

# THE STORY

Adult Sunday School Lesson Guide

Chapter 23

Jesus' Ministry Begins

**Timeless Truth: Jesus - The Messiah you'd never expect.**

## Teacher's Background Notes

Believe. The key word in John's gospel is used 98 times. John the gospel writer wrote so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name." (Jn. 20:31) John wanted to stress the necessity of an active trust in Jesus, the Son of God. Every author chooses material that contributes to his overall purpose for writing his book. While narrative literature includes historical people and events, these people and events are chosen to further a theological point. Certainly not all of Jesus life and ministry are recorded for us in the Bible. John asserts that there were so many other things that Jesus did that he did not record because he simply could not (Jn. 21:25). Therefore, we must analyze what an author included and why. Understanding this makes the details so much more significant.

Option 1 aims to encourage our learners to develop and become comfortable sharing a personal testimony to evangelize others. Two characters in this week's chapter had powerful testimonies that drew others to encounter Jesus. The Samaritan woman stands as an excellent example of a personally humble testimony that points others to the Savior. She focused on who Jesus is and that he knew her. Her witness resulted in both instant and abundant responses from other Samaritans. The leper is a slightly different story. While all three synoptic writers include his story, only Mark mentions Jesus' emotional state. The *Story* (TNIV) says Jesus was indignant. Nearly all translations say Jesus was moved with compassion. There are only five ancient manuscripts with Jesus becoming angry rather than compassionate. There is good reason to support anger as the original but Jesus' compassion is evident in His touching the man. Nevertheless, it is a textual problem to be aware of. The cleansing of the leper was different than Jesus' other healings. Leprosy was considered incurable. Only Miriam and Namaan were cleansed from it, under the godly leadership of Moses and Elisha. Both of these leaders had pre-Messianic miracles and ministries that foreshadowed the coming Christ. This leper saw something in Jesus that made him think Jesus could do that which only God could do.

By sending the man to the priests, Jesus is upholding the Law and challenging the religious establishment to recognize the power of God in Him to cleanse the leper both physically and spiritually. The greater question is why Jesus told the leper to keep it quiet. Jesus was slowly revealing His identity and His mission. His ministry was primarily redemptive. Jesus had the Upper Story plan of redemption in view. It is likely that He did not want His redemptive ministry to be obscured by a healing ministry. How often do people turn to Lord for what He can do for them in the Lower Story circumstances of life rather than turn to Him simply because of Who He is. We need to

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be cautious in our dealings with people and our testimonies that we do not try to sell the Lower Story benefits of Jesus as promises. We trust Him because His redemptive work on our behalf is complete and sufficient for our Upper Story redemption regardless of whether or not our Lower Story circumstances are ever changed. In the Lower Story, we trust Him because He *can* heal but He does not promise He always *will* heal.

In option 2, we take a fresh look at Jesus the Savior of all people. John used two opposite characters to illustrate the truth of 3:16. God’s love for the world reaches from the moral, educated, cleaned-up religious Jew to the nameless, immoral, down-and-out Samaritan. We can almost picture the cross with Nicodemus’s name on one side of the cross bar and Samaritan Woman on the other and Jesus in the middle. We all have one thing in common—our need for eternal life in Christ Jesus. The learning activity in this lesson is applicable to both options. Our Samaritan woman is an example of an effective evangelist. Her experience with Jesus compelled her to tell others of the life available through the Messiah. Most of us are not so bold. Many Christians feel nervous and uncomfortable evangelizing others. But it is a skill that can be developed with practice. Your classroom can serve as a safe laboratory in which to practice a simple testimony.

