



SESSION 5

JOHN: SINGLE-MINDED FOCUS

▶ ***The Point***

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

▶ ***The Passage***

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

▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

There are a lot of fascinating facts about the moon. For example, the moon is about 245,000 miles away from the earth, and it's moving through the universe at 2,300 miles per hour. The moon is also covered with thousands and thousands of craters, the largest of which is 181 miles in diameter and about 8 miles deep. Another interesting fact is that the moon has no light. Yes, it's the brightest thing in the night sky, and you can still find your way through the dark by the "light" of the moon—but that "light" isn't actually coming from the moon at all. The light we see coming from the moon is all reflected from the sun.

If the moon appears to be that bright, then the sun must be absolutely dazzling. In fact, looking at the moon makes me wonder about the sun. The moon points me to the sun. In a similar way, followers of Jesus live in such a way as to reflect the true Light of the World. It must be our single-minded focus to reflect Jesus and exalt Him—not ourselves—in all things.

▶ ***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. (See Deut. 18:15.) Instead, John declared he was the forerunner sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, about whom Isaiah had written in Isaiah 40:3. (See John 1:19-25.)

What does the Bible say?

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.

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

^{1:26} John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. ²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel."

³² And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

^{3:26} And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him."

²⁷ John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.

²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'

²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

STUDY THE BIBLE

NOTES

John 1:26-30

²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. ²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'

READ: John 1:26-30 on page 101 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer to do so.

GUIDE: Use the first paragraph in the Commentary to help group members understand why John's choice to baptize Jews caused such a stir.

RECAP: Ask group members to read the first two paragraphs after the Scripture text on page 101 of the PSG in order to see how John's life took a strange turn. Then read the third paragraph aloud:

From an earthly standpoint, we might look at John the Baptist and see a life of wasted potential—someone who was destined for greatness, but threw it all away. Or, we might see John as someone who realized that true significance, true greatness, is found only when we lose ourselves in pointing to the greatness and salvation of Jesus.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 101 of the PSG: **"How does our culture determine who is important or worthy of attention?"**

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): As you discuss Question #2, above, ask group members to identify specific people that our culture has determined to be important or worthy of attention. Make a list. Then, use that list to look for common themes and character traits.

TRANSITION: In verses 31-34, we'll see John make another important revelation about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

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

John 1:26-30 Commentary

Point to the greatness and salvation of Jesus.

[Verse 26] The delegation from Jerusalem had asked why John was baptizing. John used the question to focus on the One whose way he was preparing. John baptized **with water**. To **baptize** means “to dip,” “to immerse.” John did not mean his baptism was unimportant; rather, its significance lay in its preparatory role in Jesus’ appearing. John immersed repentant Jews to symbolize cleansing from sin. Jews baptized Gentiles who wanted to associate with Judaism as proselytes. Jews also practiced washings for cleansing. Immersing 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.

John the Baptist deflected attention to **one** who had come **among** the people. Jesus had journeyed to where John was working, and John had baptized Him (see Mark 1:9), so John already knew Jesus’ true identity. But the investigating party did not **know** Jesus. They did not recognize who He really was.

[Verses 27-28] John’s preceding Jesus did not indicate superiority. With a graphic image from everyday life, John emphasized his role in relation to Jesus. Untying guests’ sandal straps and washing their feet fell to a household’s lowest slave. John declared that compared with Jesus he was below the lowest slave, unworthy of performing the most menial task for Him. This exchange took place **in Bethany across the Jordan**. It is distinguished from the village of Bethany near Jerusalem. The Bethany of John’s activity seems to have been in the area immediately north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan.

[Verse 29] The following day, John saw Jesus approaching. As Jesus came toward him, John presented Him as the **Lamb of God**. 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. (See Ex. 12:5.) Lambs also were offered daily in the Jews’ sacrificial system. (See Lev. 14:12-21.) The word “Lamb” as a title for Jesus occurs only in the Fourth Gospel and Revelation. The title “Lamb of God” would be new and unfamiliar to John’s hearers. **Takes away** has the sense of lifting up, carrying something. The idea may be that Jesus removes people’s sin by taking it on Himself and bearing it. **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. Jesus would offer Himself willingly to provide forgiveness for all who would place faith in Him.

[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 burst on the scene first to announce Messiah’s coming, then Jesus appeared to begin His ministry. With the phrase **ranks before me**, John stressed Jesus’ superior status, which was based on His preexistence. John came first in terms of birth and ministry; Jesus was first in preeminence as Deity.

John 1:31-34 Commentary

Point to your encounter with Jesus.

[Verse 31] Before Jesus came to John for baptism, John had not known Him. The Greek term rendered **know** conveys the ideas of perception and discernment. In 1:26, John pointed out that Jesus the Messiah was present among the people gathered around the Baptist, but his questioners did not recognize (“know”) who Jesus really was. At one time, John did not grasp Jesus’ true identity. John’s mother, Elizabeth, and Jesus’ mother, Mary, were relatives, so the possibility is strong that John and Jesus knew about each other. (See Luke 1:36.) They may even have seen each other previously. But John had not realized Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Although John had not known the Messiah’s identity, he had begun **baptizing with water** in anticipation of His coming. John was carrying out his commission as the forerunner so Jesus could be **revealed** clearly (brought to light or to open view) as the long-awaited, promised Messiah. **Israel**—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] John the Baptist bore witness concerning the event that revealed to him Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. From Matthew’s Gospel we learn that Jesus presented Himself for baptism. Initially, John balked, deferring to Jesus. Jesus insisted, so John immersed Him. When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened and God’s **Spirit** descended in the form of a **dove** and rested on Him. A heavenly voice affirmed Jesus as God’s Son in whom God delighted. (See Matt. 3:13-17.) John personally witnessed with his eyes the incredible scene. **I saw** literally is “I have seen” and conveys the scene’s continuing impact on John.

