

New Life

Last week we did an overview of John chapters 2-4, starting with a wedding at Cana in Galilee and ending with a life-giving word of Jesus after he had come back to Cana. And when we looked at what was inside those two “Cana Brackets”, we found life, life, life. We found the zoe, the everlasting life, of the Kingdom of God. But we had to skip over some major sections of chapters 3 and 4 to get through to both Cana One and Cana Two. Today I’d like to look at three stories from chapters 3 and 4 that help fill out the picture of the life that Jesus brings with Him.

The first involves a man Jesus calls “Israel’s Teacher”, Nicodemus, who had to have been one of the most respected of all the religious leaders in Judah. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling Council and a Pharisee. He was also in the process of becoming a believer - God was tugging on his heart, so he came to interview Jesus:

“Teacher,” he said, “we all know that God has sent You to teach us. Your miraculous signs are proof enough that God is with You.”

Jesus replied, “I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the Kingdom of God.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”

Jesus replied, “The truth is, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven. So don’t be surprised at My statement that you must be born again.” (3:2-7)

Born again, born again, born of water and the Spirit, new life from heaven, born again. This whole dialogue is filled with images of life, new life, the kind of life that enters the Kingdom of God.

And John doesn’t leave his meaning with any mystery. As Jesus continues to teach Israel’s teacher, explaining to him the mysteries of God’s Kingdom, explaining that He had been sent from God in heaven, He then makes this statement:

As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so I, the Son of Man, must be lifted up on a pole, so that everyone who believes in Me will have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. (3:14-17)

What was the bronze snake all about? The story is told in Numbers 21 during the Israelites’ wilderness wanderings. They had begun to complain against the LORD again, and were asking why Moses and their God had brought them out into the desert to die and complained that they hated the wretched manna that they were given every day and which was sustaining them through their pilgrimage to Canaan. As they complained, poisonous snakes began to bite them and people were starting to die from the poison. They realized quickly that it was their complaints against God that

had caused their troubles and so they owned it and asked Moses to pray for them. And God told Moses, in response to his prayers, to make a bronze snake and to set it up on a pole so that when people looked at this bronze snake they would live. Notice that the outcome is life and Jesus makes the comparison to emphasize that those who want life, eternal life, kingdom life, will see Jesus lifted up on a pole and will believe in Him.

Then He tells Nicodemus what's behind this offer of eternal life: the love of God. When your perspective on God changes, when you allow yourself to see that He is motivated by love, you are more ready to make that love your own, to put your trust in Jesus. And to emphasize that point, verse 17 tells us that God's purpose in sending His Son into the world was not to condemn the world, but to rescue it, to save it. Jewish history is full of examples in which God punished His people for their rebellious and defiant behaviour. They would be reminded of this with the image of the bronze snake on the pole and with the history of defeat and exile and, now, Roman occupation. They were used to God's discipline, but were not as receptive to, or expectant of, His love. Yet this is the way to life, Jesus tells them. Believe in the One you will see lifted up on a pole - on the cross - and you will not perish but have eternal life.

There's lots more we could say about this amazing conversation between Jesus and Israel's Teacher, Nicodemus, but let's just look at it through the lens of the Prologue. What did John say in the Prologue that is being illustrated in some way in John 3?

1. There is, as we've seen, a major emphasis on new life. In the Prologue, John wrote about people being reborn as children of God and here Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he must be born again, this time of the Spirit.
2. In all of Jesus' teaching of Nicodemus, there is an emphasis on belief. This is the clear need, the one response to Jesus that will be rewarded.
3. Jesus tells Nicodemus that He is unique in that He has come from heaven and will be going back to heaven. And in the Prologue, John makes very clear that Jesus has existed from the beginning, that He is Creator, that He has come into the world, that He is on a mission that will involve His own suffering.

Before we get to the wonderful story of the woman at the well in chapter 4, I want us to look at an often overlooked story that comes at the end of chapter 3. John is baptizing at the Jordan River and his own disciples come to him with a concern:

"Teacher, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you said was the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going over there instead of coming here to us." (John 3:26)

It's always hard to accept when you go from being a somebody, the one everyone wants to be with or to listen to, to being the person that almost everyone ignores. As I mentioned a while back, John had been "the guy", with bigger crowds coming to hear his revival preaching than ever followed Jesus, but now he was fading into the background. The "new guy" was rising to prominence and John's ministry, as successful and well-recognized as it had been, was now in decline. Listen to John's response to these disappointed disciples:

*“God in heaven appoints each person’ work. You yourselves know how plainly I told you that I am not the Messiah. I am here to prepare the way for Him - that is all. The bride will go where the bridegroom is. A bridegroom’s friend rejoices with him. I am the bridegroom’s friend and I am filled with joy at His success. He must become greater and greater and I must become less and less.
(3:27-30)*

The friend of the bridegroom was in charge of many aspects of the Jewish wedding in that day. He organized the wedding, sent out the invitations, he made sure the bride and groom got there on the day. But he had one special task that I think is a picture of what John was saying in these verses. His job was to make sure the bridal chamber was kept safe from any interference from outside. He was to go in and make sure all was ready and secure, that no false lover could enter the room, and then, when the bride arrived he waited there until the bridegroom knocked, and when he had let him in, with a joyful heart, he left the scene, he faded out of the picture. That’s why John the Baptist called himself the “friend of the bridegroom”. It was his time to fade out of the picture, rejoicing in the success of the bridegroom, rejoicing that the one who was greater than he had now begun His ministry. What a wonderful picture of the humility and grace that makes a prominent place for the Lord Jesus, even if it means taking a lesser place ourselves.

Then the Baptist went on to say this:

He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. I am of the earth, and my understanding is limited to the things of earth, but He has come from heaven. He tells what He has seen and heard, but few believe what He tells them. Those who believe Him discover that God is true, for He is sent by God. He speaks God’s words, for God’s Spirit is upon Him without measure or limit. The Father loves His Son, and He has given Him authority over everything. And all who believe in God’s Son have eternal life. (3:31-36)

Again, as in the case of the Nicodemus story we’ve just looked at, the reward is life, and the way to life is through Jesus, the man from heaven, the One who speaks God’s words and who carries the limitless presence of the Holy Spirit with Him. How do we gain this life that John speaks about? “All who believe in God’s Son have eternal life.” Here is John repeating the theme of life from Jesus through believing in Him. You see it everywhere in John, this persuasive call to believe, to put our confidence in this One, this Son of God named Jesus.

Okay, we race on to the story of the woman at the well and this is such a rich account - it is so full of meaning.

First, what happens to every woman in the Old Testament who is found at a well? Rebekah, Rachel, Zipporah - each of them becomes a bride, and the encounter at the well is key to that happening.

Second, what does this story tell us about what happens to social barriers in the Kingdom of God? Jesus breaks through them without hesitation, brushes them away - it seems - without resistance. Jews and Samaritans didn't have anything to do with each other. There was long-standing hatred and ill-will between the two. Men didn't talk in public with women, and many religious teachers of the day spoke out against a rabbi teaching a woman about their faith. Also, this woman was an outcast from among the women of her town and so was fetching water in the middle of the day, rather than in the cool hours of morning when the others came for water. The reason for her being an outcast becomes obvious as we read the story - she's been married five times and is now living with a man she's not married to.

This is a story about the walls Jesus is willing to break through in order to reach one person, one soul that is filled with heartache and discouragement. No one would expect Jesus to talk to a Samaritan woman of ill repute. His disciples were shocked when they returned from the village and saw their Master talking to her. There was no place on their grid for dealing with the world that allowed for this to be happening - and yet, it was happening.

Let's look at parts of the story:

Eventually He came to the Samaritan village of Sychar . . . Jacob's well was there and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noon. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water and Jesus said to her, "Please, give Me a drink." He was alone at the time because the disciples had gone into the village to buy food.

The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who I am, you would ask Me, and I would give you living water." (4:5-10)

The woman questions how Jesus could have better water than Jacob enjoyed, but Jesus persists:

People soon become thirsty again after drinking this water. But the water I give them takes away thirst altogether. It becomes a perpetual spring within them, giving them eternal life. (4:13,14)

Here it is again: the goal that Jesus sets before this woman and that John chooses to include in his gospel - in a story that none of the other gospel writers included - that goal is eternal life. This whole section of the gospel is brimming with the promise of this new kind of life, unending zoe.

So, why a woman at a well and all the examples that come from the Old Testament of women at a well that lead to weddings? Let's look at the section as a whole one more time.

- Jesus attends a wedding in Cana where He turns water into wine
- Jesus goes to Jerusalem and clears out the sellers and coin merchants in the Court of the Gentiles

- Jesus invites Israel's number 1 teacher of Jewish law to be born into new life, life in the Spirit.
- John the Baptist invites people to believe in Jesus who has the Spirit without limit, and so to receive eternal life.
- Jesus crosses at least three significant social and cultural walls to invite a woman of Samaria to experience a gift that is experienced like a perpetual spring within and leads to eternal life.

The pictures of wedding and wine are pictures of joy and of expectation of fullness of life. The religion of the day acted as a barrier to people experiencing that joy and that life, but Jesus makes it clear to the day's leading theologian that this new life is not only desirable - it's necessary ... and it's a rebirth that is accomplished by God's Spirit. Jesus invites Nicodemus into joy, John the Baptist tells his followers that Jesus has that joy, that fullness of life without measure or limit and then Jesus goes all the way to the opposite end of the social scale to offer a Samaritan woman of ill-repute that same joy and life.

The conversation with the woman continues as she first asks for the water that Jesus offered and then asks Him about worship. Notice the place of the Spirit in the new worship:

The time is coming and is already here when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for anyone who will worship Him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth. (4:23,24)

The woman then says that she knows that Messiah is coming - such an interesting comment - and she is confident that when he comes, he will explain it all to her and to her people. And Jesus gives her the wonderful news: "I am the Messiah!" The disciples arrive back, in utter amazement that Jesus is talking to this woman. She leaves her water pot right there and hurries back to town and invites the town to meet Jesus: "Come and meet a man who told me everything I ever did! Can this be the Messiah?"

Because of her testimony, the Samaritans of Sychar beg Jesus to stay with them, He does stay for two more days, and they believe in Him. Their testimony is found in verse 42: "He is indeed the Saviour of the world." Then Jesus returns to Cana and, from there, heals the son of the official from Capernaum and gives him life, *zoe*, which we ended with last week.

So, what can find from these passages that might make a difference in the way we walk with Jesus? What stands out about the things John puts an emphasis on, that we want to stand out in our lives?

1. I'll start by suggesting that, into a world of dry religion that kept people weighed down rather than inspired, Jesus brought the Father's joy. All of these passages are full of life, full of the Spirit and full of joy! They are infused with hope and the promise of new life. And they each offer the invitation to people to believe in Jesus.

This is our invitation - not just once, when we decide to follow Jesus the first time, or when we decide to be baptized, but every day, in every situation life throws in our path. So here's the application, the challenge for today: invite the Spirit to fill you, to lead you, to inspire you, to be your go-to and to give you courage in all the challenges of life. I mean, who do you know who can tell the world everything you've ever done and you still want everyone to meet him? That's the effect Jesus can have, if we really trust Him and choose to live by the power of His Spirit.

2. The second application comes from John the Baptist and that is, quite simply, be content to be the friend of the bridegroom. John was so willing to step back and let Jesus take the lead. Don't assume that that was easier for John than it would be for you or me. He had a big thing going on at the Jordan River and large numbers of people came to hear him speak. Many of them were moved to live changed lives because of his preaching and they were baptized there in the Jordan. When you've started the biggest religious movement of your time, how easy do you think it is to step back and bless someone who is taking your place? How easy is it to rejoice when your position comes to an end and someone new supplants you? But John knew that he wasn't the last word, that he was a voice who cried out in the desert, making a way for the Lord to come. He knew that he wasn't the bridegroom, and that made him content, even happy, to be the friend who presented Jesus to others. Let me just encourage you to be content with the opportunities you are given. Make the most of them, for sure, but don't let envy or bitterness at missed opportunities or being passed over for promotion, or not being recognized for what you have accomplished, don't let those things take root in your heart and rob you of Jesus' joy.
3. John's passion throughout the Gospel he has written, is to see people come to trust Jesus, to begin to walk with Him. My final application today is a simple one - share that passion for people who are living without the knowledge of God's love and gracious forgiveness. In the stories we read today, we see the transformative power of Jesus' love, especially in the village of Sychar. Let's begin, or continue, to pray for those in our circle of friends, family and acquaintances who don't know Him yet and, as part of that, ask the Lord for a strategy for introducing these folks to the most wonderful person who ever lived. We may not be led to go running through the streets of our neighbourhood yelling, "Come meet someone who told me everything I ever did," but isn't that a beautiful picture of a life that has been liberated into something wonderful? Let's ask our Lord how we can be as excited and as effective as that woman was.