

NEW IMAGES, NEW UNDERSTANDING

A BIBLE STUDY FROM JOHN 3:1-21

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TEACHING PLAN BY BETSY K. DUNBAR

*NEW LIFE 2010 is a vision
set forth in 1998 for American Baptists
to reach 1,000,010 new disciples,
plant 1,010 new churches,
vitalize a multitude of caring ministries
—and so transform our congregations
by the year 2010.*



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A Bible Study from John 3:1-21

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OBJECTIVES

- Grasp a better understanding of what it means to accept a new reality by studying Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus in John 3.
- Explore three interconnected faith realities—the kingdom of God, being reborn in the Spirit, and God's salvation for the world—and ways we can live out these realities.
- Decide what implications this has for our congregation's involvement in NEW LIFE 2010 as we seek to bring people into the kingdom of God.

PREPARATIONS AND SUPPLIES

1. Ask group members to read John 3:1-21 and Psalm 145 before your session.
2. As the group assembles, play recorded Christian music to center the time of study. Recommended artists/music:

Spirit of the Living God – any artist

Hymns – Michael Faircloth

All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name – any artist

Alone in His Presence – CeCe Winans

Just Hymns – Damaris

Mercy – Andrae Crouch

Shout to the Lord or Blessed – Hillsong

Joy in the Journey – Michael Card

Mountain High...Valley Low – Yolanda Adams

Worship – Michael W. Smith
Heavenly Place or *Mi Corazon* – Jaci Velasquez
Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration
Purpose by Design – Fred Hammond
Handel's Messiah – any recording

3. Option: Consider doing this Bible study with a video, or a selected segment from a movie like “The Truman Show,” “Holy Man” or “The Matrix,” or after watching a reality TV show like “Survivor” or “Real World.” Remember when choosing a video or TV clip to consider your group’s sensitivities to issues such as language and violence.
4. Read the Scripture passages several times. Make time to become comfortable with the background information in this study, so you can share it in your own words.

STUDY PLAN

1. Determine how you will present this session. Depending on which options you choose, you could need three hours (for a video and discussion) or four to six sessions (the first for a video, then a session for dealing with “reality” and each of the three faith concepts identified in this study.)
2. View a video or selected segment (if you choose this option).
3. Discuss reality as it is portrayed in reality TV (or the video you watched) and the contrast of the reality of our faith in Jesus Christ.
4. Identify the three interconnected faith realities in the John 3 passage: the kingdom of God, being reborn in the Spirit, and God’s salvation for the world. These three realities are discussed in the sections of this Bible study that are titled, Glimpses of the Kingdom of God, (Re)Born into New Life, and Salvation—New Life for the Whole World.
5. Taking each concept one at a time, allow the group to study the passages and discuss their understanding of these concepts. Share with them the background information in your own words.

6. Use the suggested prayers at the end of this study, or your own prayers, to begin and end each session.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

BASED IN REALITY

One of the distinctive characteristics of John's narratives is that they are constructed so that readers are led to their own encounters with Jesus.

NEW LIFE 2010 is a vision calling American Baptists to be a reflection of God, pointing toward Jesus Christ and helping more people see and believe the Kingdom of God is present now. People are searching for meaning and purpose. Our consumer-driven culture points toward self-centeredness, insistent on convincing us that meaning and purpose consist in the abundance of things. (*To study the biblical view of living in a material world, read Luke 12.*)

Reality TV is taking center stage in entertainment. From "Real World" to "Road Rules," from "Survivor" to "Joe Millionaire" to "The Bachelorette," the list is extensive. The success of these shows is due in part to the perceived spontaneity. Who will get the rose? Who will get booted from the island? We are amused that someone like our neighbor or ourselves, who did not go to a school of the performing arts or take acting lessons, is on prime time TV. We watch intrigued that someone would actually subject themselves to situations that would embarrass most of us.

According to one media commentary, "reality programs seem to give more meaning to the rather dull lives of television viewers. Reality shows give Americans the opportunity to live their lives vicariously through the adventures of their favorite reality program personalities. Also, reality television offers Americans something that no television program can—it allows viewers to become voyeurs that lurk and observe the

lives of strangers on a week-by-week basis.” (Beth Rowan, “*History of Reality TV*,” uweb.ucsb.edu/links.html 2002)

The irony of reality TV is that it is not real. Any time people do anything with several cameras following them around, you can bet they are not going to be their “natural” selves. That fact, combined with all the editing that takes place, means that viewers are mistaken if they think they are being treated to the “real” thing.

But Christian faith *is* based in reality—the reality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom we cannot see, hear or touch with our natural senses.

CHANGING REALITIES

Jesus had a way of introducing new images and making familiar images seem strange in order to reveal new understanding. With the reading of all Scripture comes the invitation to be shaped or reshaped by the Word, and in the case of this text to “welcome new life on the terms offered by Jesus.” (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 9, 555)

Nicodemus was a *Pharisee*, a word that means separate, representative of a different manner of life than the general public. Pharisees, in their zeal for the law, almost gave the law god-like status. Their attitude became external, formal and mechanical. They were noted for their self-righteousness and their pride (Matt. 9:11; Luke 7:39 and 18:11-12). They did not stress the righteousness of an action, but its formal correctness. Therefore they frequently challenged the ministry of Jesus, e.g., healing on the Sabbath.

From the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the Pharisees showed themselves to be his bitter and persistent enemies. They could not bear his doctrines, and they sought by every means to destroy his influence among the people. His manner of life and teaching was essentially a condemnation of their

own. (*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words; Easton's Bible Dictionary*)

Nicodemus, however, witnessed or heard about the work of Jesus and seemed genuinely interested in knowing more *about* Jesus or *from* Jesus. This is the only recorded dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus, but Nicodemus shows up at two other important occasions in the life of Jesus: at the point of a confrontation, and at the point of Jesus' death (John 7:48-52 and 19:39). It is not recorded that Nicodemus publicly proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. But Nicodemus came to his defense during the confrontation, kept company with believers, and prepared Jesus' body for its time of burial.

Some who are immediately critical of Nicodemus label him a hard-hearted Pharisee and interpret the words of Jesus as being "over his head." Others see Nicodemus as sincerely seeking to get closer to God, know the truth and be part of the kingdom of God.

This Pharisee came to Jesus knowing the promises of God in Old Testament Scripture; that the Messiah was coming to restore the kingdom. This Pharisee was familiar with the prophets Isaiah, Micah and Zechariah (Isaiah 60-62; Micah 5; Zechariah 8-9, 14). This was his reality. But what Nicodemus knew from the prophets came to life in an unexpected way. Only faith in Jesus Christ, the One who brought the promise to life, would enable him to truly receive the promise and be part of the promise.

God is still doing new things among the community of faith. God is still trying to bring love to life in new ways, still trying to draw more people into the kingdom. That's reality. Imagine a reality-based show where Christians of all cultures and continents are filmed demonstrating acts of love to believers and nonbelievers—acts that might involve reconciliation, confrontation, restoration, liberation, visitation,

confession—generous sharing of time, talents and treasures. Now that would be worth watching!

GLIMPSES OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. John 3:3

Jesus seeks to show Nicodemus new images and a new understanding of God. He does this by talking of three interconnected faith realities: the kingdom of God, being reborn in the Spirit, and God's salvation for the world.

One of the challenges Jesus encountered was religious leaders who tried to discredit his work and attribute it to the realm of Satan (Luke 11:15-20). Nicodemus was one of the religious leaders rightly identifying God as the source of the miracles. However, Jesus needed to make clear to Nicodemus that there was more to being part of God's kingdom than miracles. These miracles pointed toward the kingdom of God. They were not the kingdom but reflections, or evidence, that the kingdom of God was "at hand," near, present.

The Christian community struggles to determine if the kingdom of God is real now or later. The response is that the kingdom of God is real now *and* later, or now *and* always. Christians also struggle to determine how we would know the kingdom of God if we saw it. The response is that the kingdom of God is present all around us and, hopefully, through us.

"God's kingdom. . . is. . . where what God wants done, is done. The person and action of God are the organizing principles of the kingdom, and everything that obeys those principles, whether by nature or by choice is part of the kingdom. The kingdom of God is not something humans produce or ultimately hinder. We do have an invitation to be a part of it, but if we refuse we only hurt ourselves. . . . So when Jesus directs

us to pray, 'Thy kingdom come,' he does not mean we should pray for it to come into existence [because it already exists]. Rather, we pray for it to take over at all points in the personal, social, and political order where it is now excluded: 'On earth as it is in heaven.' With this prayer we are invoking the kingdom, as in faith we are acting it, into the real world of our daily existence." (Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, pp. 25-26)

"There are other kingdoms that exist also. Persons other than God, such as you or I, are still allowed on earth to have a say that is contrary to God's will. All of this, God still permits. Opposing God's will—what God wants for us—leaves us at the mercy of man-made disasters, such as wars, famine and oppression, and also prevents us from dealing *successfully* with the ramifications of disease, scarcity, and weather-related disasters. So, along with the 'already here' there obviously remains a 'not yet' aspect with regard to God's present rule on earth." (Willard, p. 29)

DISCUSSION

Divide your group into twos or threes for this discussion, then reconvene the group and share their findings.

1. Read Psalm 145. (Optional to read Psalms 146 to 150 also.) What do these verses say about God's kingdom? What part of the verses speaks to you most strongly? Why?
2. Where do you see glimpses of the kingdom of God around you? How can we make the kingdom of God more evident in our church and our lives so the whole world might see it?

(RE)BORN INTO NEW LIFE

You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." John 3:7

Baptism is one of the most amazing practices of the church. It is a symbolic act involving water and the Spirit— "an outward

sign of an inward change," "a public demonstration of profession of new life in Jesus Christ." Baptism embodies spiritual cleansing, repentance, change and entrance into the Christian community. Through our baptism we pronounce, "I am born again!"

The Greek phrase, *gennethenai anōthen*—to be born again—has a double meaning rooted in human action and divine action. It envisions a new mode of life for which there are no precedents: life born of water and the Spirit; life regenerated through the cross of Jesus. (*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9, 555)

Nicodemus had to let go of what he knew in order to be reborn through what Jesus had to offer. It is not always easy to confess ignorance or deny what you have trusted to be true. Paul said of himself, "I am forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the mark of the high calling in Christ Jesus. . . . I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Philippians 3:12-14). Paul is not just forgetting past mistakes, he is leaving behind his titles, status, and former quality of life in order to embrace the life he has in Christ Jesus.

"Belief in Jesus (John 3:16,18) changes one's life so that one can, indeed, speak of being 'born again' not because of an intrinsic change in human nature, but because of the new beginning that comes with a recognition of the full character of God that is revealed in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that God loved the world so much that God gave the Son as gift. If one receives the gift, one receives eternal life, because one's life is reshaped and redefined by the love of God in Jesus." (*New International Bible*)

Nicodemus had a long way to go from renouncing what he already knew, in order to make room for what he really needed to know. His conversion may not have been immediate, but we know that something became new for Nicodemus as

evidenced by his later actions (John 7:50–52; 19:39).

DISCUSSION

1. Ask those who have been baptized and remember their baptism to reflect in silence for a few minutes on their baptism; those who have not been baptized, or don't remember, can reflect on a baptism they have witnessed. Invite two or three people to share their remembrances of its significance in their own lives, or possibly the lives of others. Comment on the importance of remembering and sharing such memories with one another.
2. Has there ever been a time when your reality changed? How did you react to the change? What did you learn about yourself? About others? About God?
3. Are there any implications for our congregation as we seek to share new life?

SALVATION—NEW LIFE FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

For God so loved the world that God sent Jesus Christ....in order that the world might be saved through him.
(John 3:1-17)

Salvation and eternal life are used synonymously to describe the promise, security or reward for all who believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God, sent to restore fellowship with God that was disrupted by disobedience. Later in John's Gospel we read in the prayer of Jesus, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). This definition seems to imply there is more to eternal life than simply "getting into heaven." Salvation has meaning on both sides of the grave. Salvation is not insurance after I die, but assurance right now.

