

# April 27 | Lesson 9

# Thirst-Quenching Water

## Focal Passage

John 4:4-14

## Background Text

John 4

## Purpose

To develop a thirst for the water of life that Jesus gives

### **John 4:4-14**

**<sup>4</sup>Jesus had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup>He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob’s well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon.**

**<sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me some water to drink.” <sup>8</sup>His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food.**

**<sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman asked, “Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” (Jews and Samaritans didn’t associate with each other.)**

**<sup>10</sup>Jesus responded, “If you recognized God’s gift and who is saying to you, ‘Give me some water to drink,’ you would be asking him and he would give you living water.”**

**<sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, you don’t have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water? <sup>12</sup>You aren’t greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.”**

**<sup>13</sup>Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life.”**

**Key Verses: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life” (John 4:13-14).**

### Connect<sup>1</sup>

Two thousand years ago, the Son of God took a journey into the far country, the unclean territory of Samaria. Just as God had once come to the despised Hebrews in Egypt, so God came to a despised village in Samaria. So God still comes to us. Having taken on Jewish flesh, Jesus lived in a world ravaged by sin, populated with people who did as they pleased. He loved that world. Still does. Its injustice breaks his heart. Its malice disappoints him. He loves it all the same.

About noon this day he was sitting beside Jacob’s well in the town of Sychar (John 4:5). He was worn out. He wanted a drink but didn’t have a bucket with which to retrieve any water. This wasn’t the last time that worn out, about noon, he would need a drink. But he wouldn’t be sitting beside Jacob’s well that last time. He’d be straddling Pilate’s tree. On this journey, this day, Jesus’ disciples had scattered to find food, leaving him alone. Again, this wouldn’t be the last time the disciples would scatter, leaving Jesus tired and thirsty and alone.

A Samaritan woman approached the well. She, too, needed a drink. She hoped the well

might slake her thirst, although nothing to which she had ever turned previously had worked. Realizing Jesus was Jewish, the woman wanted nothing to do with him. She was as unaccepting of Jews as they were of her. Unlike when Abraham’s servant had asked Rebekah for a drink and she gladly offered it (Genesis 24:17), this woman mocked Jesus when he asked for a drink (John 4:7, 9).

When Jesus countered the woman’s refusal by suggesting she was missing out on riches far beyond anything Rebekah had obtained from Abraham’s servant (verse 10), she scarcely veiled the bitterness in her voice. She knew a pick-up line when she heard one. If Jesus meant to offer her “living water,” he at least needed a bucket. But he had no resources. His hands were empty. His promises rang hollow (verse 11).

Thankfully, God is not put out by our presumptions about what God can do or how God must do it. When the woman sized up Jesus and decided he did not compare favorably to Jacob (verse 12), Jesus quietly suggested he was not the first about whom she had been wrong. She shouldn’t discount so quickly the gifts offered by others. They may just be what she most desired (verse 14). Jesus’ response intrigued the woman. He seemed to know more about her heart’s hunger, more about her parched spirit, her deep thirst for a fulfilling life than any stranger should (verse 15).

What thirst has left your spirit weak? What happiness have you given up believing you’ll ever again experience? How long has it been

since you let yourself hope that that broken relationship could be renewed, that emotional hurt healed? Said Jesus, “The water I give will become in [you] a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life” (verse 14). Dare you acknowledge to Jesus your thirst?

One caution: Jesus doesn’t offer himself as a fix to enable us to continue as before. God’s salvation isn’t interested in propping up our personal status quo. It means to overturn it. It gives us eyes to see differently, hearts to feel deeply, courage and resilience to deal with how weak and weary and full of fear we are. If there is a thirst in our gut; a hope not entirely snuffed out; and a wish to be free of the past, alive to today, at peace tomorrow, Jesus stands ready to offer himself as the Way to take, the Truth that counts, the Life that matters.

There’s no catch, no fine print to read, and no loophole to be wary of. To receive Jesus’ offer, all we must do initially is acknowledge our thirst. We own up to who we’ve become and acknowledge that that’s not who we want to remain. Like the woman at the well, we hear Jesus out, only to discover he already knows about our less-than-holy past and our present spiritual misery. Difficult? Sure. Impossible? Not if we’re tired of putting up with what life has become.