## Lesson Plan 1: The Power of the Testimony

Never underestimate the power of your testimony. Brian “Head” Welch was the lead guitarist for the nu-metal rock band Korn. He had all the worldly fame, money and success that anyone could want. But he also had a methamphetamine addiction, alcoholism and frequent suicidal thoughts. His personal life was out of control. In 2004, he got invited by a friend to church and they took him in. He went home, started snorting drugs and prayed to the Lord that He would reveal Himself. Within a couple of weeks, Brian’s drug addiction was healed. In 2005, he startled the music world when he left Korn. People thought he was crazy—and probably still do. But he had an encounter with Jesus. He went to Israel with a group from the California church and got baptized in the Jordan River. Like the woman at the well, he cannot stop talking about God. He continues to use the medium of nu-metal rock to share his testimony so that others might experience an encounter with Jesus. He now has three Christian music albums and has written a book entitled *Save Me from Myself*. Brian told *Christianity Today* magazine, “My prayer is that people would realize how real God is and want to hunger after Him more than anything in this world. I just pray that eyes will be opened. He’s lovable, man. He’s so awesome. It’s like I’m so content with everything...And I want the whole world to be saved. I know that’s kind of an immature Christian, but ‘why me, you know? Why do I get this goodness, Lord?’ I’m saved by grace only. I didn’t do anything except just ask Him. He led me into that church...He’s a big God. I pray that it [his book] imparts a hunger to Christians and others. And if tons of drug addicts get set free from their drugs, that’s awesome.” Brian gets it! He understands the gospel. He understands the redemption and new life that Jesus offered to him and to the world. He so loves the LORD that he cannot refrain from sharing the good news of who Jesus is.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah Gregier, “Interview: Former Guitarist of Korn Reflects on Conversion, Freedom from Drugs,” *Christianity Today*, July 2007.



Brian is a modern day “woman at the well.” In this week’s chapter, we see her and the cleansed leper share their testimony about their encounter with Jesus. Brian, the woman and the leper all point others to their Savior with their short but powerful testimonies. Never underestimate the power of your story.

*[You could consider showing Brian’s 5-minute testimony available on YouTube and letting him speak for himself. Brian and his music stretch the paradigm for many Christians of what a “good Christian” should be. In his interviews, he still wears dark eye make-up and has dread-lock hair. He has not conformed to the Christian genre of music that many Christians would like him to, so he is considered controversial by some. But his testimony is as effective as the woman at the well. Christians are reminded that there is no one beyond the gracious redemptive work of God.]*

## I. **The woman at the well** (p. 270-272)

- A. **Three Problems.** The woman at the well had three strikes against her from the standpoint of Judaism. She represented everything that the religious leaders despised. She was the marginalized and not worthy of someone’s time and attention.
1. **She was a Samaritan.** Samaritans were a mixed race, a people who resulted from the intermarriage of the Northern Israelites and foreign captives who were imported by their Assyrian captors after the Assyrian invasion in 722 BC. They were “unclean” and “impure.” Their religious practices were also a mix between Judaism and foreign pagan gods. They only accepted the Pentateuch, or the five books of Moses, as Scripture. They rejected all the other sacred writings. The Samaritans had threatened Nehemiah when he tried to rebuild the Jerusalem walls. These things all led to constant hostility and hatred between the Jews and Samaritans.
  2. **She was a woman.** It was stunning for a man to speak to a woman in public like Jesus spoke to her. The cultural norms of the day prohibited men from speaking to women in public, prohibited Jews from speaking to Samaritans, and this was particularly astonishing since they were strangers.
  3. **She was a sexually immoral sinner.** She was the quintessential outcast. It was unusual for a woman to come to get water by herself and during the heat of the day. Perhaps her immorality led other women to avoid or despise her. She may have been at the well at this time of day to avoid experiencing their rejection and humiliation. She represents the person that we Christians might look at and consider too hopeless, too mired in sin, to ever respond to the message of Jesus.
  4. **She is the typical human being.** The woman at the well is me and you.
- B. **Personal Encounter.** The woman experienced a personal encounter with Jesus. He met her at a point they both had in common—the need for water. He then tapped in to her curiosity by implying He had something greater to give her than she could give Him—living water. This began a conversation about spiritual



things. Then He stunned her with His knowledge of her marital status. Notice that He did so tactfully, not to bring further humiliation upon her, but to reveal something about Himself and God. He revealed Himself as the Messiah, opening the door for her to come to Him for salvation.

