

EMMANUEL

The Life of Jesus Dramatized

Bible Study Guide Included

GOD WITH US

IAN VROON

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*“LORD, you establish peace for us;
all that we have accomplished you have done for us.”*

Isaiah 26:12 (NIV)

01 • A VOICE IN THE DESERT

JOHN 1:1-34

In the beginning was the Word.

“Repent!”

Crowds gathered near the Jordan River. A man stood in it with outstretched arms and pleading eyes. “Repent,” he repeated, “for the Kingdom is near.”

The people murmured to each other. Who was this guy? Why was he speaking with such authority? And what did he mean by “repent”? Had they committed some great sin?

“Repent of your sins! Be baptized.” The man beckoned with both hands, eyes wild as he implored his audience. “Your sins will be forgiven.”

No one stirred, but all were watching—looking up and down the shore, waiting for someone to move. Whispers swept through the crowd. Could this man be serious?

And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Timidly, a man stepped forward. There was a ripple where his toes broke the water—then his feet were submerged, and his shaking knees pushed him further into the river. He raised both arms to steady himself, stumbled forward—the water’s chill made him wince—and with a few splashes came up to his waist.

The man preaching repentance watched hopefully, reaching out as the volunteer reached him. “Yes, yes!” The Baptist clapped his new convert on the shoulder and nodded triumphantly. “Now repent of your sins and I will baptize you.”

The man exhaled slowly, folding his hands and watching the sky. “I repent,” he said weakly. “I have been a foolish and stubborn man.” He closed his eyes. “I need forgiveness.”

Without hesitation, the Baptist plunged him underwater. Water exploded a second later as he pulled his convert up, spraying the Jordan’s surface with shimmering sunlight. The man inhaled quickly and shook his head.

“Well done.” The Baptist’s eyes gleamed with tears. “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” He patted him on the shoulder, then turned toward the shore. “Who’s next?”

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

“He calls himself John.”

“His name is John? But isn’t he Zechariah’s son?”

“An angel named him, if the rumors are true.”

A Levite in the group scoffed. “These self-proclaimed prophets,” he spat, looking toward the river. “What authority does he have to baptize? He wears a leather belt and clothing made of camel’s hair like he’s Elijah—and he comes from the desert. Probably half mad from the heat.”

“But what if he is Elijah?”

The Levite shook his head. “Impossible. We Jews don’t need baptism. If he were Elijah, he would know that—instead of treating us like uncircumcised Gentiles.”

The other priest disagreed. “This man is different,” he insisted, glancing at the shore. “The people take him very seriously, and we should do the same.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps?” His friend raised both eyebrows. He pointed toward the river, where an explosion of water marked John’s eighth convert in the last fifteen minutes. “A week ago, people were afraid to go near him. Now the entire countryside is lining up to hear him.” He lifted his chin. “For a crazed man, he’s awfully persuasive.”

“He certainly has a strong spirit—but not all spirits are the Holy Spirit.”

“Granted,” he replied, and shrugged. “But why not give him a chance? Ask him.”

“Very well,” the Levite said, turning to leave. “We will gather a group.”

Those nearby murmured in excitement. Soon they would discover if this John the Baptist was Elijah, the Prophet or—possibly—the Christ.

For why else did their hearts burn within them?

In him was life, and that life was the light of men.



Over four hundred years earlier

“You call this a sacrifice?” Malachi’s staff poked the crippled lamb one man had brought in. “Do you actually—” he leapt forward, “Do you think God is pleased with the worst of your flock?”

The man shied back, dropping his lamb. “I want to bring an—an offering to the Lord—”

Malachi raised a finger to silence the man. “This,” he breathed, “Is what YHWH Sabaoth—the Lord Almighty—says:

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?”

“But—”

“But you ask—” Malachi made his voice whiny and high-pitched to imitate the priests—“How have we shown contempt for you?”

He stamped the ground with his staff, and the nearby priests recoiled. “By sacrificing crippled and diseased animals!” He kicked the defective lamb on the floor. “Try offering these to your governor and see what he thinks!”

Now the priests were visibly shaken. They took a few steps back, but the Lord's messenger pursued them. "My name—says the Lord Almighty—is to be great among the nations. Great!" Malachi glared at them. "From the rising to the setting of the sun."

The priests were backed into the wall now. "We—we light fires on the altar—"

"Useless fires!" Spittle flew from Malachi's mouth. "The Lord Almighty is not pleased with you—and he will accept no offering from your hands."

