



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Chuck Swindoll observed, “It would be an understatement to say John the Baptist swam upstream.” He broke with all religious convention—not only in his message but also in his methods. Yet what genuinely marked him was his rare humility. John emerged on the scene as an enigmatic prophet in the wilderness, prior to Jesus beginning His ministry, and as a self-described “fore-runner” of Israel’s promised Messiah.

John’s parents were Zechariah and Elizabeth, both elderly people whom God graciously surprised with a baby, lifting the shame of barrenness and bestowing blessing instead (Luke 1:5–25). Luke reveals to us that, from John’s boyhood until the day of his public ministry, John lived in the deserts (1:80). During that time, he was clothed in camel’s hair, wore a leather belt, and ate a steady diet of locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6). He offered a fire-and-brimstone call to repentance to prepare the way for Jesus (Matthew 3). We will look closely at this fiery preacher and proclaimer of Jesus. Together, we’ll learn the value of genuine humility as a precursor for releasing the power of Christ through us.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

In this study we’ll put into practice the basics of Bible study methods, beginning with observation.



Observation: Taking a Closer Look

Observation answers the question, *What does it say?* As we observe the text, we look for words, names, places, events, repetitions, comparisons, and contrasts. A single entry on John 1:20–21 from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, for instance, provides an excellent example of the value of observation:

Interestingly in response to their [the Pharisees’] questions John’s answers were progressively shorter: “I am not the Christ” (v. 20); **I am not** (v. 21); **No** (v. 21). He did not want to talk about himself, for his function was to point to Another.¹

Quotable

Humility is the rare quality found in those individuals who willingly surrender all personal ambition to champion the significance of others.

— Charles R. Swindoll



This compelling observation becomes the foundational interpretive key to unlocking the meaning of the entire narrative.



Helpful Hint

To orient yourself geographically, take a few moments to locate a map titled “Ministry of Jesus” or something similar. You can usually find such a map in the back of your study Bible or in a Bible atlas. These are excellent tools to keep by your side or to have open online as you search and study the Scriptures.

Locate on a map the city of Jerusalem, about a third of the way down, near the center. Draw your finger to the east and find the Jordan River. Move a bit farther east of the Jordan and you’ll see an area that looks like desert terrain, mountainous and rugged. This is likely where John the Baptizer was preaching his message.

What observations can you make about this location that help you understand the context of John the Baptist’s ministry? Can you determine how far in miles it would be from Jerusalem, the religious center of that day? Make as many observations as possible and write them in the space provided.



Helpful Tools

Bible study tools make digging into the text easy. A Bible dictionary, Bible atlas, and concordance are available for purchase at the Insight for Living Ministries [online store](#). For a complete list of recommendations, read Chuck Swindoll’s [online article](#) “Basic Bible Study Tools.”

John the Baptist, in the gospel writer’s mind, serves as the first witness to Jesus being God’s Son—the Word made flesh—God with us. He includes a variety of descriptions of this enigmatic prophet that help us understand his significance.





Interpretation: Finding the Meaning

Now we'll take the next step in Bible study: interpretation. Interpretation is digging for meaning. To do so we'll use an additional tool of Bible study: correlation—the process of comparing a passage of Scripture to other passages of Scripture to unearth John's original intent. Although this man sent from God, John the Baptist, was unique in many ways, his name was quite ordinary. But he himself was the most uncommon of men.

He was human, but not ordinary. *“God sent a man, John the Baptist . . .”* (John 1:6).

The original Greek is translated, *God sent a man named John*. Read through the first chapter of John again. Pay attention to how often the writer mentions John the Baptist. Make some notes in the space below about how the apostle John describes John the Baptist.

What do you feel is John's purpose in highlighting the ministry of John the Baptist? How do you think it contributes to his desire to prove the claim that Jesus is God's Son?

He was a bearer of light, but he was not the Light. *“. . . to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light”* (1:7–8).

What is the relationship between John 1:5 and 1:6 regarding John's use of the metaphor *light*?



BEHOLDING CHRIST . . . THE SON OF GOD

A Man Sent from God

John 1:6–8, 15, 19–34

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STUDY

Read John 1:9. How would you explain the contrast between John’s reference to Jesus as *the light of the world* in verse 6 and John the Baptist telling people about “the light?”

Why do you think John felt compelled to make this distinction between Jesus, the light of the world, and John the Baptist, the witness to the light?

He was a voice, but not the Word. “*I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Clear the way for the Lord’s coming!’*” (John 1:23).

How does John contrast Jesus as “the Word” (1:1–4) with John as “a voice” (1:23) clearing the way for the Word?

Why would one need to “clear a way” for the Lord? Read Isaiah 40:3 to see if that Old Testament passage offers any clues to the meaning of this expression. (Remember: correlation!) Make your observations in the space provided.



Helpful Hint

When searching the Scriptures, consulting respected scholars by reading their commentaries can strengthen your ability to interpret the Bible. Having a good set of commentaries available is invaluable. (Many are available online.)



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For example, consider this commentary on the meaning of John the Baptist's quoting of Isaiah 40:

John's message was a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3 with reflections of Malachi 3:1. . . . Isaiah 40:3, however, refers to "highway construction workers" who were called on to clear the way in the desert for the return of the Lord as His people, the exiles, returned to Judah from the Babylonian Captivity in 537 B.C. In similar fashion, John the Baptist was in the desert preparing the way for the Lord and His kingdom by calling on people to return to Him.²

He was useful, but not indispensable.

Then the Pharisees who had been sent asked him, "If you aren't the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?" John told them, "I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. Though his ministry follows mine, I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal." (John 1:24–28)

How would you describe John the Baptist's view of himself compared to the One of whom he preached?

Why do you think John, the gospel writer, chose to include this interchange between the Pharisees and John the Baptist? What point did he intend to emphasize?

Read John 13:1–17. How does this account compare to John 1:24–28? How are these passages different?



In what ways is the attitude of humility put on display?

He was a witness, but not an object of worship.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.’ I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel.” Then John testified, “I saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him. I didn’t know he was the one, but when God sent me to baptize with water, he told me, ‘The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’” (John 1:29–33)

In your own words describe how this part of the story adds to the point that John the Baptist served to prepare people for the coming of God’s Son.

The apostle Paul wrote about this attitude of humility that ought to mark all who follow Christ. Read his words in Philippians 2:5–11. What strikes you as similar to John 1:29–33? How was John the Baptist displaying the mind of Christ in his responses to the Pharisees’ interrogation?



As John began his gospel, he wanted us to see that the “man sent from God” bowed to the One who came as God in the flesh. The forerunner needed God to reveal the One he was proclaiming. The water-baptizer pointed to the Spirit-baptizer, testifying boldly, “I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Chosen One of God” (John 1:34).



Application: Bringing Home the Lessons

The final step of Bible study is application: *What does all this mean to me?* This brief section introducing the ministry of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus, God’s Son, offers two compelling lessons about the nature and power of genuine humility.

1. ***Those sent from God exalt the One who sent them.*** How easy it would have been for John the Baptist to soak up some of the light shining around Jesus as He came onto the scene. Yet he resisted the glory and made certain that he only reflected Jesus’ light to those in spiritual darkness.

In what ways can you as a follower of Jesus make certain that your words and actions exalt Him and not yourself?

2. ***Those sent from God diminish the ones who are sent.*** Few early followers of Jesus modeled this rare level of humility like the apostle Paul. He declared: “You see, we don’t go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:5).

In what ways could you mistakenly “preach yourself” when attempting to minister to others? What can you do to make certain your attitude more reflects the humility of John the Baptist and the apostle Paul?





A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for including in Your Word living examples of what it means to exalt Your Son Jesus in words and in actions. Form in me, by Your Spirit, the mind of Christ and the humility that ensures that all the glory goes to Him and to Him alone. In His matchless name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty, New Testament ed.* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983), 274.
2. Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 24.



BEHOLDING CHRIST . . . THE SON OF GOD

A Man Sent from God

John 1:6–8, 15, 19–34

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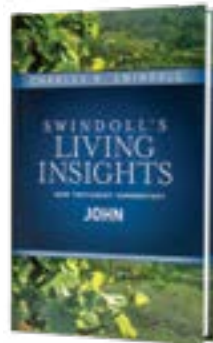
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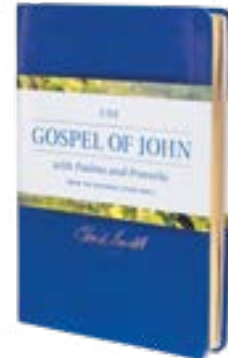
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For the 2018 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Mark Tobey in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Searching the Scriptures Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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