

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

SAY: “In our last session, we looked at Barnabas and his ongoing encouragement. Today we look at John and his single-minded focus on preparing the way for Jesus, the Messiah.” Invite members to turn to **page 3** in the **Personal Study Guide (PSG)** and review session titles.

DISCUSS: As you draw attention to the picture (**PSG, p. 126**), introduce **Question #1: If you could be a spokesperson for any product, what would it be?**

OPTION: IN ADVANCE, prepare to show a short video clip of a notable person from IAmSecond.com/films (one can be found at BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra). The individuals in these videos do a good job of making much of Jesus and seeing themselves in light of His greatness. Use the video as a follow-up to **Question #1** to help with the transition to **The Bible Meets Life**.

SESSION 5

JOHN: SINGLE-MINDED FOCUS



The Point

Christ-centered living chooses to exalt Christ, not self.

The Bible Meets Life

Self-centered living defines this world. The rationale for many is that, if this life is all there is, you should do all you can to enjoy it for yourself. Exalt yourself and

try to give yourself significance. But this life is not all there is, and we are not the centers of our own little universe. It’s all about Jesus Christ. When we encounter Christ and choose Him over ourselves, we truly find significance.

The Passages

John 1:26-34; 3:26-30

The Setting

John the Baptist appeared on the scene suddenly and began to call people to repent and be baptized. John’s clothing and diet projected the image of Elijah, the rugged Old Testament prophet (see Mark 1:6). The Pharisees sent representatives to learn his identity. John denied being the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet Moses had promised (Deut. 18:15). John declared he was the forerunner sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, about whom Isaiah had written in Isaiah 40:3 (John 1:19-25).

John 1:26-30

26 John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;

27 He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

28 These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

29 The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

30 This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.

KEY WORD:

the Lamb of God (1:29)—In the Jewish sacrificial system, a flawless lamb was offered for the atonement of sins. Jesus, God's sinless Son, offered Himself to provide forgiveness for sins.

Point to the greatness and salvation of Jesus.

Verse 26. John was immersing repentant Jews in the Jordan River to symbolize cleansing from sin; thus, he became known as John the Baptizer or John the Baptist. Jews baptized Gentiles who wanted to associate themselves with Judaism as proselytes. In the Jews' proselyte baptism, the person was immersed, audibly renounced evil practices, and donned new clothing to symbolize attachment to Judaism. Jews also practiced washings for cleansing. Baptizing Jews based on repentance, however, was unheard of and deeply disturbing to the religious leaders. Jews were God's people and had no need of the kind of baptism Gentiles experienced.

The Jewish delegation from Jerusalem had asked John why he was baptizing, if he "be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet" (John 1:25). John used the question to focus on the One whose way he was preparing: **I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not.** The word *baptize* means "to dip," "to immerse." John was not implying his baptism was unimportant. In fact, its significance lay in its preparatory role in Jesus' appearing on the scene.

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life (PSG, p. 127)**. Highlight the author's illustration of the moon: how it has no light of its own but only reflects the light of the sun.

Reinforce the importance of believers' reflecting and exalting Jesus by reading **The Point** on page 130 (PSG, p. 127): **Christ-centered living chooses to exalt Christ, not self.**

PRAY: Ask the Lord to help group members focus on Him. Thank Him for the example of John's single-minded focus.

STUDY THE BIBLE

John 1:26-30



10 minutes

GUIDE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 130.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read John 1:26-30.

LEADER PACK: Direct the group's attention to **Item 8: People & Places** to give context for the wilderness by the Jordan River.

PEOPLE & PLACES



SUMMARIZE: The birth of John the Baptist was, to say the least, unusual (**PSG**, pp. 128-129):

An angel appeared before Zechariah and told the priest his wife Elizabeth would bear a son. The angel said his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born; people everywhere would rejoice at his birth; he would turn many people back to God; and he would be great in the sight of the Lord (Luke 1:5-17).

(Continued on next page.)

John the Baptist deflected attention from himself to *one* who had come *among* the people. Because John already had baptized Jesus (Mark 1:9), he knew Jesus' true identity, but the investigating party did not. The religious delegates may have seen Jesus in the throng of people around John, but they did not recognize who Jesus really was. They lacked the necessary perception or discernment.