It has been said that this life is a rehearsal for life on the other side of the grave. If a person is not ecstatic in spending time with God while living this life, what makes that person

believe heaven—where spending time with God is the main event—is where they ought to be?

For Nicodemus the world was still considered flat and centered in Asia and Africa and Southern Europe. For Nicodemus, the tribes of Israel were the ones to whom the kingdom belonged. Jesus took the Gospel beyond Israel, beyond the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic-speaking world to the entire world. In John 3:16-17 we have a foretaste of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11).

Among the definitions of what it means to believe and be saved is “to see anew with this new sight given by a new birth.” The Gospel of John is full of references to seeing (1:33, 39, 46ff; 3:3; 4:29-48; 6:30; 7:3; 9:15; 11:34, 36; 12:21; 14:19; 16:16-22; 18:26; 20:25). “To be born anew through the Spirit means to begin to see with the eyes of Christ, not to condemn but to save; with eyes of compassion rather than judgment.” (“Living the Word,” pg.18, 1996 *Sojourners*)

What an invitation! May those who are “saved” be living with wide-open spiritual eyes to witness and be witnesses for the presence of God. May those who “have eternal life” be preparing the way now, so that all who are seeking the truth can make their way into the presence of God regardless of the hour of the day or the night. May believers of Jesus Christ be preparing the way now, so that everyone can see and be compelled to live the life that is real life.

Through NEW LIFE 2010, American Baptists are calling one another to constantly face God, point toward the kingdom of God, show the love of God, make choices that reflect our faith in Jesus Christ and draw our testimony into the light. We seek to live in the light, be transformed, revitalize our community, so that through us the world might meet Jesus.

DISCUSSION

1. Is Jesus' definition of eternal life as "knowing God" a new image for you? What does it mean to know God and Jesus Christ?
2. Ask someone to read John 3:17, then read this statement. *"To be born anew through the Spirit means to begin to see with the eyes of Christ, not to condemn but to save; with eyes of compassion rather than judgment."* As we seek to bring people into God's kingdom, what do we need to do to "see with the eyes of Christ...with eyes of compassion rather than judgment?" How does seeing in this way affect what we say and do?
3. Invite the group to commit to implementing—either individually or as a group—at least one thing they've learned in this study that will support your congregation's emphasis on the vision of NEW LIFE 2010. Be specific. Allow the group to come to their own decision, but really challenge yourselves to transform what you've learned into real action. As your group plans, coach them, if needed, with regards to teams/committees etc., where they could work within the congregation.

SUGGESTED OPENING AND CLOSING PRAYERS

Eternal and Transforming God, in the stillness of these moments, prepare our hearts and minds to receive your presence among us. We are studying a passage that seems familiar to some of us but may offer insight we have never seen before. Help your Word find room to usher new life into our lives.

Your voice reminds us that indeed we are intimately loved and wholly complete through the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. We know that real change will not happen even with a new wardrobe, new home, new cleaning supplies, or a new

lifestyle. The change we seek is truly an inward transformation made possible only by the power of your Holy Spirit.

Mold the contours of our hearts that we might be more loving. Shape the rooms of our soul that we might seek your kingdom first. Transform our minds that we might turn away from the temptations of our culture and turn fully toward you. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ who, if we open our hearts, can change the way we believe. Amen.

(Excerpted from *Change: Stewards for New Life*, ABC-USA Stewardship Resource)

The Lord's Prayer

Dear Father always near us, [Dear God, who is Mother and
Father, always near us,]
may your name be treasured and loved,
may your rule be completed in us—
may your will be done here on earth
in just the way it is done in heaven.
Give us today the things we need today,
and forgive us our sins and impositions on you
as we are forgiving all who in any way offend us.
Please don't put us through trials,
but deliver us from everything bad.
Because you are the one in charge,
and you have all the power,
and the glory too is all yours—forever—
so be it!

"The Lord's Prayer" from Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 269.

Sing “Spirit of the Living God”

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us,
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us,
Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us.
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.

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