## Inspect

**Introduction.** The five lessons in Unit 2 consist of passages from the Gospel of John that detail the life-giving water connected to

Jesus. In this first lesson from John 4, the meaning of (and misunderstandings about) “living water” dominate a conversation that took place between Jesus and a Samaritan woman.

The Scripture text can be divided into three brief sections. John 4:4-6 places a tired and thirsty Jesus beside an historic well in a village in Samaria.

Verses 7-10 introduce a Samaritan woman and contain the first exchange of conversation between her and Jesus.

Verses 11-14 contain the second exchange of conversation that took place between the Samaritan woman and Jesus.

**John 4:1-3.** Following Jesus’ well-known nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee (John 3:1-21), Jesus spent time in the Judean countryside with his disciples, baptizing persons (verse 22). The activity not only led to some pointed concern among the disciples of John the Baptist (verses 23-36) but also came to the attention of some Pharisees. Because it was not yet “time” for a public struggle with the religious authorities (7:6, 30), Jesus decided simply to leave Judea and return to Galilee (4:1-3).

**Verse 4.** To get from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, travelers had multiple options available to them. The quickest route, which still took about three days by foot, was to pass through the Samaritan heartland. However, one could also head west toward the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and traverse any of the roads that led northward to Caesarea Maritima

and Mount Carmel and beyond. The final option was to head east and cross the Jordan River into Perea before heading north. These alternate routes, which added a couple of extra days' travel time, permitted a Jewish traveler to avoid journeying through most (or all) of Samaria.

John said that Jesus "had" to travel ("must needs go" [KJV]) through Samaria. Since other routes were readily available, it wasn't geographically necessary that Jesus and his disciples travel through Samaria. The word implies that it was a divine mandate to which Jesus responded when he took the route he did.

**Verse 5.** Although Jesus' starting point in "the Judean countryside" (John 3:22, NRSV, NIV) and the precise location of Sychar are unknown, it is safe to conclude that Jesus was about halfway to Galilee. Referred to as "a Samaritan city," it is much more likely that Sychar (which doesn't appear in the Old Testament but is associated with present-day Askar because of its second syllable) was a "town" (NIV, TEV) or even a "village" (*The Message*).

Another possibility is that "Sychar" is a corrupted version of the name *Shechem*. Whether Sychar was Shechem, or merely was near Shechem, cannot be proven; however, Shechem and its immediate vicinity (present-day Nablus) was considered part of the inheritance of Joseph's descendants (Joshua 24:32), the land that Joseph received from his father, Jacob (Genesis 33:18-19; 48:22).

**Verse 6.** Near Sychar was "Jacob's well," which is more than 130 feet deep. Although

the well is never mentioned in the Old Testament, by the first century, the well was commonly believed to have been dug by Jacob. It still exists today, situated inside St. Photine, a Greek Orthodox church, the fifth church to have been built at the site. The well is about one mile west of Askar and one mile east of Nablus (and one mile northeast of Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritan temple had stood before being destroyed by Jews not quite a century and a half before the events of John 4 took place).

When Jesus arrived at Jacob's well, which was well-known to travelers, he was "tired from his journey." So he "sat down" to rest for a while. It was "about noon," "the sixth hour" (KJV, NASB). When available, travelers today often stop at a truck stop or a fast-food restaurant around noon for food and drink; first-century travelers stopped at wells.

**Verses 7-8.** While Jesus was resting at the well by himself, his disciples had continued on to Sychar in an attempt to purchase for him "some food," raising questions about the supposed refusal of Jews and Samaritans to interact with each other (verse 9). Then a Samaritan woman approached. Possibly carrying a smaller bucket and a larger "water jar" (verse 28), she intended to "draw water" to take home.

The same word is used for the "six stone water jars" at the wedding at Cana in Galilee (2:6); but since a gallon of water weighs more than eight pounds, surely the woman's jar was smaller than the "twenty to thirty gallons" variety used at the wedding.

Many writers and clergy have suggested that women in biblical times went to wells to draw water in the evening in order to avoid midday temperatures. That may generally be true (Genesis 24:11); but there are at least two biblical accounts of persons watering their animals at wells during the daytime (Genesis 29:2; Exodus 2:15-17).

Furthermore, it should be noted, readers of this account are never informed as to the season of the year or the temperature of the day. Even so, this has not stopped a majority of interpreters from jumping to the conclusion—given what will later be revealed about the woman (John 4:16-18)—that she came to the well at noon to avoid the gossip and stares of those who would have been there at other times of the day.

Jesus surely watched the woman approach. Was her step confident as she drew near, or did he see her waver momentarily? For her part, she must have noted the presence of Jesus (a Jewish stranger) at the well. Was she irritated that he was there? As the woman began to draw water to fill her water jar, Jesus asked her if she would “give [him] some water to drink.”

Once again, many writers and clergy have had much to say about Jesus choosing to converse with a woman. They regularly point out that Jewish men did not speak to women—even their wives—in public. And they cite a synagogue prayer in which the presiding rabbi gave thanks to God that he and the other males present were not born as females.

The problem with these two (and other) declarations about supposed Jewish beliefs and

practices is that they do not come from first-century Jewish texts. They are Talmudic teachings regarding the oral law (recorded in the second century) and rabbinical discussions (recorded as late as the fifth century).

As a result, these teachings reflect the interpretations of later Jewish faith and practice as understood and influenced by the Pharisaic movement that survived the destruction of the Temple and the dismantling of the priesthood. The Talmud offers wonderful insights into the beliefs and practices of early Judaism; but these beliefs and practices are not necessarily those of first-century Palestinian Jews (since only a small percentage of them were Pharisees).

As a case in point, the four New Testament Gospels are replete with accounts of Jesus conversing with women in public, including the Scripture texts studied in the first two lessons of Unit One.

**Verse 9.** Expressing shock, perhaps also a degree of mocking disgust, the woman responded to Jesus’ request for water by effectively saying, “Seriously? A Jew is asking a Samaritan for a drink? Get your own water!” John’s parenthetical explanation for the lack of compassion that the woman displayed toward Jesus suggests that there was not a lot of love lost between Jews and Samaritans or between Samaritans and Jews.

After generations of her people being demeaned by Jews, the antipathy the woman felt for them generally was like what the Hatfields once expressed for the McCoys or Irish

Protestants once felt for Irish Catholics. She had no more use for the man before her than she assumed he had for her. No matter his present need, she had no intention of offering him any kindness.

While most English translations have John suggesting that Jews and Samaritans “didn’t associate with each other,” there is another way to understand his comment. The NRSV says that they didn’t “share things in common,” a meaning that is made even more explicit by the TEV: They didn’t “use the same cups and bowls.” To some Jews, contact with a Samaritan was like contact with a dead person; it rendered one temporarily unclean. Since Samaritans knew that some (perhaps many) Jews considered them unclean (“dirty”), it is understandable that they were likely to return the demeaning favor.

**Verse 10.** Perhaps it was as he listened to the embittered woman respond to his request for water that Jesus recognized why God had required that he travel through Samaria (verse 4). To speak to this woman was why he’d taken this route through the interior of Samaria. Despite being tired and thirsty, Jesus did not respond to her in kind. His response was pointed yet gracious. It was as if he said to her, “You shouldn’t be so quick to dismiss others. You may miss out on a real gift. It may just be that I have something to offer to you that you desire: Living water.”

“God’s gift” likely refers to the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:14-17; 10:45; 11:17), as does “living water” (John 7:38-39). Then again, “living water” can be a reference to God (Jeremiah 2:13).

That said, at a more literal level (which is apparently how the Samaritan woman initially understood Jesus), “living water” meant “moving water” or “running water” (as in a river or from a spring). It contrasted with stagnant water that didn’t flow (as in a cistern or a small pond).

**Verse 11.** It would be easy to imagine the woman studying Jesus for a long moment, trying to decide if he was toying with her or if she should dare to take him seriously. His words were gentle and gracious, but she decided to stick with a literal meaning of his “living” or “flowing” water. “You don’t [even] have a bucket. In case you don’t know, Jacob’s well is deep. From where exactly do you plan to get your living water? Oh, and are you now making fun of our cistern, asking me to give you a drink from our lowly, stagnant cistern when all the while you have access to some almighty spring water?”

**Verse 12.** Again, one can imagine Jesus quietly refusing to be baited by the woman’s scornful words, permitting her to give voice to her long pent-up frustrations. “You don’t really think that you—you, who don’t even have a bucket!—are better than Jacob of old, do you? Yes, Jacob! Jacob dug this well himself, you know! And he gave it to us—to us, his Samaritan children, not to you Jews! And he was perfectly fine drinking this stagnant water, as were his children and his children’s children. Even his herds of animals drank this stagnant cistern water without a complaint. What do you and your spring-fed water have to say to that?”

