

John 4 & Psalm 23

Living Water and the Shepherd's Rod and Staff

Scripture Readings

“And he must needs go through Samaria... Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well.” — John 4:4–6

“God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” — John 4:24

“Jehovah is my shepherd; I shall not want... Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” — Psalm 23

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” — John 10:11

“Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... with his stripes we are healed.” — Isaiah 53:4–6

A Divine Appointment

The opening words of this chapter carry a weight that is easy to pass over — “he must needs go through Samaria.” The Lord Jesus did not drift through Samaria by accident. The Father was sending Him there, and He went there for one soul. Throughout His life on earth He did nothing except what the Father directed, for He was here in full subjection as a man — though He was God, eternal. Wearied with His journey, He sat upon the well. He had already been rejected by His own people, for He came unto His own and His own received Him not. And now, here in a stranger's place, He rested.

Those of Samaria were no pure people. They were a mixture of Jew and Gentile who had added the worship of Jehovah to their own idolatry. And yet the Lord was not bound by the Jewish prejudice, nor by the law. He was the Saviour of the world, and He had come to bring souls into that happiness which only comes when a heart is set free.

It was about the sixth hour — noon. That was not the ordinary time for a woman to draw water. The other women would have come in the cool of the morning. But this woman had reason to avoid them. She was a sinner, and perhaps she had not been treated kindly at the well. She came alone, in the heat of the day. Yet was this not a divine appointment? Perhaps she had come at noon every day of her life. The Lord knew she would be there, and He went there for her.

Give Me to Drink

“Give me to drink.” What a humbling thing this was — the Lord of glory asking a sinful woman for a cup of water. But He knew exactly what He was doing. The disciples had gone away into the city, and it was just the Lord and this woman alone. That is often what a soul needs: to be alone in the presence of the Lord, away from every distraction, so that what is in the heart can come to the surface.

The woman was startled. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans; they hated one another. But the Lord was not bound by that hatred. He pressed further: “If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink, thou wouldst have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.” She was still thinking of the water in her water-pot, still reasoning on the natural level. She pointed to Jacob, to the depth of the well, to the cattle that had drunk from it. The Lord answered her plainly: “Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again. But the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water, springing up into everlasting life.” The Spirit of God is that well of water. It comes with salvation itself.

The Lord Addresses the Conscience

She wanted the water — if only so that she would not have to come back to this well and risk meeting the other women. But the Lord did not give her what she asked for, not yet. He always addresses Himself to the moral condition first. “Go, call thy husband.” He knew everything about her — the five husbands, and the man she was now living with who was not her husband. He reached her conscience by speaking the plain truth.

She tried to change the subject. “I perceive that thou art a prophet. Our fathers worshipped in this mountain...” She wanted to talk religion. The Lord would not be drawn into the controversy. He told her that the hour was coming when neither this mountain nor Jerusalem would be the appointed place; that the Father was seeking true worshippers who would worship Him in spirit and in truth. Worship can only flow from a heart that knows God as a Giver. God is a Giver, and it is that which draws our hearts out to Him — feeble as our worship is at best.

It was worth noting that Jacob’s well stood near the foot of Mount Gerizim, the Mount of Blessing. She wanted the blessing. But what she truly needed was to stand at Mount Ebal, the Mount of Cursing, and acknowledge that she was under a curse until she came to know the Lord.

‘I That Speak unto Thee Am He’

When she said, “I know that Messiah cometh... when he is come, he will tell us all things,” the Lord gave her the clearest word He had spoken to anyone: “I that speak unto thee am he.” Her conscience had been engaged. Salvation had been set before her. Now He revealed Himself. And it had its effect.

“The woman then left her water-pot.” Every day she had come with that water-pot to seek a little refreshment. Now it meant nothing to her. She had found Messiah, and she ran into the city saying to the very men she had been

hiding from, “Come, see a man who told me all things that ever I did. Is not this the Christ?” There was a total change. She had forgotten herself entirely — her guilt, her shame, her isolation. She was not thinking of herself at all. She was thinking of others.

You would have thought that those who knew her past would have dismissed her. But it was so real with her that they went out of the city and came to Him. And many believed — first for the saying of the woman, and then, far more, because of His own word. “Now we believe, not because of thy saying, for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.” He had been rejected by His own, but here in a despised place He was received and known.

