



# The Gospel of John

## Session Two: The Testimony of John the Baptist

### THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

At some point, every person is faced with the question of their identity. While psychologist Abraham Maslow might call the end goal of this search self-actualization, the result for Christians should be not self-actualization, but Christ-realization.

When we put Christ at the center of who we are, He becomes our identity, and shapes our talents and vocation around His activity in our lives. When that happens, we have a story to tell—not about how great we are, but by how great Jesus is—that we won’t be able to keep inside.

John the Baptist understood his life's purpose was to know Christ and make Him known. John stands as an example of a faithful servant of God.

### TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 1:19-34

### THE MAIN IDEA

John the Baptist's identity, ministry, and testimony all pointed toward Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

*How much of what I believe about myself, the work that I engage in, and the conversations that I have, point others to Christ?*

### SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

**John 1:19-23** There are lots of ways people define themselves. This might include education, career, relationships, or favorite sports team. John the Baptist found his identity in who he was in relationship to Jesus, a pattern of humility and obedience that all believers are to follow.

**John 1:24-28** John the Baptist's ministry pointed toward Jesus. While God may not call all of us to serve Him vocationally, He does call us to bear witness to Christ in every area of our lives. In whatever stage of life or career path we find ourselves on, we can ask the Lord for opportunity to serve Christ and help others know Him.

**John 1:29-34** John the Baptist declared Jesus the Lamb of God and the Son of God. He understood that his life's purpose was to make Jesus known. In fact, his ministry could be summed up from John 3:30, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Our testimony, like his, can point others toward “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”



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## START HERE

This week we will look at the ministry of John the Baptist and His declaration of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. As you might recall from last week, John's Gospel stands alone from the other three Gospel books in that John presents his narrative thematically rather than chronologically. As you read, notice how John the Baptist pointed away from himself and toward Jesus as the Savior of the world.

## DISCUSS

*How can Christians represent Jesus in the various domains of our lives? What gets in the way of sharing Jesus wherever we go?*

## REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

### 1. John the Baptist's identity pointed toward Jesus.

John 1:19-23: *This was John's testimony when the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?"*

*He didn't deny it but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."*

*"What then?" they asked him. "Are you Elijah?"*

*"I am not," he said.*

*"Are you the Prophet?"*

*"No," he answered.*

*"Who are you, then?" they asked. "We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What can you tell us about yourself?"*

*He said, "I am a **voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord**—just as Isaiah the prophet said."*

### *Unpacking John 1:19-23*

If someone were to ask, "Who are you?", how would you answer? You might say "I am a wife," "I'm a teacher," "I'm a dad," "I'm a dog lover," or "I'm a Rangers fan." While many of those things might be true about your roles in life, your relationships, your vocation, or your hobbies, they would still fall short of helping someone know the real you. Who we are is a mixture of our genetics, our upbringing, our personality type, and our interests and experiences. More profoundly, who we are is most accurately described not in relationship to ourselves as a



creation, but in relationship to God, our Creator. When we base our identity primarily in who we are in Christ, our talents, relationships, and experiences have their proper perspective considering our eternal relationship with God.

John the Baptist understood the importance of identity. From birth, he was the talk of the town. First, elderly parents conceived him. His father Zechariah, a priest, received a visit from the angel Gabriel announcing his conception and birth. Regarding his identity and life's purpose, the angel declared, *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people"* (Luke 1:13-17).

Zechariah was struck mute in disbelief, but his mother Elizabeth believed and praised God. After John's birth, his father responded in faith to the news of the angel, and his speech was restored. Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied about Christ, but also declared this about his son, John the Baptist—"And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of our God's merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:76-79).

John the Baptist understood his identity in light of his birth. He understood his identity in his relationship to Jesus, and he understood his identity through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in His life. The same is true for us. There may be facets of our physique, personality, and family history that influence who we grow up to become. However, as followers of Jesus, our greatest identity comes in knowing who we are in relationship to Christ, and in fellowship with the Holy Spirit. When we get that right, we are less likely to be led astray by the world.

Not only do we need a right understanding of who we are, we need a right understanding of who God is. When we stop to think of the all-knowing and all-loving God of the universe making a way, through Christ, for us to be reconciled to Himself, that should be the most powerful identity marker in our lives. A high view of God gives us a right view of self. As Jackie Hill Perry wrote, *"If He is omnipotent, then we are not as powerful as we think. If He is omniscient, then there is nowhere to hide. If He cannot lie, then His promises are all true... It is the identity that we ascribe to God... that will determine the identity we will give ourselves."*

When John the Baptist arrived in Bethany and began baptizing, people wanted to know the answer to one question, "Who is this guy?" John the Baptist did not fit any mold the religious leaders of the day had. The *Expositor's Commentary* notes, *"His preaching attracted such large crowds that the Jewish hierarchy in Jerusalem sent priests (the theological authorities of the nation) and Levites (those concerned with the ritual and service of the temple) to investigate*



him. John did not seem to fit into any category familiar to the Jewish authorities, and his unusual success demanded an explanation.”

John knew who he was in respect to Jesus. He did not for one second want to be misrepresented as the Messiah. Before the question was even on their tongues, John declared, “*I am not the Messiah*” (John 1:20). The religious leaders asked a different question, “*Are you Elijah?*” This question originated from Malachi 4:5-6: “*Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.*” Because of this verse, many Jews believed that the Old Testament prophet, Elijah, would return to earth in preparation for Christ’s birth. However, Scripture is clear that John the Baptist was not Elijah reincarnated. Luke 1:17 says that in preparation for Christ’s birth John the Baptist came “*in the spirit and power of Elijah*,” not as the prophet himself. Interestingly enough, while John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah in preparation for Christ’s birth, it is the prophet Elijah who came in spirit form at the Transfiguration to talk with Christ in preparation for his death (Matthew 17:1-8).

Unsatisfied, the religious leaders asked a third question: “*Are you the Prophet?*”

“*No,*” he answered.

“*Who are you, then?*” they asked. “*We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What can you tell us about yourself?*” (John 1:21b-22)

These religious leaders wanted John the Baptist to tell them who he was and by what authority he acted. Not only that, but they wanted to make sure that the seat of power for religious instruction and teaching in Israel remained with them. His previous answers had not satisfied their curiosity. Finally, instead of supplying their own ideas (Messiah, Elijah, or prophet) they asked him directly. “*Who are you, then?*” John quoted from the prophet Isaiah and answered, “*I am a voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord*” (John 1:23).

To better understand how John the Baptist saw himself and his mission, it is helpful to look back at the verse he referenced from Isaiah 40. The prophet Isaiah ministered to the Southern Kingdom nearly 700 years before John the Baptist was born. His fiery preaching served to warn the Southern Kingdom of Judah would fall like its sister Israel if they did not repent. However, God also gave Isaiah a Messianic message of hope. In chapter 40, God told Isaiah to comfort his people with the hope of a coming King:

“*Comfort, comfort my people,*”  
*says your God.*  
*“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,*  
*and announce to her*  
*that her time of hard service is over,*  
*her iniquity has been pardoned,*



*and she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."*

*A voice of one crying out:*

*Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness;  
make a straight highway for our God in the desert.*

*Every valley will be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill will be leveled;  
the uneven ground will become smooth  
and the rough places, a plain.*

*And the glory of the LORD will appear,  
and all humanity together will see it,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 40:1-5)*

John the Baptist was the messenger in the desert calling people to God. His voice echoed the prophet Isaiah's words about the Messiah. The glory of the Lord indeed appeared in his lifetime in the person of Jesus. There may be lots of voices trying to tell us who we are or what we should be. We may be tempted to seek identity in our vocation, family, wealth and status, or even in the work we do in the church. However, like John the Baptist, when we know who we are in relationship to Christ, we are set free to serve God and others with joy and purpose.

