

## ***Finding the Satisfied Life (2)*** **John 4:27-42**

His parents were addicted to alcohol. His childhood was one of neglect and need and much poverty. He had very little schooling in the formal sense of the word. He spent much of his childhood stealing bread and milk and searching for scraps of food in garbage bins. By the age of 12 he was a state ward.

Things became even worse during his teenage years. He became a heavy drinker himself. Among other things, he worked as a look-out for those who ran illegal gambling establishments. At age 15, he was sent to gaol.

No real family life. No education. No money. No work skills. No prospects of employment. No future. Would you have recognised him as being ripe for harvest – as someone God would have in His kingdom? Yet, after such an unpromising beginning, Arthur Stace became a Christian in his mid-40s. He then wrote the word *eternity* on the footpaths of Sydney's streets – it's estimated over 500,000 times. He quietly and faithfully did the work God had for him to do. Some 70 years later, that word adorned the Sydney Harbour Bridge as the climax of the New Year's Fireworks Display.

Would you have recognised him as ripe for harvest? On the other hand, would you have recognised this Samaritan woman as being a person ripe for harvest?

### **People Coming and Going**

We've spent two weeks thinking about this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4. That

conversation's finished – it finished at verse 26 – but the narrative goes on. Back in verse 8 we're told Jesus' disciples went *into the town to buy food*. Now, in verse 27, they reappear:

*Just then His disciples returned and were surprised to find Him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"*

Notice that their surprise isn't so much that He's talking to a Samaritan woman, but that He's talking to any woman. That was their culture. What Jesus did in striking up this conversation with this woman didn't fit – it was outside the social conventions. Why they don't ask Jesus about it we're not told. Anyway, the disciples are now back.

In verse 28, the woman leaves the scene:

*Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" They came out of the town and made their way toward Him.*

Why does she leave the water jar?

- Some suggest she forgets it in her excitement.
- Others suggest she leaves it for Jesus to use to get water – after all, He did ask her for a drink.

John doesn't tell us the reason.

What he does tell us is Jesus impresses her. This woman is a social outcast. She comes alone to the well in the scorching heat of the day. Now she goes back into her village and tells everyone about this man she's met. And, what's more, they pay attention to her. The social outcast actually manages to convince them to check out this stranger for themselves. We see their response a little

later.

### True Nourishment

In the meantime, Jesus is alone with His disciples. He uses the opportunity to teach them a couple of things. First, about food and nourishment. Verse 31:

*Meanwhile His disciples urged Him, "Rabbi, eat something."*

*But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."*

*Then His disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought Him food?"*

*"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work."*

Do you see how this parallels the conversation with the woman?

- Jesus asks her for a drink. When she expresses her surprise that He spoke to her, He responds with a cryptic statement about giving living water. She misunderstands. She assumes the physical level. Jesus then explains the true meaning of the water He offers.
- Similarly, Jesus asks His disciples to go and get some food. They come back with some, but Jesus makes this cryptic comment about having food they don't know about. They misunderstand. They assume the physical level. Jesus then explains the true meaning of the food He's talking about.

It was the same with Nicodemus as well – he wanted to take *born again* at the physical level. It was the same with the Jewish leaders – they wanted to take *the temple* at the physical level.

It's a common problem. We humans think and operate at this physical level. It seems natural. It determines our priorities. Even when dealing with Jesus, we try to fit Him into this framework. We interpret Him according to our view of things – according to our needs and our wants and our priorities. It's a fatal approach. Jesus pushes people beyond that.

Here, Jesus reflects on the words of Deuteronomy 8:3. Moses speaks to the Israelites when they're about to enter the land God promised them. He reminds them to be careful to follow God's commands. He says:

*He [God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*

We humans tend to place significant emphasis on the so-called necessities of life – food and drink. We consider them important to our existence. And Moses was talking about basic foods – not pizza and coke! We recognise that, without these basic necessities, we'll quickly die.

Moses says there's something even more basic to our existence – namely, God's word. Moses says they should realise that. How did they survive in the desert?

- Was it by planting crops and harvesting?
- Was it by grinding flour and baking bread?
- Was it by digging wells and drawing up water?

No. It was by God's word. God provided manna each day. God provided water in some rather spectacular ways. God's not limited by our natural thinking.

Now, Moses isn't saying these other activities are wrong.

When they entered the land, God expected them to plant crops and dig wells. They had to do that. But, the more fundamental thing is to pay attention to God's word. It's the source of true nourishment. If they forget that – if they turn away from God's word – then they abandon the source of true life.

Suppose some anti-God dictator has you in prison. He offers you a choice.

- Stick to your belief in God – keep acknowledging Him – and I won't give you any food and drink; or
- Abandon your belief in God – curse Him – and I'll feed you at my banquets for the rest of your life.