The Water-Pot We Carry

We all have water-pots. Even as believers, there are things in which we seek satisfaction — something or someone in this world that we turn to for comfort. But the Lord would have us leave our water-pots as she did, and simply have Himself as the object before us. There is the story of an elderly sister who was near the end of her life, confined to her chair and with very little left of this world. Some came to visit her and wondered aloud how she could be content. She said simply, “I have Christ. What want I more?” That is what the Lord would bring each of us to — to be satisfied with Him alone, even while we attend to the duties and cares of daily life.

Psalm 23: The Rod and the Staff

Psalm 23 begins with the quiet confidence of one at rest in the Lord: green pastures, still waters, paths of righteousness. It is worth noting that to a sheep a green pasture is food — not a scenic backdrop, but nourishment. And the still waters are not merely peaceful; they are a safe place to drink. But the psalm is

not merely a list of blessings. Beginning at verse four it becomes a psalm of communion, the soul directly addressing the Shepherd.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” What does the valley of the shadow of death do to the natural man? It causes dread. It raises the spectre of mortality. And yet this soul walks through it without fear. Why? Not merely because of the green pastures left behind, but because of what follows: “for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

The rod, in Scripture, is frequently connected with righteous authority and correction — the rod of God’s anger against His enemies, the rod of discipline for a wayward child. And yet in this psalm, the rod is a comfort. In the light of the New Testament we read that no chastening at the time seems to be a matter of joy but of grief; yet afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness. That fruit is comfort — the comfort of knowing the Lord’s hand is in our circumstances, however unpleasant they may be. When I can see the Lord’s dealings with me and acknowledge them, then communion is restored and comfort comes.

The world has much to say about forgiveness — the great-hearted gesture of forgiving someone who has never repented. But that is not righteousness. The Lord requires repentance before there is forgiveness. And in the same way, there is no real comfort in difficult circumstances until something changes within me, my communion with the Lord is restored, and I can see His hand in what He has allowed.

And then there is the staff. The staff in Scripture speaks of support. Jacob at the end of his life “worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff” — a picture of acknowledged weakness and dependence. I may not see the staff in the thick of a trial. I may only feel the weight of the rod and the darkness of the valley. But the Apostle Paul is an example of one who seemed to pass through every awful

circumstance with a clear sense of the Lord's staff supporting him. He often looks back, even in his most dangerous moments, and points to how the Lord made a way of escape. How wonderful, in the midst of difficult circumstances, to have that sense of communion — to know that the Lord has not abandoned me, and that His support is there even when I cannot feel it.

David and the Measure of the Lord's Rod

David wrote these words having lived them. His life was full of trials — many of them of his own making. He did some grievous things. And as a result, the rod of the Lord was upon him. When the prophet Nathan came to David after his great sin, he did not come with a vague and open-ended threat. He told David precisely what the Lord had measured out as the consequence of what he had done. That precision was itself a comfort. David knew what was coming. He was not left in suspense, dreading some unknown retribution. And we read that even on his deathbed, when the last of those consequences fell, David could write these words and mean them — knowing that through it all the Lord had supported him and had never let him go from the fold.

This is very different from the experience of a believer who has wandered and whose communion with the Lord is broken. Under the Lord's chastening hand without a sense of His nearness is a hard place to be. The Lord sometimes needs to get our attention because we have been like that wandering sheep that did not want to be controlled. But His purpose is always restoration. He does not chasten capriciously, as an earthly father might in a moment of anger. He brings us into difficult circumstances because He wants us to read a psalm like this and say from our hearts, “Yes — I have felt that. I have known that. This is true.”

Brother Darby's footnote on the last verse of the psalm is striking: “only goodness and loving-kindness shall follow me all the days of my life.” Only. What a perspective to carry into the Lord's dealings with us. When He is

chastening, when He has called us back to Himself, it is only goodness and loving-kindness that follows us. May it be our portion to know the rod and the staff of our Good Shepherd, and to dwell in His house forever.

“Happy is the man that rejoiceth in Thee — Happy is the man whose heart has been set free.”