Verse 27. Continuing to point to his forerunner role, John remarked **He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me.** John made it clear that his preceding Jesus did not indicate he was superior in any way. With a graphic image from everyday life, John emphasized his role and his relation to Jesus. A rabbinic saying of that time was that a teacher's student would perform for him a slave's duties—with the exception of untying the teacher's sandals. The task of untying guests' sandal straps and washing their feet fell to a household's lowest slave. John, however, declared that compared with Jesus he was below the lowest slave: **I am not worthy to unloose His shoe's latchet.**

John's humble assessment of his role in God's unfolding redemptive act in Jesus revealed his self-awareness and his willingness to elevate Jesus as infinitely supreme. Even though multitudes were responding to his prophetic ministry, he did not allow his popularity to affect his role as forerunner or to inflate his ego.

Verse 28. John's exchange with the delegation took place **in Bethabara beyond Jordan.** The phrase *beyond Jordan* designated the area as being east of the river. Some scholars have called this place Bethany, but it is not to be confused with the village of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, near Jerusalem. The place of John's activity may have been a village in Perea, an area that extended east of the Jordan from Samaria in the north to about midway along the shore of the Dead Sea. *Bethabara* may have been the site of a ford or a ferry across the *Jordan*. John seems to have been in the area just north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan.

1▶ Verse 29. **The next day** after the Jerusalem delegation interrogated John, he, **seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, behold.** As the people directed their attention toward Jesus, John presented Him as the **Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.** Behind this dramatic designation was a rich Old Testament background. A lamb

was one of two animals—unblemished year-old males—households could sacrifice in celebrating Passover (Ex. 12:5). Lambs also were offered daily in the Jews’ sacrificial system (Lev. 14:12-21).

Jesus is called *the Lamb* only in the Fourth Gospel and Revelation (John 1:29,36; Rev. 7:17; 14:10; 15:3; 19:9; 21:22-23; 22:1,3). The title *Lamb of God* would be unfamiliar to John the Baptist’s hearers. The title *Lamb of God* may have been a way to emphasize the concept of sacrifice as vicarious suffering and to present Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for people’s sin, as the writer of Hebrews did (Heb. 10).

The phrase *takes away* suggests lifting up and carrying something. The idea may be that Jesus removes people’s sin by taking it on Himself and bearing it. The word for *sin* was an archer’s term that meant “missing the mark”—falling short of God’s design and purpose for life. It is a collective term expressing people’s shared condition. The term *world* is inclusive of all people, as in John 3:16. It implies people apart from and opposed to God. Jesus would offer Himself willingly to provide forgiveness for all who would place faith in Him. He would provide atonement for sin, a way of grace to God. John the Baptist (and John the Gospel writer) pointed to the cross and the impact of Jesus’ sacrificial self-giving. ◀

Verse 30. John the Baptist reminded his hearers of his earlier reference to Jesus. In 1:15 the Baptist proclaimed, “This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me” In general terms, John had announced the Messiah’s coming. In verse 30, **he of whom I said** literally is “on behalf of whom I said”; that is, John championed Jesus’ status above his own. John viewed himself as Jesus’ representative. The words **after me** refer to time; John came first to announce Messiah’s coming, then Jesus appeared to begin His ministry. Jesus was truly God, but He was also human, **a man** of dignity, courage, and strength. John stressed that Jesus **is preferred before me**—He is superior—because **he was before me**—He was preexistent.

John 1:31-34

31 And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.

32 And John bare record, saying , I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.

Years later, John moved out into the middle of the desert. He lived as a hermit, wore clothes made out of camel hair, and ate locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:1-4). We might see someone who, even before his birth, was destined to greatness and then threw it all away. Or we might see someone who realized that true significance—true greatness—is found when we lose ourselves in pointing to the greatness and salvation of Jesus

Every part of our lives should scream to a world that needs to see: Look! Here is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!

GUIDE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 1 on page 132 and this page and **KEY WORD** on page 131 (**PSG, p. 128**) to explain the significance of John’s calling Jesus “the Lamb of God.”

DISCUSS: **Question #2**

(PSG, p. 129): How does our culture determine greatness?

(Alternate: What do these verses teach us about Jesus and what it means to follow Him?)

TRANSITION: "In the next verses, John gave further testimony of who Jesus is."

STUDY THE BIBLE

John 1:31-34



10 minutes

READ: Ask a volunteer to read John 1:31-34.

GUIDE: Using **Bible**

Commentary 2, explain how John could be related to Jesus yet not grasp His true identity until this moment.

SUMMARIZE: Like John, we are His witnesses—the ones who steward the message of the gospel and share how our lives have been changed by our encounters with Jesus. All our testimonies, though they might be varied in their details, have a few critical things in common we can use as we point to Jesus (**PSG**, pp. 130-131).

(Continued on next page.)

33 And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.

34 And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.

Point to your encounter with Jesus.

2 ▶ **Verse 31.** As Jesus approached, John to testify concerning Him. Before Jesus came to John for baptism, John **knew him not**. The Greek term rendered *knew* reflects both perception and discernment. At one time, John did not grasp Jesus' true identity. John's mother, Elizabeth, and Jesus' mother, Mary, were relatives, so it's possible that John and Jesus knew about each other (see Luke 1:36). They may have been acquainted, but John had not realized Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Although John had not known the Messiah's identity, he had begun his ministry of **baptizing with water** in anticipation of His coming. John was carrying out his commission as the forerunner until Jesus **should be made manifest to Israel** as their long-awaited, promised Messiah. The Jews looked for God's Deliverer. He was coming to the Jews first to offer God's grace exercised in forgiveness. He then would extend that offer to all people. ◀

Verse 32. From Matthew's Gospel we learn that Jesus had gone from Galilee down to the area of John's ministry and presented Himself for baptism. Initially, John balked, deferring to Jesus. But Jesus insisted, so John immersed Him. When Jesus came up out of the water, "the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:13-17). **John bare record** concerning the event that revealed to him Jesus' identity as the Messiah because he personally **saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him**.

Verse 33. John repeated, seemingly with a note of wonder, **I knew him not**. As noted previously, John meant he had not been aware Jesus was the Messiah whose way John was preparing. John well could have been implying, somewhat

amazed, that in all the time he had known about—and perhaps had sporadic contact with—his kinsman, he had no idea of His true identity and redemptive role. God, who had **sent John to baptize with water**, had told John he would **see the Spirit descending, and remaining on** the promised Deliverer, who would baptize **with the Holy Ghost**. Included in the latter baptism is the implication of an abundance of resources God provides. The idea is that people who placed faith in Jesus would be saturated with the Spirit, and would have the Spirit’s presence in their lives.

Verse 34. With his own eyes John **saw** God’s sign confirming Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. Thus, he continued to **bear record** that Jesus **is the Son of God**. At Jesus’ baptism, the heavenly voice declared: “Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). In the Fourth Gospel, the phrase *Son of God* emphasizes Jesus’ Deity and His close relationship with His Heavenly Father, whose will He was committed to do (see John 4:34). Thus, Jesus was God’s clearest and most complete revelation of Himself.

Two of John’s disciples followed Jesus and spent the day in conversation with Him. Afterward, Andrew, one of those disciples, “findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah . . . and he brought him to Jesus” (1:37-42).

The next day, Jesus called Philip to follow Him, and Philip went to Nathanael with the news that they had found the one “of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth.” Initially skeptical because he wondered if “any good thing [could] come out of Nazareth,” Nathanael realized right away that Jesus really was “the Son of God” and “the King of Israel” (vv. 43-49).

In John 3:1-21, in a long conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, Jesus stressed that unless we are “born again” we cannot enter God’s kingdom (come under God’s rule). To receive eternal life, a person must make a faith commitment to Jesus, who would willingly die to provide forgiveness for sins. Jesus made clear that God loves all people and gave His only Son so that everyone who made a faith commitment to Him would receive eternal life. Believers do not face judgment, but unbelievers already are condemned because of their unbelief—because they choose the darkness of evil rather than the light of truth and grace Jesus was and brought.

Jesus spent time in Judea, baptizing people who committed to follow Him. John also continued his baptism of repentance. Then “there arose a question between some of John’s disciples and the Jews about purifying” (v. 25), likely whether Jesus’ baptism or John’s baptism was effective.

- **Who we were.** *Before Christ, we were dead in our sin—without hope.*
- **Who Jesus is.** *Jesus is the main Person in our testimony; we bear witness not about ourselves, but about Him.*
- **Who we are.** *We can also bear witness to who we are now. If we are truly alive in Christ, then we will have a continually growing understanding of Jesus.*

DISCUSS: Question #3

(PSG, p. 131): What are some key moments that have shaped your understanding of Jesus?

(Alternate: How has God used your story to communicate the truth about Jesus to others?)

TRANSITION: “In the next verses we see how John continued to point others to Christ.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

John 3:26-30



15 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read John 3:26-30.

GUIDE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 3 on page 137 and **DIGGING DEEPER (PSG, p. 132)** to explain the metaphors John used of the bride and the bridegroom.

DISCUSS: Question #4

(PSG, p. 133): What are some symptoms of a life that is self-focused?

SUMMARIZE: How can we rebel against this culture of self, and instead, deny ourselves and point others to Jesus? Here are three ways (PSG, pp. 133-134):

- Find your identity in Christ.
- Find your worth in Christ.
- Find your applause in Christ.

John 3:26-30

26 And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.

27 John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.

28 Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him.

29 He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.

30 He must increase, but I must decrease.

Point to Jesus, not yourself.

Verse 26. After having a dispute with “the Jews about purifying” (John 3:25), some of John’s disciples came to him with their concern. They addressed him as **Rabbi** or teacher. They had attached themselves to him as his students. John’s disciples informed him that the man to whom he had borne witness and who earlier had been with John was baptizing people. The disciples likely expressed their jealousy and resentment. They may have implied Jesus’ activity was John’s fault for putting his stamp of approval on Jesus. The statement, **all men come to him**, was overstatement for emphasis much as we sometimes say, “Everybody in the town turned out.” It was true that large crowds were gravitating to Jesus. John’s disciples may have considered Jesus to be John’s disciple because John had baptized Him. If so, why did the disciple place Himself on the same level as His teacher? They may have been irritated that Jesus had begun ministering independently of John, viewing Jesus’ action of baptizing as an intrusion into John’s ministry. Also, John’s disciples evidently were concerned that Jesus’ popularity and success would overshadow John’s ministry and stature.

Verse 27. John never lost sight of his secondary role in God’s unfolding redemptive purpose. He saw his role as forerunner and Jesus’ success as the Messiah to be divinely bestowed and permanent. The phrase **from heaven** was a round-about reference to God. Generally, Jews regarded God’s name to be sacred and often substituted alternate words and phrases for His name. An alternate suggestion is that *from heaven* implies the source or storehouse of all divine gifts. In either case, John knew God was orchestrating His plan of redemption.

Verse 28. John’s disciples were present when the Jerusalem delegation questioned him about his identity (see John 1:19-27). Thus, the disciples could bear witness that John had emphatically denied being the Christ (v. 20). He had quoted from the prophet Isaiah to identify himself as “one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord” (v. 23). John had preceded Jesus to prepare the way. The phrase **I am sent before** indicates John’s role as the forerunner. John countered his disciples’ jealousy of Jesus’ success by reminding them of his previously stated role, which he continued to fulfill.

3 ▶ Verse 29. John used a familiar Jewish custom to drive home the subordinate role he gladly embraced. In Judean weddings, **the friend of the bridegroom**—our “best man”—had a vital role in his friend’s wedding. The groom’s friend assisted the groom and made many of the wedding arrangements. The friend also brought the bride to the groom. John may have implied that his role was to bring repentant, prepared Jews (**the bride**) to Jesus (**the bridegroom**). John’s focus, however, seems to have been on the important but secondary role of the groom’s friend, not on the bride. The groom’s friend was responsible for ensuring all went well for the groom. When the friend **heareth ... the bridegroom’s voice**—which meant he was approaching—the friend **rejoiceth greatly**.

