



## International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

L.G. Parkhurst, Jr.

### **John 4:1-9 Commentary New International Version**

**Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse [International Bible Study Commentary](#). **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Study Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Study Forum](#).

**(John 4:1) Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—**

Jesus' disciples began baptizing and making more disciples of Jesus than John's disciples were making of John. Therefore, the Pharisees decided they wanted to examine Jesus and His reasons for His disciples baptizing people as they had examined John. Notice: the Pharisees had no interest in repenting of their sins, being baptized, and preparing themselves to follow the Messiah. Their interest was whether the Jews and religious teachers were conforming their lives and their teachings to Pharisaic traditions and interpretations of the Law. If they had asked Jesus directly, "Are you the Messiah?", as they had asked John, that would have led to an unproductive time of Pharisaic debate that Jesus did not intend at that time to waste anyone's time pursuing. [Remember: Jesus had just recently cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, and that would have raised even more questions for the Pharisees to waste Jesus' time pursuing.] Jesus knew what was in every person, and He knew that at times we need to turn from working with the unteachable to reaching the teachable. Later, when Jesus was in Jerusalem again and it was very dangerous for Him, He did discuss the Scriptures and

the Pharisaic traditions with the Pharisees, and in Matthew 23:13, Jesus told the Pharisees directly, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.” Jesus knew the Pharisees would come to see Him in Judea near the Jordan River to talk to Him and His disciples about baptism, but they were not interested in coming into the kingdom of heaven. With their false teachings and arguments, they would have used the opportunity to try and lock some of Jesus’ disciples out of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus chose the time and place for everything, and His followers can do the same when given a choice among options. Why choose fruitless debate, exposing new believers to the tricks of unbelievers, and wasting time in other matters of needless controversy?

**(John 4:2) although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.**

Here John clarifies that Jesus did not baptize, not because baptism was not important or necessary but because Jesus knew that some would make it a matter of prideful boasting to claim that Jesus himself had baptized them. Furthermore, so many were coming that some people would have waited for Jesus to baptize them instead of one of His disciples, and this would have wasted everyone’s valuable time. Some would have had Jesus baptize them without repenting and seriously seeking the truths of God, but only to claim superiority over others because Jesus had baptized them. Jesus taught the truth and challenged His listeners to obey His teachings: one of His teachings was that believers repent of their sins and receive baptism by one of His disciples instead of Him. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul wrote about a controversy regarding baptism, a needless controversy that Jesus prevented when He did not baptize believers.

**(John 4:3) So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.**

The distance from the northern border of Galilee to the southern border of Judea was about 120 miles. Samaria was directly North of Judea and directly South of Galilee. When Jesus left Judea for Galilee, two well-travelled paths lay before Him. He could have crossed over to the East side

of the Jordan River and travelled along the river to Galilee and then crossed the Jordan into Galilee on His way to Cana in Galilee where He healed the son of a royal official (see John 4:46-54). This route was widely travelled because the Jews hated to travel through Samaria, and the Samaritans likewise resented the Jews travelling through Samaria. Most Jews only took the route through Samaria when the shorter distance and speed of travel were important.

**(John 4:4) Now he had to go through Samaria.**

Why did Jesus “have to go” through Samaria? First, it was His Father’s will. The Father intended to draw a Samaritan woman to faith in Jesus Christ and lead many in the city where she lived to faith in His Son as the Messiah. Jesus went with perfect timing. Early in Jesus’ ministry, God wanted to show everyone that Jesus Christ came to save people from every race, not just the Jews. Second, the son of a royal official was sick and needed to be healed, and another sign needed to be given by Jesus at that time. God wanted to show everyone that Jesus Christ came to save the rich and poor, not just the rich or just the poor—Jesus even came to save Romans. Perhaps more importantly, in the short time Jesus had for public ministry (about three years), Jesus needed to minister to the most people He possibly could help as quickly as possible in the best and most wise ways possible, but at the same time “one person at a time,” when we think of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the son of the royal official as examples. Perhaps as we pray and think of what God wants us to do as followers of Jesus Christ, we can think of why Jesus had to go through Samaria and the possible priorities and principles that moved Jesus to go through Samaria despite the difficulties.

**(John 4:5) So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.**

Why did the Samaritans and the Jews despise or hate one another? The Samaritans origins went back to about 722 BC when the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and deported most of the Israelites into other countries they had conquered. These ten tribes of Israel became known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Then, the Assyrians

imported a variety of other nationalities and races into the area formerly occupied by the ten tribes of Israel. These people eventually intermarried with the Israelites who remained in the area (contrary to the Law of God). The Samaritans then became a mixed race. In 587 or 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and led exiles from the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, the former Southern Kingdom of Judah, into exile in Babylon. These two tribes did not lose their identity as Jews, and some of them returned to Judea 70 years later, and under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and the temple. When the Samaritans came to offer their help, the Jews rejected them. Therefore, the Samaritans eventually built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim and argued that it was the real temple. In about 112 BC, John Hyrcanus of the Hasmonean Dynasty in Judea, destroyed the temple on Mt. Gerizim. So, in the time of Jesus, hatred and resentment between Samaritans and Jews had been festering for hundreds of years.

