

Grace Like Water Flows Downward
What Good is God? by Philip Yancey, Part III
 John 4:5-42
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 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

A woman, we'll call her Hilda, from Costa Rica, formerly a prostitute, living in the United States, tells this story:

I have never told about my mother. My family had no money and so when I was four years old my mother sold me into sexual slavery. While other kids my age went to school I worked in a brothel, earning the high rates paid for young girls. Oh, it was so hard! Every night I cried myself to sleep. And my mother took all the money I earned. As a teenage I got pregnant, not once but twice, and each time my mother took my child from me. "A filthy girl like you cannot raise a child," she said. She made me go back to the brothel. From then on I worked harder, often double shifts, to earn more money to support my children. It was the only way I could show my love for them. All my life I felt ugly and dirty, ashamed. I relied on alcohol and cocaine to dull the pain. I had no reason to live except for my children....(*What Good is God?*, 70-71).

After a terrible beating, Hilda lay in a hospital and prayed to escape prostitution. Then she found the telephone number for the Rahab Foundation.

Rahab was a woman in the Bible, in the Book of Joshua. She was a prostitute. Her story goes like this: Joshua sent two spies to Jerusalem, and Rahab put them up for the night. The town's grapevine quickly spread the word that foreign spies were visiting the town prostitute. So the king sent for the spies. But Rahab hid the spies on her roof, sent the king's men off on a wild goose chase, and went up on the rooftop to strike a deal with the spies. She demanded that when the walls of Jericho were to fall, they would protect her and her extended family. The spies swore by their own lives, "We will be kind to you when the Lord gives us the land." So Rahab sent them on their way with advice how to evade capture. The men told her to gather her family inside her house and to mark the house with the "scarlet rope" that she used to drop them down the outside of the city walls. This red cord was to serve as a signal to all of Israel's soldiers that this was a house that the Lord wanted to protect.

Rahab won God's favor. And she ended up listed as an ancestor in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, a prostitute, no less!

Prostitution has been called the oldest profession. There was a double standard in Bible times: A man—married or not—could go to a prostitute without committing adultery, as long as the prostitute was unmarried. But if the woman were married, she and he, too, would be stoned to death for committing adultery (Deut. 22:22).

In the New Testament, Jesus singles out prostitutes in a positive way, when he says to those who do *not* believe, "Tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Mt. 21:31-32). Even the most despised people, the tax collectors, and the

least respected people, the prostitutes, get to go first. Jesus always rewards the faithful. He doesn't discriminate based on a person's status or even a person's sins. Everyone has a chance to repent and believe, and then they go first before the unfaithful into a life of salvation, a life with meaning and hope.

Today there are 25 million sex workers—that's what prostitutes prefer to be called. The vast majority come from poor countries. Traffickers purchase young women in places like Thailand, the Philippines, and the former Soviet Union and promise glamorous jobs in Asia, Western Europe, and the United States. But there is nothing glamorous about the lives of sex workers. Philip Yancey was asked to speak to a convention of 100 sex workers now in ministry programs, but first he interviewed them. All the sex workers he spoke with had always wanted out of their profession. They talked about being on the bottom of the bottom, the lowest of the low, with no self-respect. They were alone, afraid of violence and crime, drugs and alcohol, afraid of sexually transmitted disease. And they were lonely and without hope. Many had left their own children in their homeland to come to another country where they could work and earn money to send back home to the family. Many felt they simply had no choice but to earn money as sex workers in order to survive.

There is a tremendous migration of women of poverty and women of color to do "women's work"—that is, to be maids, nannies, and sex workers—in affluent countries. Poor countries encourage this because these women bring money back into their economy. Many immigrant women are here in the United States illegally, and, of course, the sex workers are working in a job that is illegal on top of that. And many of the sex workers do not come voluntarily. They are trafficked by smugglers and sold into bondage. It is hard to know how many sex slaves there are because they are hidden from the law. We cannot self-righteously just blame the prostitutes for their immoral behavior. Nor can we blame only the traffickers, though certainly they should be arrested. We must also blame our society (and our part in it) that mistreats poor women and provides a demand for their services. Whereas the third world used to be dependent on affluent countries, now it appears that the affluent countries are in this way dependent on the third-world countries. We are dependent on the labor of poor people, especially women in the case of sex workers (*Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2-13).

