

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 126** and ask **Question #1: What are some of the ways we display what we like most?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to the first paragraph in **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG, page 127** and the author's statistics about the moon: about 245,000 miles from the earth, moving at 2,300 miles per hour, covered with thousands and thousands of craters.

SAY: "The one thing the moon doesn't have is light. All the moon can do is reflect the light from the sun. The moon points me to the sun."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 127: Christ-centered living chooses to exalt Christ, not self.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Thank God for sending His Son Jesus as "the light of the world." Ask God to help us learn from the life of John the Baptist to make our first priority to exalt Jesus, not self.

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 “I baptize with water,” John answered them. “Someone stands among you, but you don’t know him.

27 He is the one coming after me, whose sandal strap I’m not worthy to untie.”

28 All this happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

30 This is the one I told you about: ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me, because he existed before me.’

KEY WORDS: 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.

1 ▶ **Verse 26.** The Jews’ delegation from Jerusalem had asked John the reason he was baptizing. John used the question to focus on the One whose way he was preparing. John was baptizing **with water**. The word **baptize** means “to dip,” “to immerse.” John did not mean his baptism was unimportant. In fact, its significance lay in its preparatory role in Jesus’ appearing on the scene.

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 (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 from himself to **Someone** who had come **among** the people. Jesus had made

STUDY THE BIBLE

John 1:26-30



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Bible Meets Life** and **The Setting** on page 130.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG pages 128-129** for information about John the Baptist from other Gospels.

LEADER PACK: Point to **Item 8: Map Overview** to show where these events occurred



READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read John 1:26-30.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 1 on page 131 to explain these things about John's baptism:

- *The reason for John's baptism was to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.*
- *The word baptize means "to dip," "to immerse."*
- *The baptism of John was for repentance, to symbolize cleansing from sin.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 2 to show the significance of John's statement about being unworthy to untie the straps of Jesus' sandals.

SAY: "All John's work can be summed up in John 1:29: 'Here is the Lamb of God.'"

GUIDE: Refer members to

Key Words on page 131 (**PSG p. 128**) to provide further information about *The Lamb of God*.

GUIDE: Refer group members to the last two paragraphs on **PSG page 129** to show how John pointed people to Jesus.

the journey to where John the Baptist was working, and John had baptized Him (Mark 1:9). **You in you don't know** is emphatic (literally, "you yourselves") and likely refers to the members of the delegation. Because John already had baptized Jesus, he knew Jesus' true identity, but the investigating party did not. They may have seen Jesus in the throng of people around John. But the religious delegates did not **know** Jesus. They did not recognize who He really was. They lacked the necessary perception or discernment.

2 ▶ **Verse 27.** John continued to point to his forerunner role. He prepared the way for Another, who would come **after** John. John's preceding Jesus, however, did not indicate John was superior. With a graphic image from everyday life, John emphasized his role and his relation to Jesus. One task of a slave was to untie the straps of others' sandals. 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 master's sandals. The task of untying guests' sandal straps and washing their feet fell to a household's lowest slave. John the Baptist declared that compared with Jesus he was below the lowest slave. He was not worthy of performing the most menial task for Him.

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 servant's role or to inflate his ego. He knew who he was—the forerunner; and he knew who Jesus was—the Messiah. ◀

Verse 28-29. John's exchange took place **in Bethany across the Jordan**. John was in the area just north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan. Bethany may have been the site of a ford or a ferry across the Jordan. The geographic detail distinguished this Bethany from the village of Bethany about two miles southeast of Jerusalem.

3 ▶ The next day John saw Jesus approaching. In the Greek text, John began with a term that means "see" or "behold" to direct attention to something or someone. At Jesus' baptism, John had recognized that He was the Messiah. As Jesus came toward him, John presented Him as the **Lamb of God**. Behind this designation was a rich Old Testament background. A lamb—unblemished, year-old male—offered as a sacrifice when (1) celebrating Passover (Ex. 12:5) or (2) offered daily in

the Jews' sacrificial system (Lev. 14:12-21). The word *Lamb* as a title for Jesus occurs only in the Gospel of John and Revelation. The title *Lamb of God* would be new and thus unfamiliar to John the Baptist's hearers. This title could be interpreted: (1) the Passover lamb; (2) the lamb of Isaiah 53:7, presented for slaughter; (3) the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53; (4) the Jewish sacrificial system's daily sacrifices; and (5) the lamb God provided in Genesis 22. The title *Lamb of God* may have been a dramatic way to emphasize the concept of sacrifice as vicarious suffering and to present Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for people's sin (Heb. 10).