Sychar was a Samaritan city in the former Kingdom of Israel near where Jacob dug a well, bought the land, gave the land to Joseph, and where Joseph was buried. Jacob's well is in a valley with Mt. Gerizim on one side and Mt. Ebal on the other. Both mountains could be easily seen and recognized from Jacob's well.

**(John 4:6) Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.**

Jesus is the only Person who is fully God and fully human. After much emphasis on the abilities of Jesus to perform signs as the Son of God, John reveals more about Jesus' humanity. Jesus suffered real tiredness, hunger, and thirst as a human being, but Jesus did not use His powers as the Son of God to relieve His personal suffering or meet His personal needs. Jesus suffered from the heat as anyone would from the blazing noonday sun. Jesus suffered thirst from a long, hot, tiring walk to Jacob's well, but without a bucket or other device near the well or without any remaining human strength to draw water from the well using a nearby bucket, Jesus had to wait for someone to help Him get a refreshing drink of water. In exhaustion, Jesus was sitting by the well and waiting for water and the food His disciples would bring Him. Fully human and fully God, Jesus could

have created loaves of fresh baked bread out of thin air to satisfy His hunger and make a water fountain out of Jacob's well for himself and the whole city, but the devil had tempted Jesus to use His powers as the Son of God, and Jesus refused to use His powers in His own self-interest—to do so would have been a sin for Him and would have invalidated His true suffering and death on the cross for our salvation (See Matthew 4:1-11). The Gospel of John gives a glimpse of what it meant for Jesus to live fully as a human and always reject the devil's temptations to selfishly help himself in ways that God has not given human beings the power to do.

**(John 4:7) When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”**

As we will learn from further study, this Samaritan woman was not only a Samaritan (despised by the Jews) and a woman (according to the Pharisees and some Rabbis, being seen with a woman in public should be avoided at all costs), but she was also a woman who lived a life of sin. She was a woman who was disobeying God, and who the religious authorities, the women of the city, and many men would have despised. A Jewish rabbi or a Pharisee would certainly have avoided any contact with her no matter how thirsty they were. But, when Jesus saw her come to the well to draw water, he asked her plainly, “Give me a drink.” Jesus explained in Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost,” and for this reason among others, Jesus had to go through Samaria to save this woman. In Jesus, we see the depth, the breadth, the length, the width, and the height of God's love for everyone. The Apostle Peter learned this lesson well, and in 2 Peter 3:9, he wrote, “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” Yet, we know, some insist on perishing.

**(John 4:8) (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)**

From this verse we learn how much Jesus had taught His disciples by example and word how to live without racial prejudice and how to respond when facing a person who expressed racial prejudice. Their demeanor should have shown all they met in Samaria that they were not prejudiced against them, but prejudice can run deep both ways; so, the disciples had to

be prepared to respond with the love of Jesus toward any who attacked them verbally or physically. John does not tell us how the people of the city responded to the disciples; perhaps all went well, and the disciples' attitude may have prepared some of the people to go to the well later and see Jesus after they heard the woman's testimony. Note: the disciples never expected Jesus to work a miracle to meet their needs (they went shopping), but Jesus did work a miracle for them one morning after a long night of fishing when they had caught nothing and were hungry (see John 21:1-14). It was not unexpected for Jesus to tell His disciples to go and buy some bread when they were hungry. For good reasons, to meet the real hunger of others, Jesus did feed large crowds and His disciples with a few loaves and fishes, but He refused to work miracles to meet His own real human needs.

**(John 4:9) The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)**

In a few words, the Samaritan woman summed up what we have learned so far. A Jew would never ask a Samaritan for a drink. A Jew would never talk to or ask a woman for a drink in public; unless that woman was a part of their own family. A Jew would never drink out of a pitcher or a bucket that a Samaritan used, for it would have been unclean. The hostility between Jews and Samaritans was so deep that they would never share anything for any reason. To Jesus' question, a Samaritan would just as likely have said “No” to a Jew as a Jew would have said “No” to a Samaritan. When Jesus asked her for a drink, Jesus was breaking all the Jewish traditions and ignoring the long-held animosity between Jews and Samaritans; therefore, this Samaritan woman expressed her shock even though she must have seen how thirsty Jesus was—thirsty enough to ask her for a drink.

### **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further**

1. Why do you think Jesus did not want to talk to the Pharisees who had heard that He was baptizing more disciples than John the Baptist?

2. Why do you think Jesus had to go through Samaria?
3. What was important about the place where Jesus rested?
4. How did John describe the fact that Jesus is fully human and fully divine?
5. Why was the woman surprised when Jesus asked her for a drink?

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Contact: P.O. Box 1052, Edmond, Oklahoma, 73083 and [lgp@theiblf.com](mailto:lgp@theiblf.com).