

# bible<sup>+</sup>study: september 2020

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

## September 6, 2020 Text: Acts 9:1-20 “The Conversion of Paul”

Sometimes, when Christian believers read these verses (Acts 9:1-20), they feel guilty if they cannot name “the time and place when I was converted.” Paul’s experience is hardly the standard measuring stick for how God’s grace reaches people. How dare we think God has only one tool at God’s disposal!

Timothy grew and was nurtured into the faith (2 Timothy 1:5). Lydia came to believe in at a women’s prayer meeting (Acts 16:13-14). Onesimus came into trust in God through a relationship that developed in prison (Philemon 10). The Ethiopian eunuch came to know Jesus through Bible study (Acts 8:35). No wonder the author of 2 Peter begins that letter with an acknowledgment that others have faith equal to (Common English Bible), as precious as (New Revised Standard Version), his own (2 Peter 1:1). The depth of faith is not measured by the drama by which that gift is given.

Paul’s faith journey is not lived in isolation. Ananias helps Paul by explaining what has happened (Acts 9:17). Paul stays for several days with the disciples in Damascus (Acts 9:19). Paul has Barnabas go to bat for him (Acts 9:27). Paul continues to share the journey with other disciples (Acts 9:28). It wasn’t long until Paul was teaming up with Barnabas to go on missionary work (Acts 13:2-3). Together.

With our cultural value of individualism and “pull yourself up by your

own boot straps,” we may be tempted to try to live out the faith expedition on our own. To do so falls short of God’s gift of community. The Common English Bible translation gives a warmth to the reality of community when it refers to those believers as “family” (Acts 9:30). “The family of believers” helped Paul—well, he was still being called Saul—when his life was under threat.

Our lives may not be under the same kind of death peril that faced the apostle, but each of us travels with some risk or hazard. It may be a temptation. It may be a broken relationship. It may be a failure of confidence. It may be blindness to human need. It may be a love of money. It may be...you know what your “threat” might be. We need one another if we are to live faithfully with the Jesus who claims us. Conversion leads to community.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Kenneth Collins (*Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Kingswood) quote E. Stanley Jones: “...the acid test of the validity of a Christian church is whether it can not only convert people from the outside to membership but also produce conversion within its own membership.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Who are You, Lord?...”

## September 13, 2020 Text: Romans 1:15-17, 5:6-11 “The Gospel

The New Testament words (*ēuaggēlizō* and *ēuaggēliōn*) that are translated as “gospel” are formed from two other words: one meaning “good” or “well done,” and the other meaning “angel” or “messenger.” (That word, in turn, has come from the word for “message” or “announcement.”) Good news! Good message!

How do we measure which news is good? The winner of the lottery may rejoice at this fortune, but studies show that many, if not most, of these winners end up in financial despair. If my favorite football team upsets a rival, I think that the season is saved, but what if Nobody Tech beats us the following week? Marriage begins with excitement and happy anticipation, but statistics reveal that half of first time marriages end in divorce, and the rate is even higher for second or third marriages.

We can define “good news” by telling of something that is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. (Want a clue? Sneak a look at Hebrews 13:8.) Really good news is news that lasts. The good news of the gospel of salvation is that it does not wear out. The good news of the gospel is that it is constant even when I am not. The good news is that if I fall from grace, grace still invites me back.

For Paul (and for us), the message of salvation is that we have “a re-

stored relationship with God” (Romans 5:11, Common English Bible). The King James Version says “We have now received the atonement.” The New Revised Standard Version calls it “reconciliation.” Eugene Peterson in *The Message* refers to it as “this amazing friendship with God.” Today’s English Version says “made us God’s friends.”

What seems to astonish Paul is that the gift God has given us has come while we were still broken (Romans 5:8). I can understand being rewarded for something I have worked hard to achieve. If I stick to my diet, hooray for losing weight. If I get to the gym regularly, hooray for better endurance. If I study hard, hooray for the top grade my professor gives. But what about this? God’s saving power in Christ Jesus does not wait for us to deserve it. It seeks us out “while we were still enemies” (Romans 5:10). And it lasts. No wonder it is called “good news.”

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Going on to Salvation* (Discipleship Resources), Maxie Dunnam writes: “The salvation we need and the salvation Christ affords is the salvation from sin....It is a present salvation...’You have been saved.’”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, help my life say ‘thank you’ for the bountiful gift of Christ’s saving power...”

## September 20, 2020 Text: Romans 8:1-11 “Life in the Spirit”

Comparing translations can be a healthy way to explore Scripture, but in the case of today’s study text, I should have left well-enough alone. First, I read the New Revised Standard Version and felt okay. The text challenges us not to live according to the flesh (Romans 8: 3-9). I can handle that. I eat well. I get regular exercise. (After all, I keep a pedometer in my pocket.) I have no carnal excesses. I am not obsessed with how I look. And I don’t judge others by how they look. On a score of living according to the flesh, I am doing pretty well.

Then, I read the Common English Bible. Oops. It did not leave me as much place to hide. This translation speaks of selfishness and being self-centered. Uh, at least it did not call me by name. I do judge other’s opinions by my own. I choose what I want to do according to how comfortable I am doing it. I even see myself as a model of how a moral life should be lived. (Oh, this is getting worse!) I have a birthday coming up next week and I wonder about the cards and gifts that might come my way. And I am even ready to brag about the one point I scored as a member of the Duke track team “back in the day.” When measured by

“self-centered,” I do not fare so well.

The beeper just went off on my clothes dryer. I’d better go tend to that...so I won’t have to keep on this negative track that describes me so well.

But there is hope. The one who brought Christ Jesus from the dead can also give life where my flesh, my self-centeredness, has denied it (Romans 8:11). Now I am set free to think/do according to the values of the Spirit of God (Romans 8:5). These are the values seen in the incarnate Word of God (John 1:14). These are the values that walked among us in Christ Jesus and which now walk among us wherever the Spirit lives in us (Romans 8:11). These are the values of faith and hope and love, and the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

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What Someone Else Has Said:

In his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Alec R. Allenson, Inc.), John Wesley made several comments on these verses: “There is therefore no condemnation, either for things present or past....(Those who are alive in the Spirit) are guided in all our thoughts, words, and actions....(Those who are not in the Spirit) are fixed...on pleasure—of sense or imagination—praise, or riches....(Those who mind the things of the Spirit) think of, relish, love things invisible, eternal; the things

that the Spirit hath revealed, which He works in us, moves us to, and promises to give us....Where the Spirit of Christ is, there is Christ....al-ready truly alive.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit, move with fresh breath upon the damaged places of my life...”

September 27, 2020 Text: Romans 10:5-13 “Faith, Salvation, and Righteousness”

We Christians talk a lot about being saved. Interestingly, the New Testament has at least four Greek words that get translated as “saved.” The definitions all kind of touch each other and blend into a fuller understanding. One might give these shortened meanings of the four words: preserve, made whole, health, and made safe. Salvation touches on all of those.

Five times in this week’s study text Paul quotes the Old Testament: Leviticus 18:5; Deuteronomy 9:4, 30:12; Deuteronomy 30:13; Isaiah 28:16; Joel 2:32. That’s a pretty wide range of sources! Even so, the apostle is clear that these roots come to full blossom only in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9).

Paul gives two indications of salvation: public confession and trust in God (Romans 10:9). It is not either/or; it is both/and. Public confession is more than just saying the right words; it is living in a way that shows the truth of the words. And, going through the motions is not enough. One needs actually to trust God. As we noted above, both of these practices are defined by one’s relationship with Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9).

The apostle observes that this results in righteousness (Romans 10:10) In traditional Wesleyan vocabulary, this means that justification leads

to sanctification. It’s a package deal: salvation and holy living.

In another place, Paul has described the fruit of life lived in the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Do we dare say that this means that these are also the fruits of salvation?

Four times in the closing verses of the assigned text, Paul expands the invitation to “all” (Romans 10:11-13). He was trying to emphasize the expanse of God’s love to include both Jews and Gentiles. If Paul were writing his letter today here in North Carolina, whom would “all” include? (In fact, whom does “all” exclude?)

Do you see yourself in this text?

What Someone Else Has Said:

N. T. Wright (*Paul: A Biography*, Harper One) says “Romans was not written to explain how people may be saved. It describes that, to be sure, vividly and compellingly, but it does so in order to highlight the faithfulness of God, and, with that, the challenges facing the covenant people.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Hear my ‘yes,’ Lord...”

Something to Think About

When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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