

She Left Her Jar

John 4:1-17

September 26, 2021

The radio talk show host and author, Dr. Laura Schlessinger, wrote a book entitled: “Ten Stupid Things Women Do To Mess Up Their Lives.” She also wrote a book entitled: “Ten Stupid Things Men Do To Mess Up Their Lives.” These titles suggest that regardless of gender people do stupid things and mess up their lives.

Some people’s lives are so messed up that they cannot put their lives back together by themselves. They need a divine intervention. There was such a woman in a town called Sychar in the region of Samaria.

This story is rather familiar to most of us. We have heard many sermons, and have had Bible studies on this passage. So, when we hear the phrase “a woman at the well” a certain image of a woman comes to mind, perhaps a woman with a questionable reputation. We assume that we know the meaning of this story. A sinful woman met Jesus and her life was forever changed.

While this meaning is absolutely correct, we can miss a lot if we do not pay attention to details, especially to the seemingly unimportant details. Scholars call them “narrative aside.” These are the words inserted by the author without any explanation.

For example, verse 4 of our passage states, “He had to go through Samaria.” It doesn’t say, “He went through Samaria.” It says, “He **had to** go through Samaria.” Why did he have to? The author does not explain.

The Jews and the Samaritans did not get along. There was a long history for their animosity but we will talk about that some other time.

Their hostility toward each other was so severe that if a Jew needed to go to Galilee from Judea, or vice versa, the shortest way to go would be through the region of Samaria. But instead on going through Samaria, he would detour to the Jordan valley about 20 miles to the East, and go through the Jordan Valley, and come back 20 miles to the West. In other word, they would walk 40 extra miles just to avoid the region of Samaria. That would be 3 or 4 extra days of walking.

But our passage verse 4 states, “Jesus had to go through Samaria.” Why did he have to go through there? Was he on a tight schedule? If he were, for what?

According to the story, nothing indicates that Jesus was in hurry. In fact, Jesus spent two extra days in Samaria.

So, why did he have to go through Samaria? If time were not the factor, what was it? Was it related to Jesus' mission? Was the author hinting us that the event which took place in Samaria was something Jesus had to do? What did the author want us to know when he said, "Jesus had to go through Samaria?"

Then there is another seemingly unimportant statement. That is in verse 8. Let's start from verse 7, "A Samaritan woman came to the well and Jesus asked her, 'Give me a drink.'" Then in verse 8, "His disciples had gone to the city to buy food." Now verse 8 has nothing to do with the woman, nor with the water. So why did the author put it there?

Is the author trying to say that Jesus asked this woman for water because there was no one else to get the water for him? Or is there a connection between the drink and the food that the disciples went to get? Water and food are elements that bring satisfaction and sustain life.

When the disciples came back, they brought him food. They said to him, "Rabbi, please eat." And Jesus said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about...My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."¹ In other words, what gives Jesus satisfaction, what sustains him and his ministry, what adds to his life and his purpose, is to do the will of his Father and to complete his work.

Then Jesus said, "Do not say the harvest is four months away...Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting."² He was literally saying that the work of saving the Samaritans was his food and his drink. That was what gave him satisfaction. That is what sustained his life and his purpose. Saving the lost was what gave strength and purpose to his life, just like food and drink would to the body. This is why the author said Jesus had to go through Samaria. It was to save the Samaritans.

Then there is another "narrative aside." That is verse 28. It states, "The woman left her water jar and went back to the city." The woman left her jar. You may say, "So what? What is a big deal about the jar?" The author could have said, "The woman went back to the city," but instead he put this seemingly unimportant

¹ John 4:31-32.

² John 4:35

phrase, “She Left Her Jar.”³ Why does the author want us to know that she left her jar? What is the significance? What does the water jar represent and what does it mean to leave it at the feet of Jesus?

As we know she was the woman who had five husbands. We don’t know what happened in her marriages that caused her to go through five different husbands. Perhaps she was divorced five times. Maybe she outlived all five. We don’t know for sure but for whatever reason, the New Testament scholars traditionally have interpreted that she, herself, had divorced all of her husbands. And the man she was living with now was not her husband. With this understanding, the scholars had treated her as if she was an immoral, promiscuous, and unclean person. Maybe she was such a person but then, maybe she was not. We don’t know for sure.