## DISCUSS

- *How would you answer the question, "Who are you?" How naturally do you connect this to Jesus?*
- *Why was John the Baptist an unexpected messenger? What are some unexpected ways God might speak to us today?*
- *What difference does seeking your identity in Christ make in everyday life?*

## 2. John the Baptist's ministry pointed toward Jesus.

John 1:24-28: Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. So they asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you aren't the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet?"

"I baptize with water," John answered them. "Someone stands among you, but you don't know him. He is the one coming after me, whose sandal strap I'm not worthy to untie." All this happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

### *Unpacking John 1:24-28*

It is fun to ask children what they want to be when they grow up. You can expect a variety of answers—everything from garbage collector, firefighter, princess, teacher, or pilot. What you might not hear, however, is, "I'll be whatever God wants me to be." While we might not expect a five-year-old to place their future career in God's hands, the sad truth is, we seldom do that as



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adults either. When considering prospective professions, many consider things like how much money it will make, location, or how much education will be required. For many, the idea of asking God what He wants us to be never enters our minds. It takes purposeful intention to seek how we can serve God in daily life.

John the Baptist may have known he would be a prophet since a young age. Most certainly his parents would have told him the message of the angel Gabriel. However, he still had to step into it. John the Baptist's profession set him at odds against the religious community, caused a stir wherever he went, and eventually led to his death. Surely there was an easier path. John the Baptist's faithfulness was a powerful witness of humble obedience and following God wherever He leads. John preached repentance in light of the Messiah's coming. People were drawn to his message, and many turned to God.

In the Jordan River, John the Baptist likely performed the same baptism by immersion that had become standard practice for proselytes converting to Judaism during the intertestamental period (the roughly 400 years between the minor prophets and the birth of Christ). John baptized Jews in a baptism a repentance.

John's ministry pointed unwaveringly toward Jesus. The size of his crowds and the passion with which he preached could have tempted him to take his own share of the limelight. His humility, however, pointed the crowd to Christ, the one of whom John declared, "*He is the one coming after me, whose sandal strap I'm not worthy to untie*" (John 1:27). Here he referenced the job of the lowest servant in the household—the one assigned to remove the sandals and wash the feet of the master's guests. Not only did John the Baptist willingly surrender his role to await the Messiah, he did so joyfully. He said in John 3:29-30, "*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. He must increase, but I must decrease.*"

Many draw self-worth from the career ladders we climb, the professional or personal accolades we receive, or the influence we gain in the sight of others. However, the highest achievement any of us can achieve, personally or professionally, is to build a life that points to Jesus.

## DISCUSS

- *What did you want to be when you were young? How do you think Christians should approach choosing a profession?*
- *How did John the Baptist's baptism point toward Jesus? What stands out to you about the way John the Baptist viewed his calling?*
- *Are there ways to serve God vocationally even if you are not in full-time ministry? How could you surrender your vocational service, inside or outside of the home, as a place for Christ to rule and reign?*



### 3. John the Baptist's testimony pointed toward Jesus.

John 1:29-34: The *next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I told you about: 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me, because he existed before me.' I didn't know him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel."* And John testified, *"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and he rested on him. 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.' I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."*

#### *Unpacking John 1:29-34*

Do your children or grandchildren know the story of how you became a Christian? Do your friends know how you came to know Christ or the difference Jesus has made in your life? Are there opportunities to share your faith with your colleagues, even if it's just something that spoke to you in church on Sunday? For believers, the transforming work of Jesus is the most significant thing that has ever happened to us, and yet sometimes it is the hardest to share with others. When we share the story of what Christ has done for us, not only do we give glory to God for the things He has done, but we might have an opportunity to share Jesus with someone who does not know Him. When we share our story, we join with John the Baptist in saying, *"I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God"* (John 1:34).

When he saw Jesus approaching, John cried out, *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* A sacrificial lamb as atonement for sin was a common theme throughout the Old Testament. In Genesis 22, God provided Abraham with a sacrificial lamb to take the place of his son, Isaac. In Exodus 12:1-13, the Hebrews were to take a Passover lamb and sacrifice it so the Angel of Death, the sign of God's righteous judgment over sin, would pass over them and they would live. When the Hebrew people came under covenant with God, He instructed them in the sacrificial system to atone for sin (Leviticus 14:10-25). Each Old Testament system of sacrifice and payment for sin was a marker pointing toward Christ, the true Lamb of God, *"who takes away the sin of the world."* One day, according to Revelation 5:6-13 we will all worship in Christ's presence as we declare, *"Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing!"*

John the Baptist reminded those nearby of his previous teaching and repeated, *"This is the one I told you about: 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me, because he existed before me.' I didn't know him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel"* (John 1:30-31).

John wanted to make sure the people understood Jesus was not just another man, or simply another itinerant preacher passing through Bethany. No, He is the eternal Christ—He came before John the Baptist, the prophets, or the patriarchs. He always has been and always will be.



John followed this declaration by saying, “*I didn’t know him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel*” (John 1:31). You might wonder, “John the Baptist was Jesus’s cousin. How could he say he didn’t know Him?” While John the Baptist knew Jesus as his cousin and the promised One of God, at Jesus’s baptism John knew and understood Jesus fully in His messianic role (John 1:32-33).

Finally, John proclaimed, “I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God” (John 1:34). First, John the Baptist saw the truth of Christ with his own eyes. The Spirit of God revealed Jesus as the Messiah. After John beheld and believed in Jesus, he pointed others to Him. He testified to his faith in Christ and proclaimed Jesus so others might also believe.

John’s ministry was never intended to mirror Jesus’s ministry, compete with Jesus’s ministry, or even run parallel to Jesus’s ministry. John the Baptist’s ministry was to point others to Christ. From his preaching to his baptisms for repentance, and finally to his public declaration, he made Christ the front and center of his life and ministry. In John 3:30, John the Baptist boldly stated his life’s purpose: “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

John’s testimony, at its heart, was one of surrender to Christ. He understood the highlight of his life was his eternal relationship with Jesus, and he joyfully embraced orienting his life around the one is, “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6). Is Christ the center of your life, or is there something or someone else on the throne of your heart? Like John the Baptist, when we make Jesus the center of our lives and our eternal hope, we cannot help but to tell others about Him. This week, as you share little parts of who you are with family, friends, and colleagues, pray for opportunities to use your story to point others toward Him.

## DISCUSS

- *Do the people closest to you know your testimony? If not, what prevents you from sharing?*
- *What two titles did John the Baptist ascribe to Jesus? How are they both important to understand Him rightly?*
- *Where do you need to be challenged this week to share what Christ has done for you? How can our group encourage one another to boldly share our faith?*



## DEEPER FOCUS

John's message could be summed up as, "Not me, but Him." Think about the thing that dominates your thoughts: a difficult relationship, a conversation you are replaying over in your mind, a big upcoming decision, or something else.

What would "Not me, but Him" look like in this area of your life and what practical next steps would this require of you?

## REFLECT ON THE TEXT

### DISCUSS

- *John the Baptist was intentional about taking the focus off himself and putting it on Jesus. How might we look at our personal and professional accomplishments differently if we saw them first as avenues through which we could influence people for Christ?*

## RESPOND TO THE TEXT

Do people in the different areas of your life (personal, hobbies, workout buddies, colleagues) know that you follow Christ? What is one way you could be intentional this week about representing Jesus in those spaces?

## APPLY

Where do you need to apply John's words, "He must become greater, I must become less"? Is there an area in your life where God is calling you to take the focus off yourself and onto Jesus? How will you respond?

## REFERENCES

Expositors' Bible Commentary (Abridged Version) New Testament, Zondervan, 2004.

*Gay Girl, Good God: The Story of Who I Was, and Who God Has Always Been*, B & H Books, 2018.