

Breaking Barriers

John 4



Have you ever had the chance to do some serious house renovating? One of the more 'funner' things in that dirty job is knocking down walls. You swing that sledge hammer and you watch those bricks come tumbling down.

In today's passage we're going to see Jesus knocking down some walls of his own. We'll see him tear down some barriers so that people who were once separated from God, can be in relationship with Him.

On the road again

Read 3:22 to see where Jesus is located at the start. Now read John 4:1-5:1. As you go, note the places where Jesus goes. You might have a map at the back of your bible. Look up the places if that would be helpful.

As we keep working our way through these early chapters of John's gospel, we see that Jesus keeps moving back and forth between Jerusalem (in the south) and Galilee (in the north). We've seen it already (2:12-13) but in today's passage we see that Jesus takes a breather at a half way point, the town of Sychar in Samaria.

The odd couple

a) Note down everything we know about the person that Jesus meets by the well (v7-18):

b) What's different about this woman compared to a person like Nicodemus who we learnt about last week in chapter 3?

In Jesus time, it was commonly thought that certain barriers stood in the way for people to properly know God and enjoy relationship with Him. There were those who were thought to enjoy the full riches of knowing the God of Israel (Nicodemus for instance), there were those who stood on the edge, and there were those that didn't stand a chance. When it comes to this sinful woman from Samaria, her barriers couldn't get much bigger.

Barrier 1: Samaritan

Samaria, the northern part of the nation of Israel was captured by the Assyrians in around 722BC. The King of Assyria deported large numbers of the Jews but also brought in all sorts of people from the Assyrian empire. You can read about it in 2 Kings 17:24. As a result of this intermingling of peoples, a 'mixed bag' of religion developed in the region, part Jewish, part whatever the newcomers brought with them. In time, a couple of features set the Samaritans apart from the

Jews 1) they based their faith on the first five books of the Scriptures - no other books in the Jewish Scriptures were used, and 2) they built their own temple on Mount Gerizim around 400BC. Over the centuries, a great deal of hostility arose between them and the Jews. This was not helped by the fact that the Jews burned their temple down in 128BC! Jews would have seen Samaritans as "political rebels", "racial half-breeds", and "religious mongrels".

Barrier 2: Woman

In Jesus' time, a common approach to women was that they were inferior to men. In lots of ways, they were seen as religious nobodies. We probably can see some of this attitude in the disciples in v27. At the time, there was even this shocking prayer that was spoken: "Blessed are you O Lord who has not made me a woman".

Barrier 3: Sinful life

Her race, religion and sex stood as barriers, but one final nail in the coffin is her behavior. This woman's whole way of life is a testament to her disregard for God's ways. She's had multiple husbands and she's not married to the man she currently lives with. You get the sense that her promiscuity led to her being shunned by her own people. Is this why she was on her own at the well in the heat of the day, instead of in the cool of the evening with the other women?

The barriers are certainly high, but let's keep reading to see what happens.

c) How would you describe Jesus' behaviour towards this woman?

Jesus' promise

d) As Jesus sits thirsty and tired by the well, what is the promise he gives to his woman? (v7-14).

e) The woman (understandably!) was a bit confused about what Jesus was saying, but what do you think this life giving water is? Also see John 7:37-39.

The Spirit of God is a big theme in John's gospel. In 1:33, John the Baptist says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. In 3:5, Jesus when speaking to Nicodemus, says that Spirit must bring cleansing and transformation in order for a person to be part of God's kingdom. In 3:34, John the Baptist says that Jesus will give the Spirit without measure. Now speaking to this Samaritan woman, Jesus is saying that he gives the Spirit. The Spirit gives life. The Spirit quenches our ultimate desire for God and eternal life with him.

Here in Jesus' words to this woman we get a wonderful picture of the Spirit. The Spirit's work quenches our thirst for God and gives true life. It's interesting that in the Old Testament it says:

My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. Jeremiah 2:13

It seems that when people refuse God, they'll try to drink from all sorts of other places. But like this woman's lifestyle, they will not be quenched. They will be left dry and broken. The only true spring of living water is Christ himself.

f) What sort of lifestyles do people pursue seeking meaning and satisfaction, yet are only dry and broken cisterns that they dig for themselves?

True worship

g) In the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, they get onto the topic of rival temples. What is Jesus' attitude to the location for true worship?

h) What sort of worship does God desire and why?

This is not the first time Jesus has devalued a specific place for worship. Remember 2:18-22. Jesus is showing that worship is not tied to a single, central sanctuary. Proper worship can take place only in and through Jesus – he is the true temple. 1:14, has a word so that it literally reads, "The Word became flesh and *pitched his tabernacle* amongst us'. The tabernacle was the temporary tent structure that was the precursor to the temple (you can read all about it in Exodus, particularly 33:7-11). It was the place where God met with Israel. So Jesus who came to earth is the very place where people meet with God. And Jesus is the one who gives us the Spirit of God. So as we receive Jesus, we are able to worship God in spirit and in truth.

i) From what John's gospel is saying about Jesus and worship, what would you say about this statement that we might hear sometimes in church circles: "we come here (into this building) to worship God".

Receiving the testimony

j) How would you describe the woman's reaction to Jesus and the also the reaction of the other Samaritans?

Notice how there is growing recognition of Jesus. Firstly, Jesus is simply a Jew (v9). Then Jesus is seen as a prophet (v19). Next the question is asked if he could be the Christ (v29). Finally there is recognition, that Jesus is the saviour of the world (v42). This really is a wonderful example of what is said in 3:19-21. So many people who are in the darkness do not want to come into the light (Jesus) because their evil deeds will be exposed. But these people do. They are open and they want the light. They discover light and life as they accept Jesus.

k) In coming to accept Jesus, what did this woman and the other Samaritans come to understand that Nicodemus didn't? (See 1:12; 3:16)

The Harvest

l) Given the context, what is Jesus referring to when he says, "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (v35) ?

As 1:11, and 3:19 says, there are many who are closed to Jesus. They will not receive him. But there are those who are ready. With these Samaritans from Sychar, the crop is indeed ripe for harvesting. This passage is obviously using agriculture language. There are some who sow in preparation, and those who reap and see the final result. The sowers could be all the teaching that comes from the Jews (see 4:22). It could include John the Baptist who was the last of the line of prophets preparing the people for Jesus. But the reapers are clearly the disciples who Jesus is sending out with the message about him.

m) What are the prejudices that the disciples may hold, that Jesus is removing?

n) When it comes to people around us, when might we think that there is no harvest to be had?

Share & Pray

1. Give thanks that Jesus gives life quenching water, the Spirit, to all those who believe in Jesus.
2. Give thanks that no barriers have to stand in the way of having relationship with God.
3. Pray that we would not be prejudiced towards others, thinking that God could not do something wonderful in their lives, coming to believe in Jesus.