

# bible<sup>+</sup>study: february 2023

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

## February 5, 2023 Text: 1 John 4:7-21; Ruth 4 "The Tie That Binds"

The answer is 27. The question is: How many times in this text from 1 John does some form of the word "love" appear? Many students of the Bible are familiar with the Greek word *agapē*. All twenty-seven uses of "love words" are some form of *agapē*. This is the self-giving love seen in God. This is the caring initiative seen in God. This is the undeserved acceptance seen in God. This is the sacrificial willingness seen in God. And we are called upon to love in the same way. As Robert W. Wall has said (*The CEB Study Bible*): "God is the source and example of true love."

The Old Testament Book of Ruth shows love that jumps across ethnic lines. The Hebrew Boaz cares for the Moabite Ruth. He knows how "to work the system," (Ruth 4:6-8) and gets to claim her (Ruth 4:10). Then, the people who heard Boaz's acceptance of Ruth celebrated and offered their blessing (Ruth 4:13). Out of their marriage came a son (Obed), who became the grandfather of David (Ruth 4:17, 22). Out of the line of David comes the Savior (Matthew 1:5-16). A little love goes a long way!

It is one thing to translate *agapē* into English; it is quite another thing to translate *agapē* into Twenty-first Century! I keep looking through these verses from 1 John, trying to find the clause that let's me make an exception on whom I love. The closest "escape clause" I can find is in verse 20. In that verse, I determine that if I am willing to be called "a liar" before God, then I can pick and choose whom I shall love. That's

not much of an option.

Loving someone does not mean that I agree with them. Loving someone does not mean that I admire them. Loving someone does not mean that I want to be like them. Think back over all the people Jesus met. Did He agree with them all? Did He admire all of them? Did He want to be like all of them? Of course not! Did He love all of them? Yes! Yes! Yes!

When Jesus was asked to give an example of how to love a neighbor (Luke 10:25-37), He told a story about a Samaritan who helped a man who had been beaten up by robbers. (I think it is interesting that we call that story "the Good Samaritan," as if we assume other Samaritans are bad.) But, in the story, love does not come from the people we expect to be caring (priest, v. 31, Levite, v. 32). Love comes from an outsider. I am left to wonder: "Who is trying to love me?"

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In S T Kimbrough, Jr.'s book (*The Struggle to Believe*, Resource Publications), the poet has written: "But we must also be sign and show this love is yours and mine. We too must love the rich and poor; that's how they'll know God's love is sure."

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "God of love, help me to love..."

## February 12, 2023 Text: 1 Kings 3:16-28 "A Parent's Love"

Get out a Kleenex before you start reading this week's text. What a beautiful story! What an amazing account of a parent's love! Jesus called God "Abba" (sometimes translated "Daddy") (Mark 14:36) because He saw there a love that suffers in order to do what is good for a child. It was just the kind of love that our Lord Himself showed when He accepted the cross because it was good for us (Hebrews 12:2).

Did you catch the passing reference at the beginning of the story? The two women were prostitutes (v. 16). We might not be surprised that one of the women was willing to slice the baby into two pieces. After all, aren't prostitutes people of low morals and sinful behavior? But, how do we deal with the fact that the brave heroine of the story is also a prostitute? Do you suppose God can use persons who are less than perfect? Do you suppose we are defined more by our bottom line values than by our mistakes? Do you suppose that God has grace hidden in the most unlikely places?

Just before this incident, King Solomon had a dream (v. 15) in which God commended him for wanting wisdom more than he wanted wealth (v. 11). The fact that this account comes immediately after that dream suggests that God gave Solomon the wisdom he desired. What have I asked God to give me? Position? Power? Privilege? Prestige? What if I asked God to give me a place to serve, a people to love, and new beginnings possible?

This is strange: a mother willing to give away a son she loves. She does it in order to save his life. She is willing to bear great hurt; she is willing to have great loneliness; she is willing to let go of her own future...and all of it because she loved the son. What is best for him? It is not ideal that he be given to the scheming other woman, but at least he would be given a chance to live.

One more thing. This woman who likes the cruel suggestion that the baby be cut in half with each woman getting half is a mother whose son has just died and he had died because she rolled over on him during the night. Can you imagine the anguish in her heart? Can you understand the self-torment that motivated her? Her dreadful request that the baby be divided comes out of her emptiness and pain. There is room here for sympathy for her crazed hope for half a child. When I see anger in another person do I know what else is going on in their life? Hang onto that tissue.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Second Mountain* (Random House, David Brooks quotes C. S. Lewis: "To love at all is to be vulnerable."

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "God, You have loved me..."

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## February 19, 2023 Text: 1 Samuel 18:1-4; 19:1-7, 20 "True Friendship"

Friendship is more than just liking someone else. True friendship involves my willingness to go to bat for the other even at damage to me. The story of David and Jonathan in this week's focal text is an example of the kind of true friendship.

Students of the Bible disagree on some of the dimensions of the love that Jonathan and David had for each other. Did it have a sexual component? In 1 Samuel 20:41, the two men kiss. In 2 Samuel I:26, David speaks of his love for Jonathan being greater than the love of women. For some, this honors David and Jonathan as a homosexual relationship. For others, they note that the Hebrew word used for "love" in these verses is not the Hebrew word used for sexual love. Maybe we can agree on one point: the sexual nature of the relationship is irrelevant to the quality of friendship.

Jonathan has two competing loyalties: his father, King Saul, and his friend David. Jonathan tries to connect the two; he takes his royal identity and gives it to David (1 Samuel 18:4). David is masterful as a soldier (1 Samuel 18:5), so the king promotes him. That works until the populace begins to celebrate David more than they do Saul (1 Samuel 18:7). This flips the switch for Saul who now tries to get rid of David (1 Samuel 18:10). This "yes" and "no" pattern continues with Jonathan trying to stay in good relationship with his father and with David. (This push-and-shove continues well after this week's study passages.)

The Hebrew word most often used for "friend" is *rea*<. That word comes from a root word that describes the kind of care that a shepherd gives to the flock. Is it any wonder that early disciples were moved to call Jesus "Good Shepherd"? (John 10:11) Jonathan and David had this kind of friendship, constantly caring for the other. Jesus says that friendship with God means keeping God's commands (John 15:10). What kind of friend am I?

Indeed, what kind of friend am I?

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Dinah Maria Mulock Craik is quoted in Jan Karon's novel *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good* (G. P. Putnam's Sons): "Oh, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person: having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them out, just as they are—chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness, blow the rest away."

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Holy Shepherd, You care for me; move me to graze in pastures green..."

## February 26, 2023 Text: Matthew 16:21-28 "To Gain the World But Lose Our Life"

When I was in the eighth grade, as we listened to our teacher explain a Mark Twain story, my friend Paul raised his hand and said, "Mrs. Gyles, I think you are wrong." A gasp of shock rushed across the room. We were in a culture that did not challenge authority, but underneath it all, I admired Paul for speaking up.

Truth to tell, I also admire Peter for speaking up in Matthew 16:22. It is interesting how various translations have described what Peter did. Common English Bible says "scolding him." New Revised Standard Version reports "rebuke him." The Knox translation renders it: "remonstrating with him." Charles P. Williams offers "began to chide him." The *NT in Language of Today* "started to correct him." Nollie's version says "protestingly said to him." Moffatt's translation offers "began to reprove him." Truth to tell, I do not reprove/scold/rebuke/chide Jesus with my words, but I have to confess that I do reprove/scold/rebuke/chide Jesus with my actions.

Peter had just proclaimed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah (Matthew 16:16). The problem was that Peter did not understand all that it meant; he did not grasp the part about the suffering and death of the Christ. I can understand Peter's failure. When I accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I often set aside the implications of that. (Surely He doesn't mean I am to love my enemies! Surely He doesn't mean I am to forgive as I want to be forgiven! Surely He doesn't mean that

I am to fight structures that keep people poor!)

I'm glad that Peter was open and honest in sharing his insight (mistaken as it was) with Jesus. I'm also glad that Jesus was ready to confront Peter with the limits of the disciple's understanding. Jesus recognized the temptation to judge success by worldly standards, such as "how many" and "how much." Following Jesus is defined more by a cross (v. 24) than it is by worldly triumph.

Let's not overlook a key point that shows up in the verses following this week's focal text. Look at Matthew 17:1. Notice who is with Jesus when the Master goes apart for the Transfiguration. Jesus took Peter with Him, the same disciple who He had said might be a stumbling block (Matthew 16:23) to the Messiah's purpose. Have I messed up? Maybe the Lord will still take me with Him.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (Alleson), John Wesley wrote: "*If any man would be willing to come after me---None is forced, but if any would be a Christian it will be on these terms.*"

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Correct me, O Lord..."



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