

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TRUE WELL

*“There's a hole in my heart
That can only be filled by you.
And this hole in my heart
Can't be filled with the things I do.”*

-Extreme, “Hole Hearted”

She came alone, at noon, when the sun had reached its zenith. At least at that hour, she could avoid the whispers and stares of the other women of her village. Her own womanhood had long been turned into a commodity by the men around her — a thing not so much to be given away but taken from her piece by piece. And so she came to the well carrying far more than the weight of her water jars. Her back was bent by the weight of her shattered reputation, and the lingering hope that, like the empty jars she carried, someday, she too, could be filled. As time wore on, these hopes dried beneath the withering heat of the noonday sun. But this day was different. This time, when she reached the well, she met a stranger, a traveler from outside who makes a shocking request. The man simply asked: “Give me some water to drink,” and though she never got his name, this man would change her life forever.

THIRSTY BY DESIGN

This woman was surely accustomed to men making requests of her. But Jesus’ request for a drink would have been a clear violation of social conventions. First, she was a Samaritan. The Samaritans were regarded as a mix of native Israelites who were not deported by Assyria, as well as foreign colonists brought in from Babylon. They were outsiders, and even the things they touched (such as a water jar or drinking vessel) was regarded as unclean. Second, she was a woman. Not only were women regarded as socially inferior, some rabbis actually taught that women could lead a man to hell. Jesus crosses both of these boundaries in coming to Jacob’s well, situated in the town of Sychar. In fact, John actually tells us that Jesus “had to pass through Samaria” (John 4:4), a statement not merely of geographic necessity but also Jesus’ commitment to spiritual outsiders. The Samaritan woman appears to be quite familiar with these social boundaries, and seems astonished by Jesus’ simple request:

So the Samaritan woman said to him, "How can you – a Jew– ask me, a Samaritan woman, for water to drink?" ...

Jesus answered her, "If you had known the gift of God and who it is who said to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said to him, "you have no bucket and the well is deep; where then do you get this living water? Surely you're not greater than our ancestor Jacob, are you? For he gave us this well and drank from it himself, along with his sons and his livestock."

Jesus replied, "Everyone who drinks some of this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks some of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again, but the water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life." (John 4:9-14)

Like most people who encounter Jesus, the woman can't quite grasp Jesus' underlying meaning. She focuses instead on the surface. Archaeology tells us that the well was, indeed, roughly 100 feet deep. But Jesus, of course, is speaking of something deeper still. "The soul of man...hath in it a raging and inextinguishable thirst,"¹ wrote Henry Scougal. The Bible frequently uses "thirst" as an image for mankind's pursuit of God. "I thirst for God, for the living God," wrote one of Israel's songwriters. "When will I be able to go and appear in God's presence?" (Psalm 42:2).

The challenge, of course, is that desire gets away from us. We look for satisfaction from sources that can't fully satisfy. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God warns that his people "have rejected me, the fountain of life-giving water, and they have dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns which cannot even hold water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

Few thirsts have been as powerful as sexual desire. For most of western culture, sex has become the highest possible good, and the purest way of expressing one's true identity. Simon May, a professor from Yale University, surveys the cultural history of "love" and concludes:

"Human love...is widely tasked with achieving what once only divine love was thought capable of: to be our ultimate source of meaning and happiness, and of power over suffering and disappointment...To its immense cost, human love has usurped a role that only God's love used to play."²

Do you understand what he's saying? May is saying that we've turned sex into a kind of god, seeking the kind of satisfaction that we would ordinarily only find in religious devotion. Even Sigmund Freud believed that men and women give in to what he called an "oceanic urge," an unspoken desire to sink into a sense of oneness or eternity. More recently, the comedian Russell Brand admitted during an interview that "the kind of sexuality that I've always had is more about worship than any kind of domination."³ Brand is onto something basic: that our "thirst" for sex is about more than just bodies. It's about the mingling of souls — or, perhaps even the longing for a connection with something far, far outside of ourselves.

Centuries earlier, Blaise Pascal observed that every human heart contains an "infinite abyss," one that can never be fully satisfied with anything but God alone:

"What else does this craving...proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?...This he tries in vain to fill with

¹ Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. (United States: Start Publishing, 2012), 108.

² Simon May, *Love: A History*. (United States: Yale University Press, 2011),

³ "Joe Rogan Experience #1021—Russell Brand," YouTube, October 5, 2017, https://youtu.be/iZPH6r_ZDvM.

everything around him...though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled with...God himself.”⁴

This seems to be at the heart of what Jesus is saying, here. “Anyone who drinks some of this water will be thirsty again.” If you are not eternally satisfied in God, you will never be satisfied in anything else. It’s not clear whether the woman grasps this just yet. Her response remains in the literal realm, until Jesus does the unthinkable by pinpointing the source of her thirst:

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

He said to her, "Go call your husband and come back here." The woman replied, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "Right you are when you said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the man you are living with now is not your husband. This you said truthfully!" (John 4:15-18)

Jesus knows exactly what this woman has been through. Admittedly, the text isn’t as clear as we might prefer. Has this woman been guilty of some form of promiscuity, jumping from one lover’s bed to the next? That’s not impossible, though it’s equally plausible that this woman had been the victim of a culture where men could marry and divorce women with a kind of casual ease. She’d “been around the block,” as they say, and it could easily be that while she sought the protection of a man’s home, her current partner wasn’t willing to put a ring on the finger of a woman marked as “damaged goods.” That’s what makes Jesus’ conversation all the more striking. He crosses borders that run deeper than culture or tradition, and comes to a woman who had experienced a lifetime of pain and rejection — a lifetime of *thirst*. And though Jesus could quite easily call this woman’s choices into question, he chooses instead to say: *I want something better for you*. Jesus wants to offer her “living water,” a term rich in Israel’s storied tradition. Long ago the prophets had spoken of a day when water would flow from Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:8; Ezekiel 47:9). Jesus is the source of this “living water” — the Holy Spirit, who would fill and satisfy every heart that aches and thirsts for more.

CHOOSE YOUR TEMPLE WISELY

The woman, now shocked at having her past exposed, proves to be a master of deflection, choosing to pivot to the topic of religious tradition:

“The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you people say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not know. We worship what we know, because salvation is from the Jews. But a time is coming— and now is here— when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such people to be his worshipers. God is spirit, and the people who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:19-24)

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (New York; Penguin Books, 1966), 75.

The irony, of course, is that the woman is getting closer to Jesus' underlying meaning. "Thirst" and "worship" are deeply connected, you see. That's because every single one of us is a worshipper at heart.

In David Foster Wallace's celebrated novel *Infinite Jest*, one of his characters points out that the word "fanatic" shares a Latin root for "temple." He goes on to say: "Are we not all of us fanatics?...Attachments are of great seriousness. Choose your attachments carefully. Choose your temple of fanaticism with great care."⁵

"Choose your temple...with great care." The reason is simple: the things we pursue will only turn to pursue us. William B. Irvine, professor at Wright State University, explains:

"[P]ursuing pleasure...is like pursuing a wild beast: On being captured, it can turn on us and tear us to pieces. Or...intense pleasures...become our captors, meaning that the more pleasures a man captures, 'the more masters will he have to serve.'"⁶

Your "temple" — the thing you use to satisfy that soul-level thirst, will invariably take control of you. Irvine continues:

"We humans are unhappy in large part because we are insatiable; after working hard to get what we want, we routinely lose interest in the object of our desire. Rather than feeling satisfied, we feel a bit bored, and in response to this boredom, we go to form new, even grander desires."⁷

Thirst, therefore makes a reliable guide, but a cruel master. Our desires hint at a deeper longing, but the more we satisfy these longings through "broken cisterns," the more we'll find ourselves running on a hamster wheel of our own hedonism.

No one understood this better than St. Augustine. Roughly 400 years after Jesus, Augustine spent most of his life looking for his next sexual conquest. "The single desire that dominated my search for delight was simply to love and to be loved,"⁸ he admits. But he found himself trapped in what he called a "lunatic lust,"⁹ the ancient equivalent of sexual addiction. Augustine would escape this trap not by suppressing his desires, as some ancient teachers insisted. On the contrary; Augustine would seek escape by re-ordering his desires.

See, Augustine believed that there was a natural order to the human heart. The easiest way to understand this idea is to picture your heart like a big pyramid. You will never be happy, Augustine would tell you, until you place God at the very top of that pyramid. But if you don't place God at the apex of your heart, something else will take his place. If money is your greatest source of joy and satisfaction, you become a prisoner of greed. If it's sex, then you become a prisoner of lust, and so

⁵ David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, (London, England: Abacus.), 106-107.

⁶ William B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*. (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 2.2.2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.4.

on. The point is simple: that if you want to change your behavior, you have to change your desires. You have to choose a different temple, so-to-speak. You have to find a new source of endless comfort and security, and that source could only be God himself.

Initially, the Samaritan woman is tripping over the geographic particulars of the temple's location. The Jews and Samaritans both adhered to Deuteronomy 12:5, where God commanded the people of Israel "to seek the place the Lord [would] choose from among all the tribes to put his name." The trouble was, no one could agree on the exact spot where this would take place, leading to a debate as to the appropriate location for true worship. Jesus simplifies the issue entirely: that if you want to worship God, it's not a matter of geography. It's about worshipping him "in spirit and in truth" — that is, by coming to God as the true well, the true fountain of life and worship.

At this point, the woman's curiosity is giving way to belief. She probes Jesus with one final question:

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming...whenever he comes, he will tell us everything." Jesus said to her, "I, the one speaking to you, am he." (John 4:25)

In previous encounters with the Jews, Jesus had revealed his divine character through signs and symbolic declarations. Here, for the first time, he openly reveals himself as the Messiah, the promised king of the Jews. On the surface, it's nothing short of shocking that Jesus would reveal himself so boldly and so directly to a spiritual outsider. Look deeper, and it makes perfect sense. This woman had come to the well carrying a terrible burden. Jesus presents himself as the true Well, the source of true satisfaction and peace. If you or I have any hope of satisfying the "thirst" of our hearts, then we have to choose our temple with great care, indeed. Either we fall to our knees in worship, or we sacrifice ourselves on the altar of our own self-indulgence.

PAST BECOMES POTENTIAL

The woman sets down her water jars — perhaps out of sheer forgetfulness, or perhaps out of a symbolic sense that she found a Well far deeper and more satisfying than the one dug by her ancestors. More importantly, she becomes something of a "missionary," spreading the news of the Messiah's arrival. Jesus' disciples, on the other hand, were scandalized to find their teacher conversing with a Samaritan woman:

"Now at that very moment his disciples came back. They were shocked because he was speaking with a woman. However, no one said, "What do you want?" or "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar, went off into the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Surely he can't be the Messiah, can he?" So they left the town and began coming to him." (John 4:27-30)

One of the most painful realities of the Christian faith is this: that very often, you are far safer in the presence of Jesus than those who claim to follow him. Because it's far too easy to dredge up the dirt of someone's failures than to hope in their future. But where some can only see the past, grace sees *potential*. Jesus challenges his disciples in this way:

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about....My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work. Don't you say, 'There are four more months and then comes the harvest?' I tell you, look up and see that the fields are already white for harvest! The one who reaps receives pay and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that the one who sows and the one who reaps can rejoice together. For in this instance the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap what you did not work for; others have labored and you have entered into their labor." (John 4:31-38)

If you need to be “right” to be nourished, you will go hungry a long, long time. Jesus’ “food” is to do God’s will. Jesus wants his disciples to see this woman not through the same lens as every other person in their culture. Instead, he wants them to see her as loved and valued in him and worthy of the calling that she now carries out.

Few writers have captured the contrast between grace and pride more vividly than Flannery O’Connor. Her story “Revelation” takes place primarily in the waiting room of a doctor’s office. There, we meet Mrs. Turpin, who chatters at length about the faults and failings of the world’s layabouts who can’t understand the value of a hard day’s work. Foreigners are compared to pigs, though Mrs. Turpin is quick to insist that the pigs that she raises with her husband Claude are of a superior lot. The whole conversation is saturated by pet hates and false humility, all the way up to the point that Mrs. Turpin is unexpectedly struck in the face by a book thrown by a young lady named Mary Grace. Mary Grace had been trying to read, but disturbed by the nature and tone of the waiting room conversation. “Go back to hell where you came from you old warthog,” Mary Grace insists. And Mrs. Turpin is dumbstruck.

Mrs. Turpin had literally been struck in the face by Grace, but when she returns home she is struck by grace all the more. While standing outside by her pigpen, the evening sky is transformed into a scene from heaven itself:

“Mrs. Turpin stood there, her gaze fixed on the highway, all her muscles rigid...At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk....She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were tumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives,...and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claude, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.... They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.”

The gospel turns the world upside down. The outcasts, the white trash, the lunatics, and Samaritan women are all afforded pride of place, while the rest of us are lucky to be standing at the back of the line where our so-called virtues are burned away. Mind you, it’s not wholly clear that the Samaritan woman ever made a full-on profession of faith, but for the time being, at least, she became a witness to the arrival of the Messiah.

This is what it's like to "sow" the seeds of God's good news. And Jesus says that planting seeds can bring all the same joy as bringing a harvest. That's what we hope for, if we truly have tasted and seen the living water that flows from Christ himself. When our thirst is quenched neither by pleasure or pride, we take unique delight in seeing the transformation of others, in seeing God's love for those who seem so, so far away and are not brought to the front of the line — jumping and clapping and laughing for Jesus.

SET THIRST IN ORDER

St. Augustine rightly understood sin as a form of dis-ordered love. The solution, therefore, is to see our loves transformed and set right, and to slake our thirst only from the Well of Jesus and his gospel. Augustine's repeated prayer was taken from a line from the Song of Songs: "Set love in order in me." Augustine wanted God to realign his heart, away from his sexual conquests and toward God alone. The same can be true for us. One writer put it this way:

"Christians...believe that Jesus Christ came so that we might have life and have it more abundantly...Jesus Christ came so that our appetites might be reconfigured in some particular way, our desires lent a certain weight — a weight that will turn us from death and fit us for life."¹⁰

Are you struggling with greed? Pride? Lust? Jesus Christ can set thirst in order in you. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus," says the old hymn. "Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of this world grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace." The more we behold the person of Jesus Christ, the more we will find our satisfaction in him alone.

¹⁰ Paul J. Griffiths, "The Nature of Desire," *First Things*, December 2009, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/12/the-nature-of-desire>