According to the Law of Moses, only men could divorce women. Women could not divorce men. So, in this woman’s case, she wasn’t the one who had divorced five times. Instead, she was put away five times by five different men. We don’t know the reasons. According to the Rabbinic interpretation of the divorce law, a man could divorce his wife with any just cause, which could be anything from burning the bread to lack of beauty. Maybe she wasn’t a good cook. Maybe she didn’t have the beauty men desired. At the time of Jesus, the Samaritans were following the Mosaic Law.⁴ So most likely she was not the one who divorced her husbands. Her husbands divorced her.

Five different men found her lacking, unsuitable, unlovely, unfit for their desire, and they simply got rid of her by giving her a Bill of Divorce. What this means is that she was not an immoral person. Instead, she was the victim of an oppressive and male chauvinistic society. Can you imagine that being rejected once is hard enough, but five consecutive times by five different men? No wonder she didn’t want to go through another marriage ceremony.

One thing we must realize is that in Jesus’ days, it was very difficult for a woman to make a living by herself. The Mosaic Law described orphans and widows as the most vulnerable people in the society. A divorced woman was no different. In those days, a woman needed to be with a man in order to survive. It was sad enough that she was rejected by one husband, let alone five. It was even worse for society to ignore her pain and dejection. I can almost sense that she had a burning desire to be accepted by someone just the way she was.

³ John 4:28.

⁴ [Brindle: The Origin and History of the Samaritans \(gordon.edu\)](http://www.gordon.edu/brindle/)

This woman had a thirst that no water could quench. She had a desire to be accepted by someone just the way she was. After a couple of failures in her marriage, she probably tried very hard to change. Maybe there were some things that she could not change. What was really difficult for her was the fact that no one understood her. No one cared for her. Everyone avoided her, to the point that she came to the well when no one else would be there.

But when then she met Jesus, and for the first time, she felt respected. She felt accepted. He did not avoid her, rather he approached her, knowing full well of her past and he did not put her down. In verse 21, he addressed her as “woman.” It is not clear what that means in English, but in Greek it means, “my lady,” or “madam.” The Greek word is “*gune*.” It is the most respectful way to address a woman.

When Jesus addressed his mother, he used this term, “*gune*.” In Jesus’ eyes, the woman at the well was a woman of worth, and that is exactly how Jesus treated her. What captured her heart was that she sensed that he had a genuine respect for her even with the knowledge of her background and her numerous failures. Even when all others rejected her and were unwilling to recognize her worthiness Jesus recognized her worthiness.

The most significant moment happened after that. Jesus revealed his true identity to her. He told her that he was the Messiah. This woman was the first person to know that Jesus was the Messiah. Immediately she realized that the Messiah himself saw her as a woman of great worth. The Messiah himself called her “Gune!” Even when she did not recognize her own worth, he did and called her Gune! That changed her life forever.

The water jar represented her endless effort to quench the thirst she had all her life. She wanted to be accepted, valued, honored, and cherished. She had that endless and unquenchable desire. All her effort gave a temporary satisfaction, one man after another, but always ended with disappointment and pain. After meeting Jesus she no longer needed that. She no longer needed the jar. She knew she was valued, accepted, respected, and cherished by none other than the Messiah himself. She no longer needed the jar. She left it at the feet of Jesus.

But that is not the end of the story. She ran back to her town and told everyone what happened and whom she met. There was true excitement in her testimony. She was not the same person they knew. Something was very different about her. She had energy that they had never seen in her before. She was not

shameful any more. She was not hiding any more. There is urgency in her plea to come out and see the man she met. As a result, the many people in Sychar came out to see Jesus and they also believed in Christ.

Now they begged Jesus to stay with them. So, he stayed with them for two more days, preaching and teaching. At the end of that visit, they said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said, now we have heard him for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”⁵

You see, you cannot evangelize and tell the story of God’s salvation until you first believe the story yourself. You cannot convince other people unless you yourself are convinced. This woman at the well stirred up the entire town because her life, her heart, her mind, her everything was absolutely stirred up by Jesus.

The question is “Are you stirred up by Jesus?” God himself calls that you are worthy of his love. You are worthy of his blessings. Do you see yourself as worthy of his love and his blessings? You bet you are.

This is what the Bible says about you:

You are an heir of God and co-heir with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

You are a holy priest (1 Peter 2:5) and God’s treasured possession (Exodus 19:5).

You are destined for “praise, fame, and honor, and you will be a holy people to the Lord your God (Deut. 26:19).

That’s who you are. Let that knowledge stir up your heart! Now, with that knowledge, let us live each and every day with confidence as children of God.

⁵ John 4:42.