

“Are You In Over Your Head?”

John 4:1-26

Series: Face-to-Face with Jesus Week 3 The Rejected Meet Jesus

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Eight inches is not much. My foot is longer than eight inches. A piece of notebook paper is wider. Eight inches is lunch plate size. And yet up from the darkness of an eight-inch pipe rose the haunting sounds of a child singing nursery rhymes and calling for her Mama. On October 14, 1987, 18-month-old Jessica McClure fell down a water pipe just eight inches in diameter. She descended twenty-two feet and stuck fast. If you suffer from claustrophobia you can almost taste and feel the terror. The air is stale. The walls of the pipe are rusty, dank and painful. The darkness is unbearable.

As rescuers worked round the clock, members of the press descended on Midland. CNN gave continuous coverage. The nation and world were transfixed by their race against time. While the team dug a parallel shaft four feet wide and thirty feet deep they could hear a little girl singing “Winnie the Pooh” from below. The operation dragged on: five hours, ten, fifteen, twenty-four, thirty-six, forty-eight, fifty-eight. Finally, on that third day, the rescuers broke through from below and lifted Baby Jessica, tightly wrapped in bandages, into the fresh air and freedom. All the networks interrupted their programming to alert the nation. Jessica, her family and her saviors appeared in parades, talk shows and at the White House. Chip and Cissy McClure cried and breathed a pent up sigh of relief. It seemed the whole world joined them.

A grown, shrouded woman approaches another well under a burning sun at high noon. She draws water at the hottest time of the day to avoid the stares and scorn of her neighbors. This is the hour when the respectable rest in the shade. Like Baby Jessica, she feels trapped. The long descending shaft of her life is lonely, dark and suffocating. She is so far down below the surface there is no hope of ever seeing daylight again. Yet nobody is even attempting to rescue her.

She’s had five husbands. Five wedding ceremonies. Five times a man spoke love to her or at least pretended to care. All five marriages ended the same. She was used, probably abused, always discarded. Three marriages is the upper limit allowed by upstanding people. She is two steps beyond that boundary. Women do not have the ability to divorce their husbands in her culture. While a breakup may have been her desire in a few of the relationships, it was never her decision. Each time, she was turned out.

Her story keeps its secrets. We’ll never know why each marriage was severed. It would be naïve to assume she played no part in each breakup. But did she deserve this? One thing is certain – five rejections will change you. You become something you’re not, someone you never wanted to be, just to hang on to your lover. Perhaps you lower your standards, discard your morals, sell your self-worth. With each trade off, she kept sinking lower down the dark hole. Instead of coming into the daylight and breathing the free air of acceptance, she slipped deeper with each rejection. Now she lives with a sixth man. He refuses to even grant her the dignity of a wedding. She probably doesn’t care. She’s buried 6 deep. She is in way over her head.

You can't get through life without facing some rejection.

- We're not going to play with you and you can't come to my party.
- I'm sorry but you didn't make the team.
- No, I don't want to go to the prom with you.
- We regret to inform you that we will not be admitting you to our college.
- I think it's time that we started seeing other people.
- Sorry but we went with someone else for the position.
- We're taking our business to another company.
- I don't love you. I don't think I ever loved you.

Probably the most common, deep seated and long lasting rejection comes from parents. A young man won admission to college. Instead of writing a letter of congratulations, his father wrote this note.

Now it is a good thing to put this business very plainly before you. Do not think I am going to take the trouble of writing to you long letters after every folly and failure you commit and undergo. I am certain that if you cannot prevent yourself from leading the idle, useless, unprofitable life you had during your school days, you will become a mere social wastrel, one of the hundreds of the public school failures, and you will degenerate into a shabby, unhappy and futile existence.¹

So wrote Lord Randolph to his son Winston Churchill, the man who led England through the dark days of World War II. His whole life, Churchill ran an endless race to win his father's acceptance.

Rejection literally hurts. Matt Lieberman, a social psychologist at UCLA conducted a study in which volunteers were given a task that caused them to experience social rejection. A brain scan of the volunteers lit up when they were rejected in virtually the same way as a person experiencing physical pain. Dr. Lieberman concluded, "When someone hurts your feelings, it really hurts you. In the English language we describe social pain as being 'kicked-in-the-gut,' a 'broken heart' and 'hurt feelings.' Now we see that there is good reason for this."²

Every time we are rejected we die a little. Some hope or dream or desire is destroyed. We have options:

- Wave it away: "Oh, well, that's life!" Yet it often returns in another form.
- Argue with the one who said, "No." That may feel good, but it rarely changes minds.
- Attack the person verbally or physically: Not a good option.
- Bury it: But the ghosts come back to haunt you.
- Build on it: Turn it into something positive. This works sometimes but it's a shaky foundation.
- Look for acceptance elsewhere: Unfortunately, no person or substance ever satisfies.
- Surrender to the rejection and let it define you.

¹ Jon Meacham, Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship. Random House, c. 2003 New York, New York.