[Verse 33] Until John baptized Jesus, John **did not know** Him, had not been aware Jesus was the Messiah whose way John was preparing. God, who had commissioned John, revealed to him the means by which he would learn the Messiah’s identity: John would see the Holy Spirit **descend and remain** on the promised Deliverer. God had dispatched John to baptize **with water**; Jesus, the Messiah, would baptize **with the Holy Spirit**. 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. The parallel idea is the Spirit’s presence in believers’ lives.

[Verse 34] With his own eyes John had **seen** (with continuing impact) God’s sign authenticating Jesus identity as the Messiah. Thus, he continued to bear witness that Jesus **is the Son of God**. At Jesus’ baptism, the heavenly voice declared: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). The statement likely combines Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1: the concepts of God’s anointed with the role of Suffering Servant. In the Fourth Gospel, the phrase “Son of God” emphasizes Jesus’ deity and His close relationship with His heavenly Father, to whose will He was committed. (See John 4:34.) Thus, Jesus was God’s clearest and most complete revelation of Himself.



STUDY THE BIBLE

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John 3:26-30

26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."



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LEADER PACK: Display Pack Item 11, "John 3:30," to provide a visual element to your group's engagement with this Scripture passage.

READ: John 3:26-30 on page 105 of the PSG.

SUMMARIZE: Help group members engage the main points from page 105 of the PSG:

1. "It's important for us to remember that John also had followers. Many followers. . . . Once Jesus began His ministry—once the One to whom John had been pointing was fully engaged in His earthly ministry—John's role seemed to diminish."
2. "John's followers, on the other hand, were not okay with that. They became concerned when Jesus' popularity began to grow, because His popularity was costing John some of his own. John's response? 'Good!'"
3. "This is easier said than done for us. We live in a world of personal advancement."
4. "Following Christ means embracing a posture of self-denial."

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 105 of the PSG: **"What are some symptoms of a life that is self-focused?"**

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 105 of the PSG: **"What are practical ways we can honor Jesus in our everyday lives?"**

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What are some characteristics of a life that is Christ-focused?

John 3:26-30 Commentary

Point to Jesus, not yourself.

[Verse 26] John's disciples addressed him as their **Rabbi** or teacher. They informed him that the man to whom he'd borne witness, and who earlier had been with John, was now baptizing people. The disciples likely expressed jealousy and resentment. They may have implied Jesus' activity was John's fault for putting his stamp of approval on Jesus. **All are going to him** was overstatement for emphasis much as we sometimes say, "The whole town turned out." 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' baptizing as an intrusion into John's ministry.

[Verses 27-28] John never lost sight of his secondary role. He was the forerunner. **From heaven** was a round-about reference to God. John knew God was orchestrating His plan of redemption. John's disciples had been present when the Jerusalem delegation questioned him about his identity. Thus, the disciples could bear witness that John had emphatically denied being the Messiah. (See John 1:19-20.) He had quoted from the prophet Isaiah to identify himself as the Messiah's forerunner. (See vv. 22-23.) The phrase **have been sent before** likely conveys the sense of permanence, indicating John's set 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.

[Verse 29] 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 to Jesus. The focus of John's image, however, seems to have been on the important but secondary role of the groom's friend, not on the bride. The responsibility of the groom's friend was to assure all went well for the groom. The friend stood by and listened for **the bridegroom's voice**—for his approach, when the friend rejoiced greatly. When the wedding concluded, the groom's friend "exited the stage," out of the spotlight. His work was done. With the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, John's **joy was complete**—fulfilled. John's emphasis was clear: Jesus was the groom, the most important figure. John was the friend whose role was to assist, and John joyfully did so. Far from being jealous of Jesus, John was overjoyed at Jesus' success.

[Verse 30] John declared that Jesus **must increase** while he decreased. "Must" has the sense of moral necessity based on God's redemptive purpose. In God's unfolding provision of salvation, Jesus was to progressively take center stage while John was to fade into the wings. To his everlasting credit, John consistently pointed to Jesus' preeminence and to John's own servant's role.



Read the article "The Rabbi's Role in the First Century" in the Fall 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles "The Jordan River" (Summer 2015), "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" (Fall 2011), and "John the Baptist: His Life and Ministry" (Fall 2007) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator.



5 minutes

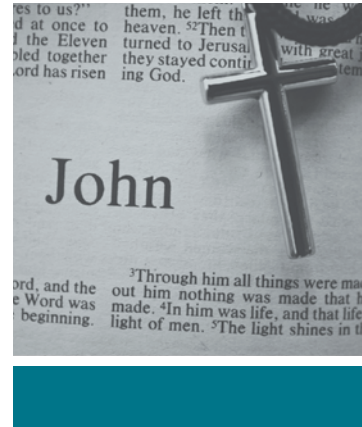
LIVE IT OUT

Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 106 of the PSG. Ask them to consider these suggestions for choosing to exalt Christ this week, instead of themselves:

- ▶ Memorize John 3:30—"He must increase, but I must decrease"—and let it drive your words and actions.
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Write out your testimony using the three bullet points on page 104 of the PSG, expressing your story in a way that keeps all the focus on Jesus. Pray for an opportunity to share your testimony with someone new this week.



Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the Conclusion from page 106 of the PSG:

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'll take an active stance in making sure all those things point to Jesus.

PRAY: Conclude by once again declaring that Jesus alone is worthy to be praised. Pray that God's Spirit would guide you and your group members to make that praise a primary focus in your daily routines this week.

**GROUPS
MATTER.**

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

LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry