

Teachers Guide

John : From Son of Thunder to Apostle of Love

Study Summary

Who Was John?

John was a Galilean fisherman from a successful family business, working alongside his father Zebedee and brother James, with hired servants and partnerships with Simon Peter and Andrew. When Jesus called him to "fish for people," John left everything immediately—his livelihood, his family business, his security—to follow a traveling rabbi he barely knew. Jesus nicknamed John and his brother "Boanerges" or "Sons of Thunder," describing their hot-tempered, impulsive, and combative personalities.

John's Journey

John became part of Jesus's inner circle—one of only three disciples (with Peter and James) who witnessed the raising of Jairus's daughter, the transfiguration on the mountain, and Jesus's agony in Gethsemane. He saw both Jesus's glory and his suffering. John's "thunder" showed up repeatedly: he wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village that rejected Jesus, he tried to stop someone ministering in Jesus's name because "he's not one of us," and he asked for the best seat in Jesus's kingdom while Jesus was explaining his coming death.

John's Faithfulness

Though John fled with the other disciples when Jesus was arrested, he came back. He was the only male disciple present at the cross, where Jesus entrusted his mother Mary to John's care. John identified himself throughout his Gospel not by name but as "the disciple whom Jesus loved"—rooting his identity not in his accomplishments but in being loved by Jesus. After Pentecost, John became a bold apostle, standing before the Sanhedrin and later being sent to Samaria—the very region he once wanted to destroy—to bring the Holy Spirit to new believers.

John's Legacy

John wrote five New Testament books: the Gospel of John, three letters (1, 2, and 3 John), and Revelation. His Gospel gives us some of Scripture's most beloved passages, including John 3:16 and the seven "I AM" statements of Jesus. His letters distill Christianity to its essence: "God is love" and "We love because he first loved us." Exiled to Patmos as an old man, he received the vision of Revelation. According to tradition, he lived to an extreme old age, and his final message became simply: "Little children, love one another." The Son of Thunder had become the Apostle of Love.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 4:21 • Mark 1:19-20 • Mark 3:17 • Mark 9:38-40 • Mark 10:35-45 • Luke 9:51-56 • John 1:1-14 • John 3:16 • John 13:23 • John 19:25-27 • John 20:1-8 • Acts 3:1-10 • Acts 4:13-20 • Acts 8:14-17 • Galatians 2:9 • 1 John 4:7-19 • Revelation 1:9-18 • Revelation 21:1-4 • Revelation 22:20

Discussion Questions and Possible Answers

Q1: John and James left their father, their fishing business, and their financial security "immediately" when Jesus called. What has following Jesus cost you? Is there something you sense Jesus calling you to leave behind that you have been hesitant to release? What makes it difficult to respond to Jesus's call with immediacy?

Possible Answers:

- Common costs of following Jesus: career paths not taken, financial decisions (tithing, generosity, not pursuing highest-paying options), relationships that changed or ended, comfort zones left behind, reputation among certain groups, control over the future.
- What makes immediacy difficult: we want more information before committing, we're afraid of making a mistake, we have responsibilities and obligations, we don't trust that God will provide, we're attached to our current identity and security
- Important nuance: John didn't know where following Jesus would lead. He couldn't calculate the cost in advance. Sometimes obedience means stepping forward without knowing the full picture.

Q2: Jesus nicknamed John and James "Sons of Thunder" because of their hot-tempered, impulsive personalities—yet he called them anyway and spent years transforming them. What aspects of your own temperament or personality do you sense need Jesus's transforming work? How does John's story encourage you about the possibility of genuine change over time?

Possible Answers:

- Common temperament issues people struggle with: anger, impatience, judgmentalism, anxiety, need for control, people-pleasing, pride, envy, passive-aggressiveness, defensiveness, tendency to withdraw or isolate.
- Key encouragement from John's story: Jesus called him knowing exactly what he was like. Jesus doesn't recruit the qualified; he qualifies the recruited. The call comes first, then the transformation.

- Important distinction: God didn't erase John's personality—he redeemed it. John's intensity and passion remained, but they were redirected toward love instead of judgment. His "thunder" became a powerful voice for truth and love.

Q3: James and John asked for the best seats in Jesus's kingdom while Jesus was explaining that he would suffer and die. In what ways does our ambition for position, recognition, or success sometimes blind us to what Jesus is actually calling us toward? What would it look like to pursue greatness the way Jesus defines it—through service and sacrifice?

Possible Answers:

- How ambition blinds us: we hear "kingdom" and "glory" but filter out "suffering" and "service." We pursue influence while avoiding inconvenience. We want the platform without the preparation. We seek recognition while resisting the hidden, faithful work that precedes it.
- Ways ambition disguises itself spiritually: wanting a bigger ministry "for God's glory," seeking leadership positions to "serve more effectively," comparing our impact to others and feeling dissatisfied, being more excited about visible roles than behind-the-scenes faithfulness.
- Jesus's definition of greatness (Mark 10:43-45): "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." Greatness is measured by service, not status. Jesus himself "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Q4: When the Samaritan village rejected Jesus, John wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy them. Later, he was sent to that same region to bring the Holy Spirit to Samaritan believers. Who are the "Samaritans" in your life—people you struggle to love, groups you instinctively judge or exclude? What would it look like for your "call down fire" impulses to become "bring them the Spirit" ministries?

Possible Answers:

- Modern "Samaritans" might include: people on the opposite side of political divides, different denominations or theological traditions, people whose lifestyles we disapprove of, those who have hurt us or our loved ones, people from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds, difficult family members.
- "Call down fire" impulses today: wanting people to "get what they deserve," feeling satisfaction when those we disagree with fail, avoiding or excluding certain people, speaking about groups in dehumanizing ways, believing some people are beyond God's grace.
- The irony in John's story is powerful: the very people he wanted to destroy became the people he was sent to bless. God often sends us to minister to those we're most tempted to reject.

Q5: When Jesus was arrested, all the disciples fled—including John. But John came back and eventually stood at the cross when the others remained in hiding. How does John's story speak to your own experiences of failure in following Jesus? What does it mean that failure is not final and that coming back is always possible?

Possible Answers:

- Common experiences of "running away": times we've denied knowing Jesus (staying silent when we should have spoken), seasons of drifting from faith, moments when fear overcame conviction, times we've prioritized safety or reputation over faithfulness.
- What made John come back? We're not told explicitly, but possibilities include: love for Jesus that overcame fear, desire to know what was happening, the Holy Spirit drawing him back, unwillingness to let fear have the final word.
- The significance of coming back: John's initial failure didn't disqualify him from faithfulness. His running away didn't prevent him from standing at the cross. Because he came back, he was entrusted with caring for Jesus's mother—a sacred responsibility given to the one who showed up.

Q6: John consistently identified himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" rather than by his name or accomplishments. What is your primary identity rooted in—your achievements, your roles, your reputation, or being loved by Jesus? How would your life change if "the person whom Jesus loves" became your fundamental self-understanding, especially in moments of failure or suffering?

Possible Answers:

- Common identity foundations: career success, parenting, ministry roles, being "the responsible one" or "the smart one," financial status, relationships, appearance, productivity, being needed by others.
- Why John's identity choice matters: when your identity is rooted in being loved, you don't have to prove yourself—you're already loved. You don't have to earn approval—you're already accepted. You don't have to compete for position—you're already valued. You don't have to hide failures—you're already forgiven.
- How this changes suffering: John could stand at the cross—watching his beloved teacher tortured and killed—because his identity wasn't dependent on circumstances. "The disciple whom Jesus loved" remained true even in the darkest moment.

Q7: John's transformation from Son of Thunder to Apostle of Love took sixty or seventy years of walking with Jesus. How does this challenge our expectation of quick spiritual growth? What would it look like for you to commit to "the long obedience"—decades of faithfully following Jesus, receiving his love, and being gradually transformed?

Possible Answers:

- Why we want quick transformation: our culture promises instant results, we're impatient with ourselves, we compare our progress to others, we want to be "done" with difficult growth areas, we confuse information with transformation.
- What the "long obedience" looks like: daily choices to follow Jesus even when we don't feel like it, consistent spiritual practices over years, returning to God after failures, staying in community through difficult seasons, trusting the process even when we can't see change.
- Encouragement from John's story: he was still John at the end—passionate, intense, bold. But those qualities had been redirected. His transformation wasn't about becoming someone else but about becoming who God always intended him to be.
- Questions to consider: Where were you spiritually five years ago? Ten years ago? Can you see growth, even if gradual? What would faithfulness look like not just this week but over the next decade?

Q8: At the end of his life, John's message was reduced to one repeated phrase: "Little children, love one another." He said that if we do this alone, it is enough. What does it mean that the apostle who lived longest and saw the most ultimately believed that everything comes down to love? How does his foundational principle—"We love because he first loved us"—reframe how you approach loving others?

Possible Answers:

- Why John's final focus on love is significant: after witnessing Jesus's ministry, the resurrection, Pentecost, decades of church growth, persecution, and the vision of Revelation—after all of that—John concluded that love is what matters most. This wasn't naive simplicity; it was hard-won wisdom.
- "We love because he first loved us" changes the equation: we don't generate love through effort or willpower. We receive God's love, and it overflows to others. The sequence matters—receiving comes before giving. This takes the pressure off our own capacity and puts the focus on God's inexhaustible love.
- How this reframes loving difficult people: instead of "How can I make myself love this person?" we ask "Am I receiving God's love deeply enough that it's overflowing?" The problem with our love is usually a problem with our receiving.

- Practical implications: John says love must be "in actions and in truth," not just words (1 John 3:18). If someone has a need and we have resources to meet it, love acts. This is not sentimental love but sacrificial love—modeled on Jesus laying down his life for us.



"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."

— 1 John 4:7-8