- C. **Evangelistic Effort.** The woman's encounter led to her excited, evangelistic effort. She left her water jar (Jn. 4:28) indicating that she rushed back to the village to tell about her discovery. She believed Jesus to be the Messiah based upon both His words and His works. His claim was supported by His ability to know her past. Not willing to keep her encounter to herself, she simply told them what He had done in her life to convince her that He was the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior (Jn. 4:29). "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"
- D. **Testimony.** The woman's testimony led to the Samaritans' personal encounter with Jesus. John records her testimony in only two simple sentences but it was effective enough to cause some to initially believe (Jn. 4:39). God uses the testimony of all kinds of people to bring others to faith in Jesus. It caused others to seek Him to find out more (Jn. 4:40-41). Her testimony opened the door for others to seek and believe. The woman was not responsible for the people's response. She was only responsible for inviting them to experience Jesus for themselves.
- E. **Message.** His message was the cause of their faith. Their faith grew into their own because of their personal encounter with Jesus. His two days worth of teaching caused more to believe. Their faith could not rest on her testimony alone. It needed to be combined with His words.
- F. *Personal testimony + Jesus' message → salvation by faith* The combination of a personal testimony and the Word of God is a powerful evangelistic means. The woman at the well provides us with a wonderful example of the effectiveness of a simple testimony. Nothing "big" changed in her life—no miraculous healing, etc. She discovered Jesus and based on His works and His words, she believed. A dramatic testimony is not necessary for effectiveness. God can use our simple encounter and our simple faith to plant seeds and reap a harvest.

## II. **The Leper** (p. 272-273, Mark 1:38-45)

- A. **Two Problems.** The leper had two major problems: leprosy and leprosy. Physically, leprosy was a general term that encompassed a wide range of skin diseases. In the hot climate of Israel, it would have been very painful and incapacitating. Spiritually, leprosy made this man ritually unclean. Therefore, lepers were required to live outside of the city and avoid contact with anyone including family members. Leprosy was associated with sin. In the Bible, people are not "healed" of leprosy, they are always "cleansed." Leprosy was regarded as incurable. The Bible only records two people who were cleansed of leprosy by God—Miriam (Num. 12:10-15) and Naaman (2 Ki. 5:1-14).



- B. **Personal Encounter.** The leper had a personal encounter with Jesus. The leper broke the Jewish Law and all social rules when he approached Jesus. But Jesus touched the leper and cleansed him. Jesus demonstrated that He was willing to become “unclean” to make someone else “clean,” perhaps alluding to His mission on the cross. “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him,” (2 Cor. 5:21). However, Jesus instructed the leper to keep the encounter to himself (Mk. 1:44). *Why?* Perhaps Jesus wanted to avoid becoming known as a miracle worker, drawing people to the miracle rather than the Worker.
  
- C. **Evangelistic Effort.** His witness led to others’ personal encounters with Jesus. The leper’s news spread quickly and had a powerful effect. People came from everywhere to Jesus. But the leper’s disobedience actually hindered Jesus’ work. Sometimes we think our way is better than God’s way. Our good intentions can still be contrary to God’s plan. Jesus could no longer enter a town openly (Mk. 1:45). His primary mission was not one of healing but one of redemption, which He later emphasized with the paralytic who was let down through the roof (p. 273). While his testimony led others to Jesus, he still hindered the work of God by his disobedience.
  
- D. **Testimony.** The results are unknown. We know that many came to Jesus from everywhere, so in that sense, his testimony was effective. However, we do not know if anyone actually *believed* because of it—and that is OK!
  1. The outcome is not the responsibility of the leper. Nor is it the responsibility of a Christian’s testimony—for that work is left up to the Holy Spirit. This truth should free the Christian to scatter seeds and know that the Lord is responsible to bring the growth.
  2. In another sense, one must keep in mind that redemption rather than reward was and is God’s plan. The leper seems to have had the Lower Story in view and may have missed the Upper Story. If the leper focused on the miracle rather than the Miracle Worker, he might have missed the main thing.
  
- E. The woman at the well and the leper show us how effective a simple testimony can be to draw people to encounter Jesus. What was true then is still true today. God still uses unlikely people to fulfill His story of redemption.

### III. Applications and Implications

- A. A personal testimony can be an effective means to invite others to encounter Jesus.
- B. I do not need a dramatic testimony to be effective.
- C. Jesus meets all kinds of people where they are at. So should I.
- D. The woman and the leper were marginalized outcasts. I should never assume that someone is beyond the reach of Jesus.
- E. Jesus’ compassion compels Him to touch the untouchable. I should cultivate that kind of compassion.



- F. If we limit our evangelistic efforts only to those with whom we are comfortable, we will fail to reach very many people.
- G. I am not responsible for whether or not someone else believes—that’s the role of the Holy Spirit. I am just responsible to invite others to get to know Jesus.
- H. I don’t have to have all the answers. I just have to have one.

## Learning Activity: The Two-minute (or less) Testimony

Nearly every Christian would agree that being able to share one’s personal testimony is an important skill for the Christian’s Great Commission. While some people are able to get on an elevator and bring three strangers to faith before the fourth floor, most of us just do not have that kind of an evangelistic comfort zone. Many people feel terribly ill-equipped to share their personal testimony. Some people think that their story is not dramatic enough. Others have such a sordid past that they would rather not include all the dirt. This activity aims to help learners value their own testimony, become more at ease in sharing it, and develop a greater personal passion to evangelize others. A 2-minute testimony is an ideal start. By setting boundaries, people begin to feel safer. First, prepare your own 2-minute testimony. Model it to the class. Then give students a few minutes to think about their own testimony and practice with a partner or two. Remind students that the great thing about a testimony is that there are no wrong answers! Nobody can deny what God has done in your life!

## Lesson Plan 2: A Savior for All People

The greatest thing about a sandwich is rarely the bread. Some artisan breads are rich, robust and hearty, adding texture and taste to the sandwich. These designer breads are the pride and joy of bakers. They are pretty and tasty and more expensive. They are proud breads that others notice. Then you have your dollar-a-loaf, ordinary, lackluster white bread. This hum-drum bread is pasty, limp and cheap. It’s mass-produced so it goes unnoticed. It’s just there. Whichever way you slice it—pardon the pun—it’s all just bread. The point of the sandwich is what’s in the middle. The bread is not there to conceal the middle. The bread serves to showcase what is in the middle.

John the Apostle used two characters in this week’s chapter of *The Story* to “sandwich” the message of John 3:16. It is the best-known verse in the whole Bible. It appears on posters at sporting events. It makes its way onto T-shirts and bumper stickers. Someone even wrote a book recently, simply titled “3:16.” Today we’ll take a fresh look at this familiar message by looking at Nicodemus and the woman at the well. The gospel writer used these two characters to make his 3:16 point—Jesus really is a Savior for all people.

- I. **The top slice: Nicodemus** (p. 269-270, Jn. 3:1-1-18)
  - A. Nicodemus represents the best of the religious Jews. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. He was an educated man who was also a great teacher. (Jn. 3:10) He was a man with the right



pedigree, position, prestige and power. As a Pharisee, he would have had great respect for the Scriptures and paid careful attention to observe and obey the Law. Obedience to the Law was the way of salvation for the Pharisees. He came to Jesus by night, probably to avoid conflict with the Pharisees who were already beginning to oppose Jesus.

- B. Whenever John refers to nighttime in his gospel, it has spiritual and moral allusions to darkness. *Bible study note: The biblical authors rarely include details that are insignificant. The stories they choose and the details they include are there to make more than a historical record. They are part of their theological point.* Nicodemus, even as moral and religious as he was, remained in spiritual darkness.

