

Homiletics Analysis: John 4:1–42

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

John 4:1–42 narrates Jesus’ deliberate journey through Samaria and his extended conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. The passage unfolds in three movements: the conversation between Jesus and the woman (vv. 1–26), the disciples’ return and Jesus’ teaching on harvest (vv. 27–38), and the Samaritans’ response and confession (vv. 39–42). Jesus initiates across every cultural, ethnic, religious, and moral boundary — Jew/Samaritan, male/female, holy/morally compromised — and in doing so dismantles every substitute the woman has placed her hope in: geographic sacred sites, ancestral religion, serial relationships, and theological evasion. The passage moves from a woman who came alone to draw water in the heat of the day to a woman who left her water jar and brought a city. The harvest metaphor of verses 34–38 interprets the entire encounter missiologically: Jesus has been doing the Father’s will in this very conversation, and the disciples are being commissioned into a harvest they did not plant.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two related effects through this passage. First, he is confronting every reader with the insufficiency of every substitute for Christ — religious heritage, relational fulfillment, ethnic identity, theological sophistication — and calling them to drink the living water that ends all thirsting. Second, he is commissioning his people into a harvest that is already ripe, already underway, already belonging to the Father’s agenda — and he is doing so by showing that the harvest begins precisely where human barriers say it cannot. The reader is meant to leave this passage both exposed in their own substitute thirsting and sent into a world of people who are thirsting in exactly the same way.

Subject Sentence: Jesus, the true water and the true worshiped, alone satisfies the soul’s deepest thirst and crosses every barrier to do so.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every false source of life and every dividing barrier through Jesus Christ, and calling his people — exposed in their own need and astonished by grace — to join the harvest already underway among the most unlikely people in the most unlikely places.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of “living water” (v. 10)

A common misreading, often found in popular preaching, treats the woman’s misunderstanding in verse 11 as naive literalism and moves on. But John’s Gospel is structured precisely around such misunderstandings (cf. Nicodemus in ch. 3, the disciples in ch. 4, the crowd in ch. 6) — the misunderstanding is not incidental; it is the hinge. The woman hears a physical promise; Jesus is making a spiritual claim; and the gap between the two is the very gap the passage is designed to expose in every reader. The “living water” (Greek: *hydōr zōn*) carries a double meaning John exploits deliberately: running water (physical) and water that gives life (spiritual). To flatten this to a simple correction of a simple misunderstanding is to miss John’s literary purpose. The Reformed reading holds that this is John’s characteristic device — misunderstanding followed by deeper disclosure — designed to show that Jesus’ claims exceed every natural category.

The woman’s five husbands (vv. 16–18)

Several homiletical traditions, particularly in popular evangelical preaching, have psychologized this passage heavily: the woman is “looking for love in all the wrong places”; the five husbands represent “five broken relationships”; the sermon becomes a therapeutic exploration of relational dysfunction. This is not wrong to the extent that the text does reveal moral disorder and its consequences. However, a more carefully exegetical reading recognizes that Jesus does not dwell on the woman’s sin — he names it, she acknowledges it obliquely, and the conversation moves immediately to the nature of true worship. Jesus is not conducting a counseling session; he is using the disclosure of her condition to establish his prophetic identity and to confront the totality of her failed sources of life. The Keller/idol-diagnosis lens is more accurate here: the five husbands and the current man are not merely moral failures — they are substitutes for what only Jesus can provide. The Reformed reading resists both moralistic dwelling on the sin and therapeutic psychologizing, and instead follows Jesus’ own movement: quick, penetrating diagnosis of need → immediate redirection toward himself as the answer.