At the physical level, the choice seems natural. We need food and drink to live. What good is it if we abandon God and die in the process? What's left then?

But that's the point. There is something left. Reality is more than the physical. Physical death is not the worst thing. Physical death is not the end. The real choice is:

- Abandon your belief in God and live the rest of your life on earth in luxury and then suffer God's judgment forever; or
- Stick to your belief in God now and die and enjoy eternal life with God forever.

God's word is what counts – more than what we call the basic necessities.

Jesus says much the same. True nourishment comes from doing God's will.

*My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work."*

For Him, "there was greater sustenance and satisfaction in

that than in any food the disciples could offer Him".<sup>1</sup> This is His priority – and He's teaching His disciples that it should be theirs as well.

Isn't it the same lesson He's just taught the woman? He exposed the deep emptiness and dissatisfaction at the core of her being. She had a desperate spiritual thirst. She tried to satisfy at the natural level – with physical things. It didn't work. She needed the living water Jesus offers. Now we see the flip side with this talk about hunger. How do you satisfy the soul's deep spiritual hunger? What food's available to deal with that? It won't be found on the shelves of a Samaritan supermarket. It can't be purchased with money. It requires spiritual food – doing God's will and completing the work He gives. That's the priority.

Many people are content to live at the physical level – to approach life that way. For them life's all about working, eating and drinking, relaxing, spending time with friends. Their priorities are their own comfort and personal security. That's how they occupy themselves. It just seems the natural way to live. They're not particularly aware of any spiritual hunger. They don't bother about reality. They focus only on the material. That's the level at which the disciples approach Jesus. Jesus says it's not good enough. They need to look beyond that. There's much more to our existence than that – stuff that's far more important.

*My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work."*

For Jesus, God's work led to the cross and an agonising physical death. Yet, He kept going. He looked beyond

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<sup>1</sup> D.A.Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (IVP: Leicester, 1991) 228.

the physical to the reality. He lived by God's word. He finished the work God gave Him to do. John 17:4

*I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work You gave Me to do.*

And on the cross, as He dies, He says: *It is finished*. This was His word of triumph.

Where do you look for satisfaction? Do you have a deep desire to do God's will – to complete the work He gives? Is this a priority for you? Do you see this as your true nourishment? If not, are you willing to ask God to give you this gift? For our anti-God dictator comes with a far more subtle offer than the one I put up before. He says:

Keep your belief in God – just don't let it control your life. Keep it in perspective. Talk to Him. Let Him have a room in your life. Keep Him happy by doing a few of the things He says. But don't go overboard – don't sell out to Him such that you always do what He wants. If you do that for me, I'll make life comfortable for you. You can have fine food and a nice house. You can have time for TV and the movies. You can enjoy your holidays however you want.

Food and drink are important to our physical lives on this earth. But even more important is doing God's will. This word of Jesus challenges our value systems. We don't usually think it's good to deny ourselves food and drink. That's the way we naturally think. We have good reason to think like that – at the physical level. Why don't we have the same attitude at the spiritual level – when it comes to God's will? Why don't we value that spiritual nourishment above the value we give physical nourishment? After all, God says it's far more important. Do we find a deep satisfaction in completing the work God gives

us? And if not, why not?

## Harvesting

Especially important in doing God's will is the harvest – for that's what Jesus immediately addresses. Verse 35:

*Do you not say, "Four months more and then the harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying, "One sows and another reaps" is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.*

This is a priority for Jesus.

Jesus quotes two sayings here.

- The first: *four months more and then the harvest*. It usually takes four months from the time of sowing until you get the crop. You sow, and then you have to wait.
- The second saying: *one sows and another reaps*. Different people have different abilities and do different jobs – but they're all necessary to put food on the table. If you don't sow, you won't reap. If you don't reap, why bother sowing?

Presumably, they were common sayings about farming.

But Jesus isn't talking about wheat or barley. Jesus talks about a different harvest altogether – harvesting people for God's kingdom.

- The first saying He uses by way of contrast. It may still be four months before the wheat's ready, but people are ready now. People are ripe now. The

reapers are already out in the fields. It's time to gather people for God's kingdom.

- The second saying He uses by way of comparison. The spiritual seed's already sown. It was done by others – people like the prophets and John the Baptist. That was their task. They've got the crop ready. You now get to go and reap. That's your task.

We still live in harvest time. It's still the time for gathering people into God's kingdom. Now is the time when the living water's available. This is the result of Jesus completing His work.

- He died for our sins. He took our place. He paid our penalty.
- He did what was necessary for God to forgive us – for God to have a right relationship with us.
- He provides us the option of giving up our rebellion and joining God's side.

That's the message. That's the living water. That's what's to be offered to people.

And Jesus says: the fields are ready for harvest. People are ripe for this message. People thirst for living water. People want to get right with God. It's time to reap. As you look around Bathurst today, do you see that? Do you see the potential for reaping for God's kingdom?

In 1975, James Engel and Wilbert Norton wrote a book called *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* Catchy title isn't it? I think that's how some of us feel these days. We look at our world and it looks so different to us. We don't see people ripe for the message. We don't see people with deep spiritual thirst. And we come up with all sorts

of excuses for them.

- It's all those atheists. They've become more prominent. They're more vocal. They lead so many astray. They're wrecking the harvest.
- It's the sexual revolution bunch. They've got everyone hooked on sex. They hijacked the media. They get everyone thinking this is normal. They've given God such bad press – no one's interested anymore.
- It's the pressure of modern society. It's just so hard on young people these days – so much choice and so many different temptations. They've got lots to do and lots to cope with. The water just doesn't look as appealing these days.

There are just all sorts of groups we can blame for wrecking the harvest. They've trampled the crop, set fire to the fields and sent in a plague of locusts. The only thing left is weeds. It's no wonder we can't find anyone interested.

They're really excuses for us. We need to come back to what Jesus says. He says the harvest is ready. On a different occasion, in Matthew 9:37, He said:

*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.*

He doesn't seem to think there's anything wrong with the harvest. We need to take His words seriously. We must resist the temptation to think the grass was greener back then – or greener somewhere else in the world today.

Jesus says the harvest is ready. He doesn't say it won't be hard work. It was hard work in New Testament times. Sure, you can read the stories of mass conversions – like the 3000 on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. But there's a lot of other stuff as well.

- Turn over a couple of pages and you find Peter and John (two apostles, no less) being hauled up before the authorities and told not to tell people about Jesus. They still do – and so a couple of pages later they're severely whipped.
- Or read the list of things in 2 Corinthians 11 – things that happened to Paul because he tried to reap: whippings, beatings, imprisonments, a stoning – and so the list goes on.

Jesus didn't say it would be easy. But through all this, harvesting went on. People drank the living water.

So what's it mean for you and I today? Well, what's your model for harvesting? Some people have the Australian model – the farmer gets up on his John Deere, drives up and down his paddock and collects the crop. The pastor gets up on his pulpit, pours out the living water and collects a huge harvest. That's not the model Jesus had in mind. The crop for harvest isn't growing in the church – it's growing outside the church. The reapers need to get out into the fields – they need to get out to where the harvest is. Maybe the problem's not with the harvest – maybe the problem is the reapers are in the wrong place. Or the reapers are in the right place but they don't realise they're in the harvest field. Or they go to the harvest field for some purpose other than reaping because their priority isn't to do the work God has for them to do.

Let me suggest five simple things to help you reap.

- First, you need to know some non-Christians. One difficulty Christians have is that the longer they've been Christians the less non-Christians they usually know. I know this problem firsthand. I've said to you before that I need to work on this in Bathurst –

but I haven't done it yet. It's very hard to reap if you're not in the fields. We need to work hard at making significant contact with non-Christians. For some of you, the contact will be at work or school – you need to work on your relationships with people there. If you're like me, you have to find other avenues.

- Secondly, you may have to give up something to do this – even something you personally enjoy. But remember, true nourishment comes from doing God's will.
- Thirdly, you should pray for the non-Christians you know. Being *born again* is God's work. You and I can't change people's hearts – only God can do that. Only God can give spiritual life. And so we need to ask Him to graciously do that in relation to our non-Christian friends.
- Fourthly, it means having a basic working knowledge of the gospel. Suppose your neighbour said to you: "What must I do to be saved?" – would you know what to say? If someone at work asked: "How do I become a Christian?" – would you be able to tell them?
- Fifthly, you should have confidence in the gospel. The Bible says the gospel's the power of God for salvation. God uses this message to change lives – to quench deep spiritual thirst. Do you believe that? Jesus says the fields are ready for harvest. Do you believe that?

As Jesus tells the disciples these things, what's happening in the background? The Samaritans in this town are coming out to meet Jesus. Why are they doing that? Is it because Jesus went in and invited them out? Is it because

the disciples passed out a few fliers while they got food for Jesus? No. It's because of the woman. She found the answer for her thirst in Jesus. She told others about it. They came to check it out. The result? Verse 39:

*Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to Him, they urged Him to stay with them, and He stayed two days. And because of His words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world."*

There was a harvest.

This passage challenges us with two questions.

- Do we see the work God's given us to do as a crucial priority?
- Is the harvest squarely on our radar?

Will you commit yourself afresh to both those things?