² "Study Finds Rejection Is Literally a Huge Pain," Chicago Tribune (10-10-03);

Marilyn Monroe is a Hollywood icon, a screen goddess. But before all the bright lights and stardom, when she was just Norma Jean Baker, she was shuffled from one foster home to another, suffering a good deal of abuse along the way. A reporter from the New York Times once asked,

“Did you ever feel loved by any of the foster families with whom you lived?”
“Once,” Marilyn replied, “when I was about seven or eight. The woman I was living with was putting on makeup, and I was watching her. She was in a happy mood, so she reached over and patted my cheeks with her rouge puff...For that moment, I felt loved by her.”³

Despite her beauty and fame, Marilyn could never escape her ghosts of rejection. She was married three times and died from a drug overdose. Rejection hurts.

The woman approaching the well gave into rejection long ago. Used by men, avoided by her upstanding Samaritan neighbors, she lives in a world of isolation. But this day, she is not alone. There is a stranger sitting on the edge of the well. He’s not Samaritan but Jewish. Like Sunnis and Shiites, Jews and Samaritans worship the same God but despise each other. They don’t talk to each other, eat together or drink together. The proper course for her is to avoid contact, fill her jug and go home. But then He does the unthinkable. He breaks through the barrier by asking her a question. “Will you give me a drink?” (John 4:7) “You are a Jew, I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (John 4:9) she replies tartly. His reply confuses her. “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10). ‘Listen, I’ve known a lot of guys who thought they were God’s gift to women,’ she thinks. But the part about ‘living water’ intrigues her. “Where can you get this living water?” she challenges. “You have no jar, no rope and the well is too deep. Are you better than our father Jacob, the father of all Jews and Samaritans, who gave us this well? How are you going to conjure up this magical water?”

He simply replies, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14). Now it starts to sink in. This Stranger is not talking about jars or ropes or wells or even water. He is not another man trying to proposition her, use her or reject her. He is not asking anything from her. He is offering her something precious. He is reaching down her long dark well with a lifeline. He is attempting to rescue her from years of rejection. He wants to quench her thirst and turn her dry, parched empty life into a bubbling spring of living water. She reaches for His hand: “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water” (John 4:15).

Then suddenly the rescue operation is interrupted. “Go call your husband and come back” (John 4:16). She pulls back. ‘If He finds out my history,’ she thinks, ‘I’m history.’ She can’t escape her past. But she can hide it. “I have no husband,” she replies. “You are right when you say you have no husband,” the Stranger states, “The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite

³ Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Gift of the Blessing* (Thomas Nelson, 1993);

true” (John 4:17-18). She is thunderstruck. This Stranger from another country knows her entire story. All her pain is laid bare. Yet His eyes do not show judgment or rejection.

All the same, she avoids His gaze and changes the subject to theology. “My you are a prophet,” she begins, “Say, I’ve always wondered who’s right. Maybe you can settle this debate for me. Should we worship God here on the Samaritan mountain or on the mountain in Jerusalem where you Jews worship?”

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth. John 4:23-24

‘It is not a matter of the temple on this mountain or the temple on that mountain,’ the Stranger replies, ‘God wants you to truly worship Him in the temple of your heart, where His Spirit wants to dwell.’ She tries one more time to change the subject. “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” With this, Jesus looks directly at her. “I who speak to you – I am he.” John 4:25-26.

Her rescuer has come. She is deep 6 – buried under the rejection and abuse of 6 men and all her neighbors. To raise her up from that dark well, Jesus must lay bare all the rejection that holds her down. He must bring all her shame, guilt and pain into His Light. Jesus discovers, uncovers and discards. He discovers her down the well of rejection, He uncovers all the obstacles that block her rescue and then He discards them and pulls her into the Light. Finally, to take the place of her pain, He promises to fill her with the Holy Spirit: a fresh, bubbling, spring of living water that never runs dry. She leaves her water jug, the symbol of her efforts to run her life on her own power. Then she runs back to town, back to the very men and neighbors who shunned her and shamed her and joyfully tells them of her Savior who pulled her up from the well. Deliverance always involves others – first with Jesus and then with the people in our lives.

Are you in over your head? What well are you in? What rejection keeps you down? Is it from parents, peers, partners? What parches your soul? What pain are you trying to drown or bury? Your Rescuer is calling to you from above. He’s excavating all the rejection and throwing it away. Like Baby Jessica, He will take you out another way: His Way. You must grab His hand so He can pull you into the Light.

Where does Jesus discover you now? What dark hole are you in? Rejection. Resentment. Frustration. Fear. Anxiety. Anger. Doubt. Depression.

What does Jesus uncover? What secrets do you hide? Past hurts and wounds. Abuse. Grief and loss. Addiction. Regrets. Shame and guilt for what you did or what was done to you.

What does Jesus discard? What do you need Him to remove that you can’t?

Now take His hand and let Him lift you out of your dark well into His Light.