

THE LOOKOUT

DECEMBER 2023

Unit: Gospel of John (Part 1)

Theme: Light and Life

Overview: Life cannot exist without light, water, and food. That is true both scientifically and theologically. First in the order of creation was the creation of light (Genesis 1:3). Second was the separation of the waters (Genesis 1:6). Finally, God made food (Genesis 1:30). Everyone needs light to see (John 8:12). Everyone needs life, which God alone can provide (John 10:10). Everyone needs food (John 6:48). For three months we will study the Gospel of John, the “spiritual Gospel,” as an early Christian theologian called it. In Part 1, students will learn about the themes of light and life from John the Baptist, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the apostle John, and Jesus himself.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a lesson aim, lesson text, and supplemental text.

Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: Study, Application, and Discovery.

Use the Discovery questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF DECEMBER 3, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Live as a testimony,
pointing to Jesus as
the Son of God.**

UNIT: Gospel of John (Part 1)

THEME: Light and Life

LESSON TEXT: John 1:6-8, 19-34

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: John 1:35-42; John 3:22-36; Matthew 3:13-17

A WITNESS TO THE LIGHT

BY MARK SCOTT

When God created the universe, he caused the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night (Genesis 1:16). Spiritually speaking, John the Baptist was the lesser light. But what a light he was! He was a witness to the greater light, Jesus. Even though John the Baptist never worked a miracle (John 10:41), Jesus said he was the greatest person ever born of women (Matthew 11:11). John fulfilled his role, even though it cost him his life (Matthew 14:6-12).

God's prophetic voice had been stilled for close to 400 years when John the Baptist began preaching in the wilderness of Judea. He was to be God's messenger and the one who would prepare the way for the Lord. His purpose was to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents (Malachi 3:1; 4:6).

What John the Baptist Was*John 1:6-8*

John the Baptist was so significant that he made it into the famous prologue of the apostle John's Gospel. That prologue (John 1:1-18) certainly is one of the loftiest pieces of theology ever produced, and with the simplest vocabulary. In the beginning, Jesus was with God and was God. John the Baptist was *sent* from God to *testify* about Jesus. The word *sent* matters in John's Gospel. It appears often and is even part of Jesus' commission statement (John 20:21). The word *sent* means that John the Baptist spoke with authority from God. The angel Gabriel provided John's name to Zechariah, John's father (Luke 1:13), and Zechariah later affirmed the boy's name (1:63).

John was a *witness*. This is a courtroom term from which the English word *martyr* is derived. It means "to tell what one has seen and heard." Witnesses testify. And so, John testified about Jesus—his identity, his character, and his mission. More than that, John's testimony was intended to produce "belief." This matches the purpose statement in the Gospel (John 20:30-31). John knew who he was (a witness to the light) and who he was not (John *himself was not the light*). But he was, as previously noted, a "martyr," giving his life in carrying out his witness.

Who John the Baptist Was Not*John 1:19-28*

The formal introduction of John's Gospel concludes in 1:18 with an awesome claim about Jesus making God known. With the next verse, we head to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist's solicited testimony. The *Jewish leaders*—

priests, Levites, and Pharisees—journeyed the 17 miles downhill from Jerusalem to the Jordan River to interrogate the Baptizer (the literal meaning of his title "the Baptist"). John probably was ministering just south of Aenon near Salim, (i.e., Bethany beyond the Jordan, according to John 1:28) where there was much water (John 3:23).

The leaders asked John about his identity. John answered, "*I am not the Messiah.*" (At times it is helpful to recognize who we are *not* in addition to knowing who we are.) John also denied he was *Elijah* (though Gabriel told Zechariah that John would come in the spirit and power of Elijah—which no doubt was what Jesus meant in Matthew 17:10-13). The leaders then inquired whether John was *the Prophet*. The use of the definite article (*the Prophet*) referred to an individual whose coming was predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. There was a belief among the Jews that his arrival would accompany the coming of the Messiah.

John was not any of the people the Jewish leaders suggested, but he did claim to be a *voice*—not an echo—but a genuine voice. John's job was to prepare people for Jesus—thus, *make straight the way for the Lord*. The leaders were not satisfied with John's answer, so they asked him why a non-messianic figure was conducting a ministry of baptism. John admitted that he was baptizing *with water*, but his baptism was part of his preparatory ministry for someone far greater, *whose sandals I am not worthy to untie*. The next day John will highlight that person as one *who will baptize with the Holy Spirit*.

What John the Baptist Did*John 1:29-34*

John's responses surely left the leaders a bit frustrated. *The next day* (note the series of days in the early verses of John's Gospel—1:29, 35, 43; 2:1), Jesus showed up. John's record does not describe Jesus' baptism (the Synoptic Gospels do), but he does include John the Baptist's *testimony* of that event. And, importantly, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" This is a label with rich biblical meaning (Genesis 22:7-8; Exodus 12:3-7, 13; Isaiah 53:7; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

John knew that Jesus *surpassed* him, because Jesus existed before him, as the apostle John declares in the prologue to his Gospel (John 1:1-3). The Spirit's descent on Jesus at his baptism was proof that Jesus was *God's Chosen One*. Socrates said, "Know thyself." John the Baptist said, in essence, "Know Jesus." ■

APPLICATION

LIGHTEN UP

BY DAVID FAUST

Kevin Schmidt has an interesting job. Every six months, the South Dakota resident climbs a 1,500-foot communication tower to change the red-flashing lightbulb at the top so aircraft won't run into the tower. And you thought it was hard to decorate your Christmas tree!

How many climbers does it take to change a lightbulb? One, if he's brave enough.

"You can't beat the view," Schmidt told a reporter, "and there's no greater sense of peacefulness than to be 1,500 feet in the air by yourself."

If you think it takes a lot of moxie to climb that high, imagine what it's like to step down from heaven to earth, as God did in the form of a baby. And when that baby grew up, he made a bold claim: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

What Does Light Do?

Light reveals and guides. We use flashlights to find lost items. In operating rooms, bright lights help surgeons see what they are doing. For centuries, some lighthouses indicated danger and others showed ships how to find the harbor. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." Without God's guidance, we stumble in the dark. The lenses of culture, politics, and social media are not clear and bright enough to show us where to go. Scripture, though, reveals how to love others, from preborn babies in wombs to aging seniors in nursing homes. It helps us understand our identity as male and female. It clarifies what marriage is meant to be. It shines a bright light on sins like racism and the abuse of power.

Light heals and brightens. Most plants thrive and grow when exposed to light, but they wither and die in darkness. Doctors use lasers to heal nerves and fix cataracts. Light heals in other ways, too. It

cheers people up and conveys a message of welcome and celebration, which is why we put candles on birthday cakes and the Statue of Liberty holds a torch in her hand.

Light alerts and awakens. When I was a boy, my dad would flip on the light switch in my bedroom to wake me up in the morning. Sin lulls us into spiritual slumber and apathy, but God's truth wakes us up and alerts us to the Father's will.

Despite Satan's efforts to extinguish it, God's Living Word still "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Whose Life Are You Brightening Up?

The Light of the World calls us to reflect his light to others (Matthew 5:14-16). Are you a bright spot in your school or workplace? Do your attitude and actions brighten up your neighborhood? Do you know a shut-in who needs a visit, a struggling friend who needs encouragement, or someone far from God who is gripped by spiritual darkness?

When admirers told Mother Teresa how much they respected her work in Calcutta, she responded, "Stay where you are. Find your own Calcutta. Find the sick, the suffering, and the lonely right there where you are—in your own homes and in your own families, in your workplaces, and in your schools. You can find Calcutta all over the world."

Thanks to Jesus Christ, we don't have to walk in darkness; and we don't have to climb a 1,500-foot-tall communication tower to make the world a brighter place.

Personal Challenge: Consider how you will let your light shine by reaching out to someone in need. Begin praying for a friend, neighbor, family member, or co-worker you will invite to join you for a meal during the holidays or accompany you to a Christmas Eve service at your church. ■

DISCOVERY

BY DOUG REDFORD

1. Review the lessons you listed as having learned from the study of Acts. What “Acts” did you do over the past week to personalize these lessons?
2. Recall a time when you unexpectedly found yourself in the dark.
 - What were the surroundings? Were you alone?
 - How long did the darkness last?
 - What was the hardest part of being in the dark?

Ask two people to read aloud **John 1:6-8, 19-34** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. Our Scripture passages draw attention to Jesus as the light. In what specific situation has knowing that Jesus is the light been especially important to you?
4. If someone asked you the question (as the religious leaders did of John the Baptist), “Who are you?” how would you respond?
5. John the Baptist described himself as a voice “calling in the wilderness.” In what ways might our contemporary culture be labeled a wilderness?
6. In what ways can we “make straight the way for the Lord” so that others see him more clearly?
 - On the other hand, in what ways could we make the way “crooked”?
7. John said he was unworthy to untie the thongs of Jesus’ sandals.
 - What was John saying about Jesus with this statement?
 - Why do we need to have this same attitude toward Jesus?
8. Mark Scott notes that John the Baptist’s testimony was intended to produce belief (John 1:7).
 - How would you define what it means to believe in Jesus?
 - What are some important truths about Jesus that you find in today’s verses from John’s Gospel?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: “I will . . .”
10. Is there someone in your neighborhood, your workplace, or a person you encounter in places like grocery stores, restaurants, or other settings to whom you could be a light? What act can you do this week to provide some light in that individual’s life?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **John 3:1-21**. You can also read next week’s supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■