

# bible<sup>+</sup>study: october 2016

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## October 2, 2016 Text: Hebrews 1:1-9 “The Imprint of God”

The opening verses of the Book of Hebrews really break loose in praise of Jesus Christ: a Son, heir of everything, creator, light of God's glory, imprint of God's being, maintains everything, powerful message, cleansing of sins, highest majesty, greater than other messengers, more important title (Hebrews 1:2-4). That's not bad for those few verses!

One description that intrigues me is translated in a variety of ways: imprint of God's being (Common English Bible), exact imprint of God's very being (New Revised Standard Version), exact representation of (God's) being (New International Version), express image of (God's) person (King James Version), flawless expression of the nature of God (J. B. Phillips), stamped with God's own character (James Moffatt), a copy of God's being (William F. Beck), perfectly mirrors God (The Message), the stamp of God's very being (New English Bible), perfect copy of God's nature (New Jerusalem Bible), like God in every way (Contemporary English Version), marks him as God (Living Bible).

The New Testament word that is rendered image/imprint/representation/expression/mirror is *charaktēr*. (Yes, my dictionary says that the English word “character” is rooted in that Greek word.) The literal meaning of *charaktēr* is an engraving term: scratching as when one is engraving on a metal. So, what is scratched is exactly what shows up in the engraving. The translators have found bountiful ways to say that the “engraving” of Jesus Christ is a full, exact expression of God.

“If you want to see God, look at Jesus.” (Compare John 1:18.)

There is no identification of the author of Hebrews and there is no clue as to whom it was written. (Based on Hebrews 13:24, we might conclude that it was sent from Rome.) Some have said that this book is more of a sermon than it is a letter (although the author calls it a letter—Hebrews 13:22). Whether we see it as correspondence or as preaching or as notes on important matters, Hebrews is a powerful explosion of celebration of Jesus Christ. After all, He is “the imprint of God's being.”

### What Someone Else Has Said:

N. T. Wright has written (*Simply Jesus*, HarperOne): “Jesus is the truly human being who will, in the end, take the properly human role (as in Genesis) of reflecting the creator's image of wise and fruitful order into the whole creation. That is what his ‘coming’ and his ‘judgment’ will mean. God will do for the whole cosmos, in the end, what he did for Jesus at Easter; the risen Jesus, remember, is the prototype of the new creation.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Eternal God, in Christ Jesus we see the kingdom into which You invite us. We praise Him as He shows us Your love and Your abiding grace...”

## October 9, 2016 Text: Hebrews 3:1-6; Matthew 7:24-29 “Builder of the House”

When Moses is depicted as “faithful in God's house” (Hebrews 3:2), the writer is using “house” to refer to “the household of Israel.” Then, when the writer moves to speak of the “house” built by God (Hebrews 3:4), the author is talking about all of creation. The image of a house in Hebrews 3 evokes a memory of the description Jesus gave of two houses (Matthew 7:24-29).

The believers to whom this writing is addressed are called “partners” in God's call (Hebrews 3:1). (The King James Version says they are “partakers” of the calling. James Moffatt translates “comrades” in the calling.) No matter which term is used, it clearly signals that we are in this together. Our culture frequently rewards individualism, but these lines from Hebrews speak of a community, a relationship.

Let me speak from a personal place. When I retired, Toni and I named our retirement home “Connexion.” That title represented three dimensions: the connection she and I had, the connection we had with the environment, and the connection we had in the United Methodist family. (“Connexion” is the way John Wesley spelled the word; that was good enough for us!) The writer of Hebrews reminds his readers that at our best no one stands alone, but lives together—connected-- in what Harold Attridge has called “a moral and religious imperative.”

In talking about how two different houses were built (Matthew 7:24-

29), our Lord makes the point that the house that survives the storms of life is the house built upon obedience to His word (Matthew 7:24). (That image shows up also in Ezekiel 13:10-12.) Because the teaching is so familiar, it is easy to miss some of the subtle dimensions in what Jesus says. Our Lord makes a point that it is not enough merely to *hear* His teachings; what is required is to *do* what He teaches. And Jesus directs His instruction not just to His disciples, but to *everybody who hears these words of mine*. Note the verse that follows the description of the two houses: “*the crowds*” were amazed. His standard is for everyone.

Hebrews 3:6b has a new expression to describe the Church. The Church is the house of Jesus Christ! That suggests it is where our Lord dwells (although He can go out the door into the world). That suggests that we are the family of Christ (by adoption).

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Hans Küng (*The Church*, Image) wrote: “The one Church in its essential nature and in its external forms alike, is always at once visible and invisible. The Church which we believe is *one* Church: visible and invisible, or perhaps rather hidden, at once.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Teach us, Lord...

## October 16, 2016 Text: Hebrew 4:14-5:10 “The Great High Priest”

Today I was reading an article about why children often respect, follow, and appreciate camp counselors more than they do their own parents. The writer of the article said it is because the counselor at camp (at age 19 or 20) seems to be much more from the world of the camper (age 8 or 9). The parent is from another world: “You just don't understand how things are now.” The typical camp counselor, on the other hand, seems cut from the same generational cloth as the camper.

Now, read Hebrews 4:15. Jesus is identified as one who can sympathize with us in our weakness, because as The Emphasized New Testament translates, he has “fellow-feeling with our weaknesses.” Jesus has, in today's vernacular, been there and done that. He has been “tempted in every way as we are.” No wonder He understands the mess we are in! No wonder He understands the pressures sin pushes against us! As a young camper might see in the counselor someone who lives in the same world as she or he does, so we see in Jesus Christ someone who

has lived in the same world as we. (Take a look at John 1:14.)