The phrase **takes away** has the sense of lifting up and carrying something. It communicates the idea 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. The term **world** included all people (see John 3:16)—but 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 (John 1:15). In general terms, John had announced the Messiah's coming. In 1:30, the phrase **the one I told you about** 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. The term **man** conveys the idea of maleness or manhood. Jesus was truly God but also human, a man of dignity, courage, and strength. With the phrase **ranks ahead of 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

31 I didn't know him, but I came baptizing with water so he might be revealed to Israel."

32 And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and he rested on him.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 3 on page 132 and this page to provide insight on the rich Old Testament background for "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

- *Unblemished, year-old male*
- *Offered as sacrifice when celebrating Passover or daily Jewish sacrificial system*
- *Takes away—lifting up and carrying something. The term communicates the idea that Jesus removes people's sins by taking them on Himself and bearing them.*

DISCUSS: Question #2

(PSG, p. 129): What can we learn about Jesus from John's words and actions?

(Alternate: How does our culture determine who is important or worthy of attention?)

TRANSITION: "In the next

verses John describes his own encounter with Jesus."

STUDY THE BIBLE

John 1:31-34



10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read John 1:31-34.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 4** on this page and page 135 to provide further explanation about John's baptizing Jesus and what he saw and heard that made it clear to him that Jesus is the Son of God.

SAY: "John got a glimpse of who Jesus really is at His baptism. John saw that Jesus is the Messiah, the One and only Son of God. Your moment of clarity might not have been as dramatic as John's, but your experience is what you can share with others."

33 I didn't know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The one you see the Spirit descending and resting on — he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

34 I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

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. At one time, John did not grasp Jesus' true identity. John's mother, Elizabeth, and Jesus' mother, Mary, were relatives, so the possibility is that John and Jesus knew each other (Luke 1:36). They may have seen each other previously. 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 so Jesus could be **revealed** (brought to light) as the Jews' 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.

4 ▶ **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 initially John balked at baptizing Jesus. Jesus insisted, so John immersed Him. When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened and He saw God's Spirit descending in the form of a dove and resting on Him. A heavenly voice affirmed Jesus as God's Son in whom God delighted (Matt. 3:13-17). John personally witnessed with his eyes the incredible scene of the dove's alighting on Jesus. The phrase **I saw** literally is "I have seen" and conveys the scene's continuing impact on John.

Verse 33. Until John baptized Jesus, John **didn't know** Him. 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 with a note of wonder that in all the time he had known about (and perhaps experienced

sporadic contact with) his kinsman, he had no idea of His true identity and redemptive role. 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 **descending and resting on** the promised Deliverer. God had dispatched John to baptize **with** (or in) **water**; Jesus, the Messiah, would baptize **with the Holy Spirit**. 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. ◀

John 3:26-30

26 So they came to John and told him, "Rabbi, the one you testified about, and who was with you across the Jordan, is baptizing — and everyone is going to him."

27 John responded, "No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven.

28 You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I've been sent ahead of him.'

29 He who has the bride is the groom. But the groom's friend, who stands by and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the groom's voice. So this joy of mine is complete.

30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

GUIDE: Refer group members to the outline provided on **PSG page 131**, and encourage group members to develop their testimonies following this pattern and explanation:

- *Who we were.*
- *Who Jesus is.*
- *Who we are.*

DISCUSS: Question #3
(PSG, p. 131): **What are some experiences that have shaped your understanding of Jesus?**

(Alternate: How has encountering Jesus transformed your life?)

TRANSITION: "As Jesus gained popularity, John became the forgotten one. Let's see how he responded to this change."

STUDY THE BIBLE **John 3:26-30**



15 minutes

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

SAY: “John understood that his role was to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah and to point people to Jesus.”

