



# FOCUS ON JOHN

a study guide for  
groups & individuals

**revised edition**

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# Introduction to the Focus Series

The Focus Bible Study Series offers a unique and inviting way to interact with and experience God's word, allowing that word to filter into every area of life. They are designed to challenge growing Christians to explore scripture and expand their understanding of God's call. The studies echo the **Living the Good News** strategy of experiential learning; that is, they welcome the participant into a journey of discovery.

## Journal Format

Focus Bible Studies are adaptable for individual use or group use. Adult classes, small-faith communities, mid-week Bible studies and neighborhood discussion groups will find these books a helpful resource for in-depth exploration, personal growth and community building. When used in a group, leadership may be designated or shared.

Each of the studies' twelve sections begins with a brief synopsis of the passage and a *Find the Facts* section, which can help you prepare to consider the material. Informative commentary is not intended to provide definitive answers to the meaning of the passage, but to give you background information, clues to the context and suggestions for thought. It can serve as a point of departure for personal reflection or group discussion.

The questions posed in each section are designed to speak to at a variety of levels:

- Some are questions of *interpretation*: What is the author's meaning in this passage?
- Some are questions of *application*: How does the author's message apply to contemporary Christianity?
- Some are questions of *reflection*: How is this God's message to me? to my family? to our community?

Every level contributes to the faith-nurturing impact of the study. The variety of questions are grouped together topically so that you can respond to the level most directly per-

taining to your situation. The same goes for group use: participants can respond to those questions most relevant to their current circumstance.

Each section includes suggested *Group Activities*. These activities provide small groups with experiential activities that can help participants to grasp an idea through various methods of learning rather than through intellect alone. These activities involve the whole person—senses, emotions, mind and spirit. If you are using this book in a group setting, we encourage you to incorporate these activities into your group’s time together. Many adults may feel awkward when invited to work with clay or pipe cleaners, or to create songs or poetry; they may feel these are childish activities. Such concrete experiences, however, can serve to move group members from learning about an idea toward an understanding of the idea.

Each section closes with a *Journal Meditation* and a *Stepstone to Prayer*. These offer you the opportunity to record or illustrate thoughts and feelings about the passage explored and to express these to God in prayer. The *Journal Meditation* invites you into deep, personal reflection that can produce life-changing understanding. *Stepstone to Prayer* leads you into a time of communion with God.

## Individual Use

- Begin each session with prayer—that you will be open to God’s message to you, that the Spirit will illuminate God’s work, and that you will be empowered to follow God’s call.
- Read the passage several times in the scripture translation of your choice. (Note that the New Revised Standard Version Bible has been used in the preparation of these studies.) Try to understand what the author is saying before you begin to interpret, apply or reflect on the message.
- Note key words or phrases that you find especially significant in the scripture. When you have finished a section, go back and review these words or phrases and explore their importance in light of your greater understanding of the passage.
- Spread your exploration of any given section over several days; come back to those questions that have provoked considerable thought. You may be surprised at the new insights you find if you spend some time each day on the passage. Give the passage time to sink into your heart and mind.
- Record your thoughts in the space provided. The discipline of journaling can help you synthesize your thoughts and direct your understanding.

## Small Group Use

- Prepare for each gathering following the suggestions given above under “Individual Use.” Group interaction is impoverished if participants have not immersed themselves in the passage before meeting.
- Begin your time together with prayer. Expect God to increase your faith, expand your understanding of scripture and build your fellowship.
- Accept one another’s experiences and interpretations of the passage. Listen carefully to comments; offer your own insights; be willing to look at things in new ways.

## Small Group Leadership

- Prepare for each gathering as a participant first. Your role as a leader is not to teach but to facilitate the process of sharing and discovery for everyone.
- Keep in mind the group’s time restraints. Begin and end on time. Underline those questions that you think will be most appropriate for your group’s discussion time, but be open to those questions that group members wish to pursue.
- Choose one or two group activities that your group will enjoy and learn from. Make sure you have gathered any required materials for your chosen group activities.
- Begin and close each gathering with prayer. Ask a volunteer to read each section of the passage as you come to it in the study.
- Welcome all contributions, but keep the discussion on track. Certain passages may have two or three possible interpretations. Do not be concerned if all participants do not agree in their understanding. Acknowledge the differences of opinion and move on to the next question.
- Allow time at the end of each gathering for those individuals who wish to share their thoughts or drawings from their *Journal Meditations*.
- If your group members are not well-acquainted, it may take some time to build a trust level within the group. Let the dynamics of the group develop as group members gain confidence in themselves and in one another.