Tempted as we are, yet without sinning...in the New Testament language, the word “tempted” comes from a root that means “pierced.” Have you ever scratched (pierced) the surface of a piece of wood or metal to see what was beneath the surface? That is the implication of this word “tempted.” Temptation comes when we have been “pierced” or scratched to see what we are made of beneath the surface. Most of us avoid the highly visible sins; it's the ones that are just below the surface that catch us! Jesus, on the other hand, was as good below the surface as He was on the surface. He was tempted (pierced), but below the outward appearance was an inward appearance that was still sin-free.

So, Jesus is the high priest (Hebrews 4:14, 5:10) who goes to bat for us before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). And He can offer in our be-

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half the same “prayers and requests...loud cries and tears” (Hebrews 5:7) as He did when on earth. Twelve-step programs are often helpful because participants recognize others who have had the same burdens of addiction and temptation. We can recognize in our Lord someone who has faced the same temptations to sin as we do. He conquered the temptation and did not sin (Hebrews 4:15) and knows what we are going through as we struggle to do the same.

October 23, 2016 Text: Hebrews 7:1-3, 19b-28 “The High Priest Forever”

*God’s covenant through Jesus Christ does not expire because Jesus Christ lives forever.* That seems to be the heart of this text in Hebrews about Jesus, our high priest.

The description of Jesus in Hebrews 7:26 is a celebration of what God has done in God’s Son. Let’s take a quick look at each of those portrayals.

*Holy:* There are several words that get translated “holy.” This particular one carries the implication of someone who is pledged to obey God.

*Innocent:* This word identifies someone who cannot appropriately be blamed. It carries with it the power of someone of the highest integrity.

*Incorrupt:* Other translations use the word “undefiled” or “spotless” or unstained.” In this context it means “moral purity.”

*Separate from sinners:* J. B. Phillips has captured the heart of this phrase: “beyond the very reach of sin.”

*Raised high above the heavens:* Note the use of the plural (“heavens”, not “heaven”).

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Sugar-Free Religion* (Trafford Publishing), Denny C. Wise wrote: “The real sin that worried Jesus was not the violation of some statute, but a sickness of soul until spiritual death.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Oh, Lord Jesus, my priest...”

This suggests that Christ is beyond anything we can see.

The writer of Hebrews is contrasting Jesus Christ (our great high priest, Hebrews 7:26) with human high priests. (Look at Hebrews 7:27 where that contrast is spelled out.) Human priests come and go—they all eventually die (Hebrews 7:23)—but Jesus Christ is forever alive.

There is an interesting twist to the word translated “forever” in Hebrews 7:28. The word means alive all the way in the future, but also alive all the way in the past. The same point is celebrated in Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric has written (*Wesley, Aquinas, & Christian Perfection*, Baylor): “In sum, the double significance of the perfection of Christ’s life for us can be stated in this way. Christ’s manner of life was perfect in order to show us what perfection is and to lead us to this perfection. Christ is both the efficient cause and the exemplary cause of our perfection.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, You have invited us into Your holy presence...”

October 30, 2016 Text: Hebrews 12:1-13 “Pioneer and Perfector of Our Faith”

In the Common English Bible, some form of the word “discipline” shows up seven times in Hebrews 12:1-13. Others translate the word as “chastisement” (King James Version) or “punishment” (New Testament in Basic English) or “correction” (Berkeley Version of the New Testament) or “educates” (The Message). It is no wonder that students of the Bible do not agree on the best way to express what the writer of Hebrews is saying. The Greek-English dictionary gives all these definitions: train, educate, instruct, teach, discipline, punish, learn, and chasten. As retired Duke Divinity School professor Mickey Efrid used to say: “You pays your money and you makes your choice.”

Whichever choice you make in translation, the writer is trying to establish God’s parental relationship with us. God is trying to move us toward righteousness (Hebrews 12:11b). In the Wesleyan tradition, we speak of this journey as “going on to perfection.” Each deacon or elder who seeks to come into full connection with an annual conference of The United Methodist Church is asked: “Are you going on to perfection? Do you (look forward to) expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you earnestly striving after perfection in love?”

There might well be an accusation of excessive ego against anyone who answers “Yes.” How does one dare answer “Yes” to these questions about perfection? Read Hebrews 12:2. That ought to take away any braggadocio about one’s steps toward perfection. The one who does the perfecting is not ourselves, but is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the

pioneer (v. 2) who shows the way and the perfecter (v. 2) who invites us to receive that gift---full love of God and full love of neighbor. (Go back and read the “What Someone Else Has Said” segment of last week’s study.)

Have you ever seen a basketball or football player repeatedly lift arms to encourage the crowd to get involved in a game? An athlete seems to run faster, try harder, dig deeper when the spectators yell and cheer her or him on. The writer of Hebrews says we have folks in the stands cheering us on as we seek to live lives of righteousness, moving toward perfection. That “cloud of witnesses” (v. 1) no doubt includes some names we know, some voices that are long gone, some saints and sages of other generations, some friends who support our daily walk. It is no small thing to realize that we are not in this alone. God as our Parent and a surrounding cloud of witnesses make the journey with us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Ruben Job (*Three Simple Questions*, Abingdon) says “We can remember who God is, who we are as individuals, and who we are together as part of God’s entire human family.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God, You walk this walk with me...”

Some Food For Thought

“When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible but in the end, they always fall — think of it, always!” *Mahatma Gandhi*

“I slept and I dreamed that life is all joy, I woke and I saw that life is all service. I served and I saw that service is joy”. *Mother Teresa*

“I want to know one thing, the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. Give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God!” *John Wesley*