When I was younger, I remember hearing the story of "The Woman at the Well." I thought of the woman as someone who had chosen a sinful life, the life of a prostitute. But when I read a fiction version of the story, called *Living Water*, by Obery Hendricks, I began to realize how this unnamed woman in John's Gospel may not have had any choice about the way she had lived. In this historical novel, the woman at the well, named Maryam, first witnesses the Roman soldiers beating the Samaritan men of her village in front of their wives and children, at 12 her father marries her off to a spoiled, lecherous husband who later divorces her under a law that allows a man to cast aside a wife at will. She is an outcast in society, given a derogatory name. With no financial support, Maryam marries another man in order to survive. He dies, she marries again, and again. Two husbands commit suicide. Finally, she lives with a man who is kind to her. She comes to the well at noon, in the heat of the day, to draw water to avoid the other women of the village who draw their water in the cool evening hour. Jesus asks her for a drink—*She* is thirsty for

some good news and yet *he* asks her for a drink from the well. He knows all about her life, and yet what is important to him is not her sin, but that she receive living water, the water that keeps flowing and brings eternal life.

We know so little about the real facts of this woman's life. And we know so little about the real facts of any person's life. Why are we so quick to judge? Didn't Jesus say, when asked about stoning the woman caught committing adultery, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). And didn't Jesus say of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet from the alabaster jar of ointment, "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love" (Luke 7:47). When we open ourselves to God's love, we are forgiven. God's grace is overflowing! Like water, it flows downward, down to the bottom of the bottom. Down to the outcasts and the sex workers and the children of the sex workers.

The woman at the well is changed, not because Jesus reveals her sin, but because Jesus reveals *himself*. He is the Messiah, the anointed one who has come to save the world. She comes to this realization slowly: at first she calls him "a Jew," then "sir," then "a prophet," then "Messiah," and finally the people of her village call him "the Savior of the world." It doesn't matter who she is, or who she was. What matters is who *he* is.

He is the Savior of the world, the bringer of God's grace that flows downward to the lowest of the low.

It may be hard for you to receive this living water, this grace that flows downward to each of us, no matter who we are or what we have done. There may be abuse or addiction or divorce or some failure or disappointment in life that makes you feel unworthy. You may be thirsty for this same living water that Jesus gave the woman at the well.

There is a movie just released that illustrates this thirst for living water. It's the classic, "Jane Eyre," based on the novel by Charlotte Brontë. Jane is an orphan, taken to live with her mean aunt, who belittles and abuses her. She locks her up in "the red room," where her uncle had died. Jane freaks out, and mercifully is sent away to a boarding school. At Lowood School the headmaster and minister, Rev. Brocklehurst, humiliates Jane in front of all the girls, and mistreats the poor children while living an opulent lifestyle with his own family.

Jane is plain, unattractive, and thinks very poorly of herself. All she really wants is to be loved and find a family to belong to. Her search for love and acceptance takes her to Thornfield, to be the governess for a young girl. There she falls in love with the lord of the manor, Mr. Rochester, who treats Jane poorly and yet admits he truly loves her. She consents to marriage, and on the wedding day, Jane learns that he is married to a woman who has a dreadful mental illness, and of course, Mr. Rochester, being married, could not legally marry Jane. Once again, hurt and dejected, Jane leaves.

Next she has a transformative experience—a turning point in the story—when she finds herself completely penniless and alone outdoors on the heath all night long, cold and

hungry. She gazes into the sky and speaks of God as a mother nurturing her. For the first time in her life, she recognizes God's grace, ironically not to be found from the corrupt and conceited ministers in the story, but to be found in being alone with God. She, even she, plain Jane, abandoned, and lonely, is loved by God. This realization turns her life around, and then she finds her family and calling, an inheritance, and, finally, love and marriage.

At Whitcross—a symbolic name, meaning White Cross—on the moor looking out into the night sky, Jane says, in her moment of discovery, "God is everywhere, but certainly we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us; and it is in the unclouded night-sky, where His worlds wheel their silent course, that we read clearest His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence. I had risen to my knees to pray...I felt the might and strength of God. Sure was I of His efficiency to save what He had made: convinced I grew that neither earth should perish, nor one of the souls it treasured. I again nestled to the breast of the hill; and ere long, in sleep, forgot sorrow" (*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, chapter 28).

For Jane Eyre, to "forget sorrow" was to say she knew for the first time that she was a beloved child of God. When we receive Christ's living water, we can forget our sorrow. This water is available for everyone: for the poorest, the lowest, the most vulnerable and afraid. It is the living water that we receive when we accept God's grace. My prayer is that we might find ourselves showered by the living water that flows downward, even to each of us.