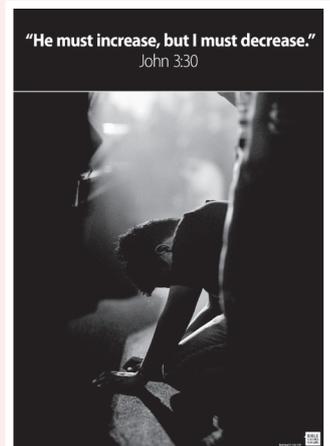
When the wedding concluded, the groom’s friend made his exit, out of the spotlight. His work was done. When Jesus began His public ministry, John’s **joy** was **fulfilled**. Far from being jealous of Jesus, John was overjoyed at His success. ◀

Verse 30. John rightly declared that Jesus and His ministry **must increase** while he **must decrease**. The Greek term rendered *must* means “it is necessary” and has the sense of moral necessity based on God’s redemptive purpose. In God’s unfolding provision of salvation, Jesus was to increasingly take center stage while John was to fade into the wings. To his everlasting credit, John consistently pointed to Jesus’ preeminence and to his own servant’s role.

DISCUSS: Question #5
(PSG, p. 134): **What are some practical ways we can decrease so that Christ may increase?**

(Alternate: *What are some characteristics of a life that is Christ-focused?*)

LEADER PACK: Direct the group’s attention to **Item 11: John 3:30** to highlight John’s life goal of bringing glory to Jesus’ name above all others.



DO: Invite volunteers to share their responses to the activity on **PSG page 134: “Single-minded Focus.”**

LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point: Christ-centered living chooses to exalt Christ, not self.**

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 135;** see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Emphasize that we must be willing like John to decrease so that Jesus might increase in our lives.

PRAY: "Father, give us selfless hearts that focus more on You than the things around us."

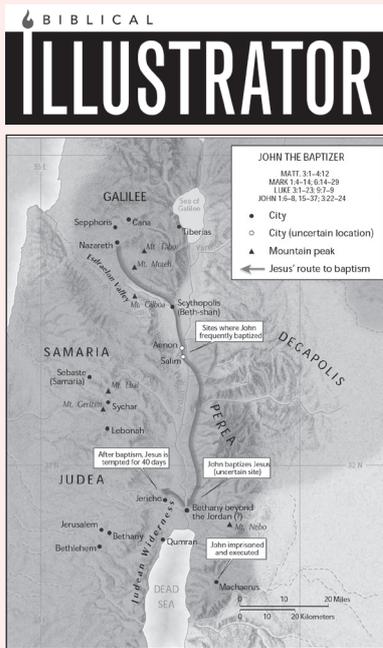
NOTE: Remind group members that **PSG pages 6-9** are there to journal one another's prayer requests

LIVE IT OUT

How will you choose to exalt Christ this week? Consider the following applications:

- ▶ **Memorize.** Memorize John 3:30—"He must increase, but I must decrease"—and let it drive your words and actions.
- ▶ **Plan.** Take a personal inventory of your life in recent months. Determine who or what your life points to. Consider the steps you need to take in order to place the focus of your life rightfully on Jesus.
- ▶ **Profess.** Write out your testimony using the three points on page 131, expressing your story in a way that keeps all the focus on Jesus. Pray for an opportunity to share your testimony.

Your life is going to point to something. Your clothes, your relationships, and your speech are all signposts pointing somewhere. The question is whether you will take an active stance in making sure all those things point to Jesus.



Map of the area around “Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing” (John 1:28).

Referring to Jesus’ baptism, the Bible says, “All this happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing” (John 1:28). The exact location of this Bethany has been elusive.

The Synoptic Gospels merely mention that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River (Matt. 3:13; Mark 1:9; Luke 4:1). They do not specify in what part of the Jordan John baptized Jesus.

Much in early Christian tradition supports the location of Bethany on the eastern side of the Jordan a few miles north of the Dead Sea. A fourth century Christian writer located the site of Jesus’ baptism about four to five miles north of the Dead Sea. Church writers and pilgrims in the fifth to seventh centuries mention churches in the lower Jordan area that marked the supposed site of Jesus’ baptism. Also, traditions from the fourth to twelfth centuries consistently claimed the center of John the Baptist’s ministry was about one and one-half miles east of the Jordan.

The 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan allowed archaeologists to work on the eastern bank of the Jordan. Discoveries made confirm, that the area east of the Jordan was associated with John’s baptismal ministry. By implication we may suggest this was likely the site of Jesus’ baptism

The excerpt above is from the article “Bethany Beyond the Jordan” (Fall 2011), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He can take away your sins if you receive Him as Lord and Savior.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, “Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All,” on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.

**GROUPS
MATTER.**

Grow with other group leaders at the [Groups Ministry blog](http://GroupsMinistry.com).

LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry