

# Living Word Small Group Study Guide

June 14-20, 2020

## Sermon Series: The People Called Methodists

### Week One: "Wesley and Faith"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

#### **Suggested Opening Prayer:**

*Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.*

*Lord God, Creator and Redeemer, claim our lives and ministry for Your high and holy purpose. Help us to remain faithful and steadfast all day long, and when evening comes, grant a peaceful rest in Your presence. In the name of Jesus, Amen.*

#### **Sermon Series Theme:**

What makes United Methodism different? While sharing in the fundamental beliefs of broader Christianity, there are certain beliefs of "the people called Methodists" that make us unique.

#### **This Week's Sermon Theme:**

For United Methodists, faith is best described as "a sure trust and confidence in God."

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** Ephesians 2:4-10 (A group member should read the passage aloud).

#### **For Group Discussion:**

##### ***What does the text actually SAY?***

*The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.*

Why did God make us alive in Christ while we were dead in our transgressions? (2:4-5)

Why have we been saved? (2:5)

In whose presence with God have we been seated? (2:6)

Why has God done this? (2:7)

By whose actions have we received our salvation? (2:8)

What would we do if we were saved by our own actions? (2:9)

Why has God saved us? (2:10)

### **What questions does the text raise for us?**

*The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.*

We might ask why Paul describes our former state of being as “dead in transgressions.”

We probably wonder why Paul writes as if we are already seated in heaven. Is that something that is true now, or that happens after we die?

We might wonder about these “coming ages” when Paul says God will show the riches of His grace – since Paul wrote 2,000 years ago, is this something that is happening now, or is it still in our future?

We might wonder about the relationship between God’s grace and our faith – what exactly does it mean to be saved by GOD’S grace, through OUR faith?

We might find ourselves wondering about Christians we’ve known who DO seem to boast about their faith ... why do they do that when Paul writes that they have no reason to?

We might wonder, if Christians are created to do good works, what about the good works non-Christians do? Has God created them to do good works, too?

Finally, we might ask why Paul says faith is the means of being saved – if God is rich in mercy and has great love for His creation, why doesn’t God just make everyone alive, regardless of whether they have faith or not?

### **Commentary on the text:**

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Acts 19-20; Romans 1:18-3:20; Romans 6:1-11; Colossians 2:12-13; Philippians 2; Galatians 5

This week’s Scripture from Ephesians is the source of what has been the classic definition of salvation for Christians at least since the Reformation – “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith,” in Ephesians 2:8.

Although the authorship of Ephesians is debated by the scholars, we’re going to assume the traditional understanding that Ephesians was written by the apostle Paul late in his life, during his imprisonment in Rome somewhere between 60 and 62 AD. There are reasons related to word choices, and themes, and style that cause some commentators to believe that the letter was instead written to the church in Ephesus by a first-generation follower of Paul rather than by Paul himself, but we’ll take the more traditional view that Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus that he was very, very familiar with, having spent much time there, as we can see in Acts 19 and 20. There are many good reasons to believe that this more traditional perspective on authorship of the letter is accurate.

In Chapter 1 of the letter, leading up to today's reading, Paul has emphasized that he wants his readers to really grasp the concept of God's transformational power – of just how greatly God wants to act to truly change their lives. So here, in chapter 2, he draws a huge contrast between their pre-Christian lives (how they “used to live”) and their present, Christian lives (how they are to live “now”). To create a picture of just how huge this contrast is, he refers to the pre-Christian life as actually being dead – 2:1 says, “you were dead in your transgressions and sins.” Because Paul himself has experienced the transformation of life he is writing about, he understands the contrast intimately. The life we have lived apart from Christ will, Paul recognizes, end with physical death and a final judgment. Sin and transgression characterize this former life, and for Paul, it really is equivalent to living “in death.”

But beginning in verse 4, Paul emphasizes how amazingly God has acted in rescuing us from this “living death”! Verse 1 to 3 are almost devastating in their picture of the human condition, but in verse 4 the picture turns to one of praise and exaltation of God – we have been made alive in Christ even though we were dead in our sins! Why would God do that? Paul exclaims joyfully, simply because of God's great love for us and God's mercy! God has taken the initiative to do this, not because humanity had some great potential to do better, but simply because of God's love. The word Paul then uses for this action is “grace.” Grace is unmerited favor – God has literally rescued us from death even though we don't merit it. We have been saved – made alive again – by grace!

Not only that, Paul says, but “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus”! In other words, what God has done for Jesus, God has also done for all Christian believers! But it is not just a parallel action to what God did for Jesus, it's not just that God did something for Jesus, and now God is doing it to us – no, it is something that, somehow, God has done for us THROUGH Jesus' resurrection. In Paul's thinking here, when Jesus was resurrected and when Jesus ascended into heaven, somehow, He served as a proxy, a representative, for ALL of humanity. Paul is relying on an almost literal understanding of what it means to be united with Christ – if we really have been united with Christ, if we really are ONE with Christ, then that reality transcends time and space. For Paul, then, when Jesus was raised to life and seated at the right hand of God, so were all of those who are united with Him.