The worship debate (vv. 20–24) — Samaritan vs. Jewish claims

Some Dispensational readings treat verse 21 (“neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem”) as a prophetic statement about the Temple’s destruction, making the passage primarily about eschatological transition. This reading has some canonical merit — the Temple’s obsolescence is a genuine Johannine theme (2:19–21) — but it misplaces the emphasis. Jesus’ point is not about geography becoming irrelevant at a future date; it is about the nature of true worship as already and now being reconstituted in himself. “The hour is coming, and is now here” (v. 23) — the *and is now here* is essential and must not be collapsed into a purely future reference. The Samaritan five-book canon issue (they accepted only the Pentateuch) underlies the woman’s deflection in verse 20 but need not dominate the exposition. The governing claim is that worship in Spirit and truth is not a new ethnic or geographic category — it is a new kind of worship, centered on the One who is

himself the truth and who gives the Spirit. The Reformed reading holds that this is already-and-not-yet inaugurated: the new covenant mode of worship has arrived in the person of Christ, and the church lives now in that mode.

Verse 42 — “the Savior of the world”

This is one of the most theologically loaded titles in John’s Gospel. Wesleyan/Arminian traditions will emphasize the universal scope of this title as evidence for unlimited atonement — Christ is available to all without exception. Reformed exposition must not minimize the universality of the title while affirming the particularity of effectual calling. The title does not appear in a theological treatise; it appears on the lips of Samaritan villagers who have believed (v. 41). The universal scope of the title is displayed through a particular act of saving: these Samaritans, despised outsiders in the Jewish religious economy, confessing Jesus as Savior. The Reformed reading takes the title with full seriousness — Jesus is not merely a tribal Jewish messiah but the Savior of the world — while grounding its application in the actual believing community that confesses it. The point is not doctrinal scope but missiological range: the Savior’s saving reaches precisely where human religious exclusion has said it cannot.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 55:1–3** — “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters” — the prophetic invitation that Jesus embodies and fulfills; the free offer of what money cannot buy prefigures the living water offered without condition to an outcast woman.
 - **Jeremiah 2:13** — “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” — the diagnostic backdrop for the entire passage; every substitute the woman has tried is a broken cistern; Jesus is the fountain being rejected and now re-offered.
 - **John 7:37–39** — Jesus’ cry on the last day of the feast: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” — the same living water claim made publicly; the narrator’s identification of it with the Spirit grounds John 4’s offer in trinitarian reality.
 - **Romans 10:12–13** — “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him” — the theological articulation of what Jesus enacts at the well; the barrier-crossing of John 4 is not a one-off exception but the pattern of the gospel.
 - **Revelation 21:6; 22:17** — “To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment” / “let the one who is thirsty come” — the eschatological fulfillment of what Jesus offers at the well; the living water offer at Jacob’s well is the first installment of the new creation’s inexhaustible supply.
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Aim: To expose every listener’s false sources of life, confront them with Jesus as the only water that truly satisfies, and send them into the harvest with the urgency and boundary-crossing confidence of the Savior himself.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Jesus learns the Pharisees have heard of his growing following; he leaves Judea for Galilee	Sets the stage for a deliberate journey — not escape but mission
4	“He had to pass through Samaria”	The <i>dei</i> (had to/must) signals divine necessity, not geographical inevitability — the route was routinely avoided by Jews
5–6	Arrival at Sychar, Jacob’s well; Jesus is tired; it is the sixth hour (noon)	Weariness is real — the incarnation is fully in view; noon = the woman’s isolation; other women came in the cool of the day
7	A Samaritan woman comes to draw water; Jesus asks for a drink	The initiative is entirely Jesus’ — across every cultural barrier simultaneously
8	The disciples have gone into the city to buy food	Sets up the disciples’ return as a separate movement
9	The woman’s astonishment: “You are a Jew and ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?”	She names three barriers: ethnicity, gender, historical enmity; John adds the narrator’s note about Jewish-Samaritan relations
10	Jesus: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is speaking to you, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water”	First major disclosure — gift, identity, living water; the condition (“if you knew”) is the hinge of the entire passage
11–12	The woman: you have no bucket, the well is deep — are you greater than our	Misunderstanding (John’s characteristic device); she tests with an ancestry

