

# SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

John 4:27-42

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, March 9, 2008

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They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world" (Jn. 4:42).

One of the most important themes in John's Gospel is that of *witness*. We have encountered this theme numerous times already in the first few chapters. The Prologue highlights John the Baptist: "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light" (Jn. 1:7). Later in chapter 1 we hear John's testimony: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!... I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (Jn. 1:29, 34). This was followed by the witness of Andrew, who told his brother, Simon Peter, "We have found the Messiah" (Jn. 1:41). Chapter 3 records Jesus' witness to the Pharisee Nicodemus. In chapter 4 we have been studying Jesus' witness to the woman at the well, which led to her conversion so that she, too, became a witness for Christ.

Obviously, it is important to John that Christians should be witnesses for Jesus and his gospel. So important is this to Jesus that in Luke's version of the Great Commission, he places our witness on equal footing with his own death and resurrection: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name" (Lk. 24:46-47). This helps us to see our witness in its proper place. God's saving plan relies on Christ's death, Christ's resurrection, and the witness of Christ's church. In this present age, our witness is the way Jesus is bringing salvation to the world.

## HER WITNESS PROVED HER NEW BIRTH

**A**s we conclude our study of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, we learn a number of lessons about a Christian witness.

The first is that *her witness was proof of her new birth*. In our last study, I pointed out that by leaving her water jar, the woman showed the change in her whole worldly way of thinking. In the same way, a change in our values and lifestyles is a necessary sign of the new birth. But Christianity involves much more than leaving behind a sinful, worldly life. It also involves a living discipleship with Jesus, one vital aspect of which is that we tell others what we have found. This is exactly what happened with this woman. John records that she "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).

Hers was a powerful witness, because it presented Jesus through the lens of her own changed heart. It seems that she was an immoral woman who was shunned by her neighbors, so the subject of her sinful past would surely have been a sore subject with her. But now, instead of being ashamed of her past she blurts out that Jesus knows all about it. This is one of the most important signs that a person has come to faith in Christ: instead of covering their sin and resenting the subject, true Christians publicly admit their sin – in fact, they delight to do so – in order to show that Jesus is the Savior of sinners. This is how the new birth changes us into witnesses for Christ, and it is because people notice our change that they listen and come. In this way, the new birth both causes and empowers our witness to Christ.

The Samaritan woman's witness has two essential elements that any Christian witness must include: she told people what she knew about the Lord, and she invited them to meet him for themselves. Hers was like Andrew's witness to his brother Simon, who said, "We have found the Messiah" (Jn. 1:41), and brought him to Jesus. If nothing else, all Christians should be able to tell what they have found in Jesus and invite people, saying, "Come and see!" This is how the majority of people come to Christ today: a heart-felt testimony and an invitation to church or a Bible study, where they encounter Jesus for themselves.

## THE WOMAN'S WITNESS IS WHAT EXCITED JESUS

**I**t is important to note Jesus' reaction, which comes out in his reply to the disciples when they returned with food. They urged him, "Rabbi, eat." But he said, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Has anyone brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work'" (Jn. 4:31-34).

Most people have some interest that is so engrossing to them that while it is going on their bodily functions are suspended. For some it is classical music; while Bach is played they hardly even breathe. Others are this way about fishing. While reeling in a great marlin, they are lost in a heart-pounding euphoria that removes all hunger and thirst. Jesus felt this way about the saving of souls! What great news this is for us! Jesus' passion is our salvation! It also shows us the importance of our witness to Christ. Jesus must have been watching the Samaritan woman on her way back to Sychar, excited at his knowledge that she was born again. Surely he asked the Father to fan the spark of her faith and bless her witness. Perhaps Jesus was thinking about his words of greeting to the people she was going to bring. He was completely caught up in the spread of his gospel – so much so, that when the disciples offered him food – and remember that Jesus was weary and hungry – he replied, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." Jesus was exhilarated by the woman's new birth and her witness, so he had no thought for any other food.

What does this tell us about Jesus' view of our world and its affairs today? Surely it is literally the case that the things that make front-page news are of comparatively little interest to him. What rulers are decreeing, what polls are showing, what stock prices are up or down – much less the sports scores – these things are affairs of the worldly kingdom but not of Christ's kingdom. During his life he paid no attention to military or political or economic affairs. But he wearied himself down the Samaritan road to save this woman's soul, and her witness to her neighbors was of compelling interest to our Lord. Does this not challenge our own priorities and interests? Even though we have earthly duties, isn't what truly matters in every arena not the things of worldly concern but those things that advance the

gospel and glorify God? Isn't what truly matters about your conduct at work not how much money you make or how your career is advanced but how you witness for Christ and glorify him in your life?

A telling chapter in C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* makes this very point. This chilling book envisions letters between demons regarding how to ensnare and destroy souls. Lewis was writing during the darkest days of World War II, and in one of the letters the junior demon rejoices because his subject may be drafted into the Army and perhaps even killed. But his superior demon points out that the war itself matters little, nor even his subject's death, but only the spiritual response occasioned by the war. The key, he pointed out, was to use the war to cultivate hatred or self-boasting pride of reckless folly. He warned that their Enemy (that is, Jesus Christ), often uses terrible things like wars to make people think about eternity, inspire compassion, and spread the message of salvation through his gospel.<sup>1</sup> This is how Christians should think, too, even about important matters like wars. What matters most is not the rising and falling of nations but the harvesting of souls either for heaven or hell. Our most central concern in every situation should be the same as Christ's: the witness we are or are not giving to the gospel of his salvation.

Jesus applied this as a general principle: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (Jn. 4:34). These two things consumed his mind and heart: to act in conformity with God's will and complete the work God gave him to do. This sets an agenda for how we, too, can lead fulfilling lives despite hardships or trials: by committing ourselves to godly living and faithful service to God.

Do you realize that the more self-centered we are the more unhappy and unfulfilled we are? The way to lead a joyful, meaningful life is not to pursue your own pleasure but to do everything to the glory of God. This means leaving behind the clay water jars of sin and worldly ambition. It means delighting to do God's will and to serve his kingdom. As Jesus shows us, our chief delight should be playing a role in the salvation of other people. Is there a greater thrill than to lead another person to Christ? I have known many excitements in

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour Books, 1990), ch. 5.

life, but none surpasses playing the least role in the salvation of a human being through their faith in Christ.

For many of us, this explains our unhappiness and lack of fulfillment, even as Christians. Are you trying to feast on the unwholesome diet of worldly amusements, earthly success, or sinful pleasure? You will never be satisfied that way! Too many Christians can recite details of all the sit-coms on television but do not know what to say to lead a sinner to Christ. Many others feed richly on God's Word, but because they do not serve – and especially because they do not witness – they find themselves strangely unfulfilled. What Jesus said should be true of us as well: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (Jn. 4:34).

#### HER WITNESS ENCOURAGES US BY ITS SUCCESS

**T**he woman's witness not only showed that she was born again and excited our Lord, but also encourages us by its success. The townspeople followed her to Jesus, and “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony... They asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word” (Jn. 4:39-41).

There are three encouragements for witnessing that Jesus wants us to note. The first is that his coming has brought a time of spiritual harvest to the world. Jesus said, “Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest” (Jn. 4:35).

Jesus stated a local proverb, that there are four months of sowing before a harvest is reaped. But his coming changes all that: “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.” What did he mean that “the fields are white”? One answer is that Sychar was part of a region known for its corn. We do not know the exact season in which this event took place, but it may have been that Jesus could wave his hand around to the fields surrounding them with ripe corn stalks, symbolic of the harvest of souls made possible by his coming. Another suggestion is made by H.V. Morton, who wrote of his visit to this very place: “As I sat by Jacob's Well a crowd of Arabs came along the road from the direction in which Jesus

was looking, and I saw their white garments shining in the sun. Surely Jesus was speaking not of the earthly but of the heavenly harvest, and as He spoke I think it likely that He pointed along the road where the Samaritans in their white robes were assembling to hear his words.”<sup>2</sup> In either case, Jesus’ point was that what previously seemed impossible is able to happen by the heavenly power he brings.

Think how unlikely it was that a whole town from Samaria would be converted to faith in a Jewish teacher, much less by the witness of a woman they previously had despised. But the most unlikely people can believe the gospel and be saved today – by the most unlikely witnesses – because Jesus’ coming brings a glorious harvest of souls.

John G. Paton brought the gospel to the cannibals in the New Hebrides Islands. People tried to dissuade him, arguing that it was impossible to convert savages and that he would most likely be killed and even eaten. But Paton was possessed by the same passion that fed the heart of our Lord. He wrote, “I was sustained by the lofty aim which burned all these years bright within my soul, namely to be owned and used by Him for the salvation of perishing men... The wail and claims of the heathen were constantly sounding in my ears. I saw them perishing for lack of the knowledge of the true God and His Son Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

But when Paton arrived in the South Seas, even he was shocked by the depravity of the cannibals. The account of his many miraculous deliverances is amazing and glorious to God. But what is most glorious is his display of the gospel’s power through the conversion of an entire island of violent natives. Paton lived among the people, learning their language, translating the Bible, and proclaiming the gospel. He announced God’s judgment on their sins and forgiveness through the atoning death of God’s Son. One of his biographers noted how his harvest was won: “The Word of God brought conviction of sin and begot faith, and this faith brought forth ‘works meet for repentance.’”<sup>4</sup> In other words, Paton simply gave witness to

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<sup>2</sup> Cited from William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 1:167-168.

<sup>3</sup> John D. Legg, “John G. Paton: Missionary of the Cross,” in *Five Pioneering Missionaries* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 309.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

the gospel, as we are to do, and he found, as Jesus promised, that the fields were “white for harvest,” even in the most unlikely place.

Jesus also used the Samaritan woman’s success to point out how great is the reward of our witness: “Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together” (Jn. 4:36). Not only can we expect success through our witness, but the reward is incalculable. Leon Morris writes, “The task is not some insignificant one, where it does not matter much whether or not it is done. Jesus is talking about work in a field where the eternal welfare of people is at stake.”<sup>5</sup>

Third, Jesus said that we will often be reaping where others have sown before us: “For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor” (Jn. 4:37-38). This was true even with these Samaritans. Jesus and the woman had sown the gospel, and now the disciples could reap the harvest. But this was not the first witness to this region, for John the Baptist had preached nearby (Jn. 3:23). We also know that the Samaritans believed the five books of Moses, so now his long-past labor was bearing fruit. Years later, Philip the deacon would come to Samaria and lead many to salvation, perhaps following up with some of these very people who met Jesus through the woman’s witness (Acts 8).

If God uses your witness to save someone, realize that you are almost certainly reaping where someone else has sown. This is Christ’s blessing to you: he said, “I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor” (Jn. 4:38). Indeed, there could be no salvation without Jesus having sown the seed of his life on the cross. We are able to reap because of the forgiveness he has sown through his own blood.

Even when we do not get to see the results for which we long – when our witness does not apparently lead to faith and salvation – we can rejoice to know that others may come and reap from our witness. We are not responsible for the outcome, but only for our faithful, loving witness. Yet we speak to others about Jesus with a great hope,

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<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 151.

knowing that he is mighty to save through the combined witness of his many people.

Jesus' statement in verse 37 makes clear that sometimes we will sow but not reap, whereas other times we will reap because others sowed. I mentioned John G. Paton's great success among the South Sea cannibals. I neglected to point out that he spent several years on the island of Tanna with much labor and sacrifice – including the death of his wife and their son – only to be driven off the island. Despite his faith, his first, painful venture was an apparent failure. But he kept at it, and on another island, Aniwa, God gave him such success that the whole island became a beacon of Christian godliness. So what about Tanna? Some time after Paton departed from Aniwa, the believers there sent a mission to Tanna and a great harvest of conversions was enjoyed on the ground once sown with Paton's labor and tears.

#### HER WITNESS REVEALED JESUS AS SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

I want to conclude with the statement heard from the lips of these Samaritan converts: “They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world’” (Jn. 4:42). Her witness did not have to save them – nor could it. She merely led them to Jesus and he did the rest. Their salvation reveals that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

Do you realize this? Do you realize it when you think about other people you know? There is no other savior for their souls in all this world than Jesus Christ. Yes, a doctor may save them from disease. An employer may save them from poverty. But what about death? What about God's judgment on our sin? What about the eternity that awaits beyond the grave? Jesus is the only One in all the world who can save us from sin and death and God's just wrath. What good will you have done others if you befriended them, or spent time with them in some worthy cause –yet did not tell them about the world's only Savior, apart from whom they must perish forever? What kind of love is this – to know Jesus as the Savior of the world yet fail to tell people who do not know him? Surely, if the spark of new life is burning in our souls and we have the slightest shed of Christ's love

for people, we will at least do what this Samaritan woman did. Surely we can risk a little embarrassment or inconvenience to tell people, “I have found the Savior – Come and see!”

If you have never understood this and have never trusted Christ for yourself, let me have the privilege of urging you to do so now. When the Samaritans called Jesus “the Savior of the world,” they did not mean that everyone in the world will be saved. The Gospel of John is very clear that many will perish in sin. John says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (Jn. 3:18). What the Samaritans meant is that Jesus is such a Savior that even the most unlikely people – and that is what Samaritans were in that day – can be saved simply by coming to him in faith. There are no sins so dark that they cannot be washed clean by his atoning blood. There is no rebel so outcast before God that he will not be received through God’s own Son. This is Jesus’ passion – the food that consumes his heart– to do God’s work of salvation for everyone in the world who will come. Let us not fail to tell the world, and let us not fail to receive the Savior of the world as our own Savior, so that we might then enter into his harvest of eternal life.