

Commentary on the Samaritan Woman

by St. Augustine

*Excerpt from St. Augustine's 15th Tractate on the Gospel of St. John (John 4: 1-42)
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And there came a woman. Figure of the Church not yet justified, but now about to be justified: for this is the subject of the discourse. She comes ignorant, she finds Him, and there is a dealing with her. Let us see what, and wherefore. *There comes a woman of Samaria to draw water.* The Samaritans did not belong to the nation of the Jews: they were foreigners, though they inhabited neighboring lands. It would take a long time to relate the origin of the Samaritans; that we may not be detained by long discourse of this, and leave necessary matters unsaid, suffice to say, then, that we regard the Samaritans as aliens. And, lest you should think that I have said this with more boldness than truth, hear the Lord Jesus Himself, what He said of that Samaritan, one of the ten lepers whom He had cleansed, who alone returned to give thanks: *Were there not ten cleansed? And where are the nine? There was not another to give glory to God, save this stranger.* (Luke 17:17) It is pertinent to the image of the reality, that this woman, who bore the type of the Church, comes of strangers: for the Church was to come of the Gentiles, an alien from the race of the Jews. In that woman, then, let us hear ourselves, and in her acknowledge ourselves, and in her give thanks to God for ourselves. For she was the figure, not the reality; for she both first showed forth the figure and became the reality. For she believed on Him who, of her, set the figure before us. *She comes, then, to draw water.* Had simply come to draw water, as people are wont to do, be they men or women.

Jesus says unto her, Give me to drink. For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy meat. Then says the Samaritan woman unto Him, How is it that you, being a Jew, ask drink of me, who am a Samaritan woman? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans. You see that they were aliens: indeed, the Jews would not use their vessels. And as the woman brought with her a vessel with which to draw the water, it made her wonder that a Jew sought drink of her—a thing which the Jews were not accustomed to do. But He who was asking drink was thirsting for the faith of the woman herself.

At length, hear who it is that asks drink: *Jesus answered and said unto her, If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that says to you, Give me to drink, you would, it may be, have asked of Him, and He would have given you living water.* He asks to drink, and promises to give drink. He longs as one about to receive; He abounds as one about to satisfy. *If you knew,* says He, *the gift of God.* The gift of God is the Holy Spirit. But as yet He speaks to the woman guardedly, and enters into her heart by degrees. It may be He is now teaching her. For what can be sweeter and kinder than that exhortation? *If you knew the gift of God,* etc.: thus far He keeps her in suspense. That is commonly called living water which issues from a spring: that which is collected from rain in pools and cisterns is not called living water. And it may have flowed from a spring; yet if it should stand collected in some place, not admitting to it that from which it flowed, but, with the course interrupted, separated, as it were, from the channel of the fountain, it is not called *living water*: but that is called living water which is taken as it flows. Such water there was in that fountain. Why, then, did He promise to give that which He was asking?

The woman, however, being in suspense, says to Him, *Lord, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep.* See how she understood the living water, simply the water which was in that fountain. *You would give me living water, and I carry that with which to draw, and you do not. The living water is here; how are you to give it me?*

Understanding another thing, and taking it carnally, she does in a manner knock, that the Master may open up that which is closed. She was knocking in ignorance, not with earnest purpose; she is still an object of pity, not yet of instruction.

The Lord speaks somewhat more clearly of that living water. Now the woman had said, *Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself, his children, and his cattle?* You can not give me of the living water of this well, because you have nothing to draw with: perhaps you promise another fountain? Can you be better than our father, who dug this well, and used it himself, and his? Let the Lord, then, declare what He called living water. *Jesus answered and said unto her, Every one that drinks of this water shall thirst again: but he that drinks of the water that I shall give him, shall not thirst forever; but the water which I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water, springing up into everlasting life.* The Lord has spoken more openly: *It shall become in him a fountain of water, springing up into everlasting life. He that drinks of this water shall not thirst forever.* What more evident than that it was not visible, but invisible water, that He was promising? What more evident than that He was speaking, not in a carnal, but in a spiritual sense?

Still, however, the woman has her mind on the flesh: she is delighted with the thought of thirsting no more, and fancies that this was promised to her by the Lord after a carnal sense; which it will be indeed, but in the resurrection of the dead. She desired this now. God had indeed granted once to His servant Elias, that during forty days he neither hungered nor thirsted. Could not He give this always, seeing He had power to give it during forty days? She, however, sighed for it, desiring to have no want, no toil. To be always coming to that fountain, to be burdened with a weight with which to supply her want, and, when that which she had drawn is spent, to be obliged to return again: this was a daily toil to her; because that want of hers was to be relieved, not extinguished. Such a gift as Jesus promised delighted her; she asks Him to give her living water.

Nevertheless, let us not overlook the fact that it is something spiritual that the Lord was promising. What means, *Whoso shall drink of this water shall thirst again?* It is true as to this water; it is true as to what the water signified. Since the water in the well is the pleasure of the world in its dark depth: from this men draw it with the vessel of lusts. Stooping forward, they let down the lust to reach the pleasure fetched from the depth of the well, and enjoy the pleasure and the preceding lust let down to fetch it. For he who has not dispatched his lust in advance cannot get to the pleasure. Consider lust, then, as the vessel; and pleasure as the water from the depth of the well: when one has got at the pleasure of this world, it is meat to him, it is drink, it is a bath, a show, an amour; can it be that he will not thirst again? Therefore, *Whoso shall drink of this water, says He, will thirst again;* but if he shall receive water of me, *he shall never thirst. We shall be satisfied,* it says, *with the good things of Your house.* Of what water, then, is He to give, but of that of which it is said, *With You is the fountain of life?* For how shall they thirst, who shall be drunk with the fatness of Your house?

What He was promising them was a certain feeding and abundant fullness of the Holy Spirit: but the woman did not yet understand; and not understanding, how did she answer? *The woman says unto Him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw.* Want forced her to labor, and her weakness was pleading against the toil. Would that she heard the invitation, *Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you!* (Matthew 11:28) This is, in fact, what Jesus was saying to her, that she might no longer labor: but she did not yet understand.

At length, wishing her to understand, *Jesus says unto her, Go, call your husband, and come hither.* What means this, *Call your husband?* Was it through her husband that He wished to give her that water? Or, because she did not understand, did He wish to teach her through her husband? Perhaps it was as the apostle says concerning women, *If they wish to learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home.* But this the apostle says of that where there is no Jesus present to teach. It is said, in short, to women whom the apostle was forbidding to speak in the Church. (1 Corinthians 14:34) But when the Lord Himself was at hand, and in person speaking to her, what need was there that He should speak to her by her husband? Was it through her husband that he spoke to Mary, while sitting at His feet and receiving His word; while Martha, wholly occupied with much serving, murmured at the happiness of her sister? (Luke 10:40) Wherefore, my brethren, let us hear and understand what it is that the Lord says to the woman, *Call your husband.* For it may be that He is saying also to our soul, *Call your husband.* Let us inquire also concerning the soul's husband. Why, is not Jesus Himself already the soul's real husband? Let the understanding be present, since what we are about to say can hardly be apprehended but by attentive hearers: therefore let the understanding be present to apprehend, and perhaps that same understanding will be found to be the husband of the soul.

Now Jesus, seeing that the woman did not understand, and willing her to understand, says to her, *Call your husband. For the reason why you know not what I say is, because your understanding is not present: I am speaking after the Spirit, and you are hearing after the flesh. The things which I speak relate neither to the pleasure of the ears, nor to the eyes, nor to the smell, nor to the taste, nor to the touch; by the mind alone are they received, by the understanding alone are they drawn up: that understanding is not with you, how can you apprehend what I am saying? 'Call your husband,' bring your understanding forward. What is it for you to have a soul? It is not much, for a beast has a soul. Wherein are you better than the beast? In having understanding, which the beast has not. Then what is *Call your husband?* Thou dost not apprehend me, you do not understand me: I am speaking to you of the gift of God, and your thought is of the flesh; you wish not to thirst in a carnal sense, I am addressing myself to the spirit: your understanding is absent. 'Call your husband.' Be not as the horse and mule, which have no understanding.* Therefore, my brethren, to have a soul, and not to have understanding, that is, not to use it, not to live according to it, is a beast's life. For we have somewhat in common with the beasts, that by which we live in the flesh, but it must be ruled by the understanding. For the motions of the soul, which moves after the flesh, and longs to run unrestrainedly loose after carnal delights, are ruled over by the understanding. Which is to be called the husband?— that which rules, or that which is ruled? Without doubt, when the life is well ordered the understanding rules the soul, for itself belongs to the soul. For the

understanding is not something other than the soul, but a thing of the soul: as the eye is not something other than the flesh, but a thing of the flesh. But while the eye is a thing of the flesh, yet it alone enjoys the light; and the other fleshy members may be steeped in light, but they cannot feel the light: the eye alone is both bathed in it, and enjoys it. Thus in our soul there is a something called the understanding. This something of the soul, which is called understanding and mind, is enlightened by the higher light. Now that higher light, by which the human mind is enlightened, is God; for *that was the true light which enlightens every man coming into this world*. Such a light was Christ, such a light was speaking with the woman: yet she was not present with the understanding, to have it enlightened with that light; not merely to have it shed upon it, but to enjoy it. Therefore the Lord said, *Call your husband*, as if He were to say, I wish to enlighten, and yet there is not here whom I may enlighten: bring hither the understanding through which you may be taught, by which you may be ruled. Thus, put the soul without the understanding for the woman; and having the understanding as having the husband. But this husband does not *rule* the wife well, except when he is ruled by a higher. *For the head of the woman is the man, but the head of the man is Christ*. (1 Corinthians 11:3) The head of the man was talking with the woman, and the man was not present. And so the Lord, as if He said, Bring hither your head, that he may receive his head, says, *Call your husband, and come hither*; that is, Be here, be present: for you are as absent, while you understand not the voice of the Truth here present; be present here, but not alone; be here with your husband.

And, the husband being not yet called, still she does not understand, still she minds the flesh; for the man is absent: *I have not*, says she, *a husband*. And the Lord proceeds and utters mysteries. You may understand that woman really to have had at that time no husband; she was living with some man, not a lawful husband, rather a paramour than a husband. And the Lord said to her, *You have well said, I have not a husband*. How then did Thou say, *Call your husband*? Now hear how the Lord knew well that she had not a husband. *He says to her*, etc. In case the woman might suppose that the Lord had said, *You have well said, I have not a husband*, just because He had learned this fact of her, and not because he knew it by His own divinity, hear something which you have not said: *For you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly*.

Once more He urges us to investigate the matter somewhat more exactly concerning these five husbands. Many have in fact understood, not indeed absurdly, nor so far improbably, the five husbands of this woman to mean the five books of Moses. For the Samaritans' made use of these books, and were under the same law: for it was from it they had circumcision. But since we are hemmed in by what follows, *And he whom you now have is not your husband*, it appears to me that we can more easily take the five senses of the body to be the five former husbands of the soul. For when one is born, before he can make use of the mind and reason, he is ruled only by the senses of the flesh. In a little child, the soul seeks for or shuns what is heard, and seen, and smells, and tastes, and is perceived by the touch. It seeks for whatever soothes, and shuns whatever offends, those five senses. At first, the soul lives according to these five senses, as five husbands; because it is ruled by them. But why are they called husbands? Because they are lawful and right: made indeed by God, and are the gifts of God to the soul. The soul is still weak while ruled by these five husbands, and living under these five husbands; but