The point is this – whereas once believers were citizens of THIS world, of this dominion, that is dominated by transgression and sin, when they are united with Christ (and maybe Paul is thinking of baptism here), when they are RAISED with Christ, then their citizenship REALLY HAS been transferred to an entirely NEW dominion – one dominated by love and freedom from the power of sin that used to enslave them. What's more, this whole “rescue operation” is meant to highlight God's grace. The change of life that is so extreme that Paul can refer to it as regeneration, or rebirth, or moving from death to life, demonstrates just how grace-filled God truly is better than anything else imaginable! God did this, Paul writes “in order that in the coming ages, He might show the incomparable riches of His grace.” Because what God accomplished in Jesus will stand for all time, really because it stands OUTSIDE of time, eternally, God's grace will be demonstrated in all the coming ages until the end of human time!

And now, in verse 8, comes the definitive statement – “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith.” Paul has already said, once, “it is by grace you have been saved,” in verse 5. But now he adds to that statement the MEANS of that salvation – it has been accomplished THROUGH FAITH. Paul has already made the point that this rescue from death, this salvation, is done completely by God's initiative. There is no component of human merit involved. But the WAY this salvation is appropriated by

human beings is “through faith.” What that means is, salvation is made effective in your life when you simply trust and believe that in Jesus, God has acted to do this for you. A theologian named Andrew Lincoln wrote “Faith involves the abandonment of any attempt to justify oneself and an openness to God which is willing to accept what He has done in Christ.” Faith may well be a human activity, but it is never to be understood as a “work” that humans do to earn salvation. Faith is a response to GOD’S activity, an attitude of the heart which accepts what has already been accomplished by Christ on our behalf. This is an important distinction from how faith has sometimes been viewed – if “faith” is the actual exercise of our religious beliefs – what we DO with our Christianity – then being saved by grace through faith CAN be wrongly interpreted to suggest that our actions play a role in our salvation. Paul insists, strongly here, that they do not – “this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” As with any gift, all we have to “do” to receive the benefits of it, is accept it. Christian faith is the acceptance of the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ, simply by trusting that it has already happened. We have been rescued out of death, and into life!

Paul goes on to say, more explicitly, that this salvation is not by works, so that no one can boast. There is not a single Christian who has been saved because of something they did that made them worthy of it. And yet – the REASON for this transformation from death to life, this transference of citizenship from THIS world to a HEAVENLY realm, is so that we might do good works in THIS world! Living in this new realm where love and mercy and compassion rule means that doing good things will simply be second nature to us! We have been moved from a world that is self-centered to a world that is other-centered. The statement that God has prepared these good works in advance for us is not so much an assertion of a doctrine of predestination or absolute determinism, as evidence of the fact that God does save us TO A PURPOSE – God has work for us to do, so we should get to it! Paul writes that believers are, essentially, a “project” of God’s (God’s “workmanship”) whereby God’s grace is made visible to the world through the actions of those who have been saved BY that grace, through their faith.

In these verses, Paul has encapsulated and summarized some of his deepest thoughts about what God has done in Christ. If you’d like to dig deeper into Paul’s thoughts on these topics, consider reading Romans 1:18-3:20, where Paul goes into great detail about the “deathlike” state of pre-Christian humanity. Romans 6:1-11 and Colossians 2:12-13 also delve into the idea of being transferred from a dominion dominated by evil to a dominion ruled by love. Philippians 2 and Galatians 5 both reference the demand for ethical activity (“good works”) as a response to salvation. Ultimately, the passage wants us to understand that it is God’s initiative to save us. God WANTS to save us. Faith that God has done all that needs to be done to do so, in Jesus, is all we need to make that salvation ours.

### **Final Thoughts for Discussion:**

*The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.*

How would you define faith?

Does your life look like one that has moved from one dominion, dominated by sin and transgression, to another dominion, dominated by love, mercy, and compassion?

Do you think of Christian salvation as only being about what happens when you die, or about living in a “new world” now?

Do you ever feel like you need to be “rescued” from your way of life?

Do you ever still feel like you have to DO something before God will rescue you?

What can you identify as things that inhibit you from living the way Paul describes the Christian life? Are you trying to do something to “be better” in the eyes of God? What would look different if instead, you submitted to letting GOD “do something” for YOU?

**Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Holy and loving God, we give You thanks for Your grace. It is sometimes hard for us to really believe that You want to save us even while we are dead in our transgressions. Help us to have the faith to accept that in Your great love and mercy, You are reaching out even now to save us. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our hope and salvation. Amen.*