# Introduction to the Gospel of John

Each gospel has been symbolized throughout the centuries by a different animal. John's symbol, the eagle, was given precisely because of the gospel's soaring language as well as keen insights into the meaning of Jesus' words and the spiritual application of Jesus' works. Less of a biographical account of Jesus' life and ministry, the Gospel of John offers an interpretive account by one who had meditated long under the guidance of the Spirit about the significance of Jesus' good news.

The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, sometimes referred to as the synoptics, were written from a viewpoint similar to one another and report many of the same incidents from Jesus' life. The Gospel of John, however, is the gospel that is different, and we are all the richer for that difference.

## Authorship and Date

We cannot state positively who wrote this gospel, but from very early times, John, the son of Zebedee and one of the twelve apostles, has been accepted as the author. John is presumed to be “the disciple whom Jesus loved” who is first introduced by that title in 13:23, and who also appears at the foot of the cross in 19:26, at the empty tomb in 20:1-8 and by the Sea of Tiberias in 21:7, 20. He is usually thought to be the “other disciple” who helped Peter gain admission to the high priest's courtyard in 18:16. This beloved disciple says he is the one “testifying to these things” (that is, to message and identity of Jesus Christ) in 21:24.

While scholars have raised some questions about the identity of the author, there is no compelling reason to reject the assumption that John the apostle did indeed write—or at least provide the information for—this gospel. We shall, for the purposes of this study, refer to the writer as “John” and accept the theory that he is John the apostle.

It is generally agreed that this gospel was probably composed about A.D. 90–100 and written in Ephesus. This late date makes it the last gospel to be written. John may or may not have had the other gospel accounts before him as he wrote; certainly many of Jesus' teachings and miracles were commonly known by then and, if he was indeed one of the twelve disciples,



his writing reflects not just his observations of the events, but his long meditation on their implications.

## **Purpose**

By the end of the first century in the Christian era, there was a need for a fresh statement of the Christian faith. Christianity had been born in the cradle of Judaism, but as that first century drew near its close, Christianity had spread well beyond the Jews and was increasingly a religion of Gentiles. The Gospel of John, written with the Gentile in mind, provided the fresh restatement of the faith built on the words and work of Jesus Christ.

Though the author sought to make his message intelligible to the philosophical Greek, it clearly arises out of a deep understanding of and appreciation for Jewish history and faith. The stated purpose of the work is given in 20:31—“these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” In reading this record of Jesus’ words and deeds, both Jew and Gentile alike are called to belief, not only a decision of conversion, but a continual process of believing.

He is true to this stated purpose as he writes. Of all the material on the life and work of Jesus available to him, he selects certain events and words as evidence or “signs” that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament and is the Son of God.

John frequently uses courtroom language, and many of those whom Jesus touched give “testimony” in support of John’s claim about Jesus. That “Jesus is the Messiah” becomes irrefutably clear throughout the gospel.

## **John and the Other Gospels**

Even a casual reading of John reveals significant differences from the synoptic gospels:

- Jesus speaks very little about “the kingdom of God,” preferring instead to teach about the quality of eternal life. He also speaks much more about his own role as an agent of the Father.
- Instead of parables, fairly lengthy speeches of Jesus are recorded.
- John reports seven miracles of Jesus, five of which are found only in John. Also, in John

these miracles function as “signs,” or divine revelations of Jesus’ identity.

- In John a great deal of Jesus’ ministry occurs in Judea, primarily in Jerusalem. In the other gospels, Galilee is the normal setting. John begins his gospel by setting Jesus in a theological rather than a historical context (1:1–18). The gospel offers no background to Jesus’ human origins or birth and concentrates instead on his spiritual/divine origin.

It is important that John not be viewed as a contradiction of the other three gospels. Rather, we can thank John for providing us with additional information about Jesus and a different point of view from which to see him.

## Structure

The following is a simple outline of the gospel:

- 1:1–18 the prologue, an introduction of the titles and interpretations of Jesus to be used throughout the gospel
- 1:19–12 Jesus’ ministry to the public, displaying his signs to all and teaching about his work
- 13–17 Jesus’ private ministry to the disciples, teaching them the nature of their relationship with him, with the Father and with the Holy Spirit
- 18–19 the arrest and crucifixion
- 20 the resurrection
- 21 an epilogue

## Contemporary Relevance

John’s gospel continues to be important today because in it we find the clearest statement of who the Church understands Jesus to be. In reading this gospel we also learn a great deal about the work of the Holy Spirit, who can be described as Jesus’ “alter ego.” Since it is through the Holy Spirit, the presence of the risen Christ within us, that we most frequently meet God today, this gospel serves to help us understand the ways in which the Holy Spirit ministers to us.

Above all, this gospel challenges us, as it challenged the first readers, to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that by believing we may inherit eternal life.

# John 1–2

## Jesus—The Incarnate Word

**I**n these first two chapters of the gospel, Jesus is first introduced from a spiritual point of view, then as the Christ to whom John the Baptist points, and finally from the perspective of the first disciples. John also reports Jesus' first miracle and his clash with the money-changers and merchants in the temple. Most importantly, John introduces words that he later develops as primary themes through the rest of the book. Read through both chapters 1 and 2 at one sitting to understand the scope of John's introduction.

### Find the Facts

Whom does John believe Jesus to be? When did Jesus Christ the Lord come into being? What is the role of John the Baptist? Who are the first two disciples identified in this gospel? What need did Jesus meet in his first miracle? Why was Jesus angry at the merchants in the temple?

## Consider:

1. Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John begins his account with a beautiful and moving hymn to Jesus' glory. Choose three or four words that John uses in 1:1-18 that describe the essence of Jesus.

### John 1:1-3

Verses 1-18 of chapter 1 are often called John's prologue, for they preface the body of his gospel as a doxology, revealing both Jesus' divine source and his human origin and placing him in a timeless perspective. Rather than starting with Jesus' birth, John returns to Genesis. "In the beginning..." reads Genesis 1:1, and that is where John places Jesus. This gospel, then, becomes a new creation story, the account of a new beginning in God's relationship with humanity.

John calls Jesus the "Word." The term *word* in Greek thought meant the controlling and organizing force in the world, the higher mind that held everything together. In Jewish thought, *word* represented the creative power of God. In the creation story (Gen. 1), everything came into being through God's word. God speaking is synonymous with God acting creatively. Each of the six creation days begins with the phrase, "and God *said*..."

John's choice of the word *logos* perfectly combines Greek and Hebrew thought and introduces Jesus to both cultures as the fullest expression of the depths of God.

## Consider:

2. In your own words express what you think is John's main point in 1:1-3.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What does John's claim about Jesus in 1:1-3 add to your understanding of Jesus? What does it clarify? What questions does it raise?

## John 1:4-5

*Light* and *life* are key words in John's gospel. He uses them together here in verse 4 and many times more throughout the gospel. This life is different from the period of human existence we call a "life span." Rather, the life in Jesus has about it the essence of "Godness." He does not just *have* life, he *is* life. The eternal life that characterizes God's existence also characterizes the Word.

Jesus is a light to humankind. Powers loose in the world try to hide the life of God in the same way that darkness makes objects difficult to see. Jesus is light because his life and ministry illuminate the life of God so that we may perceive and receive that life.

In speaking of light, John again links Jesus with the creation story. When the earth was "a formless void" (Gen. 1:2), there was only darkness, chaos and disorder. God's first creative act was to bring light.

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’” (Gen. 1:3). In the same way, the light of Jesus drives away the chaos of spiritual darkness.

In John’s day, light and darkness were not considered simply neutral qualities. Darkness was not just the absence of light; it was a force that was actively hostile to the light of God.

## Consider:

4. What kinds of darkness in the world try to overcome the life of God today? In what circumstances have you observed that darkness is unable to overcome the life of God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. In what sense do you experience the life of God as light? What kinds of darkness are hostile to the life of God in you?

## John 1:6-8

John the Baptist has a critical role in preparing the people to receive Jesus’ message. It is he who serves as the link between the Old Testament prophecies and the new kingdom that dawned with Jesus. John, the writer, takes great pains to put to rest any idea that John the Baptist is himself Christ. Rather, he prepares the way for Jesus.

Besides his role of preparer, John the Baptist serves as a “witness to testify to the light.” Throughout the Gospel of John, witnesses come forth to testify concerning Jesus. John the Baptist is called as the first witness and later in this chapter (1:19-28) he is even “interrogated.”

As a witness, John the Baptist points to Jesus—to his identity, to his message and to his mission (1:29-37). In the line of the Old Testament prophets before him, John the Baptist calls men and women to repentance, which prepares the way for belief.

## Consider:

6. In what ways is the ministry of John the Baptist a witness and a model for Christians today? How can you help to prepare the way for Jesus in someone else’s life? Who would you call the preparer in your life?

## John 1:9-18

When John says of Jesus that “the world did not know him,” he explains a purpose for writing. Though the creating force of the universe resides in Jesus, people fail to recognize him. To miss meeting Jesus is tragic, so John writes to give people the evidence they need to see Jesus. Though Jesus’ exhortation to be “born from above” comes later (3:3), John introduces this thought here. By receiving Jesus, we experience God’s power (1:12), enabling us to inherit a position of privilege as God’s children.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.” John summarizes the Christmas story in this one sentence. The

birth narratives from Matthew and Luke are useful in telling us what *happened* on the first Christmas, but John tells us what that day *means*. Like Matthew, John understands the incarnation as the presence of God among humanity (Mt. 1:23), surpassing every other experience in the history of God's chosen people. In Jesus, God is with us more fully than ever before (Ex. 40:34-38). The glory of the Lord manifests itself clearly in Jesus, explicitly in the transfiguration (which John possibly alludes to in 1:14) and implicitly in his ministry (2:11).

*Grace* and *truth*, two weighty words in John's gospel, perfectly describe this incarnate Word. Grace describes that unmerited favor of God, which Jesus embodies and communicates to us. Though the word *grace* never appears again in John's gospel, its presence here alerts us to watch for God's favor in all that Jesus says and does.

Truth becomes a refrain throughout the gospel. It describes the reality that lies behind all the confusion, misbelief and ignorance of our lives. In Hebrew thought, truth only had meaning in relation to God's character; the reality of God provided the basis for truth, and God's name represented the integrity of truth (Is. 45:19, 65:16; Ps. 43:3, 51:6). For John, Jesus does more than simply tell us the truth; Jesus the Word *is* truth (14:6; Eph. 4:21).

Here John honors Moses' role as the giver of the law, but elevates Jesus in comparison. Moses told us how to conform our lives to God's truth; Jesus came to impart God's truth.

## Consider:

7. John says of Jesus, "we have seen his glory" (1:14). Do you think the "we" he was speaking of refers only to those who were eye-witnesses of Jesus in the flesh? Why or why not? How is Jesus' glory eternally present in our world today?



## John 1:19-3

Many Jews of Jesus' day anxiously awaited their deliverer, their Messiah ("the Anointed One of God," Gk., *Christ*). A fiery leader like John the Baptist, who apparently rallied the people, might well have become such a deliverer.

Refusing any misdirected devotion, John the Baptist claims that he is neither the Messiah, Elijah nor the prophet. Through Malachi, God had promised to send the great Jewish hero, Elijah, who had not died (2 Kg. 2:11), to prepare the people for the day of the Lord, the day of final judgment and the fulfillment of God's promised salvation (Mal. 4:5-6).

Though John the Baptist ministered "with the spirit and power of Elijah" (Lk. 1:17) and thereby acted in a fulfillment of this prophecy (Mt. 11:14, 17:10-13), he was not Elijah. Neither was he the promised prophet-like-Moses (Dt. 18:17-18). Quoting from another great prophet, Isaiah, John the Baptist calls himself the preparer (Is. 40:3); the one who makes all things ready for a greater one.

John the Baptist then identifies Jesus as that One, the Lamb of God. Such a title recalls the sacrificial lamb slaughtered at Passover. Passover is the feast that celebrates the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt when the blood of lambs caused the angel of death to pass over God's people (Ex. 12:1-14).

### Consider:

8. If you had been standing next to John the Baptist (1:29), what would you have felt and understood by "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"? In what way does Jesus take away sin in the world today?



## John 2:1-12

John's account of Jesus' first miracle serves as another witness to support his claim that Jesus is the Son of God. Mary, too, "gives testimony"; in bringing her concern to Jesus, she discloses her confidence in Jesus' unique abilities.

In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, a wedding was the occasion for a grand celebration, often lasting up to a week. Hospitality played a major role in eastern societies, and a wedding was often a critical measure of a family's hospitality. The lack of a sufficient supply of wine for the guests caused more than chagrin; it was a social disgrace. Jesus' gracious gesture demonstrates "his glory" and is the first of the seven "signs" John records. Each miracle in the gospel becomes a window through which the seeker can see the truth of Jesus. This sign in particular reveals Jesus' supremacy over the law, represented by the stone jars used in the Jewish purification rites. The law prescribed cleansing from every variety of defilement (Mk. 7:3-4), but was powerless to provide new life, as symbolized by the wine (Gen. 27:28; Num. 18:12; Dt. 7:13, 33:28; Jer. 31:12).