when she comes to years of exercising reason, if she is taken in hand by the noble discipline and teaching of wisdom, these five men are succeeded in their rule by no other than the true and lawful husband, and one better than they, who both rules better and rules for eternity, who cultivates and instructs her for eternity. For the five senses rule us, not for eternity, but for those temporal things that are to be sought or shunned. But when the understanding, imbued by wisdom, begins to rule the soul, it knows now not only how to avoid a pit, and to walk on even ground— a thing which the eyes show to the soul even in its weakness; nor merely to be charmed with musical voices, and to repel harsh sounds; nor to delight in agreeable scents, and to refuse offensive smells; nor to be captivated by sweetness, and displeased with bitterness; nor to be soothed with what is soft, and hurt with what is rough. For all these things are necessary to the soul in its weakness. Then what rule is made use of by that understanding? Not one to discern between black and white, but between just and unjust, between good and evil, between the profitable and the unprofitable, between chastity and impurity, that it may love the one and avoid the other; between charity and hatred, to be in the one, not to be in the other.

This husband had not yet succeeded to those five husbands in that woman. And where he does not succeed, error sways. For when the soul has begun to be capable of reason, it is ruled either by the wise mind or by error: but yet error does not rule but destroys. Wherefore, after these five senses was that woman still wandering, and error was tossing her to and fro. And this error was not a lawful husband, but a paramour: for that reason the Lord says to her, *You have well said, I have not a husband. For you have had five husbands.* The five senses of the flesh ruled you at first; you have come to the age of using reason, and yet you are not come to wisdom, but art fallen into error. Therefore, after those five husbands, *this whom you now have is not your husband.* And if not a husband, what was he but a paramour? And so, *Call,* not the paramour, but *your husband,* that you may receive me with the understanding, and not by error have some false notion of me. For the woman was still in error, as she was thinking of that water; while the Lord was now speaking of the Holy Spirit. Why was she erring, but because she had a paramour, not a husband? Put away, therefore, that paramour who corrupts you, and go, *call your husband.* Call, and come that you may understand me.

The woman says unto Him, Sir, I see that you are a prophet. The husband begins to come, he is not yet fully come. She accounted the Lord a prophet, and a prophet indeed He was; for it was of Himself He said, that *a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country.* (Luke 4:24) Again, of Him it was said to Moses, *A Prophet will I raise up to them of their brethren, like you.* (Deuteronomy 18:18) Like, namely, as to the form of the flesh, but not in the eminence of His majesty. Accordingly we find the Lord Jesus called a Prophet. Hence this woman is now not far wrong. *I see,* she says, *that you are a prophet.* She begins to call the husband, and to shut out the paramour; she begins to ask about a matter that is wont to disquiet her. For there was a contention between the Samaritans and the Jews, because the Jews worshipped God in the temple built by Solomon; but the Samaritans, being situated at a distance from it, did not worship there. For this reason the Jews, because they worshipped God in the temple, boasted themselves to be better than the Samaritans. *For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans:* because the latter said to them, How is it you boast and account yourselves to be better

than we, just because you have a temple which we have not? Did our fathers, who were pleasing to God, worship in that temple? Was it not in this mountain where we are they worshipped? We then do better, say they, who pray to God in this mountain, where our fathers prayed. Both peoples contended in ignorance, because they had not the husband: they were inflated against each other, on the one side in behalf of the temple, on the other in behalf of the mountain.

What, however, does the Lord teach the woman now, as one whose husband has begun to be present? *The woman says unto Him, Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus says unto her, Woman, believe me. For the Church will come, as it is said in the Song of Songs, will come, and will pass over from the beginning of faith. She will come in order to pass through; and pass through she cannot, except from the beginning of faith. Rightly she now hears, the husband being present: Woman, believe me. For there is that in you now which can believe, since your husband is present. You have begun to be present with the understanding when you called me a prophet. Woman, believe me; for if you believe not, you will not understand. Therefore, Woman, believe me, for the hour will come when you shall neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem worship the Father. You worship ye know not what: we worship what we know; for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour will come. When? And now is. Well, what hour? When the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth, not in this mountain, nor in the temple, but in spirit and in truth. For the Father seeks such to worship Him. Why does the Father seek such to worship Him, not on a mountain, not in the temple, but in spirit and in truth? God is Spirit. If God were body, it were right that He should be worshipped on a mountain, for a mountain is corporeal; it were right He should be worshipped in the temple, for a temple is corporeal. God is Spirit; and they that worship Him, must worship in spirit and in truth.*

We have heard, and it is manifest; we had gone out of doors, and we are sent inward. Would I could find, you said, some high and lonely mountain! For I think that, because God is on high, He hears me the rather from a high place. Because you are on a mountain, do you imagine yourself near to God, and that He will quickly hear you, as if calling to Him from the nearest place? He dwells on high, but regards the lowly. *The Lord is near. To whom? To the high, perhaps? To them who are contrite of heart.* 'Tis a wonderful thing: He dwells on high, and yet is near to the lowly; *He has regard to lowly things, but lofty things He knows from afar;* He sees the proud afar off, and He is the less near to them the higher they appear to themselves to be. Did you seek a mountain, then? Come down, that you may come near Him. But would you ascend? Ascend, but do not seek a mountain. *The ascents, it says, are in his heart, in the valley of weeping.* The valley is humility. Therefore do all within. Even if perhaps you seek some lofty place, some holy place, make yourself a temple for God within time. *For the temple of God is holy, which temple are you.* (1 Corinthians 3:17) Would you pray in a temple? Pray in yourself. But be first a temple of God, for He in His temple hears him that prays.

The hour comes, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth. We worship that which we know: ye worship ye know not what; for salvation is of the Jews. A great thing has He attributed to the Jews; but do not understand Him to

mean those spurious Jews. Understand that wall to which another is joined, that they may be joined together, resting on the corner-stone, which is Christ. For there is one wall from the Jews, another from the Gentiles; these walls are far apart, only until they are united in the Corner. Now the aliens were strangers and foreigners from the covenants of God. (Ephesians 2:11-22) According to this, it is said, *We worship what we know*. It is said, indeed, in the person of the Jews, but not of all Jews, not of reprobate Jews, but of such as were the apostles, as were the prophets, as were all those saints who sold all their goods, and laid the price of their goods at the apostles' feet. *For God has not rejected His people which He foreknew*. (Romans 11:2)

The woman heard this, and proceeded. She had already called Him a prophet; she observes that He with whom she was speaking uttered such things as still more pertained to the prophet; and what answer did she make? See: *The woman says unto Him, I know that Messiah will come, who is called Christ: when He then has come, He will show us all things*. What is this? Just now she says, The Jews are contending for the temple, and we for this mountain: when He has come, He will despise the mountain, and overthrow the temple; He will teach us all things, that we may know how to worship in spirit and in truth. She knew who could teach her, but she did not yet know Him that was now teaching her. But now she was worthy to receive the manifestation of Him. Now Messiah is Anointed: Anointed, in Greek, is Christ; in Hebrew, Messiah; whence also, in Punic, Messe means Anoint. For the Hebrew, Punic and Syriac are cognate and neighboring languages.

Then, *The woman says unto Him, I know that Messiah will come, who is called Christ: when He then has come, He will tell us all things*. Jesus says unto her, *I that speak with you am He*. She called her husband; he is made the head of the woman, and Christ is made the head of the man. Now is the woman constituted in faith, and ruled, as about to live rightly. After she heard this, *I that speak with you am He*, what further could she say, when the Lord Jesus willed to manifest Himself to the woman, to whom He had said, *Believe me?*

And immediately came His disciples, and marvelled that He talked with the woman. That He was seeking her that was lost, He who came to seek that which was lost: they marvelled at this. They marvelled at a good thing, they were not suspecting an evil thing. *Yet no man said, What seekest Thou, or why talkest Thou with her?*

The woman then left her water-pot. Having heard, *I that speak with you am He*, and having received Christ the Lord into her heart, what could she do but now leave her water-pot, and run to preach the gospel? She cast out lust, and hastened to proclaim the truth. Let them who would preach the gospel learn; let them throw away their water-pot at the well. You remember what I said before of the water-pot: it was a vessel with which the water was drawn, called *hydria*, from its Greek name, because water is *hydor* in Greek; just as if it were called *aquarium*, from the Latin. She threw away her water-pot then, which was no longer of use, but a burden to her, such was her avidity to be satisfied with that water. Throwing her burden away, to make known Christ, *she ran to the city, and says to those men, Come, and see a man that told me all things that ever I did*. Step by step, lest those men should get angry and indignant, and should persecute her. *Is this Christ? Then they went out of the city, and came to Him*.

And in the meanwhile His disciples besought Him, saying, Master, eat. For they had gone to buy meat, and had returned. But He said, I have meat to eat which you know not of. Therefore said the disciples one to another, Hath any man brought Him anything to eat? What wonder if that woman did not understand about the water? See; the disciples do not yet understand the meat. But He heard their thoughts, and now as a master instructs them, not in a roundabout way, as He did the woman while He still sought her husband, but openly at once: My meat, says He, is to do the will of Him that sent me. Therefore, in the case of that woman, it was even His drink to do the will of Him that sent Him. That was the reason why He said, I thirst, give me to drink; namely, to work faith in her, and to drink of her faith, and to transplant her into His own body, for His body is the Church. Therefore He says, My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me.

Say ye not, that there are yet four months, and then comes harvest? He was aglow for the work, and was arranging to send forth laborers. You count four months to the harvest; I show you another harvest, white and ready. Behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are already white for the harvest. Therefore He is going to send forth the reapers. For in this is the saying true, that one reaps, another sows: that both he that sows and he that reaps may rejoice together. I have sent you to reap that on which you have not labored: others have labored, and you are entered into their labor. What then? He sent reapers; sent He not the sowers? Whither the reapers? Where others labored already. For where labor had already been bestowed, surely there had been sowing; and what had been sown had now become ripe, and required the sickle and the threshing. Where, then, were the reapers to be sent? Where the prophets had already preached before; for they were the sowers. For had they not been the sowers, whence had this come to the woman, I know that Messias will come? That woman was now ripened fruit, and the harvest fields were white, and sought the sickle. I sent you, then. Whither? To reap what you have not sown: others sowed, and you are entered into their labors. Who labored? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Read their labors; in all their labors there is a prophecy of Christ, and for that reason they were sowers. Moses, and all the other patriarchs, and all the prophets, how much they suffered in that cold season when they sowed! Therefore was the harvest now ready in Judea. Justly was the grain there said to be as it were ripe, when so many thousands of men brought the price of their goods, and, laying them at the apostles' feet, having eased their shoulders of this worldly baggage, began to follow the Lord Christ. Verily the harvest was ripe. What was made of it? Of that harvest a few grains were thrown out, and sowed the whole world; and another harvest is rising which is to be reaped in the end of the world. Of that harvest it is said, They that sow in tears shall reap with joy. But to that harvest not apostles, but angels, shall be sent forth. The reapers, says He, are the angels. (Matthew 13:39) That harvest, then, is growing among tares, and is awaiting to be purged in the end of the world. But that harvest to which the disciples were sent first, where the prophets labored, was already ripe. But yet, brethren, observe what was said: may rejoice together, both he that sows and he that reaps. They had dissimilar labors in time, but the rejoicing they shall enjoy alike equally; they shall receive for their wages together eternal life.

And many Samaritans of that city believed on Him, because of the saying of the woman, who testified, He told me all that ever I did. And when the Samaritans came to Him, they besought Him that He would tarry with them; and He tarried there two days. And many

more believed because of His word; and said to the woman, Now we believe, not because of your words; for we have heard Him ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world. This also must be slightly noticed, for the lesson has come to an end. The woman first announced Him, and the Samaritans believed her testimony; and they besought Him to stay with them, and He stayed there two days, and many more believed. And when they had believed, they said to the woman, *Now we believe, not because of your word; but we have come to know Him ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world:* first by report, then by His presence. So it is today with them that are without, and are not yet Christians. Christ is made known to them by Christian friends; and just upon the report of that woman, that is, the Church, they come to Christ, they believe through this report. He stays with them two days, that is, gives them two precepts of charity; and many more believe, and more firmly believe, on Him, because He is in truth the Savior of the world.