

LifeChange

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing
encounter with God's Word*

JOHN

*John's portrait of Jesus has drawn
men and women into a trusting, intimate
relationship with the Son of God.*

NAVPRESS 

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John

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book.
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides.
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible.
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole.
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take 60 to 90 minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not

give obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: (a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and (b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you as a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, and a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and Details

The study begins with an overview of John. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lesson one you will lay the foundation for your study of John by asking yourself, “Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?”

In lessons two through twenty-two, you will analyze successive passages of John in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

In lesson twenty-two, you will review John, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

Kinds of Questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do You want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Study Aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 211. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the King James Version (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as *The Living Bible* is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and Meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen’s studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You

will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called "For the group." These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each "For the group" at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board (pre-formed shower wallboard works well), so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Pages 213–214 list some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

INTRODUCING JOHN'S GOSPEL

Jesus' Ministry



Leon Morris compares John's Gospel to "a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant can swim."¹ On the one hand, it is commonly given to new believers and even inquirers to examine the foundations of Christian faith. It is a favorite for the simple faith of simple folk. On the other hand, "years of close study of this Gospel do not leave one with a feeling of having mastered it, but rather with the conviction that it is still 'strange, restless, and unfamiliar.'"² Like Him whom it portrays, this book readily welcomes the humble and endlessly challenges the wise.

First impressions

You should have a chance to form first impressions of a book before someone tells you what you should see. The best way to do this is to read John’s gospel through, in one sitting if possible. Read quickly for an overall view, not stopping to ponder the details. Notice the passage subtitles in your Bible, if it includes them.

Before you begin reading, look over questions 1 through 7. Keep them in mind as you go through the gospel. You can list repeated words as you read, or underline them in your Bible. You can also jot notes about your first impressions in this study guide, a notebook, or the margin of your Bible.

Study Skill—Overview

It is wise to come to some tentative sense of what a book is about and what its author is trying to accomplish before examining isolated passages in detail. The first question we strive to answer as students of the Bible is, “What message was the author trying to convey to the original readers?” This question helps us focus on the intent of the author so that we will get out of the book what the Holy Spirit intended.

We approach this question by reading the book through one or more times, looking for first impressions, repeated words and ideas, and the author’s feelings about his topic and his readers. Then, we sketch a general outline of the book by giving titles to each chapter or major section. Having made these sorts of observations, we can have some preliminary opinions about the author’s purpose.

1. What are your first impressions of this book? (For example, what is it about? What overall impression does it give you of Jesus? What do you notice about the way the author writes? Is there a lot of action, description, dialogue, doctrinal teaching, instructions for behavior, or what? Is it easy or hard to follow?)

2. What key words and phrases appear over and over?

3. If you are familiar with any of the other three gospels, how is John's gospel like and unlike them?

Study Skill—Outline

A broad outline of a book often helps you see at a glance how it is put together and what it is meant to say. You make a broad outline by giving a title to each chapter (sometimes to part of a chapter or to several chapters). Good titles accomplish these things:

1. They help you recall the content of the passage.
2. They are unique to that passage.

To come up with a good title, ask yourself, "What was the author's purpose in including this section? How does this section fit his overall purpose for writing?"

4. Give a title to each of the following sections:

1:1-18 _____

1:19-51 _____

2:1-11 _____

2:12-25 _____

3:1-21 _____

3:22-36 _____

4:1-42 _____

4:43-54 _____

5:1-47 _____

6:1-71 _____

7:1-53 _____

8:1-59 _____

9:1-41 _____

10:1-21 _____

10:22-42 _____

11:1-57 _____

12:1-11 _____

12:12-50 _____

13:1-38 _____

14:1-31 _____

15:1-27 _____

16:1-33 _____

17:1-26 _____

18:1–19:42 _____

20:1-31 _____

21:1-25 _____

5. Another clue to the author’s intent, perhaps the most obvious one, is what he says explicitly about it. What do you learn about John’s purpose from 20:30-31?

6. Now that you’ve made some initial observations, try to pull your thoughts together into a summary statement. What would you say was John’s main purpose in writing this book?

7. Did this overview suggest questions you would like answered and topics you would like to pursue further as you study the book in detail? If so, jot them down to serve as personal objectives for your study.

Study Skill—Application

James 1:22 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17 remind us of the primary reason we study God's Word to let it affect our lives so that we will become fully the people God desires. Therefore, the last step of Bible study should always be to ask yourself, *What difference should this passage make to my life? How should it make me want to think or act?* Application will require time, thought, prayer, and perhaps even discussion with another person.

At times you may find it most productive to concentrate on one specific application, giving it careful thought and prayer. At other times you may want to list many implications a passage of Scripture has for your life, meditating on them all for several days before you choose one for concentrated prayer and action. Do whatever helps you to take to heart and act on what the passage says.

8. Look over your notes so far, and ask the Lord to help you see one or two areas He wants to focus on in affecting your life. Write down those general areas or specific ways in which you want to change and grow.

