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God's Incarnate Word

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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

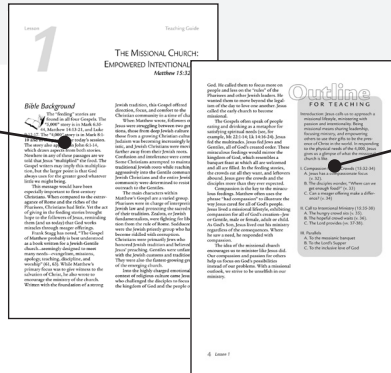
The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide.

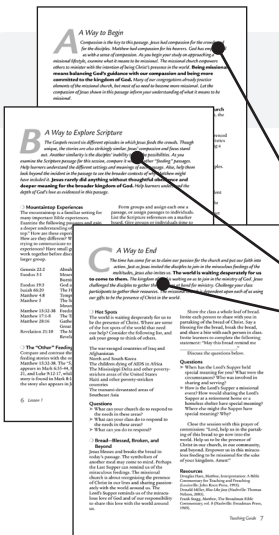
These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.



THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

John 1:1-5; 9:1-7, 35-41

Bible Background



The Light of Christ

When one reads the beautiful words of the first five verses of John, it is obvious that one is reading something like a poem. Like all good poems, these verses pack a great deal of meaning in only a few words. John's prologue gives us a starting point for understanding the nature of Jesus. Both Jews and Gentiles had their own difficulties in grasping the full meaning of Jesus' coming. Yet John's use of words and symbolism strategically penetrated the philosophies and theologies of the time through familiar language and imagery.

What does the Gospel of John want to say about Jesus? Both the Jews and the Gentiles of John's day struggled with the same theological issues Christians deal with today. How does one make sense of the notion that Jesus can be present with God and be God at the beginning, yet live in the flesh of humanity, and continue to live into the future? How can any single entity have so many different facets?

John uses two powerful words that would have made sense to his Jewish and Gentile readers: "word" (1:1-4) and "light" (9:4-5, 9:5). These are words that remain just as powerful today. John uses these words to convey the deep meaning of the nature of God's revelation through Jesus. Gail O'Day restates the meaning of the

first verse as, "The Word is what God is and the Word does what God does. The Word thus represents the self-expression of God" (520).

John draws our attention to "the beginning" as described in Genesis (John 1:1-2). In that ancient account, God created the heavens and the earth by speaking them into existence. God's word is God's action. There is a seamless connection between who God is and what God does. John wants us to be clear that Jesus reveals God in totality. Who Jesus is and what Jesus does and says is the Word.

John connects the major elements of this cosmic scenario. "What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people" (John 1:3b-4). The life that came into being in the beginning is sustained in the light that Christ reveals. Just as God and Jesus are one, so, too, are life and light and Word.

The confession that Jesus is the complete revelation of God is deeply connected to the concept of "the light that shines in the darkness" (John 1:5). There is some debate as to what John means by "darkness." Some argue that darkness is another word for evil while others suggest that darkness merely describes misunderstanding or lack of faith. Perhaps each of these elements is a component of the darkness of which John writes. It is very clear, in any case, that Jesus is the light that dispels this darkness.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

The Jews of John's time were confused and challenged by the assertion of John and other early Christians of the divinity of Jesus. Confronted by the message of Christ, those Jews who believed in Jesus sought to understand the meaning of his coming by searching the writings of the prophets. For their part, Greek believers sought to understand Jesus through the lens of their philosophic traditions. New ways of understanding the relationship between God and Jesus sprang up as both groups tried to make sense of the coming of Christ in terms they could understand.

There are still competing ideas about the nature of God and the meaning of good and evil. John pronounces an answer to these questions that spoke to people of his time and speaks to us today. Jesus Christ, he says, is the light through which truth can be seen. Jesus does not cast light on questions about the nature of God. John makes clear that Jesus, in fact, *is* the light through which we come to know God and enter into a relationship with God.

The Blind Who See and the Sighted Who Are Blind

John's prologue gives us beautiful, even lofty, notions of the relationship between God and Jesus and how the life that was in Jesus in the beginning brings light to all people. The episode recorded in chapter 9 provides a more conventional way of looking at the same themes. This story of Jesus giving a blind man sight takes the theology revealed in the prologue and demonstrates how it can apply in the everyday world.

John 9 tells the story of a blind man who gains his sight through a miraculous and revelatory act of Jesus. It is also, however, the story of the people who observed this event and tried to make sense of it. The blind man has a relatively minor role in the story as the object of theological debate. In keeping with the thought of their day, the disciples wondered about the origin of the man's affliction: was it

- I. Prologue: The Word (John 1:1-5)
 - A. The Word is preexistent (v. 1).
 - B. The Word is intimately connected to God (vv. 1-2).
 - C. The Word has the power to create (v. 3).
 - D. The Word is the source of life (vv. 3-4).
 - E. Life is light (v. 4).
 - F. Light overcomes all darkness (v. 5).

- II. Jesus Heals a Blind Man (9:1-7)
 - A. Disciples debate the cause of the man's blindness (vv. 1-2).
 - B. Jesus uses the occasion to teach (vv. 3-5).
 1. God's might will be visible (v. 3).
 2. Jesus speaks of his limited time (v. 4).
 3. Jesus declares that he is the light of the world (v. 5).
 - C. Jesus heals the blind man (vv. 6-7).
 1. Makes mud to put in his eyes (v. 6).
 2. Man washes and can see (v. 7).

- III. Jesus Redefines What It Means to Be Blind (9:35-41)
 - A. Jesus seeks out the healed blind man (vv. 35-38).
 1. The man confesses belief in Jesus and sees him for who he is (vv. 35-37).
 2. The man worships Jesus (v. 38).
 - B. Jesus confronts the Pharisees (vv. 39-41).
 1. Jesus redefines sight and blindness (v. 39).
 2. Pharisees do not see who Jesus is (v. 40).
 3. Jesus passes judgment on their spiritual blindness (v. 41).

his sin or the sins of his parents? (The story of Esau and Jacob suggested to some early interpreters that one could sin even in the womb [O'Day, 653].)

Rather than responding to this pointless speculation, Jesus points to the events about to unfold as revealing something of the nature of God. O'Day points out, however, that the often overlooked point of the story is to help us understand a new definition of sin. Sin is not wrongdoing that leads to blindness or other afflictions, as the disciples contended. In this Gospel, O'Day writes, "sin is defined not by what one does, but almost exclusively by one's relationship to Jesus, and more specifically, by whether one believes that God is present in Jesus" (664).

This truth is revealed at the end of the story. In the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees (John 9:35-41), we see the complete reversal of everyone's understanding of sight and blindness and of sin and judgment. The blind man understands that God, through Jesus, has given him physical sight. But the story celebrates the true miracle, his gaining of spiritual sight to recognize who Jesus is. The Pharisees, however, though given numerous opportunities to see the nature of Jesus, refuse to see the truth in front of their eyes. Through this refusal, they condemn themselves to the judgment of their sin.

A Way to Begin

Even a small campfire brings warmth, light, and comfort to a dark place. Similarly, John speaks of a light that shines into a dark world. Our passages today focus on the relationship between light and darkness, which are, of course, symbolic of the spiritual reality revealed in Scripture. (Note: be sensitive throughout this lesson to how it may be received by those who are visually impaired.)

○ Many Kinds of Light

Brainstorm as many different kinds of light as possible. (Examples: lasers, spot-light, LED, the sun, stars, etc.) Ask the following questions about each of these kinds of light as time allows.

Questions

- What is the nature of this form of light?
- Is it natural or does it come from human intervention?
- What function does it have?

Discuss why light is often symbolic of good and darkness symbolic of evil.

○ Light and Darkness

Invite participants to imagine the darkest place they have ever been, perhaps a cave or the woods on a moonless night. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What feelings do you associate with this place or experience? If you were frightened, what *specifically* did you fear? Looking back, was this fear justified?
- Was there any light at all? If so, what do you remember about becoming accustomed to the little light you had?
- Did you leave this darkness suddenly or gradually? What do you remember about being returned to full light?

○ Characteristics of Light

Today's lesson describes Jesus as one who brings light into the darkness. Consider the physical characteristics of light and how light is an appropriate symbol for Jesus.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

This lesson pairs John 1:1-5 with the story of Jesus healing the blind man in chapter 9. John's prologue is written in beautiful and symbolic language while the miracle story is a more straightforward account. Each passage says something about the nature of Jesus' light. **Help participants focus on the central elements that connect these two passages.**

○ **Contemplative Reading**

Invite the class to listen meditatively while you read John 1:1-5 four times. Each time through, have participants focus on one of the following aspects of the passage.

- Listen to the beauty of the words and experience the presence of God through the elegance of the words.
- Listen to what the passage says about "the Word."
- Listen to what the passage says about light and darkness.
- Listen with openness to hear what God would have you hear in the reading.

After a moment of silence, let participants share what they heard.

Read John 9:1-7, 35-41. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How are the themes of John's prologue echoed in this story?
- What kinds of blindness are evident in this story?
- What does it mean that Jesus is "the light of the world" (John 9:5)?

○ **The Word**

Using material from the *Study Guide*, discuss the various ways first-century readers might have understood John's reference to "the Word" (or "word"): as a manifestation of God's self, the ordering principle of the universe, and the message of the apostles. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Which of these options best reflects your understanding of Jesus as "the Word"?
- How does your understanding of "the Word" influence how you interpret the meaning of the light that shines in the darkness?

Read John 9:1-7, 35-41. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Rather than debating the cause of the man's blindness, Jesus simply healed him. What does this say about the value of such debates?
- When have we lost sight of our calling to meet people's needs rather than debate the reasons for their plight?
- Of what have the Pharisees in this story lost sight?
- With whom do you most identify in this story: the blind man or the Pharisees? Why?
- What does it look like when people finally see the light Jesus shines in the darkness?

C *A Way to End*

The light of Jesus means different things to different people. Even in this diversity, however, everyone can appreciate how the light of Christ brings hope to our human condition, including the promise of a life with God that death cannot touch.

○ **Journaling**

Provide paper and pens or pencils to each participant. Have them write what the light of Christ means in their lives. Have them think about the “dark” places of life, which may include illness, concerns about family, money, or work. Encourage them to reflect on what the light of Jesus brings to each of these areas of darkness.

Invite as many as would like to share some of the things they wrote. Then place all the papers face down in the center of the group.

After a minute of silent prayer, offer a prayer of petition regarding the dark places described on the cards. Have another person voice a prayer of thanks for the light that Jesus brings to the darkness.

○ **Singing**

Distribute hymnals to the class. Have participants find Advent or Christmas hymns that speak of light.

Invite two or three volunteers to read aloud key verses of the hymns they have found. Discuss how the hymn writer(s) used the imagery of light. Compare and contrast this with what is expressed in today’s Scripture passages.

Sing together one of the hymns that you have discussed. Close with prayer.

Resource

Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

JOHN'S
TESTIMONY*John 1:6-9; 3:25-30***Bible Background****Introduction**

It is the second Sunday of Advent, and the excitement of Christmas is building. I am sure you are studying hard to make these lessons as meaningful as possible so your class will move increasingly into the true spirit of the season.

It's only human to feel a great deal of satisfaction when, upon the completion of a well-prepared lesson, one of your students comments on what a wonderful job you did. It is easy to fall into the trap of trying to showcase your teaching skills rather than moving out of the way and letting the Scripture message take center stage.

If this describes you and the members of your class at times, you will find much to learn from John the Baptist in the text today. Today's text speaks of the human tendency to seek credit for our good work, and why it is often better to avoid the spotlight.

John Comes on the Scene

In John 1:6, the lofty poetic language of the hymn that introduces Jesus and his eternal connection to God comes to an end. (It picks up again in verse 9.) "A man named John was sent by God," the author writes. This verse brings the reader out of the eternal language of the prologue and places a flesh-and-blood human being

into a historical setting. This contrasting approach of introducing John in this manner highlights clear demarcations between John and Jesus. Jesus is the eternal and divine Son of God. John, however, is a mortal man who is merely "sent" by God. Verses 7-8 underscore this point. John is not the light but merely one who bears witness to that light, the light of Christ.

It can be confusing for some to distinguish between John, the author of the Fourth Gospel, and John the Baptist, but the two are definitely not the same person! By longstanding church tradition, the author of this Gospel is John, son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve.

Although the Gospel of John, unlike the other Gospels, does not identify the John in verse 6 as "the Baptist" (or "the Baptizer"), there can be no doubt about whom the author writes. This is the one whose prophetic voice is heard in all of the Gospels. The Fourth Gospel focuses more on John the Baptist's message than upon his methods. It does not mention his unusual diet or his striking clothes, all of which help to draw a picture of a rather "untamed"-looking fellow.

John the Baptist commanded much attention. He was certainly an unusually charismatic person. It is only natural, then, that he created quite a commotion with his preaching. In the process, he also created quite a following

Outline

FOR TEACHING

There is so much effort in John's Gospel to underscore the subordinate role of the Baptist that it is safe to assume that some degree of misunderstanding persisted about the relative importance of John and Jesus. Other New Testament writings bear this out. In Acts 19:1-7, Paul encounters a group of "disciples" (v. 1) who claim allegiance to John and his baptism. Even years after the conclusion of Jesus' earthly ministry, John the Baptist's followers were still active and still unclear about the relative importance of the two figures.

A Tale of Two Baptizers

In John 3:25, a debate between John the Baptist's follower and "a certain Jew" signals the beginning of an important narrative that reveals something of the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. We can only speculate as to who the "Jew" mentioned in verse 25 was or what the nature of his debate with John might have been. It may have been someone confused about the relationship between John the Baptist's water ritual and the traditional Jewish rites of ceremonial cleansing using water. It is easy to see how confusion could have arisen over this issue.

However the conversation began, the focus quickly changed. The heart of the conflict for John's followers was the ever-increasing popularity of Jesus. Jesus, through his disciples, was baptizing more people than John (3:26; 4:1-2). Why were John's disciples so concerned about this? Apparently, they wanted John to do something to once again obtain the upper hand in the follower count. (I find it amazing that followers of a person like John can be so misinformed about their leader's motives!)

John, therefore, had to clarify once again the message he had been preaching from the beginning. He is not the Christ, he says (3:27-28, see 1:20). He is only one who has been sent before him.

- I. Introducing John the Baptist (John 1:6-9)
 - A. John was sent by God (v. 6).
 - B. John was the witness of the light (v. 7).
 - C. He himself was not the light (v. 8).
 - D. The light to which John testifies is for all people (v. 9).

- II. John and Jesus: Two Baptisms (John 3:25-30)
 - A. John the Baptist's followers are disgruntled (vv. 25-26).
 - B. John the Baptist's reaction (vv. 27-30).
 1. He says that all things are given by heaven (v. 27).
 2. He reminds his followers of what they already know (v. 28).
 3. He tells a parable of the best man at a wedding (v. 29).
 4. He makes a statement of his subordination to Jesus and his cause (v. 30).

The Parable of the Wedding

The implication that John was in competition with Jesus was wrong on so many levels that John told a parable about a wedding to set the record straight. At a wedding, the bride and groom are the centers of attention. The best man, or "friend of the groom" (v. 29), attends to every detail so that the ceremony proceeds without a hitch. When this happens, and the best man hears the happiness in the voices of the newlyweds, there can be only happiness in his heart.

John the Baptist was like a best man setting the stage for Jesus. He was preparing the way for the coming of Christ by planting the seeds of great expectations. The fact that the voice of Jesus was now being heard and that people were follow-

ing him could only bring the greatest of joy to the one who attended to the details of his coming.

John shows incredible selflessness here. Can you imagine how enticing it must have been to keep the adulation of the crowds for himself? John's years of preparation for his ministry, which included a very disciplined and Spartan lifestyle, and his years of preaching in the parching sun were now coming to an end.

The completion of his ministry was not accompanied by the cheers of the crowd, however, but rather by watching the crowds dwindle away from him to follow another. Famously, in verse 30, John the Baptist ends his ministry with the watchword of all who seek to make Christ the focus of their ministry: "He must increase and I must decrease." John accomplished something that many in ministry say they try to do: he worked himself out of his job.

A Way to Begin

*As Christmas approaches, shopping, parties, decorating, and other things seem to constantly distract us from Jesus. To be honest, every day of the year makes demands on our loyalty, our attention, and our worship. At Christmas, it just becomes more obvious. **Begin the lesson by exploring these competing voices and how to handle them.***

○ **Many Voices**

Have a volunteer sit or stand in the middle of the room. Have one person tell the volunteer about a recent, innocuous experience he or she has had. Repeat the process with two people on opposite sides of the room. Then, repeat with three people. Finally, have the entire class talk to the volunteer at once. Ask the following questions.

Questions for the Volunteer

- How did you feel as the number of people talking to you increased?
- How did you cope with the competing voices?
- What did you want to tell those who were talking to you?

Questions for Those Who Were Talking

- Did you find yourself speaking louder as the number of voices increased?
- What was it like to have your story drowned out by other voices?

Today's lesson is about John the Baptist's testimony of Jesus. Although he proclaimed Christ, some of his listeners failed to get the message. Like them, we also sometimes miss things that ought to be clear because of competing voices.

○ **Getting the Message Through**

Share with the class print ads, video, or audio recordings of Christmas advertising. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How much attention do you pay to seasonal advertising?
- What are some ways to turn off the parts of the season that distract you from its real meaning?
- Why does our culture seem to struggle to hear the true message of Christmas?
- What are some ways our class could help that message come through?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

John the Baptist had a following of his own. This was fitting, of course, as he was a prophet used powerfully by God. But what happens when people ignore the words of a great preacher to idolize the preacher him- or herself? John attempted to be transparent in his ministry and point people toward Jesus, not himself. How well do we distinguish between the message and the messenger today?

○ Encountering John



Distribute copies of the resource page “Encountering John.” In groups of three or four, have participants compare the picture of John the Baptist we gain from the synoptic Gospels to that found in the Gospel of John. What details are found in all (or most) of the Gospels? What details are only found in one Gospel?

Have groups share their findings. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Does the more detailed picture of John the Baptist in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) help or hurt the story? Explain.
- Why do you think John’s account left out the baptism of Jesus?
- What does John’s Gospel add to the picture that the synoptic Gospels leave out?

Read John 3:25-30. Discuss connections between this episode and what the class has already learned about the life and ministry of John the Baptist.

What does it mean in practical terms to say, “He must increase and I must decrease” (v. 30)? How can we live out this principle in our own discipleship?

○ Letting Go

Read John 1:6-9. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Do you think John was content with his secondary role? Why or why not?
- How did John testify about the light without acting as if he *was* the light?
- What lessons does this hold for Christians today in our witness to the world?

Read 3:25-30. Discuss reasons John’s followers had trouble letting Jesus take the lead.

In this story, John countered his disciples’ assumptions in three ways: (1) he reminded them that God is in control (v. 27), (2) he reminded them of what he had already told them (v. 28), and (3) he told them a parable about a wedding party (v. 29).

Questions

- Which one of these methods would have been most effective with you? Why?
- The Bible doesn’t say if John’s followers realized their mistake. Do you think they did? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to “decrease” (v. 30)? What acts or attitudes can help us reach this goal?

C A Way to End

*It is ironic that the closer we get to the day we celebrate the birth of Christ, the more “noise” competes for our attention. This parallels the story of John the Baptist. The closer the time came for Jesus’ appearance, the more confused some people became about John’s powerful message and presence. **There has never been a time when Christ did not have competition for our time, attention, and worship.***

○ **Keeping the Focus on Christ**

Brainstorm the most distracting elements of the Christmas season. List these on the board. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What can we do to eliminate or at least lessen the effect of these distractions?
- How can we help our fellow class members keep the focus on Christ during the season of Advent?

Close with prayer. After a time of silent prayer, invite a volunteer to voice a prayer for vision and focus to keep our minds and hearts centered on Christ.

○ **Pointing to Christ**

Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How can we show people the way to Christ without getting in the way?
- What can we do as individuals and as a class that would bring a little more of the light of Christ into the world?

Remind the class of John the Baptist’s statement, “He must increase and I must decrease” (John 3:30). (Perhaps have these words written on the board throughout the class session.) Suggest that as participants leave the classroom, their mission is to increase the presence of Christ in the world.

Close with prayer, asking God for opportunities to share the love of Christ with others and the ability to be transparent and unobstructive in our sharing.

3

JESUS' MISSION
TO THE WORLD*John 1:10-13; 7:37-44***Bible Background****Recognizing the Light**

The two Scripture passages that are the focus of today's lesson are connected by a thematic thread that runs through the Gospel of John. This thread is that Jesus, the light that shines in the darkness, was not recognized by the world he enlightened. The narrative of the Fourth Gospel repeatedly proclaims who Jesus is, sometimes from the mouth of John the Baptist and sometimes from Jesus himself. More often than not, however, those who hear the message are confused about what it means.

Today's Scripture lesson begins with just such a progression. John's prologue proclaims that the light through which the world came into being became present in the world, yet the world did not recognize or welcome the light (John 1:10-11). These verses set the theme and the tone for the plotlines that follow.

The word "world" is used for the first time in John in verse 10. The biblical writer uses this word to refer to humanity in general. This word narrows the focus from the entire universe to the pinnacle of God's creation, human beings whom God created in God's own image. The idea captured in the following verse suggests a more intimate form of rejection. Even his "own people didn't welcome him," John says (v. 11). Here, the Gospel

writer underscores the harshness of Jesus' rejection because it came at the hands of those who shared with him a history and tradition.

The writer quickly dispels the harshness of verse 11 by offering a word of hope. Verse 12 interprets what it means to welcome Jesus in the language of covenant. Each party in a covenant relationship both gives and receives. Our recognition of Jesus is not based on rules and regulations. Rather, John uses two words to embrace the response that everyone is called upon to make: "welcome" and "believe" (v. 12).

We need to read these words in light of the value the first-century world placed on the virtue of hospitality. People in that world, both Jewish and Gentile, considered welcoming others a divine obligation. An important aspect of this obligation was to open one's home to one you were welcoming. Similarly, those who "welcome" Jesus do so by opening their hearts.

John's culture embraced the idea that there was a great deal of meaning in names. To believe in the name of Jesus (v. 12) was to believe in who he said he was and in the purpose of his coming. In turn, Jesus offers something for those who welcome and believe in him: a promise that they will become children of God.

We often think of the whole human race as children of God, and in a certain respect, this is quite correct, as all of us

are brothers and sisters of Adam's race. In this passage, however, being a child of God implies having experienced the transformation, the rebirth, by which believers become new beings in Christ.

As elaborated in the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1-8, this transformation is deeply relational. It involves being born anew (John 3:3). Many things might come to mind in relation to the concept of being "born" (v. 13), so the Gospel writer takes the time to explain what he does and does not mean when using that word. He explains that the kind of birth that makes one a child of God has nothing to do with the physical aspects of human birth.

Being God's children, he explains, is not about bloodlines. The conventional, literal image of childbirth assumed that the mingling of blood was the root of a child's heredity. This was not the case with God's children. One does not become a child of God through the physical act of procreation at all. This transformation does not come about because of sexual desire or instinct. John is not talking about human passions or desires of any kind. Rather, being born from God requires God to act according to God's own will.

Debating about the Light

The episode recorded in chapter 7 gives an example of how those most closely connected to Jesus were confused about his identity. The event taking place was called the Feast of Tabernacles. On the final day of this festival, the people walked around the altar seven times to celebrate how God provided water when Moses struck the rock at Meribah (Fredrikson, 149).

This detail of the celebration helps us understand Jesus' words in verses 37-38: "All who are thirsty should come to me! All who believe in me should drink!" (7:37-38). These provocative words were made all the more powerful coming as they did at the climax of this high and holy time of the commemoration of

Outline

FOR TEACHING

I. The Light and the World

(John 1:10-13)

A. Those who did not recognize him (vv. 10-11).

1. The world did not recognize him (v. 10).

2. Even his own people did not recognize him (v. 11).

B. Those who did recognize him (vv. 12-13).

1. Authorized to be children of God (v. 12).

2. Special nature of rebirth (v. 13).

II. Jesus Creates a Stir (John 7:37-44)

A. Jesus' words at the festival (vv. 37-39).

1. Come to me to drink (vv. 37-38).

2. Claiming authority of Scripture (v. 38).

3. The spiritual nature of Jesus' words (v. 39).

B. The People's Reaction (vv. 40-44)

1. Guesses of who Jesus is (v. 40).

2. Confusion over the facts of Jesus' origin (vv. 41-42).

3. Crowd remains divided over Jesus (vv. 43-44).

Moses, the great giver of the law. Through Moses, God provided water in the wilderness. How much more, then, will God through Jesus provide the living water that we need? (See John 4.)

Jesus goes further by declaring that the Scripture quoted in verse 38, "*Rivers of living water will flow out from within him,*" was speaking of him. But there is a puzzle here. To what Scripture text was Jesus referring? No Old Testament text records these words. The simplest conclusion is that these words are meant not as a direct quotation but rather a summary of the Scripture's depiction of water as a metaphor for spiritual renewal.

John inserts an explanation of Jesus' words, equating the "living water" Jesus promised with the outpouring of God's Spirit (vv. 38-39). He explains that believers had not yet experienced the Spirit because Jesus had not yet been glorified (presumably, at his ascension into heaven).

The Gospel writer is certainly not asserting that the Holy Spirit was not present in the world at all. He has, after all, already described the Spirit's presence at Jesus' baptism. But from his perspective at the end of the first century, he knew that the way people experienced God's Spirit would change when Christ's saving work was completed.

The crowd responds in verse 40. Some immediately made the connection with Moses and acclaim Jesus as a prophet. Others even confess that he is the Christ (v. 41)—but these are quickly shouted down when others insist that Jesus, as a Galilean, could not have come from David's bloodline or from Bethlehem, David's city (vv. 41-42).

In this scene, people justify their preconceived ideas with arguments based on false information. Just like today, they see what their beliefs already support. But judging based on outward appearances risks reducing Jesus to fit our expectations rather than letting him in his fullness shape our perceptions (O'Day, 625).

A Way to Begin

"And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" (Matt 16:15). This is the all-important question that Jesus asked the disciples at Caesarea Philippi. It is a question we must ask ourselves every day. Peter answered with a confession that Jesus is the Christ. We answer this question with the choices we make and the things we value. Help participants recognize how their lives show the world who they say Jesus is.

○ Lives of Famous Christians



Distribute copies of the resource page "Lives of Famous Christians." Have participants review these brief biographies either individually or in small groups. After a few minutes, bring the group back together and ask the following questions.

Questions

- Which of these people do you most admire? Why?
- What influence do you think Jesus had in shaping these people's lives?
- How did these people influence others?
- How were their lives controversial? If so, does that strengthen or weaken our appreciation of them?
- Does following Christ mean having to be as controversial as Jesus was? Explain.

○ Controversy!

Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What is the most controversial thing you have ever done? What made it controversial? What happened as a result?
- What is the most controversial thing you have done *as a Christian*? What led you to decide to act as you did? Would you do it again? Why or why not?

Jesus said and did many controversial things. In today's lesson, we will look at how Jesus' ministry generated heated debate among those who encountered him.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Jesus was a powerful presence during his time on earth and still is in the lives of his followers. He cannot be present, however, without influencing the lives of everyone he touches. The season of Advent is a good time to consider Jesus' influence on the lives of those who call him Lord and Savior.

○ Questions for Discussion

Read the Scripture passages noted and ask the accompanying questions.

John 1:10-13

- What is the difference between “the world didn’t recognize [him]” (v. 10) and “his own people didn’t welcome him” (v. 11)?
- Why do you suppose Jesus’ own people did not recognize him? What might keep Christians today from recognizing Jesus if he came among them?
- How is being “born from God” (v. 13) different from natural birth? (You might want to discuss John 3:1-8 in this context.)
- List some of the advantages of becoming a child of God.
- What are some of the responsibilities of becoming a child of God?

John 7:37-44

- What did Jesus mean by saying, “All who are thirsty should come to me! All who believe in me should drink!” (vv. 37-38).
- Might some in the crowd have heard these words as a challenge? Explain.
- What evidence did some in the crowd give that Jesus was not the Christ? What might the first readers of John’s Gospel have said in response?
- What misconceptions of Jesus are we likely to hear today?

- It has been said that people hear what they want to hear. Do you agree? If so, how does this affect matters of faith in Christ?
- How can we guard against preconceived notions?

○ Tracking the Story

Read John 1:10-13. Draw a horizontal line across the middle of the board. For each phrase in verses 10-13, track the relative positivity or negativity of the statement (the horizontal line being “neutral”). The resulting line graph can be read as a summary of the story of Jesus and his saving work. Identify the high and low points.

Read John 7:37-44. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Where would you place this story on our graph?
- Where in this passage do we see people not recognizing or welcoming Jesus? What led to this failure to respond to Jesus appropriately?
- When have you seen people “divided over Jesus” (v. 43)? Why was Jesus a cause of division?
- How might John 7:39 point to the same reality as John 1:12-13? Why are such details important?

C A Way to End

Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ is called to a new life. But this new life may be in conflict with the world around us. Today's texts speak of those who saw the light of Jesus but failed to recognize who he was. **Perhaps an even more important question for us today is, can others recognize Christ in us? Do we as Christians stand out from our surroundings, showing the way of Christ for our world today?**

○ **Who Jesus Is to Me**

Have everyone who is able to stand in a circle. Invite everyone to make a statement about who Christ is for them in just a few words. Next, go around the circle again, having each participant say something that they can do this week that might show others who Jesus is to them.

Close with prayer for discernment and the courage to do those things that might shine the light of Christ a little brighter in the world.

○ **The Transforming Power of Christ**

Draw attention to the "Reflecting" section of the *Study Guide*. Remind the class of the stories of addicts whose lives were transformed by the presence of Christ.

Invite volunteers to share stories of people they know who exemplify the power of Christ in a person's life. They may want to share their own story of how Christ has transformed them.

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving for the transforming power of Christ.

○ **What Do I Say about Jesus?**

On the board, write, "What do I say about Jesus?" Ask the following questions.

Questions

- In what ways, either through words or actions, do we testify about Jesus?
- How does what we say about Jesus set us apart from the world?
- What can we do this week that would allow us to be even clearer about who Jesus is to us?

Close with a prayer for clarity in our witness.

Resources

Roger L. Fredrikson, "John," *The Communicator's Commentary* (Waco TX: Word, 1985).

Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995).

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

John 1:14-18; 6:35-40

Bible Background



Introduction

Just as a piece of music can build to a mighty crescendo, the prologue of John's Gospel now comes to the climactic revealing of the essence of the writer's message about Jesus. Using only four words (in Greek as well as English), John reveals the crux of the salvation story: "The Word became flesh" (1:14).

These four words define the term that frames the entire Christmas story: incarnation. Whole books have been written on the meaning of these four important words. They are powerful, but they are also mysterious. We must be careful to interpret and proclaim them rightly. These words provide a scriptural context for the growing excitement and anticipation we feel in the days leading up to the celebration of Christmas Day.

The Moment We Have Been Waiting For

The Gospel writer introduces us to the concept of "the Word" at the very beginning of the prologue. This Word, he writes, was present "in the beginning" (1:1). In verse 14, we learn another crucial truth about this Word. Not only was he present in the beginning as the agent of creation, he also "became flesh."

Many readers of this Gospel underscore the significance of these two statements. They make quite different

claims, yet refer to the same subject. How can the divine Word become incarnate? This is a difficult idea to accept or even understand. How can anything be both divine in nature and made of flesh and blood? Various schools of thought arose in the early days of Christianity that attempted to explain (or explain away) this seemingly irreconcilable paradox.

Not only did the Word become flesh, he also "made his home among us" (v. 14). This phrase marks an important shift in the grammar. For the first time in the Gospel, John uses the first-person pronoun "us." God's creative Word became part of the world in which humans live. The story of this Word is thus something with which all of us can relate on a personal level.

Verse 14 not only reveals the splendor of God's becoming flesh. It also speaks about how this event reveals God's "glory." In Scripture, the glory of God refers to a visible exhibition of God's might such as the Israelites experienced at Mount Sinai (Exod 19–20). Perhaps we are so conditioned to the meaning of the Christmas story that the irony of this statement has become lost to us. All of creation is a display of God's tremendous power. Great acts showcasing God's power are part of a long and storied tradition. It was not, however, until the Word became flesh—until God became a human being—that his glory could be seen in all its fullness.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

The life of the One who came in the flesh testifies to God's glory by revealing the fullness of "grace and truth" (v. 14). This "glory...full of grace and truth" is a reference to God's ongoing covenant with God's people to be both caring and just. The grace and truth of God, seen in the life of Christ, highlight the balance in humanity's relationship with the divine. As Fredrikson writes, "An emphasis on grace by itself can dissipate into a shallow and sentimental fellowship, and stressing truth alone can become hardened dogma" (47). Both characteristics are necessary.

John portrays the richness of the incarnation as "grace upon grace" (v. 16.). This phrase refers to the bounty of blessings that are available through the incarnation of God. The Word becoming flesh ushers in a new reality. Through the incarnation, God's grace is available in boundless supply through the one and only Son of God.

For the first seventeen verses of John, the biblical writer uses symbolism, pronouns, and metaphors to refer to the One who has come in the flesh to reveal the true and glorious nature of God's redeeming truth and grace. Finally, in verse 17, John reveals the name of the One who inaugurates this new chapter in God's dealings with humanity. These blessings, he says, "came into being through Jesus Christ." Just as Moses was God's instrument for bringing the law to Israel, so is Jesus Christ God's channel of grace and truth to the world.

The Bread of Life

The episode recorded in chapter 6 follows a familiar theme in John's Gospel. Today's Scripture passage recounts a conversation between Jesus and those who witnessed one of Jesus' miracles, the feeding of the five thousand. This crowd of people pursues Jesus, apparently imagining him to be a present-day Moses through whom God supplied manna in the wilderness. Having already been fed once by Jesus' miraculous provision, they ask for even

- I. The Incarnate Word (John 1:14)
 - A. The Word became flesh.
 - B. The incarnate Word lived among us.
 - C. Through the incarnate Word we see the glory of God.
 - D. The incarnate Word provides a balance of grace and truth.
- II. A Reminder of John the Baptist's Role (John 1:15)
 - A. To observers at the time, Jesus came after John the Baptist.
 - B. John testifies that Jesus actually existed before him and is greater than he is.
- III. The Word Is Given a Name (John 1:16-18)
 - A. Through the incarnate Word we receive boundless blessings (v. 16).
 - B. The Word moves us beyond Moses and now has a name: Jesus Christ (v. 17).
 - C. Jesus has made God known to us completely (v. 18).
- IV. The Bread of Life (6:35-40)
 - A. Jesus proclaims that he is the "bread of life" (v. 35).
 - B. There are still people who do not believe (v. 36).
 - C. Jesus will receive all whom God sends to him (v. 37).
 - D. Jesus provides what God desires for them (v. 38).
 - E. Jesus gives hope for the end times (v. 39).
 - F. Jesus reveals the ultimate will of God: eternal life through God's Son (v. 40).

more bread the next morning! A single meal was not enough; they wanted an endless supply of bread.

Jesus responds to their request by saying, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). Like all of the "I am" statements in the

Fourth Gospel, this declaration invokes the memory of God’s voice from the burning bush (Exod 3:14). This statement brings the crowd to a further revelation. The bread that Jesus really wants them to choose is not the physical kind that will leave them hungry the next day but spiritual bread that will fill the longings of the heart. Jesus is not only the giver of God’s gifts, as Moses was. Rather, Jesus is himself a gift sent from God.

With his next words, Jesus calls for a response from the crowd: “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry,” he says, “and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (v. 35). How might Jesus’ hearers have responded to such a bold promise? For some, it may have come as a breath of fresh air. Others, however, may have felt threatened by the nature of Jesus’ offer. Jesus asked for a personal response from those who would follow him, just as he himself lived out an intimate relationship with his heavenly Father.

In verse 37, Jesus describes the assurance of everyone who comes to and believes in him. Such people will never be sent away. This is, in part, because of Jesus’ commitment to serving God rather than self. Those whom God has given to him will come to him (v. 37) and will not be lost but will be raised up on the last day (v. 38). This fulfills the will of God that “all who see the Son and believe in him will have eternal life” (v. 40). To see Jesus opens the possibility of a divinely transformed life.

A Way to Begin

Christmas is just around the corner. No doubt many if not most members of your class are feeling some of the stress of holiday preparation. Allow participants time to become an island of quiet in the sea of noise of the season.

○ **Nativity Scenes**

Provide images of nativity scenes, either displayed on an easel or projected onto a screen. Invite participants to think about these images while reflecting on the words “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14).

Discuss ways we see in Jesus the characteristics that we associate with God (for example, love, forgiveness, healing, righteousness, etc.).

Questions

- How might our celebration of Christmas be different if we only had the Gospel of John?
- How does John’s Gospel stretch our understanding of the meaning of Christmas?

○ **Songs of Christmas**

Sing a simple and restful Christmas carol together such as “O Little Town of Bethlehem” or “Away in a Manger.”

Have participants close their eyes and imagine the scene that the carol brings to mind. While they are meditating on this image, read the first part of John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his home among us.”

Whereas Luke offers a homey image of a baby in a manger, John’s portrayal of the incarnation is more theological and “ethereal.”

Questions

- Which of these portrayals resonates most deeply with you? Why?
- What are the strengths of each portrayal?
- How does each portrayal offer something that completes the other?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Today's lesson invites us to focus on one single idea: that God became human. We use the word "incarnation" to describe this great mystery, but it would take a lifetime to fully understand all that this word entails. Long familiarity has perhaps even dulled us to the wonder of the incarnation. If so, it is time to renew our sense of awe that the Word became flesh.

○ Schools of Thought



Either distribute copies of the resource page "Schools of Thought" or reproduce the table on the board.

Explain that early Christians struggled for centuries to clarify the Bible's witness to both the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

Take a moment to summarize the chart. Do not focus on "Who is wrong?" and "Who is right?" but simply on the biblical truths that each position attempts to uphold—however imperfectly.

John declares, "The Word became flesh" (1:14). As we study, let us seek to understand what that affirmation means to us and how it affects our spiritual walk.

○ Word and Bread

Read John 1:14-18. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What themes in this passage seem to point toward Christmas?
- What comfort do you find in knowing that the Word "made his home among us" (v. 14)?
- How does Jesus make God known (v. 18)?

Read John 6:35-40. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What does "bread of life" (John 6:35) mean to you?
- Some saw Jesus and still didn't believe. Why might this have been?
- What promises does Jesus offer in this passage to those who believe in him?

○ Heavenly Bread

Read John 1:14-18. Note the results that follow from the Word becoming flesh, such as "we have seen his glory" (v. 14), "we have all received grace upon grace" (v. 16), and Christ "has made God known" (v. 18). Without the incarnation, these blessings would be in jeopardy.

Read John 6:35-40. Another way of talking about the Word becoming flesh is that Jesus has "come down from heaven" (v. 38). What other biblical expressions point to this truth? (Example: "God sent his Son," Gal 4:4.)

Questions

- What memories do you associate with bread?
- How has Jesus come in the flesh like bread?
- What assurances does Jesus give to those who come to him and believe?

C A Way to End

Today is your last class session until after Christmas. In many ways, all the lessons of this unit have built up to this point. **Take time to reflect on all that John has told us about the Word that became flesh.**

○ **The Meaning of “the Word”**

Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What are some Christmas plans that you have this week?
- Of the 18 verses of the Johannine prologue, which speak to you with the most clarity about the meaning of Advent?
- What verse (or phrase, or word) can you treasure in your heart this week?

Read John 1:1-18 slowly and with expression while participants listen reflectively. Close with prayer.

○ **Christmas from a New Perspective**

The Gospel of John is not often the preferred Gospel for the Christmas story. As a result, though, the lessons of this Advent unit have offered us a different perspective on the meaning of Christ’s coming.

Question

- How has John’s prologue helped you see Christmas in a new light?

When all who want to have shared, close by singing together a favorite Christmas hymn.

○ **The Bread of Life**

Provide a loaf of freshly baked bread. As participants leave, invite them to pinch off a small piece as a token of Christ’s coming to us as “the bread of life” (John 6:35).

Resources

Roger L. Fredrikson, “John,” *The Communicator’s Commentary*, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Waco TX: Word, 1985).

Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*, 3rd ed. (West Sussex UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)

5

BEHOLD
THE LAMB OF GOD*John 1:29-34; 19:28-30***Bible Background****Jesus Enters the Scene**

Both Jesus and John the Baptist are introduced in the prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1-18). The biblical writer explains the significance of both men. Jesus is the Word who was present at the beginning, the light of God who enlightens every human being. John is the prophet who calls the world's attention to the coming of Christ.

Two important events take place in today's Scripture passages. First, we hear John the Baptist's own voice as he proclaims the Jesus' identity as the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29). Second, we hear John's testimony of an encounter he had with Jesus when he saw the Spirit "coming down from heaven" (v. 32) to rest upon him.

Jesus does not yet speak in these verses. The situation might be compared to both men being on stage. John the Baptist is introducing the keynote speaker, who has not yet taken the lectern.

It is enlightening to read this story alongside the parallel passages within the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). In Matthew and Mark, for example, Jesus is baptized by John and then goes immediately into the wilderness to be tested. Luke also indicates that John baptized Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel,

however, the actual baptism of Jesus is passed over, leaving only John's report of the Spirit descending like a dove. As we have seen, some followers of John the Baptist continued to align with him even after Jesus' appearance. Perhaps the Gospel writer downplayed Jesus' baptism lest it give such people the wrong impression of the relationship between these two men.

At any rate, the human agent involved in Jesus' baptism is not important to the narrative of John's Gospel, which makes the action of the Holy Spirit more apparent (O'Day, 529).

Behold the Lamb

At this point in the story, it is clear that John the Baptist has done his job well. The crowds are growing, and there is much excitement in the air. The religious power brokers of the time are worried, however, and have begun to try to discredit John with questions designed to show him up as one with no title or credentials (John 1:19-26). But it is far too late for that. John has only one more task to do: he must introduce Jesus to the world and then fade from the stage, his mission complete.

"Look!" he says, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). What an introduction! "Lamb of God" was probably a new phrase to John's listeners, but it provides a wealth of imagery full of deep meaning.

Three possible contexts have been proposed for understanding this powerful image (Culpepper, 496–97). First, there is the *apocalyptic lamb* (or ram), a powerful agent of God, found in several Jewish apocalyptic works, that overcomes evil and saves God’s people (see 1 Enoch 90:38; Rev 5:5-6; 7:17; 17:14). Second is the imagery of the *suffering servant*, an association that derives from the description of this Old Testament figure as “like a lamb being brought to slaughter” (Isa 53:7). This verse is specifically applied to Jesus in Acts 8:32, and the accounts of Jesus’ baptism draw on the language of Isaiah 42:1, another passage about Isaiah’s “Servant of Yahweh.”

Finally, there is the imagery of the *paschal lamb* that was sacrificed at Passover and eaten in remembrance of the lamb’s blood sprinkled on the doorposts in the book of Exodus, saving the people of Israel from the angel of death before their flight out of Egypt. Early in the history of the Christian church, the reference to the paschal lamb became the preferred interpretation of the meaning of the phrase “Lamb of God.” The Passover story contains elements of protection as well as salvation. Even so, the lamb sacrificed at the Passover is not specifically intended as a sacrifice for sins. In Jewish thinking, its purpose is not to take away the sins of the world (v. 29) but to protect the Israelite slaves from death and, with succeeding observances, to commemorate this turning point in biblical history.

John’s declaration seems, therefore, to merge the Passover image with one or both of the others. Like the apocalyptic lamb, the “Lamb of God” deals with human sin. Like the suffering servant, he accomplishes his mission through a path of death and rejection.

John the Baptist has thus identified the person of Jesus, who is now on the scene, and connects him with this powerful title. The dots are now connected. The person, his title, and the affirmation

that this is the one that John has been announcing all come together.

To “come after” a person (v. 30) was a common way of describing a disciple carrying on in his teacher’s footsteps. Clearly, however, John is not suggesting

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. John the Baptist’s Testimony (John 1:29-34)
 - A. The Lamb of God (v. 29-31).
 1. Jesus takes away the sins of the world (v. 29).
 2. He came to the scene after John the Baptist, but existed before him (v. 30).
 3. John’s baptism with water sets the stage for Jesus’ appearance (v. 31).
 - B. Jesus and the Spirit of God (v. 32-34).
 1. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus like a dove (v. 32).
 2. The Holy Spirit resting on Jesus made John recognize who Jesus was (v. 33).
 3. Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and is the Son of God (v. 33-34).
- II. The Work of Jesus is Complete (John 19:28-30)
 - A. On the cross, his work completed, Jesus also fulfills Scripture by announcing his thirst (v. 28).
 - B. The soldiers use a hyssop branch to lift wine to Jesus (v. 29).
 1. Hyssop was used at the first Passover (Exod 12:22).
 2. This is a clear reference to Christ as God’s paschal lamb.
 - C. The life of Christ reaches its victorious conclusion (v. 30).
 1. Death was completion, not defeat.
 2. Jesus gave his life; his life was not taken from him.

that he is Jesus' teacher! On the contrary, he affirms that Jesus "is really greater than me because he existed before me" (v. 30).

John the Baptist testifies that he saw the Spirit descending from heaven and resting on Jesus (v. 32). He further states that the Spirit continues to rest on Jesus and thus he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (v. 33). For all of these reasons, John can proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 34). This is a clear and definitive pronouncement of the unique connection between Jesus of Nazareth and the God of Israel.

It Is Completed

We end our study of the Fourth Gospel with Jesus' final words from the cross: "It is completed" (John 19:30). In light of all that has gone before these words, we can see that they express an announcement of victory and the fulfillment of all that Jesus set out to do.

John's is the only Gospel that includes the detail that the soldiers gave Jesus sour wine, holding it up to him on a hyssop branch (v. 29). In the Old Testament, the Israelites used a hyssop branch to apply the blood of the Passover lamb to their doorposts (Exod 12:22). Thus, the work of the Lamb of God is completed. The sin of the world has been forgiven.

The meaning of the baby in the manger becomes clear on the cross. The Baptizer's title frames the entire vast, sweeping narrative of God's saving work for humankind. The helpless lamb in the manger is the bearer of God's glory on the cross. That is the "complete" story of Christmas.

A *A Way to Begin*

This Sunday and next are counted as part of the twelve-day season of Christmas. As you welcome participants back, capitalize on their recent holiday festivities to bring today's lesson into focus.

○ Back from Christmas

Begin the session by asking participants about their Christmas festivities. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How did you celebrate Christmas? What aspects were most meaningful for you?
- How much "down time" did you have this past week? What did you do with it?
- Are you still in the "Christmas spirit"? Explain.
- Did the past week afford you opportunities to reflect upon the meaning of the season? If so, what insights did you gain?

○ The Most Useless Gift

Invite participants to tell about the most useless gift they received this Christmas. (Note that they may not all have the same definition of "useless.") List these gifts on the board.

Have participants debate which gift is truly the most useless. Encourage them to argue their point taking into account their personal needs and tastes. You may even want to award a prize for the recipient of the "winning" gift.

Observe that some things are useless. They have no function. On the other hand, some things are multi-functional and can be used for many things.

Although it would be crass to speak of the "usefulness" of the gift of Christ, we can certainly see in Scripture that this one gift, in fact, offers a multitude of blessings to the world.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

It is important in this session to connect the two focal passages of Scripture. Unpacking the term “Lamb of God” provides the opportunity for the class to explore the meaning of Jesus’ life. “Lamb of God” gave the people of Jesus’ time a picture of his purpose in coming, but it is not an image with which people today easily identify. Even so, understanding the meaning of “Lamb of God” helps us understand Jesus’ final statement from the cross, “It is completed” (John 19:30).

○ The Lamb of God



Read John 1:29-34. Using information from the Bible Background section, explain the three possible scriptural contexts for understanding the phrase “Lamb of God”: (1) the apocalyptic lamb/ram, (2) the suffering servant, and (3) the paschal lamb. Although there are good reasons to suggest that all three of these contexts might have been in play, the Passover imagery is clearly central in the Gospel of John.

Distribute copies of the resource page “The Lamb of God” or summarize the information provided. Discuss “Lamb of God” as an image of Jesus. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How is the image of “the Lamb of God” appropriate for Jesus?
- How might this image fall short in describing all that Jesus means? (Note, for example, the image says nothing about Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing.)
- What aspect of Jesus as the Lamb of God is most compelling to you?
- How do the other interpretive options (apocalyptic lamb, suffering servant) add depth to this imagery?

Read John 19:28-30. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- When Jesus says, “It is completed” (v. 30), to what is he referring?
- How does Jesus’ death complete his life?

○ Christ’s Completed Work

List on the board some of the highlights of Jesus’ ministry. Some items will be specific, such as “He healed a blind man,” and others may be very general, such as “He saved us from our sin.”

Read John 19:28-30. Discuss the extent to which all of these acts were “completed” on the cross. How is the cross the culmination of Jesus’ life?

Read John 1:29-34. John the Baptist used the term “Lamb of God” to describe Jesus. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How does this imagery of sacrifice shed light on the statement “It is completed” (19:30)?
- If Jesus’ work is completed, what is left for us to do?
- How do we hold Jesus’ completed work and our ongoing work in tension?

C A Way to End

What is the purpose of Jesus' life? This question leads us to an additional question: what is the purpose of my life as a follower of Christ? Christ's coming into the world is the climax of the great story of God's redeeming work. Our life story merges with this great narrative and compels us to ask, "Where shall I take this grand story of salvation?" Lead your class to ponder this very important question.

○ **Suffering Servants**

Discuss the following questions either as a class or in groups of four or five.

Questions

- We are all familiar with the question "What Would Jesus Do?" How might we approach the question differently if we were to rephrase it "What would the Lamb of God do?"
- What does it mean to follow in the footsteps of one who embraced suffering as part of his calling? (Consider reading Mark 8:34-37.)
- What is one "Lamb of God" act that you could do today?

Close with prayer that everyone might have the opportunity and the courage to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

○ **Songs of the Lamb**

Provide hymnals for each participant. Have everyone search for hymns that refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God or make other references to lambs.

Let volunteers share what they have found and describe the significance of the lamb imagery in these hymns. How does this imagery paint a picture of the nature of God?

Sing together one of the hymns that was discussed.

Close with prayer that we might all be "lambs of God" in our world today.

Resources

R. Alan Culpepper, "Lamb of God," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995).