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	father Jacob?	argument — Jacob gave us this well; can you do better?
13–14	Jesus: everyone who drinks this water will thirst again; whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst; it will become a spring welling up to eternal life	The contrast is absolute — all earthly substitutes = temporary; Jesus' water = permanent, self-replenishing, eternal
15	The woman: sir, give me this water so I won't have to come here to draw	Still on the physical level — but the desire is real; Jesus does not rebuke the misunderstanding but works through it
16–18	Jesus: go call your husband / I have no husband / you have had five husbands, and the one you have is not your husband	Sudden shift — prophetic exposure of her whole life; he does not dwell, he diagnoses; she confirms: "you said truly"
19–20	The woman: I perceive you are a prophet — our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say Jerusalem	Evasion? Or genuine theological question? Probably both; she changes the subject but raises the right question
21–24	Jesus: the hour is coming (and is now here) when true worshipers will worship in Spirit and truth; God is Spirit; he seeks such people	The definitive teaching on worship — not geographic, not ethnic, not ritualistic; Spirit and truth = the Holy Spirit and Jesus himself who is the truth (14:6)
25	The woman: I know that Messiah is coming; when he comes, he will tell us all things	She reaches the edge of her own theological category
26	Jesus: "I who speak to you am he"	The only unambiguous Messianic self-disclosure in John's Gospel to this point — given to a Samaritan woman in private
27	The disciples return, marveling — but no one asks	Their silence is significant; the text names their astonishment and their

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		restraint
28–29	The woman leaves her water jar, goes to the city: “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”	The water jar left behind = she has found what she came for; her testimony is exactly Jesus’ method — come and see (1:39, 46)
30	The people went out of the city and were coming to him	The harvest approaching
31–34	Disciples urge Jesus to eat; Jesus: “I have food to eat that you do not know about” / “my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work”	Second misunderstanding (disciples this time); the Johannine device again; Jesus’ mission = his nourishment; the Father’s will = the harvest just underway
35	“Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest”	The Samaritans approaching = the white fields; the harvest is now, not later; the disciples are looking at their food, not the mission
36–38	The reaper receives wages and gathers fruit for eternal life; one sows, another reaps; you are entering others’ labor	The missional economy: the disciples did not initiate, they are entering a harvest others (Jesus, the woman, the prophets) have prepared
39	Many Samaritans believed because of the woman’s testimony: “He told me all that I ever did”	The converted testify; the testimony is personal and specific, not doctrinal abstraction
40	The Samaritans ask Jesus to stay; he stays two days	The Savior of the world abides with the formerly excluded
41	Many more believed because of his word	Testimony opens the door; the word closes the deal — faith that rests on Christ’s own word is full faith
42	“We know that this is indeed the Savior of the world”	The climax confession — not just our Messiah, not just a Jewish figure: the Savior of

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		the world, confessed by Samaritans

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Necessary Journey: Divine Compulsion Toward the Excluded
2	7–15	The Gift Unrecognized: Living Water Offered Across Every Barrier
3	16–20	The Life Exposed: Prophetic Diagnosis of Every Broken Cistern
4	21–26	The Worship Reconstituted: Spirit, Truth, and the Messiah Disclosed
5	27–38	The Harvest Already Underway: The Father’s Will and the Ripe Fields
6	39–42	The Confession of the World: Samaritans Declare the Savior

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Jesus, the true water and the true worshiped, alone satisfies the soul’s deepest thirst and crosses every barrier to do so.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every false source of life and every dividing barrier through Jesus Christ, and calling his people — exposed in their own need and astonished by grace — to join the harvest already underway among the most unlikely people in the most unlikely places.

Applications (Five)

1. Identify your water jar — the thing you are carrying to the well that will not satisfy. (*Mind/belief*) The woman came to the well at noon carrying a water jar and carrying five

failed relationships and one present compromise. She had not stopped thirsting; she had changed water sources. Before this passage can send you anywhere, it must stop you in front of your own water jars: the achievement you are drawing from, the relationship you are depending on for identity, the theological correctness you are resting your standing on, the religious heritage you are treating as sufficient. Jesus' question to her is his question to you: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is speaking to you, you would have asked." The gift is available. The question is whether you know you need it and whether you know who is offering it.

2. Let Jesus name what is broken before you deflect to theological controversy.

(Affections/worship) The woman's move in verse 20 — "our fathers worshiped on this mountain" — is a recognizable move. When Jesus gets close to the actual disorder of a life, the instinct is to raise a doctrinal question. The question she raises is not wrong — it is the right question, and Jesus answers it fully. But it is also evasion, and Jesus knows it. The affectional application here is this: allow the passage to do what Jesus did — come close, name what is actually there, and sit with the exposure rather than immediately escaping into abstraction. Grief, not cleverness, is the appropriate first response to prophetic disclosure. The woman eventually drops her water jar. That dropping is an act of the affections, not just the will.

3. Worship God in Spirit and in truth — which means worship him as he actually is, not as your tradition has made him comfortable. *(Mind/belief)* "God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth." The "must" is as demanding as it is liberating. It liberates from geography and ethnicity — no mountain, no city, no heritage, no liturgical form is the condition of access. But it demands that worship be genuinely Spirit-animated and genuinely truth-oriented — not culturally comfortable, not aesthetically satisfying, not ethnically familiar. The Samaritan woman's religious tradition was half-right (she worshiped the same God) and deeply wrong (she did not worship in full truth — "salvation is from the Jews," v. 22). The application is not "worship however feels right" but "let the Spirit and the truth — Jesus himself — define the shape and content of your worship, not your background or your preferences."

4. Leave your water jar and go tell someone specifically what Jesus showed you about yourself. *(Will/behavior)* The woman's witness is the most direct application in the passage. She does not offer a theological lecture. She does not wait until she has more information. She does not clean up her reputation first. She leaves the water jar — the thing she came for, the thing that occupied her — and she goes and says: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" Her testimony is personal, specific, and self-implicating. It is precisely the testimony Jesus asks for from anyone who has encountered him. The behavioral application is concrete: identify one person, in the specific geography of your life, to whom you can say the equivalent of "come and see" — and whose thirst is already visible to you, even if they do not name it as thirst.

5. Lift your eyes and see the white fields — the harvest is already ripe among the people you have been trained to overlook. *(Affections/worship)* The disciples returned

from buying food in a Samaritan city. They walked through the people who were about to confess Jesus as Savior of the world. They were thinking about lunch. Jesus says: “Lift up your eyes.” The affectional and missiological application is not primarily about strategy or method — it is about desire and perception. The disciples did not hate Samaritans; they just did not see them as the harvest. The question this passage presses on every congregation is: who are the Samaritans in your geography — the people your tradition, your ethnic comfort zone, your theological tribe, your social class has told you are outside the reach of the gospel — and what would it mean to lift your eyes and see them as white fields, already ready, already approaching?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This passage is a comprehensive disclosure of Jesus’ identity and mission. He presents himself simultaneously as the gift of God (v. 10), the living water (v. 14), the prophetic knower of the human heart (v. 17–18), the ground of true worship (v. 23–24), and the Messiah (v. 26) — and the Samaritans confess him as Savior of the world (v. 42). This is not a string of titles; it is a unified claim about who Jesus is in relation to every form of human thirst and every human barrier. The theology of worship that emerges in verses 21–24 is among the most significant in the New Testament: worship is reconstituted in Jesus himself, available to all, demanded of all, and defined by the Spirit and the truth — both of which are christologically grounded in John’s Gospel (14:6, 16–17). The passage also displays what it means for the Son to live by the Father’s will (v. 34): his food, his nourishment, his purpose is to accomplish the Father’s saving agenda — and that agenda reaches precisely where human exclusion says it cannot.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: John 4 is a sustained display of the sovereign grace that initiates, crosses, and converts. Jesus does not wait for the woman to come to him — he waits at the well and speaks first. He does not wait for her to meet conditions — he offers the gift before she understands it. He does not limit the offer by her moral history — he names her history only to show that he knows her completely and offers living water completely. This is the architecture of grace: God acts first, crosses every barrier, exposes every counterfeit, offers himself freely, and produces faith. The harvest metaphor of verses 36–38 grounds Reformed missiology: the disciples reap where others have sowed; the results belong to God; the laborers are commissioned, not self-appointed. The confession of verse 42 — “the Savior of the world,” spoken by Samaritans — is the Reformed insistence that election and covenant are never tribal, that the gospel is never captured by any ethnic or cultural expression of the church, and that the living water flows wherever the Spirit blows (cf. John 3:8). The passage thus displays grace as sovereign, as particular in its work (this woman, these Samaritans), and as universal in its scope (the Savior of the *world*).

Main Takeaway

You are standing at the same well as that woman — carrying whatever you have been drawing from that has not ended your thirst. Jesus is already there. He already knows everything about you. And he is offering, not demanding — offering the water that, if you drink it, means you will never thirst again. Leave the jar. Go tell someone. The fields are already white.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Making the woman's sin the main point.** This is perhaps the most common mishandling of this passage. The five husbands become the sermon, the woman becomes a cautionary tale or a therapeutic case study, and the passage ends up being about relational dysfunction rather than about Jesus. Jesus himself does not dwell there. He names it, she confirms it, and the conversation moves immediately to worship and identity. The preacher who spends more time on the woman's sin than Jesus does has inverted the passage's emphasis. The sin is load-bearing only as diagnosis — the cure is the point.
- **Flattening the misunderstanding dialogue into a simple correction.** John's Gospel is architecturally built on misunderstandings that serve as vehicles for deeper disclosure. The woman's literalism in verse 11, the disciples' confusion in verse 33, are not mistakes to be corrected and moved past — they are windows. The preacher who moves through these exchanges too quickly loses the very device John uses to draw the reader in. The congregation should feel the gap between what the woman hears and what Jesus means — because they are meant to feel that same gap in themselves.
- **Treating “worship in Spirit and truth” as primarily a worship-style debate.** This text is routinely drafted into contemporary worship wars — contemporary vs. traditional, formal vs. informal, sung vs. spoken. This is a category error. Jesus is not adjudicating between worship styles. He is announcing that the entire geographic-ethnic-ritual structure of access to God has been reconstituted in himself. “Spirit and truth” in John's theological vocabulary means the Holy Spirit and Jesus who is the truth. The application is not “worship authentically” — it is “worship the one who is the truth, animated by the Spirit he gives.”
- **Missing the missiological movement of verses 27–38.** Many expositions treat the passage as ending at verse 26 (the Messianic disclosure) and treat the harvest material as a separate, loosely attached teaching. But the harvest material is the interpretive frame for the entire encounter. The disciples' confusion about food, Jesus' statement about his food being the Father's will, and the image of the white

fields all function to show the reader what has just happened at the well: Jesus has been doing the Father's missional work, and the disciples — who went to buy food from the Samaritans without seeing them as the harvest — have just missed the field that is now coming to them. This movement cannot be dropped without losing the passage's missiological claim.

- **Domesticating “the Savior of the world” (v. 42).** The confession of verse 42 is the climax of the passage and among the highest Christological confessions in John's Gospel. It is frequently mentioned in passing without full exposition. The preacher should pause here: who says this? Samaritans — the excluded, the half-right, the wrong-mountain worshipers. What do they say? Not “the Jewish Messiah” or “our deliverer” but “the Savior of the world.” This confession, on these lips, in this location, is John's declaration that the gospel's reach is structurally unlimited and that the church's boundaries can never be drawn to match its cultural or ethnic comfort zone.
- **Preaching the woman as the hero.** Popular exposition frequently celebrates the woman's boldness in witness and turns the passage into a model of personal evangelism with the woman as the exemplar. Her witness is genuine and effective — but she is not the hero. She is the recipient of grace who, having received it, cannot help but tell others. The hero is Jesus — who initiated, who knew, who offered, who disclosed, who stayed. When the woman becomes the hero, the passage becomes moralistic (be bold like her) rather than gospel-shaped (receive what she received, and the witness will follow).