

# TWO CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH CHRIST

John 3, 4

Charles Dickens began *A Tale of Two Cities* with the words ***“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”*** And as you study John 3 and 4, you might believe that Nicodemus was the best that humanity had to offer, and the woman at the well, perhaps the worst that life could do to a person! I would like to examine these 2 examples and note some **Compelling Contrasts**, followed by some **Key Conclusions**.

## I. COMPELLING CONTRASTS:

### A. Contrasting Settings and Characters:

#### 1. The Settings Contrasted

**John 3** takes place in Jerusalem; **John 4**, at a well near Sychar in Samaria...

**John 3** is at night; **John 4**, at high noon...

In **John 3**, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to talk with Jesus; in **John 4**, a nameless woman came to draw water...

In **John 3**, Nicodemus initiated the conversation with Jesus; in **John 4**, Jesus initiated the interaction...

In John 3, Nicodemus called Him ***“Rabbi”***; In John 4, the woman called Him ***“Sir”*** ...

#### 2. The Characters Compared:

a. In **John 3** we meet a Pharisee – a religious and civic leader and member of the Sanhedrin, the assembly of Hebrew high court judges. Nicodemus was prosperous, devout, and upstanding.

And when he called Jesus – a young man with no formal religious training – *“rabbi,”* it showed that he was more open-minded than most of his peers. So, in Nicodemus you have an admirable person – successful, disciplined, moral, religious, open-minded, and somewhat radical himself as revealed in the fact that he would come to speak with Jesus, even if secretly at night! Next, ...

**b. Jesus’ initiation of the conversation in John 4 was extremely radical.** In fact, the woman seemed shocked that He spoke to her, for Samaritans and Jews were bitter enemies. Historically, at the time of the Babylonian Exile, some Jews stayed behind and intermarried with the Canaanites, forming a new tribe that combined Jewish and Canaanite worship into a syncretistic religion. Because of this, the Jews considered the Samaritans racially and religiously inferior.

And as well, it was scandalous for a Jewish man to speak to a strange woman in public. In addition, normally women came to draw water early in the a.m. so they could have it for the house-keeping chores for the entire day. So, her coming at noon indicates that she was a moral outcast even within her own marginalized part of society. Thus, when Jesus spoke to her, He reached across every significant barrier that people put up between themselves, including racial, cultural, gender, and moral barriers! Jesus reached across all human divides to connect to her.

## **B. Contrasting Tactics by Christ:**

**1. His Directness with Nicodemus:** Nicodemus began courteously: *“Rabbi, people say You have a lot of wisdom that God has given You.”* But Jesus immediately confronted him, saying, *“You must be born again.”*

Nicodemus had spent his life worshiping God according to strict Jewish tradition, and he must have been offended by this strange pronouncement. But Jesus pressed him on his self-satisfaction. What did you have to do, Jesus asked, with being born? Did you work hard to earn the privilege of being born? Not at all. You didn't earn or contribute *anything* to being born. It is a free gift of life. And so it is with the new birth. Salvation is by grace – no moral efforts can earn or merit it. You must be born again.

2. On the other hand, Jesus surprised the woman at the well with His gentleness and only slowly confronted her with her spiritual need. I might have been tempted to begin, ***“You must be born again”*** for surely, she fit all my definitions of a sinner. But Jesus began by saying, ***“If you know who I was, you would ask Me for living water; and if you drink that water you will never thirst again.”*** Jesus was speaking of ***“eternal life.”*** People who lived in an arid climate next to a desert knew a lot about thirst. And Jesus said: ***“I’ve got something for you that is as necessary to you spiritually as water is to you physically. Something without which you are absolutely lost.”*** And He revealed that this life-saving water satisfies ***from the inside*** when He said, ***“My water, if you get it, will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”***

Jesus was talking about soul contentment deep within a person. There is a tendency to think that what will make us happy is something ***out there*** – but Jesus said there's nothing ***outside*** that can truly satisfy the thirst deep ***inside***; He promised *absolute satisfaction in the core of one's being regardless of what is happening outside of you*. The woman asked, ***“What is this living water? Would you give it to me?”*** And Jesus said, ***“Go get your husband.”*** She replied, ***“I don't have a husband.”*** ***“No, you're right,”*** He said.

***“You have five husbands, and the man you’re living with right now is not your husband.”*** Jesus was saying, *“If you want to understand the nature of this living water I offer, you must first see how you’ve been trying to get it through men, and it’s not working!”* The woman, shocked by His knowledge of her life and His insight, responded, ***“Sir, I see you are a prophet”*** and she asked, ***“We worship at this temple here and the Jews worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Who is right?”*** Jesus responded: ***“The time is coming when there will be no need for a physical temple in order to have access to God.”*** Overwhelmed, she said, ***“When the Messiah comes, He will explain all these things to us.”*** And Jesus answered: ***“I, the One speaking to you – I am He”*** (John 4:26).

### **C. Contrasting Outcomes:**

**1. With Nicodemus**, the discussion ended with no further remarks, according to John’s record. However, we do know that Nicodemus reappears in the Gospel story, once while trying to bring some relief amid a discussion about Jesus and again, at His burial.

**2. As for the Samaritan woman**, she testified to the whole community about meeting the Messiah and invited everyone to go meet Him, too. As a result, they asked Him to stay an extra two days and many believed because of His Word (John 4:42).

## **II. KEY CONCLUSIONS:**

### **A. Both Were Thirsty and Needed Water from Inside**

After reading the stories, it seems obvious that both Nicodemus and the woman at the well were thirsting for something more! The woman was trying to satisfy her thirst with men, and Nicodemus was trying to satisfy his with devout works.

And if two such polar opposites were thirsty, it seems reasonable to believe that everyone who doesn't know Jesus, regardless of their circumstance, is also thirsty, looking for an answer to the deep longing within their souls! Sadly, most people can't recognize soul thirst for what it is as long as they think there is a chance they can achieve their dreams and be "successful". And so, we can live our entire life without admitting the depth of our spiritual thirst. **And** often, those people who do reach their dreams are shocked to discover that achieving these longed-for desires doesn't satisfy either. Indeed, it may enhance their inner emptiness! In *Guideposts* 7/9/1994, **Boris Becker**, the former great tennis champion notes: *"I had won Wimbledon twice, once as the youngest player. I was rich...I had all the material possessions I needed...It is the old song of movie stars and pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything, and yet they are so unhappy... I had no inner peace."*

Becker achieved all those things, and, in the end, found that they didn't satisfy his thirst in the slightest. There is also a famous **Sophia Loren** interview in which she said she had had everything – awards, marriage – but that *"in my life there is an emptiness that is impossible to fulfill."*

American writer **David Foster Wallace** was an award-winning, bestselling postmodern novelist. He once wrote a sentence that contained a thousand words. A few years before committing suicide at age 46, he gave a commencement speech at Kenyon College and said the following:

Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god... to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before [they] finally plant you... Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And] the insidious thing about these forms of worship is... that... they are default settings.

Wallace, an unbeliever, understood that everyone trusts in something for their salvation, everyone bases their life on something that requires faith. Wallace's parting words are sadly terrifying: ***"Anything else you worship will eat you alive."***

Jesus says, *"Unless you're worshiping Me, unless I'm the center of your life, unless you're trying to get your spiritual thirst quenched through Me and not through these other things, unless you see the solution must come inside rather than just pass by outside, then whatever you worship will abandon you in the end."*

## **B. Both Needed to Be Born Again**

What Jesus said to Nicodemus was astonishing! Jesus said that the **"sinners"** outside on the street were in the same position, spiritually, as he was: both were equally lost: both needed to start from scratch; both had to be born again; and without eternal life, something would eat them alive! And that true life was going to have to be a gift. Most people probably understand why Jesus would regard the woman at the well as a sinner in need of salvation.

But why would Jesus tell this good man that he has done essentially nothing to earn a place in heaven? Here is the answer: Jesus is working on a deeper understanding of sin than most people have. **Sin is looking to something else besides God for your salvation. It is putting yourself in the place of God, becoming your own savior and lord, as it were.** One way to do this is to break all the moral rules in your pursuit of pleasure and happiness, like the woman at the well. This makes sex or money or power into a kind of salvation. But there is also the religious way to be your own savior and lord. That is to act as if your good life and moral achievement will essentially require God to bless you and answer your prayers the way you want. And what is insidious about this is that religious people constantly talk about trusting in God – but if you think your goodness is even contributing to your salvation, then you are happy being your own savior. You are trusting in yourself. And your heart will increasingly be filled with pride, self-righteousness, insecurity, envy, and spite.

### **C. Both Needed Jesus**

And so, clearly, both needed Jesus! Everybody has got to live for something, but Jesus argued that, if **He** is not that thing, it will fail you. First, it will enslave you. Second, if you **do** achieve it, it will fail to deliver the fulfillment you expected. Every other savior but Jesus Christ is not really a savior. It can only punish you with self-loathing and shame. Jesus is the only Savior who, if you gain Him, will satisfy you, and if you fail Him, will forgive you.

There was a revival among the Samaritans because Jesus was tired and thirsty, and He was tired and thirsty because He, the divine Son of God, the maker of heaven and earth, had emptied Himself of His glory and descended into the world as a man, subject to weariness and thirst.

On the cross just before He died, Jesus said, ***“I thirst,”*** and He meant more than just physical thirst. There Jesus experienced the loss of relationship with His Father because He was taking the punishment we deserved for our sins. There He was cut off from the Father, the source of living water. He experienced the ultimate, torturous, thirst of which the worst death by dehydration is just a hint. And because Jesus Christ experienced cosmic thirst on the cross, you and I can have our spiritual thirst satisfied. It is because He died that we can be born again. And He did it gladly. Seeing what He did and why He did it should turn our hearts away from the things that enslave us and toward Him in worship.

And so, remember, everyone you meet who doesn't know Jesus is thirsting for something they can't define, they need the New Birth, and the Answer to their needs is Jesus, and Jesus only!

May God bless this study of John 3 and 4. Amen.



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### **I. COMPELLING CONTRASTS**

#### **A. Settings and Characters**

- 1. The Settings Contrasted**
- 2. The Characters Compared**
  - a. Nicodemus**
  - b. The woman at the well**

#### **B. The Tactics of the Lord Jesus**

- 1. His Directness with Nicodemus**
- 2. His Gentleness with the Woman at the Well**

#### **C. The Outcomes**

- 1. Nicodemus**
- 2. The woman at the well**

### **II. KEY CONCLUSIONS**

- A. Both Were Thirsty and Needed the Water that Satisfies Forever**
- B. Both Needed to Be Born Again**
- C. Both Needed Jesus**