Jesus on that day. While her dramatic transformation was taking place, Jesus' disciples returned from Sychar, where they had gone to buy food. They missed Jesus' instructive dialogue with the woman, but came back in time for the glorious finale of her conversion. John tells us: "Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you seek?' or, 'Why are you talking with her?'" (John 4:27).

The disciples thought only in terms of the stifling social conventions of their time and could not see the spiritual transformation taking place. They could not imagine a sinner becoming a saint, and they were especially skeptical about a Gentile being admitted into the company of God's people. They were surprised by grace—indeed, *dismayed* or *appalled* by grace might be more accurate! Their minds were fixed on the social status quo rather than the ground-shaking effects of Christ's coming. John, who was present as one of these

unspiritual disciples, tells us that they wanted to challenge Jesus, saying, “Why are you talking with her?” That is the way dead religion always responds to grace. Had they asked, Jesus’ answer would have been, “To give her living water.” But the disciples’ mouths were stopped—whether by astonishment or by God himself we are not told—so that they were not permitted to desecrate the holy occasion.

This portion of the story raises an important question for those who are sincere in wanting to lead souls to salvation in Christ: How do we know that a person has really been saved? The disciples doubted the conversion of this Samaritan woman. So how can we have confidence that she was truly born again—and that others like her today have found new life in Christ?

When we studied Jesus’ teaching in John 3, we saw that the new birth is known only by its effects. Jesus said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Just as wind is seen by its effects, the new birth has necessary consequences that always occur and by which we may know that we or others are saved. John’s narrative highlights three signs of true salvation, and every Christian should know what they are.

CONFESSION OF FAITH IN CHRIST

When a doctor delivers a baby, the first thing he wants to hear is the infant’s cry. This tells him that air has entered its lungs and the baby has started to breathe. So it is with the spiritual rebirth. When the Spirit enters the heart, the new life he brings causes the spiritual infant to cry out confessing his faith in Jesus Christ.

This is a matter of some confusion to people. Many believe that the new birth is caused by our profession of faith, but the situation is exactly reversed: our confession of faith in Christ is a result of our being born again of the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). Paul adds, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, ... and he is not able to understand them” (1 Cor. 2:14). So until one has

been born again as God's sovereign work through his Word, he does not possess the ability to believe. But that does not make a public confession of faith optional to salvation. James Boice comments, "Some persons think that they can be secret believers, but the Word of God never considers this a possibility. What does the Word of God say? 'Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven' (Mt. 10:32-33)."¹

Here is where we see the main difference between Nicodemus, to whom Jesus witnessed in John 3, and the woman by the well in John 4. Nicodemus was a much more religious and moral person, but he left Jesus without professing his faith. He apparently struggled with this until he actually saw Jesus dying on the cross, after which he finally confessed his faith by going with Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus' body (Jn. 19:39). But the woman at the well, having beheld Jesus' deity when he revealed himself as the Messiah, responded with a public confession of faith that clearly reveals her new birth. John 4:28-29 tells us, "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?'" From her subsequent conduct it is evident that she meant, "I have found the Messiah," and her public confession to her neighbors demonstrates her rebirth.

Have you confessed Jesus before men, publicly professing your faith? It is as important for you to do so spiritually as it is for a newborn baby to draw its first breath and cry out.

CHANGE IN LIFE

According to the Bible, however, a bare confession of faith is not in itself enough to demonstrate a new birth. The reason is that a confession of faith is not credible unless it is accompanied by a changed life. It is one thing to say the "sinner's prayer" or give verbal assent to the gospel; but a true conversion will lead to a living faith – not a dead faith – that bears the spiritual fruit of change in one's life.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:308.

An illustration of this truth is the life of John Newton. He was raised in a Christian home, but his parents died when he was only six and he was sent to live with an unbelieving relative who mocked Christianity and abused Newton. So he ran away to be a sailor and fell into gross sin. After a while he deserted to live in one of the worst areas of Africa because there he could, as he recounts, “sin his full.”

There, Newton joined a slave trader, who treated him so badly that he ran away again and joined the crew of a slave ship. Since Newton was a trained navigator he soon became the ship’s mate. One day, however, he broke into the ship’s rum supply and got so drunk he fell overboard; he was saved only when one of the crew harpooned him in the thigh and hauled him back in.

As the ship was nearing its port in Scotland they entered a storm and began to sink. Newton was sent down into the pitch blackness of the hold to work the pump with the slaves. For days on end he pumped, and in the darkness his mind recalled the Bible verses his mother had taught him as a little child. They spoke of God’s grace and the cross where the Savior died for his forgiveness. Through God’s Word he was born again and cried out in saving faith. How do we know? Because when the storm passed and the ship safely arrived home, Newton left the ship, sought out a church, and began a new life that was increasingly godly. He went on to be greatly used of God as a notable preacher and great writer of hymns, a trophy of God’s amazing grace, as revealed by both his confession of faith and his changed life.

What about the Samaritan woman? What evidence do we have that she began a new life when she believed on Jesus? John indicates this in beautiful fashion by telling us, “The woman left her water jar and went away into town” (Jn. 4:28).

This detail reminds us that John was an eye-witness to the events he records; only someone who was personally present could include a detail like this. What could he be suggesting by telling us that she left her water jar behind? For one thing, we should note that John uses the imagery of water all through his Gospel. Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water into wine. The water jars at the wedding in Cana were used for ceremonial washing under the old covenant law. The same word is used here for the Samaritan

woman's water jar: it was not a small container, but likely a substantial clay vessel that she would carry with great effort on her head or hip. In chapter 5, John again brings water into his Gospel. There, Jesus heals a lame man who had been hoping to be cured by the waters of the pool of Bethesda. In all of these occasions, sitting water – like the water this woman had come to draw from Jacob's well – depicts powerless, outward religion, which Jesus replaces with the living water of true spiritual power and life.

This trend in John's Gospel suggests that by leaving her water jar the Samaritan woman was abandoning her lifeless religion of ceremonies and works. F. F. Bruce describes this as "a parable of the renunciation of the old ceremonial, practiced by Jews and Samaritans alike, on the part of those who through faith in Christ have received the divine gift of eternal life."² She had brought her jar to Jacob's well to draw its stagnant water, but had instead found living water, which, Jesus said, "will become in [you] a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn. 4: 14).

The water jar also signified the overall emptiness of her life. J. C. Ryle says, "Grace once introduced into the heart drives out old tastes and interests. A converted person no longer cares for what he once cared for. A new tenant is in the house: a new pilot is at the helm. The whole world looks different."³ This explains how God's grace changes us. What the woman experienced was the expulsive power of a new affection: thoughts of Jesus drove out her former desires and filled her with zeal to declare his glory. Boice comments about this:

I wonder if you have experienced a change in your life and values as a result of pondering the truths of the gospel. I do not mean, "Have you been totally transformed overnight?" That does not often happen, although it can. Generally, the Christian life is one of growth, just as a baby must grow through childhood, adolescence, and into adult life... [But] has there been at least a partial transformation of your values? Are you different now since you have believed? Are you being changed?⁴

If there has been no change in your life, then your confession of faith in Christ is doubtful at best. Again, the woman's water jar is

² F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 112.

³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), I:231.

⁴ Boice, 309.

instructive about the struggle many people have. They are held back by some remnant of their former lives they have not given up for Jesus: some false source of comfort, some sinful habit or ungodly ambition they have failed to renounce. If so, that is keeping them from the kind of lifestyle change that will give them the joy and assurance of salvation they ought to have.

A helpful book in understanding the new birth was written by a little-known pastor in early 19th century Brooklyn, Ichabod Spencer. In it, he depicts his many one-on-one encounters in leading people to faith. One of them involves a man who needed to give up a container like this woman's. A middle-aged farmer had been attending church faithfully for years. His wife was a vibrant Christian, but he never showed any personal response. At the wife's request, Spencer dropped by their home to speak to the man about his soul. The farmer admitted that though he attended church he never felt the love of God or any spiritual power, and that he lived a gloomy, fearful existence. Spencer assured him that God has opened the way to salvation if only he would yield himself to Jesus as Savior and Lord. The man offered to try, but after some months nothing happened.

One day, Spencer was out for a ride when he happened upon the farmer bringing his carriage into town. As they talked, Spencer spied a brown jug under the farmer's seat – a vessel not unlike the one the Samaritan woman brought to Jacob's well. He gently inquired about the jug's contents, learning that it was filled with rum. Further inquiry revealed that the man was not a drunkard, but whenever he was low in spirits or troubled at night, he would minister to himself with rum. Spencer realized the situation and immediately told him that this was his spiritual problem: when the Holy Spirit was pressing on his heart to lead him to Christ, he was dulling himself spiritually with the rum.

The problem was not alcohol as such, but a worldly source of relief that was standing in the way of repentance and faith in Christ. Spencer told him this, and urgently called the farmer to renounce his fleshly compulsion. There happened to be a large rock beside the carriage and, Spencer recalls, "His eye fixed upon it, and then glanced back to the jug upon his knee. Then he looked at the rock, and then at his jug again, and then at me. And thus his eye continued to wander from one to another of these three objects, as if it could not get

beyond them... Finally he seized the poor jug by its side, wrapping the long fingers of his right hand half round it, and slowly rising from his seat, he stretched up his tall frame to its full length, and lifting the brown jug aloft... he hurled it, with all his might, against the rock, dashing it into a thousand pieces.” That is what you must do with whatever water jar or brown jug is holding you back from a saving embrace of Jesus Christ. Spencer tells us that “within a single month... that man became, as he believed, a child of God. His gloom and fears were gone, and he had peace, by faith in Jesus Christ.”⁵ Do not let any worldly concern or influence keep you from the salvation life that Jesus has to give.