Not only did Jesus' action demonstrate the failure of the old covenant of the law, it proclaimed the unsurpassable abundance of the new covenant of Jesus (10:10). That much superior wine (120-180 gallons) would provide for weeks and weeks of celebration. Jesus' message was one of lavish grace (Eph. 1:7-8).

### Consider:

11. Of what is this first miracle a sign for you? Explain your answer. To what event in your life would you like to invite Jesus and his disciples? What miracle do you need Jesus to perform?

12. What is the significance in this story of the role of Mary? of the servants? of the steward? What part have you played in someone else's miracles? How has it revealed Jesus' glory and increased someone's faith?

## John 2:13-25

The incident of the clash with the money-changers in the temple is also reported by the other three gospel writers, but each of them place the incident during the final week of Jesus' earthly life. John, on the other hand, puts it early in Jesus' ministry. Instead of writing a chronologically arranged biography of Jesus, John reported selected incidents that supported the claim that Jesus was the Son of God.

The practice of selling animals for sacrifice probably arose innocently enough. The temple in Jerusalem was the only acceptable place for sacrifice, and pious Jews from all parts of the ancient world would travel to Jerusalem to fulfill their religious duties.

An animal chosen for sacrifice must be unblemished (Lev. 1:10, 3:6, 4:3). Spotless at the start of a long journey, an animal would rarely be found without defect by the time the traveler reached Jerusalem. Appointed temple officials inspected each animal at a cost to the worshiper; if it were rejected, another would have to be purchased.

By the time of Jesus, these officials had probably become corrupt, rejecting most animals and charging exorbitant prices for acceptable ones. The abuse was compounded by the monetary exchange system of the temple. Only temple currency was accepted in the purchase and inspection of the animals, and the money-changers made a great profit by offering a poor exchange rate.

All of this business was being conducted in the outer courts of the temple, which was the only place Gentile “God-fearers” could worship. Instead of being “a light to the nations” (Is. 42:6, 49:6), Israel’s religious center had become a marketplace.

Jesus passionately opposes this abuse. His violent demonstration of outrage calls forth the first signs of hostility from the Jewish leaders. They demand a sign of his credentials. Again and again they ask for proof (4:48, 6:30, 10:24), but reject the signs he provides (2:23). Here Jesus alludes to the ultimate sign of his authority—his death and resurrection. The temple, representative of the old covenant of the law, will indeed be destroyed and a new one raised (Rev. 21:22).

## Consider:

13. What does the incident in the temple reveal to you about Jesus? How do you feel about the power and emotion expressed? In what sense might Jesus operate in a similar fashion today? in the world? in the Church? in your life?
14. What habits in your spiritual life might be keeping you from pure worship and from being a light to others?

## Group Activities

1. Distribute drawing paper and crayons and invite group members to express John 1:1-5 as a drawing. When these are completed, invite volunteers to show their drawings.

Allow group members to discuss the feelings that each of the drawings raises.

What reassuring feelings are expressed? what empowering feelings? what feelings of worship?

2. List on a chalkboard or newsprint the various pieces of evidence that Jesus is God's Son and each of the "witnesses" that John offers.

Ask group members to imagine that they are on trial for claiming that Jesus is the Son of God. What personal witness could they offer to support their claim?

Have group members imagine that they are attorneys and decide how they would arrange the evidence that John provides for a presentation in Jesus' defense.

3. Ask the group to identify the various words and titles used for Jesus in the first two chapters of John. List these on chalkboard or newsprint.

Discuss the different aspects of Jesus that each title suggests:

- In what ways do these words and titles reveal Jesus' divinity?
- How do they define his mission?

4. Provide for group members a variety of the following materials: clay, aluminum foil, pipe cleaners, watercolors (and brushes), drawing paper, charcoal pencils, etc. Ask each group member to select one of the words or titles for Jesus that they listed above (or take time to list them now) and to illustrate it using one or more of the materials listed. Invite volunteers to explain their work.

## Journal Meditation

John says of Jesus that “we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only Son” (1:14). Take a few moments to think about the ways in which you have “seen the glory” of Jesus. Try to remember how such beholding made you feel. Then record here any insight that this remembering brings, whether about Jesus, about yourself or about your relationship with others.

## **Stepstone to Prayer**

“We have found the Messiah.” And Jesus said, “Follow me.”