One of them protested. "But our festival sacrifices—"

"I will spread on your faces the animal entrails from your sacrifices!" Malachi's hand made a covering motion over the priest's face. "And you will be carried outside the temple and burned with it."

The priest's mouth opened—then he swallowed. "We—"

"I remember my covenant with Levi—says the Lord Almighty." Malachi gave a little smile. "A covenant of life and peace." He breathed in deeply, closing his eyes. "He stood in awe of my name—and true instruction was on his lips. He walked with me in peace and righteousness, and turned many from sin."

His eyes flew open. "But you—you!" He thrust a trembling finger at them. "*You* have violated the covenant of your fathers. You have turned from God's way and your teaching has led others astray. You have broken faith!"

"We didn't mean to! It's just—it's been so long." The priest's lower lip trembled. He held out his hands. "Where is the prosperity Yahweh promised us? We returned from exile long ago."

Malachi studied him, knuckles white as he clutched his staff. Then he gave a long, drawn out sigh. "This admonition is for *your* sake," he emphasized. "For the sake of my covenant with Levi—and because I love you."

Another priest found his tongue. "But—but how?!"

"By choosing you over Esau," Malachi replied. "I transformed Edom's mountains into a desert wasteland—a haunt for jackals."

"But what's the use?" The first priest pleaded with his hands. "God has abandoned us. We are a downtrodden nation under oppression. We pray to him and he doesn't listen." He shook his head. "Why bother? His promises are not coming true."

The other priests murmured in agreement, nodding to each other. "Where is the eternal kingdom he promised?" one of them asked. "Where is the Messiah come to judge the world?"

Malachi rolled his eyes. "You flood the altar with tears!" he spat. "You weep and wail and ask, 'Why?'" He pointed at their faces. "It is because you have broken faith with the wife of your youth and married the daughters of foreign gods. You have divorced and you have ignored the covenant."

No reply. None of them could meet his eyes.

Malachi leaned into their faces. "You have wearied the Lord with your words." He bobbed his head from side to side and imitated their speech. "But you ask, 'How have we wearied him?'"

Malachi stamped the ground with his staff. "By saying it is futile to serve God! You ask where the God of justice is. But the Lord does not change." His shoulders lowered. "That is why he still loves you."

He beckoned with his free hand. "Return to him, and he will return to you."

The priests whispered to each other, uneasy but receptive. One of them cleared his throat. "And the Messiah?"

Malachi smiled. "This is the Lord Almighty's answer:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.” Malachi straightened. “Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.”



The Present

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There he was. John the Baptist, Elijah’s twin, passionately exhorting the crowd toward repentance. The crowds were thicker than ever, drawn by the promise of forgiveness.

The Pharisees and Sadducees also sought baptism. After all, it was the proper thing to do. They approached the shore tentatively, letting the crowd part before them.

John saw them and his eyes grew wide. “You brood of vipers!” he screamed, throwing a trembling finger in their direction. “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

The crowd gasped. The Pharisees and Sadducees exchanged glances—had they just heard that?

“And don’t you even think about saying ‘We have Abraham as our father!’” John’s voice shook with fury. He jabbed his finger at a nearby cluster of rocks. “I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”

This was unacceptable. Who did this man think he was? The Lord’s messenger? Not since Malachi had they been so vehemently—

“The ax is already at the root of the tree,” John continued, making a sinister motion with his hands. “And every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down—” he clenched his fist, “And thrown into the fire.”

The people were speechless. Some turned to the Pharisees and Sadducees—but their mouths were open, hands hanging by their sides.

Then a woman broke from the crowd. “What should we do?” She fell to her knees, holding out her hands. “What *can* we do?”

Anxious murmurs rippled through the crowd. What would John say?

“The man with two tunics should share with him who has none,” John replied, “and the one who has food should do the same.”

Some in the crowd murmured approval. A few tax collectors stepped out and asked, “Teacher, what about us?”

John indicated the crowd with his palm. “Don’t collect more money than you have to.”

“And us?” A soldier approached him with two of his comrades. He dipped his head to John in respect. “What should *we* do?”

“Don’t extort people and don’t accuse people falsely.” John’s eyes blazed as he surveyed the soldiers. “Be content with your pay.”

The soldier swallowed. “Right,” he said, stepping into the water, “It will be as you say.”

John nodded. “Make your words your life.”

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.

“There he is.” The priests and Levites made their way toward the shore, whispering to each other. “John the Baptist—our supposed Elijah.”

A Levite scoffed. “He certainly plays the part.”

“I hear he eats locusts and wild honey.”

“Grew up in the Qumran community, I think. Been living in the desert for years.”

“Qumran? Aren’t they all crazy?”

John’s words floated over the water: “He who comes after me has surpassed me, because he was before me!”

Yep. Completely mad.

“John the Baptist!”

John turned to see the priests and Levites approaching the water’s edge. His face became stone.

“We have some questions for you.” One of the priests cleared his throat. “The people wish to know who you are.”

John’s expression did not change. “Fire away.”

The priest cleared his throat. “Are you the Christ?”

The crowd waited with bated breath. Was this it?

John spread his arms. “I am not the Christ,” he confessed, dipping his head.

There were murmurs. Not the Christ?

“Then who are you?” The priest tilted his head. “Are you Elijah?”

“I am not.”

More murmurs. The priest glanced at his comrades, but they only shrugged. “Are you the Prophet?”

“No.”

A moment of silence. Then, “Well who are you?”

No reply. John stared at him, eyes burning.

“Give us *something* to take back to those who sent us.” The priest pleaded with his hands. “What do you say about yourself?”

John raised his face toward heaven and closed his eyes. “I am the voice of one calling in the desert.” He spread his arms. “Make straight the way for the Lord.”

The priests whispered to each other. The words of Isaiah the prophet?

“Every valley will be filled in, every mountain made low,” John continued, “The crooked roads will become straight, the rough ways smooth.” He opened his eyes. “Then all mankind will see God’s salvation.”

The true light that gives life to every man was coming into the world.

“Strong words from Isaiah.”

The crowd turned to see a Pharisee making his way toward John. He stopped at the shore and sneered. “But you are not Elijah. And you are not the Prophet.” He raised his chin. “And you are certainly no Messiah.”

Other Pharisees gathered behind him. No doubt they had arrived with the priests.

“I preach repentance,” John replied, “to prepare the path for the Messiah.”

“Oh?” The Pharisee arched an eyebrow. “And just how does baptizing people do that?”

John cupped water in both hands. “It cleanses their hearts.” He opened his fingers, letting the liquid trickle between them. “Allowing the Messiah passage.” He pointed at the people. “*They* are his path.”

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Feet moved behind the crowd, dust rising with each step. Another man had joined.

“I baptize with water,” John said, cupping water with one hand. “But among you stands one you do not know—one more powerful than I.”

The feet moved through the crowd slowly, dust turning to sand.

“One whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” He dumped the water this time, inhaling deeply. “He will baptize with the Holy Spirit—” he gritted his teeth, “and with fire.”

The feet reached the river’s edge and stopped.

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor,” John continued, making a motion with his hands. “He’ll gather the wheat into his barn—and *burn* the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

A man stepped forward. There was a ripple where his toes broke the water—then his feet were submerged. He moved with purpose, and the crowd watched as he approached John. The Baptist had stopped speaking, and now all eyes were on the newcomer.

The man crossed his arms over his chest. “I am ready,” he said, keeping his eyes fixed on John. “Baptize me.”

John found his tongue. “Jesus! I remember you!” He creased his eyebrows, trying to place a memory. “What are you doing here? *I* need to be baptized by *you!*” He shook his head, incredulous. “And you come to me?”

Jesus nodded. “We must do this to fulfill every righteous requirement.”

John closed his mouth, studying the man’s face. He remembered his friend from childhood, but that was it. From what he could tell, Jesus was still more righteous than he would ever be. But if the friend wanted John to baptize him—

“Very well,” John said, taking Jesus in his arms. The surface broke as he thrust the man through it. A second spent underwater—

The prophet Isaiah stood before the people of Israel, long robes and staff. He held out a hand to indicate an unseen friend. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,” he said softly, “my chosen one in whom I delight.” He smiled confidently. “I will put my Spirit on him—and he will bring justice to the nations.”

—An explosion of water droplets preceded Jesus’ exit. The man from Galilee inhaled sharply and cleared his eyes. John clapped him on the shoulder—

And the heavens opened.

Far above the river, beyond the stars, beyond the whirling galaxies and cosmos, through the black holes and nebulae and voids of deep space, there is a throne. Above all majesties and powers and kings and queens this throne rests. The Earth is its footstool—the roots of the mountains trinkets at its base.

From it rules an eternal power, an omnipotent being wrapped in light and zeal as a cloak, bearing righteousness as a breastplate and salvation as a helmet, and holding the fate of every creature in his right hand. Before the past, after the future, and greater than the present, he reigns with an outstretched arm and a mighty fist.

His wrath is poured out like fire—and shatters the rocks before him. Mountains melt beneath him like wax running from a candle. Valleys split apart from his anger. The trenches of the ocean are laid bare at his rebuke.