CONCERN FOR THE LOST

The third sign that this woman was truly born again is her immediate concern for the spiritual well-being of others: “So 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?’” (Jn. 4:28-29). This depicts what is true of us all: the day of her conversion to Christ was also the day of her appointment as a missionary for his gospel.

The Bible tells us that different believers receive different spiritual gifts. Some are gifted with teaching, others with encouragement, and others with administration. But witnessing the gospel is not only a spiritual gift for some. It is also a duty every believer shares. More than that, it is the inevitable result of the overflow of the living waters Jesus gives to all who believe. John Calvin said, “It is the nature of faith that we want to bring others to share eternal life with us when we have become partakers of it. The knowledge of God cannot lie buried and inactive in our hearts and not be made known to men.”⁶ I mentioned John Newton as an example of a man whose confession of faith was confirmed by his changed life. But he also displayed a great concern for the lost. His most famous contribution was the hymn, *Amazing Grace*, in which he recounted for millions the basic facts of his conversion, and the salvation they, too, can receive:

⁵ Ichabod Spencer, *A Pastor's Sketches*, 2 vols. (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2001), 256-263.

⁶ John Calvin, 104.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found; was blind, but now I see.

That was the testimony of the Samaritan woman. Her zeal to tell the people of Sychar about Jesus is particularly lovely when we remember that she seems to have been shunned by them. This was probably why she had to get her water during the heat of the day, since the other women did not welcome her company in the cooler hours. The natural result of such a rejection is resentment, but having been born again she instead showed concern for their salvation. Moreover, we might think that with her newfound faith she would want to remain close to Jesus. But she was overwhelmed by her burden for others to learn what she had discovered: that the Messiah had brought salvation to their corner of the world. Later, she would spend time with Jesus, for John tells us that he stayed in Sychar for two full days (Jn. 4:43). But the new birth instilled in her a new love: the love of God for the lost. This is the final proof of her new birth: first, she confessed her faith in Christ; second, she began a changed life; and, third, she showed concern for the salvation of others by telling them about Jesus. The same marks will be evident in at least some measure in the lives of all who are born again to faith in Jesus Christ.

“COME!”

In conclusion, we should give thought to the words the Samaritan woman spoke to her fellow villagers: “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (Jn. 4:29). She had not yet advanced far in understanding, but that did not stop her from giving a witness to Christ, and it should not stop any of us. Instead of being hindered by what she did not know, she witnessed what she did know: the man she had met at the well was a true prophet and, what is more, he had revealed himself as the long-awaited Messiah. This was enough – in addition to the obvious change in her life – to bring people out to see for themselves. That is the goal of our witness: “They went out of the town and were coming to him” (Jn. 4:30).

“Come” is the great invitation of Jesus Christ. It is what he had said to her earlier in their conversation: “Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here’” (Jn. 4:16). Now the woman passes on this

invitation to others. Boice exclaims, “Come! This is a great word of the Christian gospel. It has brought peace to millions of restless hearts and satisfaction to many that were empty and lonely.”⁷

So many great verses of the Bible contain the invitation, “Come!” Isaiah said: “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa. 1:18). He offers, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!” (Isa. 55:1). Micah foretold the gospel witness: “Come, let us go up... to the house of the god of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths” (Mic. 4:2). Jesus invited the disciples, “Come, follow me” (Mk. 10:21). He says to all, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). Indeed, this will be the song of angels as they usher the redeemed into the glory of heaven: “Come, gather for the great supper of God” (Rev. 19:17). And in conclusion to the entire Bible, the Spirit joins his voice to the Church: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev. 22:17).

Understand, then, if you are one of those who do not enter into heaven but instead fall under the judgment of God, it will not be because no invitation was offered to you. God sent his only Son to bear the penalty of sin and to say to you, “Come!” If you will not come, you will perish in your sins to an eternity of wrath in which no offer of salvation will ever be heard again. But simply to come to Jesus is to be renewed with eternal life and to inherit an eternity of glory. Won’t you come? And if you have come, confess him before the world, submit your life to Jesus to be changed by him, and become a witness who extends the gospel invitation to others, so that they, too, might come and be saved.

⁷ Boice, 311.