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 132** to show how John’s followers responded to Jesus’ growing popularity.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 5** to explain the tension John’s disciples felt because everyone had begun going to hear Jesus.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 6** on this page and page 137 to reveal John’s response to this change.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 133** to show how we can follow the example of John by rebelling against the culture of self, denying ourselves, and pointing others to Jesus.

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

Point to Jesus, not yourself.

John 3:1-21 tells of a lengthy conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Jesus stressed the necessity of being born again (or from above) to enter God’s kingdom (come under God’s rule). To receive eternal life, people had to make faith commitments to Jesus, who would willingly die to provide forgiveness for sins. Jesus made clear that God loved all people and gave His Son so everyone who believed in 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 ministered in Judea, baptizing people who committed to follow Him. John also continued his baptism of repentance. John’s disciples and a Jew began arguing “about purification” (3:25), likely whether Jesus’ baptism or John’s baptism was effective.

5 ▶ Verse 26. John’s disciples came to him with their concern. They addressed him as their **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, **everyone is going to him**, was overstatement for emphasis much as we sometimes say, “The whole town turned out.” 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, evidently John’s disciples were concerned that Jesus’ popularity and success would overshadow John’s ministry and stature. ◀

6 ▶ 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 given and permanent. The phrase **from heaven** was a reference to God. Generally, Jews regarded God’s name to be sacred and often substituted words and phrases for the

name. An alternate suggestion is that *from heaven* has the sense of 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 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). John had preceded Jesus to prepare for His being brought to light as the Messiah. The phrase **I've been sent ahead** 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.

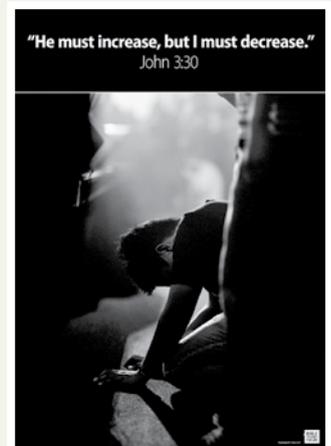
Verse 29. John used a familiar Jewish custom to drive home the subordinate role he gladly embraced. In Judean weddings, **the groom's friend** (our "best man") had a vital role in his friend's wedding. The groom's friend assisted the groom and made many of the wedding arrangements. The friend brought 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 groom's voice**—for his approach. When the groom's voice became audible, 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 His success.

Verse 30. John declared that Jesus **must increase** while he decreased. 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 progressively 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 #4
(PSG, p. 133): **What are some practical ways to live out: "He must increase, but I must decrease"?**

LEADER PACK: Point to **Item 11: John 3:30.**



DISCUSS: Question #5
(PSG, p. 134): **In what ways can we make Jesus greater in our lives?**

(Alternate: What are some symptoms of a life that is self-focused?)

DO: Encourage group members to take a few minutes to complete the activity **"He Must Increase, But I Must Decrease"** on **PSG page 134.**

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 by nature we are selfish and self-serving, always looking out for number one, asking what's in it for me. But when Jesus transforms our hearts, we begin to realize it's not about us, it's all about Him.

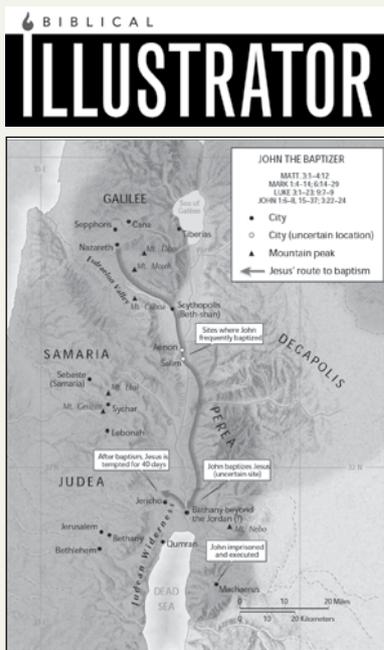
PRAY: "Father, help us to follow the example of John the Baptist and say with him, Jesus must increase, I must decrease."

LIVE IT OUT

Your life is going to point to something. Your clothes, relationships, 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.

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





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.**

LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry