



Have you ever wondered why a particular story is in the bible or how it fits into what the writer is trying to get across? The gospels for example can often seem like just a random collection of stories about the life of Jesus leading up to His death on the cross and resurrection. However, through various bible studies, the Lord has shown me numerous examples of how every story, parable, and discussion is included for a reason. Often, every detail and even the order of the stories are significant. Many stories in the bible are organized in such a way to invite comparison and contrast between them, even the structure of whole books like the Gospel of John. The Lord knows that the primary way we learn is by comparison and contrast. A gifted bible teacher I know once taught me that when you are trying to understand a passage, it is very helpful to read the passage or story before it and the one after it and compare them to see how they are similar or different. It helps you to identify common phrases or ideas or deliberate contrasts.

Take for example the Gospel of John. The writer tells us in John 20:30-31 that the stories and details included in this gospel were all carefully chosen. In chapter 3, Jesus is in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and He has a lengthy conversation with a man named Nicodemus, who is a highly respected religious leader and teacher of the law. In chapter 4 on His journey back home to Galilee from the feast, Jesus is compelled to go through Samaria which many Jews avoided because their peoples did not get along. There, He has another lengthy conversation at a well with an unknown Samaritan woman, who has no status or reputation other than a negative one. Elsewhere, He had told His disciples to not go to Samaritans or others, but only to the house of Israel. This passage even tells us His disciples were shocked to see Jesus talking privately with not only a Samaritan, but a woman. Why is this conversation with the Samaritan woman included here? For one thing, it presents a striking contrast to the conversation with Nicodemus. They are the two main stories in this section of John (Ch. 2:12 – Ch. 4) and are intended to be compared and contrasted.

As noted, Nicodemus was an Israelite (God's chosen people) and a respected religious leader, "the teacher of Israel." She was a Samaritan woman, who had had 5 husbands and was living with a sixth who was not her husband. The Samaritans were a mixed blood race (Jew & gentile) that were looked down upon by the Jews. They did not accept most of the Jewish scripture (only the first 5 books) and did not worship at the Jewish temple. Nicodemus came to Jesus and asked Him questions. Jesus seems to have orchestrated the meeting with the woman, and He initiates the conversation with her. When you have time, read these two stories in John 3 & 4 again and compare them. Do you see any other similarities or differences?

It is remarkable, that these two very different people were both able to have a personal conversation with the Lord, and He offered to both of them eternal life, but in different ways. We are not told how Nicodemus responded to the conversation though he later defended Jesus and may have become a believer. However, the Samaritan woman who did not know the truth and seemed to be the last person Jesus would ever use to spread His gospel became a paratrooper evangelist. She put down her water pot (symbolic of her need – having to come draw water day after day that never fully satisfied) and went into the town the apostles had just come from to find food. She witnessed simply based on her experience with Jesus and brought the whole town out to him. Jesus used her actions to teach the apostles (Ch. 4:32-42). Amazing.

Why is this story in the bible? It is in fact a mini picture orchestrated by the Lord's own actions of what he would eventually do in God's plan of redemption – namely finding His bride, the church. In chapter 2, He went to a wedding and told His mother in effect that their relationship was about to change (note people were thirsty there also – the wine ran out). He was starting His ministry to seek a bride – "He who has the bride is the bridegroom" John the Baptist would say (Ch. 3:29). As pictured in this section, the Jews generally would not receive Him (Ch. 3:32, 4:1-Pharisees becoming wary of Him), and He would go outside of the House of Israel to another people (the church-made up of Jews and gentiles). To them He would offer the gift of the living water – The Holy Spirit (see Ch. 7:37-39), and they would receive Him as "the Savior of the world" (Ch. 4:41-42, Ch. 1:11-12). Those who do receive Him and His gift will never thirst again forever (spiritual thirst, not physical), because they have a well of water springing up within them to eternal life. Finally, He does not want to use great theologians to share this good news, He wants to use you and me. That woman and the Samaritans picture us. There are similarities or common threads among all the stories in Ch. 2 – 4 such as the emphasis on the Lord's words and the importance of hearing Him. God's word is a treasure trove of amazing and beautiful truths that He wants us to find. We encourage you to dig this month.