

Adult Bible Studies



Encounter

Fall 2020

Editor's Perspective

Establishing a clear sense of identity is a critical life skill. Discovering more about ourselves is easier today than ever thanks to at-home DNA ancestry tests. Readily available and relatively inexpensive to purchase, these tests enable people to find out much of what they want to know: who their ancestors were; where they came from; whether they have any previously unknown relatives; and what health risks they could face, among other things.

Sometimes the information is unwelcomed, however. One company's privacy statement cautions: "You may discover things about yourself and/or your family members that may be upsetting or cause anxiety and that you may not have the ability to control or change."¹

While learning more about our ancestry is fascinating and can tell us a lot about our physical beings, more important is learning who we are in Christ. Our spiritual roots are deep and long, carrying in them the stories of ancestors such as Abraham; Moses; Joshua; and, of course, Jesus. The mighty acts God performed in their lives are part of our spiritual DNA and help form our identity just as they did for those who witnessed them firsthand.

Each time we participate in Holy Communion, recall these acts, and receive the bread and the cup, we better understand who we are and who God calls us to be. As some people discover when they trace their ancestry, parts of our faith story are unpleasant, characterized by disobedience, disloyalty, and selfishness. But the One in whom we find our very identity is always faithful, loving, and forgiving. Our holy and transcendent God not only allows us to come near; God also reaches out to us,

even "when we [have] turned away and our love failed."²

Our lessons this quarter, written by Chuck Aaron and David Mosser, call us to see Jesus for who he is, recall and reaffirm our identity as God's people and Jesus' disciples, and worship the God who comes to us, grateful that "the LORD has helped us to this very point" (1 Samuel 7:12).



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¹From cnbc.com/2019/02/12/privacy-concerns-rise-as-26-million-share-dna-with-ancestry-firms.html.

²*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 9.

Daily Bible Study (Unit 1)

August 31

Psalm 7:1-10

September 1

Acts 7:59-8:3

September 2

Acts 9:1-6; 22:4-5; 26:9-11

September 3

Acts 9:7-9; 26:12-18

September 4

Acts 9:10-20; 22:12-16

September 5

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

September 6

Romans 1:1-6

September 7

Mark 1:14-15

September 8

Matthew 11:2-5

September 9

Hebrews 2:1-5

September 10

1 Peter 1:7-12

September 11

Philippians 1:27-29

September 12

Romans 1:15-17

September 13

Romans 5:6-11

September 14

Proverbs 24:9-12

September 15

2 Timothy 3:1-9

September 16

Luke 11:14-20

September 17

Acts 13:34-39

September 18

John 5:21-30

September 19

Romans 8:1-5

September 20

Romans 8:6-11

September 21

Isaiah 45:21-24

September 22

Psalm 40:1-10

September 23

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

September 24

Galatians 2:15-21

September 25

Revelation 14:9-13

September 26

Romans 10:5-13

September 27

Romans 10:14-17

Unit 1

So That You Can See

This unit begins with an account of Paul's transformation from an angry persecutor of the church to a committed, humble, but passionate missionary in service to the church. Paul's transformation involved, in part, the healing of his anger and control issues. This transformation reveals the power of God's grace.

The rest of the unit reveals important emphases on Paul's understanding of the Christian's response to God's grace. The other lessons in the unit come from Paul's most important letter. Romans has had an incalculable influence on the church, from the Protestant reformation, to John Wesley, to twentieth-century theological developments. Paul unswervingly believed that the message of the gospel included Jews and Gentiles.

One of the key ideas of Paul's understanding of the response of the Christian to God's grace involves the Christian's faith as a foundation of everything else he or she does and how the believer incorporates the teachings of the Bible into an ethical life. The lessons then move to the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling the Christian to grow into the kind of person who can live out the Law.

September 6

Lesson 1

Seeing Jesus

Focal Passage: Acts 9:1-20

Background Text: Acts 9:1-20; 22:3-18; 26:9-18

Purpose Statement: To let go of anger that blocks our spiritual growth and wrecks our relationships in the church

Acts 9:1-20

¹Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, ²seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?"

⁵Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

"I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply. ⁶"Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do."

⁷Those traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸After they picked Saul up from the ground, he opened

his eyes but he couldn't see. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

He answered, "Yes, Lord."

¹¹The Lord instructed him, "Go to Judas' house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³Ananias countered, "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴He's here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name."

¹⁵The Lord replied, "Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

¹⁷Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord sent me--Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again

and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Instantly, flakes fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. ¹⁹After eating, he regained his strength.

He stayed with the disciples in Damascus for several days. ²⁰Right away, he began to preach about Jesus in the synagogues. "He is God's Son," he declared.

Key Verse: "Ananias . . . placed his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord sent me--Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit' " (Acts 9:17).

In my first full-time parish assignment out of seminary, I made a pastoral visit to one of our homebound members, a retired, high-ranking army officer. He no longer enjoyed good physical health, but his mind had remained sharp.

During our lively conversation, while asking me about my ministry, he posed an unexpected question: "Have you made anyone angry yet?" I proudly announced that I had not done anything to make anyone angry. He replied quickly, "Well, you're not doing your job then, are you?" I have encountered that sentiment several times in the intervening years, but he introduced me to the idea that serving as a pastor meant that something I said or did would eventually cause anger.

Our religious faith touches the deepest feelings and convictions we have. Our faith matters to every aspect of our lives. The only way a pastor, a Sunday school teacher, or any religious leader (lay or clergy) can avoid causing anger is never to

say anything that matters. The big questions concern why we feel the anger and what we do with the anger.

Do we feel the anger for a legitimate reason, such as a great injustice, or do we feel the anger because something has touched a weakness in us that we don't want to face? Do we use our anger to work to correct injustice, or do we use our anger to bully another who just happens to disagree with us? Do we channel our anger in constructive ways, or do we use it to lash out and punish someone who doesn't deserve it?

In the spirit of full disclosure, since those early days in North Carolina, I have occasionally stirred anger by something I have said or done in the churches I have served. In complete honesty, I have always received at least one angry email every time I have written for ADULT BIBLE STUDIES.

I hope that I have aroused anger for a legitimate reason, such as pointing out racism or the responsibility to minister to those in poverty. If those feeling anger must face the question of the legitimacy of the anger and the use of the anger, those in a position of some authority must ask if they have aroused anger for a legitimate reason.

Authors, pastors, and leaders face the temptation of self-righteousness. If leaders confront injustice, can they answer the accusation of hypocrisy? Leaders and teachers must speak out, even at the risk of facing anger and backlash. Those who feel anger at others in the church must ask whether the anger arises from legitimate injustice or from pettiness. Why one feels anger and how one handles anger serve as tests of spiritual maturity.

Paul's Experience

Scripture provides much evidence that Saul felt deep anger at the young church. Luke describes Paul's actions as "still spewing out murderous threats

against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1). The NRSV says that Paul was "breathing threats and murder" against the church. Either term--"spewing" or "breathing"--creates in our minds the picture of a hothead. We don't know exactly why Saul felt such anger at the church. We do see a portrayal of one who used coercion to try to stop the growth of the church.

Acts 8:1-3 depicts Saul going house-to-house to "drag off" men and women to imprison them. Luke does not fill in the gaps for us. Saul may have had soldiers or some type of henchmen to do the physical work of dragging people away from their homes. If that was the case, where did Saul acquire his henchmen, and who paid them? Luke doesn't tell us.

We do form a mental image of Saul as an angry, callous, cruel control freak who would stop at nothing to suppress the church. If we can suppose that Saul's henchmen carried frightened women with terror in their eyes off to prison, we do not come away with a sympathetic view of Saul.

Saul obviously underwent a dramatic change when he encountered the risen Christ. If we label this event as his conversion experience, how was he converted? What was he converted from, and what was he converted to?

In the contemporary church, we might think of a conversion experience as happening to an atheist who becomes a person of faith. We can also talk about a conversion that occurs as one who felt apathetic toward faith grows into a believer. Neither of these examples seems to fit Saul's/Paul's case. Saul would have considered himself a devoutly religious man, as the early chapters of Acts portray him, but he did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

Acts 17 reports the experience of Paul on Mars Hill in Athens, speaking to the philosophers who had gathered for debate. Some scholars have suggested that Paul appears as a kind of "Christian Socrates" in this chapter, a man with polished rhetorical skill. The man who became the eloquent speaker on Mars Hill of Chapter

17 did not try to use persuasion to convince the early church of their mistakes. Although he was capable of persuasive speech, he instead used brute force to punish those who believed differently than he did.

We can contrast Saul's attitude toward the early church with that of Gamaliel, a prominent Pharisee who also did not agree with the early church about Jesus' identity. When the other council members wanted to kill Peter and the apostles, Gamaliel took a nonanxious attitude toward the new movement: "Let them go! If their plan or activity is of human origin, it will end in ruin. If it originates with God, you won't be able to stop them" (5:38-39). By contrast, Paul tried to stop them with force and, apparently, with callous disregard for their personal well-being.

How has your ability to manage your anger and other emotions changed as you have grown in your faith?

God's Intervention

An experience that would challenge the special-effects crew of a movie to display happened unexpectedly to Saul. It began with light surrounding him (Acts 9:3).

The Bible often associates light with God's presence and activity. Creation began with light (Genesis 1:3); John used light to affirm God's goodness opposed to evil (John 1:5). We can see also the theme of shining as part of God's sudden presence in the appearance announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds in Luke 2:9.

Saul fell to the ground and heard Jesus' voice. Saul's response contains ambiguity. He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5). The term *Lord* could mean simply "Sir," or it could indicate an immediate recognition that only a divine voice could have sounded like the voice he heard.

How can we understand the significance of what happened to Saul? In other

words, why did the divine revelation to Saul come the way it did? Everything about the experience seems designed to overwhelm Saul. The light surrounded him. The voice addressed him directly, so he could not miss that he was the target. When he opened his eyes, he could not see, and so became helpless. Perhaps the events of Saul's experience happened to make the control freak completely lose control. Certainly, elsewhere in the Book of Acts, people accepted Jesus' message without experiencing such powerful events.

Peter's preaching led to impressive results (2:41). Luke did not think that everyone must experience a supernatural light and divine voice in order to undergo conversion. For some reason, Paul must have needed such an intervention.

How have you experienced God's intervention in your life? In subtle ways? in unexpected ways? How has God gotten your attention?

Ananias's Ministry

If the light, voice, and blindness got Saul's attention and broke down his mean-spirited assault on the church, Ananias served as one of God's instruments to lead Saul to what he became. Understandably, Ananias felt reluctant to go near Saul (Acts 9:13-14). Overcoming his reticence, Ananias ministered to Saul's physical and spiritual needs. God worked through Ananias to restore Saul's eyesight and to become the channel of the Holy Spirit to Saul (verses 17-19).

The narrator in the passage does not interrupt the flow of events to explain how these experiences worked within Saul. Perhaps one can say that the dramatic experience of the light, voice, and blindness broke Saul's shell of anger that he used to control those with whom he disagreed. Ananias's ministry helped Saul grow from his brokenness.

In what ways have you experienced some event in your life that

served as a wake-up call? How did it affect you, and how did you seek to change? How do you think God worked through that event?

Our Experience

Not many of us can plug ourselves into Paul's experience. Our introductions to the church likely cannot compare to Saul's Damascus Road encounter. In thinking of how this experience represents Paul's conversion, we might say that Saul/Paul overcame an anger that caused him to abuse and control people and became someone open to the Holy Spirit to transform him. For the first time in his life, he could see.

By Acts 9:20, Paul had changed his opinion about Jesus' identity. His transformation changed him psychologically (dissipating his rage) and theologically (changing his doctrine about Jesus). Paul also began to understand and accept his mission on behalf of God. He would become God's evangelist to "Gentiles, kings and Israelites" (Acts 9:15).

If we contemplate how Saul's/Paul's experience influences our spiritual growth, we can begin with attention to how his understanding of Jesus changed. And we can consider how our understanding of Jesus has changed over time, too. Chances are that, within your church, people have a variety of understandings of Jesus. Some may think of Jesus in terms of an activist prophet. Others might affirm the traditional labels of Messiah and Son of God. What words come to your mind to describe Jesus? How do you identify him?

What do you do when you encounter people with whom you disagree about Jesus' identity? What does Paul's experience teach you about how best to respond?

God's Healing

Luke does not give us much real insight into Paul's psychological change. Luke wanted the attention to fall on how God worked in Saul's life to call him to end his persecution of the church and call him to ministry. Nevertheless, the psychological change in Saul/Paul has much instruction for the church.

Anger can cause widespread damage on many levels. Unresolved anger can harm a person physically. Anger can eat away at a person's soul. It can devastate a marriage, a Sunday school class, a church.

Anger influences our lives in more than one way. Sometimes anger is justified. Paul sounds angry at his opponents in Galatians 5:12. Jesus threw out the moneychangers in the Temple (Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:1-19; Luke 19:45-48). Sometimes anger suggests immaturity, if we cannot handle life's frustrations. Some people use anger to silence criticism or to get their way. Anger can mask other emotions such as grief, pain, guilt, or shame. Anger can arise from long-ago, unresolved trauma. Anger can take much work and intervention to heal.

Anger that morphs into bitterness can block spiritual growth. Anger that seeks to control others can destroy relationships, including our relationship with God. Often, people who use anger to control others do not want to heal from their own anger. They like the power their anger gives them. Perhaps that's why Paul needed the overwhelming experience he had. He had to experience weakness in order to give up the power his anger gave him.

How have the hurts from the past affected you today? What situations cause you to become angry? How does unresolved anger keep us from seeing Jesus?

We thank you, O God, for the change within Saul. Help us in our frustration over our inability to change things within ourselves that we find difficult to change. Show us the ways we use our anger for power and control. Give us insight into how to heal relationships. Give us the courage to look honestly at ourselves; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The Spiritual Practice of Simplicity

Simplicity as a spiritual practice involves every aspect of our lives. It is not just one thing that we add. We practice simplicity by clearing out all kinds of clutter. If we have too much stuff, we can give it away. If we have too much on our agenda, we can pare it down to spend more time with God, with our families and friends, and on our own growth.

Some people become serious about simplicity. They buy smaller houses, find less stressful jobs, live on smaller incomes. We do not have to do any of those things to practice simplicity. We can begin with small changes that clear our homes, our heads, and our agendas.

Simplicity has become more difficult in our world. Life moves at a dizzying pace. Our jobs, the use of computers, the explosion of technology, all make simplicity not so simple. That is why simplicity is so important. Taking sabbath time, eating well and healthy, asking ourselves what we need, and making time for devotion and for family in the midst of our hectic world all help us live a simpler life.

The spiritual practice of simplicity can become the foundation for all of the other disciplines. When we arrange to have more time, we can begin to find more opportunity for prayer, study, exercise, and other spiritual disciplines. Even by itself, the discipline of spirituality can enable our souls to breathe and our hearts to reconnect with God. We may find that the rewards of the spiritual disciplines become more important to us than what we gave up to practice simplicity.
