

# Deeper Dive

## John 4:5-42: Living Water for Wounded Lives

### 1. Why John puts this story here

John 4 is not just “the next story” after Nicodemus. John has arranged these two encounters to interpret each other.

In John 3, a respected Jewish male leader comes **at night** with theological categories, caution, and status. In John 4, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman **at noon** in public, across ethnic, religious, and gender boundaries. Many scholars read the two scenes as an intentional pair: insider/outsider, night/noon, private/public, confusion/testimony. Mary Margaret Pazdan famously described Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman as contrasting models of discipleship, and more recent work still sees John 3-4 as a deliberately arranged comparison.

Week 2 is not simply “another encounter.” It is John showing what happens when the life Jesus offers begins to overflow.

### 2. Jewish-Samaritan history in the background

To modern readers, “Samaritan” can sound like merely a geographic label. In the first century, it carried a long, painful history.

The Samaritans claimed to be true Israel, rooted in the northern tribes and faithful to the Torah. Jews, especially in later polemical traditions, often viewed them as compromised, schismatic, or ethnically mixed. One of the clearest fault lines was **the proper place of worship**. Jews insisted that God had chosen Jerusalem; Samaritans insisted that God had chosen **Mount Gerizim**, near Shechem. Samaritans built a temple there, and though it was destroyed by John Hyrcanus in the late second century BCE, Gerizim remained the center of Samaritan identity and worship.

That is why John 4:20 is not a random theological rabbit trail. When the woman asks about “this mountain” versus Jerusalem, she is asking one of the oldest and sharpest religious questions dividing Jews and Samaritans. Jesus is stepping into a centuries-old conflict, not a side issue.

### 3. “He had to go through Samaria” ... more than geography?

John says Jesus “had to” go through Samaria. On one level, that can simply describe route logic. On another level, many interpreters hear a Johannine note of divine necessity: Jesus is

not merely taking a shortcut; he is moving according to the Father's mission. This fits John's Gospel, where Jesus repeatedly acts according to heavenly purpose rather than human convenience.

Nicodemus came to Jesus, but here Jesus goes looking for her.

## 4. Why the noon visit matters, and why we should be careful

John notes that it was "about the sixth hour," usually taken as **noon**. Many preachers and commentators have assumed that her noon visit proves she was an outcast avoiding the other women of the village. That reading is possible, and it has intuitive force: drawing water was hard work, and cooler hours would normally be preferable.

But scholars have become more cautious here. The text itself never explicitly says she came at noon because she was ashamed, and recent interpreters warn against overconfident reconstructions that turn her into a moral stereotype. The newer scholarly discussion stresses that while noon may suggest social strain or unusual circumstances, we should not build too much on a claim John never directly states.

So the best way to handle it is:

- **Yes**, noon is narratively significant.
- **Yes**, it likely heightens the sense of exposure, heat, and vulnerability.
- **No**, it does not require us to preach the woman as a caricature of shame.

That is a much stronger and more careful reading.

## 5. The "five husbands": what likely is going on?

This is one of the most debated details in the passage.

### The traditional literal reading

The most common reading is that Jesus reveals her actual relational history: five previous husbands, and the man she is with now is not her husband. That would at minimum signal instability, vulnerability, and social complexity. But even here, modern scholars caution against assuming sexual immorality is the only or primary point. In the ancient world, women were often economically dependent on men, and repeated marriages could also reflect widowhood, abandonment, or being repeatedly cast aside.

### The symbolic/allegorical reading

Some interpreters have connected the “five husbands” to 2 Kings 17 and the five foreign groups associated with Samaria after the Assyrian conquest. This reading treats the woman as a symbolic embodiment of Samaritan religious history. But James McGrath and others warn that this can flatten her into allegory and miss the very personal, human drama of the story.

## **Best synthesis**

The safest, strongest conclusion is this: Jesus truly knows her life, and he names it truthfully, but John does not present this as a public shaming scene. He presents it as a moment of revelatory grace. Jesus exposes her to heal her, not to condemn her.

## **6. First-century norms: why this conversation is so surprising**

Several social conventions make the scene startling:

- Jesus is a Jewish man speaking to a Samaritan woman.
- The conversation happens in public.
- The subject matter becomes intensely personal and theological.
- His disciples are shocked enough that John specifically mentions their surprise.

The point is not that Jesus is careless with propriety. The point is that the mission of Jesus crosses the kinds of boundaries people use to decide who is “in,” who is “clean,” and who is worth speaking to.

That is one reason this story matters so much for discipleship. Jesus is not merely offering private spirituality. He is redrawing the map of belonging.

## **7. The worship conversation: “this mountain” or Jerusalem?**

When the woman asks about worship, she is not necessarily dodging conviction. She may be moving to the deepest religious issue she knows: *Where can someone like me actually meet God?* Jesus’ answer is remarkable because he does two things at once.

### **First: he affirms salvation history**

“You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” Jesus does not flatten Jewish and Samaritan claims into a vague “everybody’s basically right.” He locates God’s saving purpose within Israel’s story.

### **Second: he relativizes sacred geography**

“A time is coming and has now come” when worship will be neither on Gerizim nor in Jerusalem, but “in spirit and truth.” In other words, Jesus does not say place no longer matters because truth no longer matters. He says place is no longer ultimate because **he** is bringing the reality toward which the holy places pointed.

That fits John’s Gospel more broadly. In John, Jesus repeatedly replaces or fulfills sacred institutions: temple, feast, manna, purification water, and more. So here, too, worship is being relocated around Jesus and the life of the Spirit rather than a sacred mountain.

## 8. “In spirit and truth”, what does that mean?

This phrase is often reduced to “sincerely and biblically,” but in John it is deeper than that.

### “Spirit”

At minimum, this points to worship animated by the Spirit of God rather than tied to physical site. It also connects naturally with John 3: new birth by the Spirit leads to new worship in the Spirit.

### “Truth”

In John, “truth” is not merely correct propositions. Truth is often tied to **ultimate reality disclosed in Jesus**. John Mark Hicks makes this point well: in John, truth is not simply “right information,” but the reality to which earlier shadows pointed. That fits John 1:17, where grace and truth come through Jesus Christ.

So “worship in spirit and truth” means something like:

- worship enlivened by God’s Spirit,
- centered on the reality revealed in Jesus,
- freed from dependence on sacred geography and ritual boundary markers.

The woman’s real question is not just “Which mountain?” but “Where do I belong?” Jesus answers by offering not a place, but a life.

## 9. The language of “living water”

The Greek phrase is **hydōr zōn**, literally “living water.” In ordinary Greek usage, it can mean fresh, flowing water, as opposed to stagnant stored water. That surface meaning matters, because Jesus begins with ordinary well-water imagery and then deepens it into spiritual reality.

John loves this kind of double-layered conversation:

- Nicodemus hears physical birth; Jesus means birth from above.
- The woman hears running water; Jesus means eternal life and the Spirit.

## 10. Old Testament intertexts behind “living water”

This is one of the richest biblical threads in the passage.

### **Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13**

God is called “the fountain of living waters,” and Israel is rebuked for forsaking him and digging broken cisterns that cannot hold water. That background makes Jesus’ offer astonishing: he is offering what the prophets said belonged to God himself.

### **Isaiah 12:3 and 55:1**

Isaiah links salvation with drawing water joyfully and invites the thirsty to come without money and drink. John 4 sounds very much like Isaiah’s promise of eschatological satisfaction by divine gift.

### **Ezekiel 47 and Zechariah 14:8**

These prophetic visions imagine life-giving waters flowing out in the age of restoration. Zechariah in particular speaks of “living waters” flowing out in the day of the Lord. John’s readers would likely hear Jesus’ offer as belonging to that restoration hope.

### **John 7:37-39**

John later interprets Jesus’ water language explicitly in terms of the Spirit. That makes it legitimate to read John 4’s “living water” as anticipating the Spirit-borne life Jesus gives.

So the phrase is not merely “Jesus satisfies.” It is also: the promised water of God’s end-time renewal is arriving in Jesus.

## 11. Well-scenes and betrothal echoes

A lot of literary scholars observe that John 4 resembles Old Testament “meeting at the well” scenes: Rebekah, Rachel, Zipporah, and others. In biblical narrative, wells are often places of encounter, covenantal turning points, and family formation. John seems to echo that pattern while transforming it.

That matters because John 3 already called Jesus the **bridegroom** through John the Baptist’s language. Then John 4 gives a woman-at-the-well story that looks like a betrothal scene, but instead of romantic union, Jesus offers covenant life and creates a witnessing community.

In other words, this is not a romance scene. It is a new-creation, covenant-renewal scene.

## 12. The woman as witness

One of the most beautiful features of the story is how quickly she becomes a witness.

She does not say, “I fully understand everything.” She says, “Come and see.” Her testimony is not polished, but it is powerful. And John says many Samaritans believed first because of her word, and then because they heard Jesus for themselves. That movement (testimony leading to encounter) is deeply Johannine.

This is where Michael Gorman’s participationist instincts fit especially well. Gorman regularly emphasizes that salvation is not only something received but a life entered into, a participation in God’s mission. John 4 gives you a narrative version of that: living water becomes public witness. The life Jesus gives becomes a life that overflows.

## **13. N. T. Wright-style synthesis**

John 4 is not merely about a morally messy woman getting a private spiritual pick-me-up. It is about Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, arriving at the fractured borderlines of Israel’s story and announcing that the long-promised renewal is here. New creation begins to break out in the life of a thirsty Samaritan woman, and that new life immediately turns outward in witness.

## **14. A few takeaways for deeper reflection**

### **1. Don’t flatten the woman into a stereotype**

The text gives us enough to know she has a complex and painful history. It does **not** give us permission to preach her as a cartoon of sexual shame.

### **2. The worship question is not a dodge**

It is probably the deepest religious question she knows: where can someone like me meet God? Jesus answers it by relocating worship around himself and the Spirit

### **3. “Living water” is loaded with restoration imagery**

Jeremiah, Isaiah, Zechariah, and John 7 all stand behind this phrase. Jesus is offering not merely comfort, but eschatological life.

### **4. The story moves from thirst to witness**

The woman leaves the jar because the old organizing center of her thirst has been displaced. That is not sentimental detail; it is embodied theology.