His love redeems nations. What is torn and shattered is restored, piece by fragment, until it is superior to its original. The adulteress is allured by his love. The valley of trouble becomes a door of hope with his guidance. He cares for any who would trust in him, and he heals all who would come to him.

He is God.

Now the Holy Spirit descends to the Earth. The Earth, that infinitesimal speck in an infinite cosmos. No small cause sends him there. The Holy Spirit is on a mission.

Past every galaxy, through the atmosphere and to a small river between continents. He assumes the form of a white bird, simple and sublime—a dove. Peace. He flutters more slowly now, descending upon the man exiting the water.

God's Son.

It is a mission older than time—and the time has come for its accomplishment.

A voice shook the Jordan River and thundered across the sky.

“This is my Son, whom I love.”

Jesus raised his arms to receive the Holy Spirit, now a dove descending upon him.

“With him I am well pleased.”

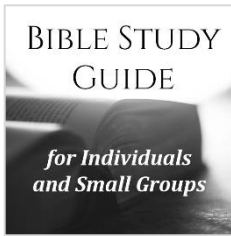
The crowd was speechless. Jesus exited the river, streams of water cascading down his tunic as he shook his sandaled feet.

“Look!” John said, pointing at Jesus, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” He looked around the crowd with wild eyes, gesturing frantically. “Don’t talk about me! I’m not the messiah! I was sent to prepare the way and to reveal the One who will walk it. The One on whom the Holy Spirit rests!” He slogged through the Jordan, unable to control himself. “I have seen,” he stammered, almost tripping. “I have seen and I testify!”

He reached the shore in a few steps and stopped. Pointing a shaking finger at Jesus, he said, “I have seen and I testify that this is the Messiah—the Son of God!”

We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

FOR DEEPER STUDY



Want to go deeper? These questions are meant to spur thought and spiritual development, and are intended to be used as you study the Word of God alongside these dramatizations. The questions can be used individually or in a small group setting.

I pray God opens your eyes to his glorious identity and gives you wisdom as you prayerfully undertake this study.

A VOICE IN THE DESERT • DEEPER STUDY

John is an interesting figure in history. He grew up in the Qumran community, an ultraconservative sect of Judaism which believed in asceticism (refraining from earthly pleasures), extreme modesty and memorization of the Scriptures—word for word, every inch of every scroll—from youth. They lived out in the desert, and their belief was that the Jewish race’s goal was to keep itself from being polluted by outsiders until the Messiah came. As a result, isolation was their primary way of life.

Furthermore, it is likely John would have known Jesus since childhood. (Though he would not be aware of Jesus’s status as Messiah until now.) Qumran was close to where Jesus grew up, and there was prohibition against mingling with fellow Jews.

It is interesting, then, that John comes at a time when God has been silent for 400 years (since Malachi). Out of the desert—out of silence, out of wilderness—God begins speaking to Israel again. And John is his instrument.

John Preaches Repentance

John 1:1-34; Luke 3:1-18

1. We all have a purpose in life. What was John’s purpose?
How did John’s upbringing and circumstances make him fit for this purpose?
2. What is your purpose in life?
3. How does John bring purpose to his audience?
4. Read Isaiah 43:21. Why does purpose matter to God?
5. If you were standing on the shores of the Jordan asking, “What about me? What should I do?” What do you think John would say to you?

Malachi Chastises the People

Overview of Malachi, particularly 1:1-14; 2:1-9, 17; 3:1

6. Is Malachi’s behavior toward authority acceptable here? Why or why not?
When is it appropriate to exhibit this behavior in your own life?
7. What is God’s purpose for people like Malachi—and how does it compare to John’s purpose?
8. As the writer, I don’t simply insert flashbacks randomly. They’re always related to the event I’m dramatizing. So what is the relationship between the Malachi flashback and the dramatization?

The Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:1-11; Luke 3:21-23; Isaiah 42:1

9. What does it mean to “prepare the way”?
10. Why bother with a messenger to “prepare the way”? Why couldn’t Jesus simply prepare his own way?
11. For what reasons would Jesus want to be baptized?
12. What would your reaction be if Jesus asked you to baptize him?

BIBLIOGRAPHY & NOTES

01 • A Voice in the Desert

A Voice in the Desert

1. John preaches repentance:
John 1:1-34; Luke 3:1-18
2. Malachi chastises the people:
Overview of Malachi, particularly 1:1-14; 2:1-9, 17; 3:1
3. The baptism of Jesus:
Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:1-11; Luke 3:21-23
4. Isaiah 42:1 is quoted in the final section