9. Is there anything you want to do about this during the coming week? If so, jot down your plans.

A gospel of John?

Few scholars today, besides conservative evangelicals, believe the ancient tradition that the apostle John wrote this gospel. Readers interested in this debate should consult the commentaries.³ Despite the current fashion of opinion, the evidence points to a Palestinian Jew who had access to much eyewitness testimony about Jesus' life, who had substantial authority in some part of the church, and who wrote before AD 100. The unanimous opinion of the church from AD 180 onward (we have no clear records before then) was that this person was John the apostle.

When did John write his gospel? Modern scholars no longer find any good reason to date the book after AD 100, and some evidence suggests before AD 70.⁴ Anytime toward the end of John's life seems reasonable.

Four Gospels

Gospel is an Old English word that means "good news." It translates the Greek word *euangelion* (*eu*-, "good" and *angelion*, "message"), which also gives us words like "evangelist" and is related to words like "angel." When the first Christians wanted to record the "good news" about the Man who was God, none of the familiar forms of literature seemed suitable. The Christians didn't write the kinds of biographies or sacred texts that were common in Greek or Jewish culture. Instead, they created a new form: the gospel.

Many collections of Jesus' words and deeds were composed in the century after His death, but God uniquely inspired four men to write the Gospels that would bear His authority. The early Christians took time and trouble to discern authentic from spurious records of Jesus' life. The books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the *Synoptic* (one view) Gospels because they have much more material in common than any of them has with John.

The Synoptics focus on Jesus' ministry in Galilee and His last week in Jerusalem, but John highlights Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem during several visits over the space of three years. John omits Jesus' birth, His human ancestry, His baptism, the Transfiguration, almost all of Jesus' parables, the bread and wine of the Last Supper, and the agony in Gethsemane. Only one of the miracles John records (the feeding of the five thousand) is in all three of the other gospels. Instead of the short, pithy parables and sayings in the Synoptics, John gives us long discourses on subjects related to Jesus' identity and mission. He records seven "I am" statements by Jesus, none of which are in the Synoptics. Why the differences?

Even an ordinary man is usually seen differently by different friends. We have accounts of Socrates by two different disciples that make one wonder if they are describing the same man. The Synoptics seem to be based on the memories of Peter, Matthew, Mary and others, while John's gospel seems to be his own recollections independent of theirs. God apparently prompted John to show us another face of Jesus.

Many people have remarked on how different Jesus' teaching in John is from His teaching in the Synoptics. Yet there are many possible explanations. For example, the parables and short sayings we find in the Synoptics are the kind of public teaching that rabbis used to make their students memorize. First-century students didn't take notes on paper; people thought you hadn't really learned a thing until you had memorized it. So, the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, and so on are probably material Jesus made His disciples commit to memory. "But any teacher does more than engage in public discussion and instruction. There is also more informal teaching which takes place in private."⁵ It may be that John has given us some of Jesus' informal discussions with His disciples and other people He met.

These are just a few of the differences between John and the other gospels. In His wisdom, God has given us a fuller portrait of His Son than one human mind could convey.

Misunderstandings

In your first reading of John, you may have noticed that almost everyone who encounters Jesus in this gospel misunderstands what He says and does. This fact and 20:31 suggest to some scholars that John wanted to clear up misunderstandings of what "the Christ" and "the Son of God" meant. The Jews had a distorted idea of the Messiah, so they were confused about Jesus' identity and mission. Even the disciples didn't understand Jesus' words and deeds until after the Resurrection, when Jesus and the Spirit began to make things clear (2:22; 7:39; 12:16; 16:13-16). From the time of Jesus onward, it was dangerous for a Jew to profess faith in Jesus (9:22,34; 12:42; 16:1-4; 19:38), and John may have wanted to encourage his fellow Jews to understand and believe in Jesus despite opposition.⁶

But John was not only trying to sort things out for Jewish converts. His gospel so often explains Jewish customs that he seems to have had his eye on a Gentile audience as well. By the time John was writing, most Jews were rejecting the gospel, but Christians were finding many Gentiles hungry for it. John was apparently as concerned that they believe accurately and actively as he was that Jewish converts do so.⁷

A pattern occurs over and over in John's gospel. Jesus reveals something about Himself through a sign or some teaching, and people react in mixed ways. Some accept the revelation—these receive further revelation and have their misunderstandings clarified. Others reject the revelation, and their misunderstanding deepens. John 9:39 is Jesus' own statement on this pattern. As you study this gospel, think about why John may have emphasized this pattern and what its implications are for you today.

Outline

Question 4 gave you a start on outlining John's gospel. Many good and different outlines have been made of it, so you should feel free to make your own or look at some commentaries and Bible handbooks. As a broad framework, consider the following:

THE WITNESS TO JESUS

- I. Prologue (1:1-18)
- II. Public Ministry—Signs and Discourses (1:19–12:50)
- III. Private Ministry—Discourses for the Disciples (13:1–17:26)
- IV. The Passion⁸—The Great Sign (18:1–19:42)
- V. Resurrection Appearances—Signs (20:1–21:25)

As you study further, think about how you could improve these divisions and titles.

For the group

This “For the group” section and the ones in later lessons are intended to suggest ways of structuring your discussions. Feel free to select and adapt what suits your group. The main goals are to get to know John's gospel as a whole and the people with whom you are going to study it.

Worship. Most groups like to begin with some kind of worship—a few minutes of prayer and/or a couple of songs. Worship helps people lay aside the business of the day and focus on God. It relaxes, renews, and opens you to listen to the Lord and each other. If you don't already have worship built into your meetings in some way, discuss how you might do so.

Warm-up. The beginning of a new study is a good time to lay a foundation for honest sharing of ideas, to get comfortable with each other, and to encourage a sense of common purpose. One way to establish common ground is to talk about what each group member hopes to get out of your group—out of any prayer, singing, sharing, outreach, or anything else you might do together. Why do you want to study the gospel of John? What do you hope to give as well as receive? If you have someone write down each member's hopes and expectations, then you can look back at these goals later to see if they are being met. Goal-setting at the beginning can also help you avoid confusion when one person thinks the main point of the group is to learn the Scriptures, while another thinks it is to support each other in daily Christian life, and another thinks prayer or outreach is the chief business.

How to use this study. If the group has never used a LIFECHANGE study guide before, you might take a whole meeting to discuss your goals for the group and go over the “How to Use This Study” section on pages 5–8. Then you can take a second meeting to talk about the background and questions in this

lesson. This will give you more time to read John and prepare lesson one for discussion.

Go over important points of the “How to Use This Study” section that you think the group should especially notice. For example, point out the optional questions in the margins. These are available as group discussion questions, ideas for application, and suggestions for further study. It is unlikely that anyone will have the time or desire to answer all the optional questions and do all the applications. A person might do one “Optional Application” for any given lesson. You might choose one or two “For Thought and Discussions” for your group discussion, or you might spend all your time on the numbered questions. If someone wants to write answers to the optional questions, suggest that he use a separate notebook. It will also be helpful for discussion notes, prayer requests, answers to prayers, application plans, and so on.

Invite everyone to ask questions about the “How to Use This Study” section.

Reading aloud. It is often helpful to refresh everyone’s memory by reading aloud the passage you are going to study. You probably won’t want to read all of John, but consider having someone read 1:1-18, another read 3:16-21, another 19:16-30, and another 20:1-9,19-23. These selections will remind the group of John’s themes, his style, and his personality. You can shorten them if your time is limited.

First impressions. Ask the group to share first impressions of John’s gospel—its style, mood, content, or whatever strikes you. For instance, how is this book like and unlike the biographies people write today, and like and unlike the other three gospels?

Next, zero in on John’s themes and purposes by discussing questions 2, 5, and 6. Try to state as succinctly as possible what the book is about.

You probably don’t need to discuss the evidence for whether John did or didn’t write this gospel. Also, you probably don’t have to take a lot of time to compare your broad outlines (question 4). Do allow time for the group to share questions (question 7) and areas for application (questions 8 and 9).

You will probably want to leave many of the group’s questions about the book until later in your study; they may answer themselves if you are looking for answers. Point out the list of references, and encourage members to bring questions to their pastors or other Christians they respect.

Wrap-up. The group leader should have read lesson two and its “For the group” section. At this point, he or she can give a short summary of what members can expect in that lesson and the coming meeting. This is a chance to whet everyone’s appetite, assign any optional questions, omit or clarify any numbered questions, or forewarn members of any possible difficulties.

You might also encourage anyone who found the overview especially hard. Some people are better at seeing the big picture or the whole of a book than others. Some are best at analyzing a particular verse or paragraph, while others are strongest at seeing how a passage applies to our lives. Urge members to give thanks for their own and others’ strengths, and to give and

request help when needed. The group is a place to learn from each other. Later lessons will draw on the gifts of close analyzers as well as overviews and appliers, practical as well as theoretical thinkers.

Worship. Some groups like to end with singing and/or prayer. This can include songs and prayers that respond to what you've learned from John, or prayers for specific needs of group members. Many people are shy about sharing personal needs or praying aloud in groups, especially before they know the other people well. If this is true of your group, then a song and/or some silent prayer, and a short closing prayer by the leader, might be an appropriate end. You could share requests and pray in pairs instead, if appropriate.

1. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 7.
2. Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. N. Davey (London, 1947), 20.
3. For an introduction, see Morris, 8–64; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 29:xxiv–li, lxxx–civ; Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 139–292.
4. Morris, John, 30–35.
5. Morris, John, 47.
6. John Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1975), 12–15.
7. Ironically, his book was often misunderstood because he used Jewish symbols (word, light, darkness, truth, water) that had different meanings among Gentiles. Heretical groups used John's gospel to prove their doctrines by misinterpreting the Jewish concepts.
8. Jesus' trial, torture, and death are called His Passion from the Latin word *passio*, "to suffer."