

THE LOOKOUT

DECEMBER 2023

Unit: Gospel of John (Part 1)

Theme: Light and Life

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

HOW TO USE

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

Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

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

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

WEEK OF DECEMBER 10, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Believe in Jesus
so you may receive
eternal life in him.**

UNIT: Gospel of John (Part 1)

THEME: Light and Life

LESSON TEXT: John 3:1-21

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: John 5:24-30; 12:20-26; Romans 6:23;
Galatians 6:7-9

STUDY

ETERNAL LIFE

BY MARK SCOTT

A very young person might ask, “How long is eternity?” A momentarily befuddled teacher may respond, “Well, eternity is forever and ever and ever.” Bound by time and space, eternity is tough to get one’s arms around. Perhaps there is no way to know or describe it until one reaches that land of no more tears.

The New Testament basically has two Greek words translated as *life*. The word *bios* means biological life. Everyone created by God has that. Even animals have that. The word *zoe* means life in its richest sense—God-gifted life that goes beyond one’s physical life. It is abundant life (John 10:10). Only believers in Jesus have that.

A Teacher Learns About Eternal Life

John 3:1-15

Jesus conducted a brief Judean ministry prior to journeying north for the larger part of his 18-month (or so) Galilean ministry. The cleansing of the temple (John 2:13-22) created such a stir that Jesus had to lay low before heading to Samaria to encounter the woman at the well. This might be one reason Jesus met Nicodemus, a distinguished *teacher* of Israel, at *night*.

Nicodemus, who was a *Pharisee* and a member of the *Jewish ruling council* (Sanhedrin), apparently had a growing, genuine interest in Jesus. That is how John presents him in the chronology of his Gospel (3:1-15; 7:50-51; 19:39-42). Nicodemus began this dialogue by admitting that Jesus came from God; he was convinced of this because Jesus had performed miracles. John thus far has specifically mentioned only one miracle (2:1-12), but clearly there were others (2:23).

Jesus looked beyond Nicodemus’s compliment and answered Nicodemus’s heart. To *see the kingdom of God*, Jesus said, one must be *born again* (or “from above” or “anew”). The language was strange, and Nicodemus asked for clarification. Jesus explained that this born-again experience consisted of a spiritual “makeover” that involved *water* and the Holy *Spirit*. Upon hearing those words (*water* and *Spirit*), a good Jew like Nicodemus would likely have thought of Genesis 1. Water and the Spirit were both present at the creation (Genesis 1:2). Water and the Spirit are essential to a person’s re-creation or “rebirth” in Christ (Titus 3:4-5; cf. Acts 2:38).

In describing the Spirit’s work, Jesus also mentioned the *wind*. In the Greek language as well as in the Hebrew, the

same word can mean either “wind” or “spirit.” Wind later accompanied the Spirit’s arrival on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

When Jesus spoke about being born again, Nicodemus was baffled by this. He believed that life came from obeying the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 18:5). Jesus zeroed in on the difference between *heavenly things* and *earthly things*. The born-again experience is a gift from God above—not from the law below.

Then Jesus drew upon an Old Testament story found in Numbers 21:4-9 to drive home his point to Nicodemus about *eternal life*. As Israel made their way to their homeland via Edom, the people began to complain (again) about not having sufficient water and food. God punished them with venomous snakes who bit the people. Some died. When the people turned to Moses in repentance, God instructed him to make a serpent and put it on a pole. If the people, when bitten by the snakes, looked to the bronze snake on the pole they would live. This became a symbol of salvation, just as the cross later came to symbolize salvation. Belief in the lifted-up Son of Man would lead to eternal life. Nicodemus learned much that night.

The Teacher Gives Eternal Life

John 3:16-21

Some suggest that Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus ended at verse 15. The following verses (16-21) may have been spoken by Jesus on another occasion, or perhaps the apostle John added them. Since the language and themes are so well connected, it seems best to consider the entire section as spoken to Nicodemus.

The golden text of the Bible (John 3:16) shines so brightly because darkness is its backdrop. We should receive the love of God in Christ because, if we do not, we have nailed our own coffin. God, through his love, invites us to believe. He does not want to condemn the *world* (v. 17)—a word that appears four times in these two verses.

Belief leads to *eternal life* now. Unbelief leads to condemnation *already*. Jesus came into the world as the light takes vulnerability, but the result of doing so is a life that can be lived free of fear and pleasing in *the sight of God*. ■

APPLICATION

SO WHAT?

BY DAVID FAUST

So is such a tiny word. Even if you double it, you're left with mediocrity. It's only "so-so." No one applauds a "so-so" meal or a "so-so" construction job. It's an insult to call someone an old "so-and-so."

Kids on the playground express their indifference and defiance by saying, "So what?" Churchgoers may ask that question, too, though usually not out loud. While the preacher talks and the worship leader sings, a part of them wonders, "Why does this matter? How does it affect my life?" Churches miss the mark if we don't address the "so what?" question.

Jesus didn't miss the mark. His Sermon on the Mount, for example, concludes with the memorable story about the wise and foolish builders because Jesus wanted his disciples to put his message into practice and do something about it. His sermon was a call to action, not a theoretical discourse. Reading the Bible should do more than make us think, "That's interesting." It should move us to ask, "So what will I do now?"

The "So" in John 3:16

The tiny word *so* plays a role in the much-loved verse, John 3:16. What does it mean to say, "God so loved the world"? We naturally understand those words as a reference to the extent of God's love. He loved us "so much," "to this degree," or "to such an extent." This interpretation makes sense, for on the cross, the Lord demonstrated the full extent of his love. He made the ultimate sacrifice to be reconciled with us, for he loved the world "so much."

But in many Bible translations, John 3:16 doesn't say "God loved us so much," but rather, "God so loved." The Greek word translated *so* in this verse (*houtos*) normally means "thus," "like so," "in this way," or "in this manner." John 3:16 highlights not only the *amount* God loved ("so much") but especially the *way* he loved ("like so")—by giving his Son to save us from perishing.

So, What Does It Mean for Us?

John 3:16 shines a spotlight on God's far-reaching, undeserved love. What are the practical implications for us? Three responses stand out.

First, we need to *receive the gift*. God "gave his one and only Son," and a gift is meant to be received. If you buy and wrap Christmas gifts for your loved ones, you don't want them to leave the presents unopened under the tree. God graciously offers a much-needed gift. Have you received it by faith with a repentant heart and surrendered to him in baptism?

Second, we should *share the gift*. When international travelers go through customs in the airport, most of them pass through the area that says, "Nothing to Declare." But Christians do have something to declare! We bear witness to God's love not only with words, but with sacrificial actions.

Third, let's always *appreciate the gift*. After years of following Christ, it's tempting to become lukewarm; and after celebrating Christmas dozens of times, it's easy to lose some of our enthusiasm about the holidays. But even if the season's carols, candles, and cookies don't send excited shivers down our spines, the lyrics of carols still remind our hearts to sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

The tone of the Christian life shouldn't be an indifferent shrug that says, "So what?" but a grateful cry that exclaims, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Personal Challenge: Find a way to share God's love during this Christmas season. Visit a shut-in or a prisoner. Give an extra gift to a missionary along with a letter of encouragement. Share a meal with someone who lives alone. Volunteer at a homeless shelter, hospital, or nursing home. Write a thank-you note to a friend, a neighbor, or a volunteer at church. **L**

DISCOVERY

BY DOUG REDFORD

1. Were you a light in someone's life over the past week?
 - How can you maintain that connection and keep the light shining?
 - Are there specific ways you can help this individual during the Christmas season?
2. Looking back on your school years, who would you consider your favorite teacher and why?

Ask two people to read aloud **John 3:1-21** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council (John 3:1) and a respected teacher, as Jesus noted (v. 10); and Nicodemus called Jesus "a teacher who has come from God" (v. 2).
 - What does it say about Nicodemus that he was willing to speak with Jesus?
 - What do you think Nicodemus found in Jesus' teaching that was so attractive?
4. Mark Scott suggests one reason Nicodemus came to Jesus at night was because Jesus created a stir by cleansing the temple and had to lay low.
 - What might be some other reasons for Nicodemus doing so?
 - What problems might Nicodemus have encountered by trying to see Jesus during the daytime?
5. Nicodemus found what Jesus was saying hard to grasp.
 - What do you do when you find something in the Bible that is difficult to understand? To what source(s) do you turn for help?
6. John 3:16 is a verse familiar to many, even to nonbelievers.
 - What are some ways in which you have seen God's love demonstrated in your life?
 - What makes God's love in Jesus so special?
7. David Faust observes that it's tempting to become lukewarm after years of following Jesus. What are some practical, intentional steps you can take to keep that from happening?
8. When was the last time you thought seriously about eternity? What were the circumstances?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. During the coming week, evaluate your daily life to see if there are habits or other areas of behavior (thoughts, words, or deeds) that you have been hesitant to expose to the light of God's truth. Form a plan by which you will address these and make the necessary changes.

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **John 4:4-26**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■