**II. The bottom slice: The woman at the well** (p. 270-272, Jn. 4:3-30, 39-43)

- A. This woman does not even rate having being named. She represents the opposite extreme from Nicodemus.
  1. She was a Samaritan, which means she was of mixed race between the Northern Israelites and the foreigners imported by the Assyrian captors.
  2. She would have had a mixed religion—part Jewish and part pagan.
  3. She was a woman. In those days, it was culturally unacceptable for men to speak to women in public, especially strangers.
  4. She was the worst kind of woman (by religious standards)—a sexually immoral woman. Though we do not know the circumstances of her first five husbands, we know that the man with whom she lived was not her husband.
- B. Jesus approached her in the middle of the day, out in the open for anyone to see.

Let’s compare and contrast these two people:

*[You could copy and paste this chart to a PowerPoint slide or handout as a visual aid for your students.]*

	<b>Nicodemus (named)</b>	<b>Samaritan Woman (nameless)</b>
Sex	Male	Female
Place	Jerusalem / Judah	Samaria
Race/Ethnic group	Jew	Samaritan (mixed)
Social status	Highly respected, ruler, teacher	Immoral, discarded
Time of day	Darkness, night	Light, daytime



Occasion	Pre-planned visit	Spontaneous
Initiator	Nicodemus	Jesus
Conversation	Dialogue became monologue	Dialogue continued to the end
Content	New birth – didn't "get it"	Living water – didn't "get it"
Result	Not mentioned	Believed
Outcome	No witness to others	Witnessed, others believed

### III. Between the slices: Jesus

- A. These two characters represent the whole spectrum of people in the world, from super-saint to super-sinner. And the one thing they had in common was their need for Jesus. It's not about the people, it's about the Savior. "Sandwiched" between these two characters is John's famous 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John's point between the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus is that they represent "the world." They both need salvation which could be found only in Jesus.
- B. While Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about needing to be "born again" to Nicodemus and "living water" to the Samaritan woman, neither one of them understood initially. But they both came to realize that Jesus' words were about eternal life. They both needed salvation by faith in Him.
- C. Jesus really is a Savior for all people.
1. All need a Savior—Jew and Gentile, the moral man and the sinner. Paul's argument to the Romans is that the pagan, the moral man and the religious man are all in the same sinking boat. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Rom. 5:23). "For we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one.'" (Rom. 3:9b-10a)
  2. Salvation is equally available to all by faith. "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Rom. 10:12-13)
  3. Paul affirms equality in Christ in his letter to the Galatians. Those who are moral or religious get no more brownie points than the filthy sinner. Once saved, our new identity is in Christ. "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ



have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:26-28).

- D. Jesus is worth sharing with others. One big difference between these two characters is their response to Him.
1. We do not have a response from Nicodemus. If he did believe after his conversation with Jesus, he did not rush out to tell anyone. At some point in time, it seems that he probably came to faith in Jesus. He defended Jesus against the Sanhedrin’s irrational hatred (Jn. 7:50). More importantly, the next encounter we see between Jesus and Nicodemus is at the cross. Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus’ body for burial. Nicodemus supplied a large amount of spices and a linen cloth for the body, showing his deep respect and regard for Jesus (Jn. 19:39-40). This he did in the light of day.
  2. The Samaritan woman immediately believed and ran back to her village to evangelize all her neighbors. Her testimony brought many others to faith in this Jesus, further proving John’s point—Jesus is the Savior for all people.

#### **IV. Applications and Implications**

- A. Jesus is the Savior for all people. I should not consider any sinner beyond His redemptive reach.
- B. Religious people need to be born again. Being a religious, moral person is not synonymous with faith in Christ alone.
- C. Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman represent the whole range of mankind. Where was I on the spectrum when I first encountered Jesus?
- D. An encounter with Jesus is worthy of sharing with others. I need to develop the ability to share my faith with joy like the Samaritan woman.
- E. Faith doesn’t necessarily come with the first encounter with Jesus. Like Nicodemus, it might take some time. I should not give up on others.
- F. Jesus, the Son of GOD, is the ONLY Savior. There is no other way to have eternal life.

**Learning Activity: See Lesson Option #1 above.**