At this point, it may be helpful to learn that the word for “well” in verse 6 is not the same

word used for “well” in verse 11. The words can be used as synonyms; but “well” in verse 6 can refer to a “spring” while “well” in verse 11 can refer to a “cistern.” My emotionally imagined paraphrase of the woman’s response in verses 11-12 permits her to take offense at yet one more Jew casting aspersions on all things Samaritan.

**Verse 13.** Replied Jesus, “Forgive me. I did not mean to offend. I stopped here because I am thirsty. Jacob’s well water will suit me just fine. But, as you’ve rightly pointed out, I have no bucket. And, no, I have no problem drinking from a Samaritan cup. But as you know all too well (or you wouldn’t be here), Jacob’s water doesn’t keep you or anyone else magically hydrated. Drink it as you do any water you may draw anywhere, and you will get thirsty again.”

**Verse 14.** Noting that the woman was still listening, Jesus continued. “You asked me about Jacob. Jacob was a great man; blessed be his memory! But I do have access to water that, if you drink it, will quench your thirst forever.” Seeing the woman’s eyes start to narrow and her lips constrict, Jesus raised a hand and said, “I’m not speaking of the water that our bodies need, which we’ll always need. I’m speaking of the water that our spirits need. I can provide you water that will satisfy you. It will become in you “a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life.”

**Verses 15-26.** Something about Jesus’ words, or perhaps it was his demeanor, permitted the woman to drop her defenses enough to

risk engaging him in a real conversation that began addressing matters of the Spirit. She acknowledged she had need of such water (verse 15). Jesus’ insightful and thoughtful responses convinced her even further that maybe there was something to what he was saying after all (verses 16-19). To her surprise, he declared that true worship of God was more than her people or his had yet known (verse 20-24). She confessed that she and her people believed that Messiah would one day reveal such things (verse 25). Said Jesus, “I am” (verse 26).

**Verses 27-42.** Jesus’ disciples then returned with food only to discover Jesus no longer seemed hungry. He was, however, happy (verses 27, 31-38). Meanwhile, the woman hurried back to her village, bearing witness to the special conversation she had just had with Jesus (verse 28).

Intrigued, many from the village accompanied her back to Jacob’s well (verses 29-30), so taken by the woman’s testimony that they had become convinced as well (verse 39). Others, wanting to hear more, invited him to stay with them a couple of days, which he did (verse 40). The conversations Jesus had with them convinced them, too; and they became devout believers (verses 41-42).

## Reflect

### *Ahead of Time*

If you have the *Adult Bible Studies* DVD, preview the segment related to this lesson, and arrange to show it during class.

Carefully read the corresponding lesson in the student book, and highlight statements and questions you can use during your class discussion.

### *During Class*

Begin class with prayer. Consider using the following: *God of plenty and abundance, you offer us gifts of yourself that we are slow to recognize and somehow even slower to appreciate. Do not permit our indifference to your goodness frustrate your generosity. By your loving words and lavish gifts, dismantle the façades we hide behind, breach our protective defenses, and fill us with an insatiable desire for your eternal goodness; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

If you have the *Adult Bible Studies* DVD, show the segment related to this lesson.

Note that this is the first of five lessons in Unit 2, all of which are based on readings from the Gospel of John. In each reading, you will meet up with Jesus, and you will address matters related to water.

Ask a class member to read aloud the Purpose Statement for today's lesson. Ask: *Can you recall a recent lesson in which Jesus spoke of thirst? (Lesson 4 was based on Matthew 5:6, the beatitude that speaks of hungering and thirsting for righteousness.)*

Invite a class member to read aloud John 4:4-6.

If your classroom has a large map of first-century Palestine, take time to point out the location of Samaria, Sychar, Jacob's Well, and Mount Gerizim. If not, a nice map can be downloaded for free from [loc.gov/item/2009579463/](http://loc.gov/item/2009579463/), printed, and copied for distribution.

If class members have an interest in knowing more about Jacob's well, a helpful article

is available at [earlychurchhistory.org/martyrs/jacobs-well-st-philoumenous/](http://earlychurchhistory.org/martyrs/jacobs-well-st-philoumenous/).

Say: *Halfway through his journey from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, Jesus stopped in a village in Samaria because he was tired and thirsty. Ask: When have you been away from home, perhaps on a hike, become tired and thirsty, and not had access to water? What did you do?*

Say: *The student book writer draws attention to the fact that most of our earth's water is not drinkable. Ask: Were you aware of this fact? Does this fact make you nervous? Why or why not?*

Say: *Jesus stopped at a well because he was thirsty and hoped to get a drink of water. This is the only account in the New Testament involving a well.*

Ask: *Can you think of any Old Testament stories involving a well or a cistern? What happened at the well or cistern? (Abraham's servant found a wife for Isaac [Genesis 24:10-58]; Jacob found a wife [Genesis 29:1-30]; Joseph was thrown into a cistern by his brothers before being sold into Egyptian bondage [Genesis 37:17-28]; Moses befriended the daughters of a Midianite priest and one of the daughters became his wife [Exodus 2:15-21]; Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern by officials of the king [Jeremiah 38:13]; as well as many others)*

Invite a class member to read aloud John 4:7-10. Ask: *Given the enmity between Jews and Samaritans that had festered since the Judahites' return from Babylonian exile, why*



*do you think Jesus and his disciples took a route from Judea to Galilee that led them through Samaria? (Other routes were available, but this route was the shortest; Jesus believed he “had” to go through Samaria [verse 4].)*

Say: *In verse 10, when conversing with the Samaritan woman, Jesus referred to “living water,” which had a literal meaning and a metaphorical meaning. Ask: What was the literal meaning of “living water?” (water that was moving or flowing, as in a stream or river, rather than water that was stagnant, as in a cistern or pond)*

*What was the metaphorical meaning of “living water?” (The student book writer says Jesus was referring to himself; Jeremiah 2:13 suggests God; John said it referred to the Holy Spirit.)*

Ask the first question at the end of “Nor Any Drop to Drink” in the student book, and invite class members to respond.

Allow a few minutes for class members to read “Nor Any Drop to Drink.” Ask: *When have you (or someone you know) tried to quench your/their thirst with information? When have you (or someone you know) tried to quench your/their thirst for success with notoriety, wealth, or power?*

Ask the third question at the end of “Nor Any Drop to Drink,” and invite class members to respond.

Say: *The Samaritan woman’s distrust of Jews blinded her to Jesus’ identity and the goodness of the gift he held out to her. Invite*

class members to meditate silently for about 60 seconds on the following question: *What is keeping you from responding more fully to Jesus when he draws near?*

Ask a class member to read aloud John 4:11-14. Ask: *What do you think was going through the Samaritan woman’s mind as she responded to Jesus’ mention of “living water”? Was she angry, incredulous, dismissive, indifferent? Explain.*

Read aloud the commentary on verses 11-12, which contains an imaginative paraphrase of the woman’s response. Ask: *What do you think?*

Say: *Look back at Jesus’ response in verses 13-14. Ask: What is your response to Jesus’ words? Are you intrigued, interested, indifferent, put off?*

Read aloud the commentary on verses 13-14, which contains another imaginative paraphrase, this time of Jesus’ response to the Samaritan woman. Ask: *What are your thoughts about Jesus’ response?*

Point out that the student book writer boils down Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman to one of compassion. Give class members a few minutes to read “Water for the World” in the student book. Ask: *What are your thoughts about the student book writer’s plea to concern ourselves with clean drinking water?*

*Before we dismiss the issue as one that is too large for us to affect meaningfully, much less solve, what are some things we could do as individuals or as a class to become more*

*informed about and possibly even to address the matter of clean drinking water? (Pray; read news reports; fund a local, national, or international agency that creates or provides clean drinking water; write lawmakers; tour a local dam; conserve water; become involved with an organization such as Healing Waters International; or invite a local water department official to speak on issues involved in securing and providing clean drinking water to residents.)*

Ask: *What are other ways that we, as individuals or as a class, can share the compassion*

*of Jesus with persons who need the “living water” that he shares freely?*

Tell class members that the next lesson, from John 5, will address Jesus' healing of an invalid at the Bethesda pool in Jerusalem.

Conclude class by asking class members to pray aloud with you the prayer at the end of the lesson in the student book: **Lord Jesus, Living Water, remind us of our thirst for you. Meet us where we are, and offer us your life-giving presence and Spirit. Have compassion on us, and help us have compassion for others so that all the world will know your love and providence; in your name we pray. Amen.**