

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 4 OF 104

Guard Your Heart

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Genesis 25–30
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 4
Gospels	Matthew 5:13–5:48
General New Testament	Acts 4:23–5:16

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to move the class from behavior to the heart that produces it. Every reading works the same direction. Genesis shows a family managing appearances while the inside is a war. Proverbs 4 says the heart is the thing to guard because everything else flows out of it. Jesus traces the outward commands back to their interior source. And Acts 5 shows a couple whose public act and private truth did not match. Nobody in your class has a behavior problem that is not first a heart problem.

Doctrinally, the load-bearing passage is Matthew 5:17–20. Settle it clearly: Jesus fulfilled the Law, the Old Covenant was taken out of the way at the cross, Christians live under the law of Christ, and we still read the Old Testament as inspired and profitable. Two other places want care. Romans 9 and Genesis 25:23 concern the line through which the promise ran, not unconditional individual election. And Acts 4:28 speaks of God's foreordained plan of redemption, not of God decreeing anyone's personal sin.

Formationally, the thread is integrity, the state of being one thing all the way through. Esau wanted the blessing without the birthright. Jacob wanted the promise without the wait. The scribes wanted the commandment without the heart. Ananias wanted the reputation without the price. Put this to your class before they go: where in your life is the public version of you ahead of the private version, and what is one honest step toward closing that gap this week?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Matthew 5:13–5:48. It carries the week's central idea and its central doctrinal question. Settle 5:17–20 in the first fifteen minutes so the class is not anxious about the Law, then give the rest of the hour to the six contrasts, especially anger and lust.

Second session: Take up Acts 4:23–5:16. Begin with the prayer in 4:24–30 and let the class compare it with our own praying, then give the second half to Ananias and Sapphira. It is a hard text and people have questions; leave room for them.

The other two readings: Genesis 25–30 and Proverbs 4 belong to the extended questions. Warn the class that Genesis will not flatter anybody in it, and ask them to read Proverbs 4:23 first thing each morning this week before they read anything else on a screen.

Grasping for the Blessing

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Genesis now narrows from Abraham to a household that is difficult to admire. Isaac loves Esau because he eats his game; Rebekah loves Jacob. That single sentence in 25:28 explains most of what follows. Favoritism in a home is never a private preference; it is a slow-acting poison, and Moses records it without comment because he expects the reader to watch it work.

The two brothers are drawn sharply. Esau is a man of appetite who cannot see past the next hour, and Hebrews 12:16 judges him for it. Jacob is a man of calculation whose very name means heel-grabber, and who spends his first seventy-odd years trying to secure by cleverness what God had already announced before he was born. The birthright is bought for stew, the blessing is stolen with goat skins, and then Jacob runs.

The turn comes at Bethel. A fugitive with a stone for a pillow sees a ladder set up on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, and God stands above it and makes him the same promise He made his grandfather. Jacob has done nothing to deserve this and has just done a great deal to deserve otherwise. That is the point. God is not endorsing Jacob's methods; He is keeping His own word. The remaining chapters are twenty years of Jacob being deceived by Laban exactly as he deceived Isaac, and learning, slowly, the difference between grasping and receiving.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The birthright was the double portion of the inheritance and headship of the family; the blessing was the father's formal, prophetic word over his sons. They were distinct, and Esau lost both.
- Moses is writing for the nation descended from Jacob. These chapters explain why Israel exists and why Edom, descended from Esau, is a neighbor with an old grievance.
- Isaac's deception of Abimelech in chapter 26 repeats Abraham's failure twice over. Sins run in families, and Genesis is honest about it.
- Marriage customs here include the bride price paid in labor, the veiling of the bride, and the giving of handmaids. These are described, not prescribed.
- Bethel means "house of God." The place becomes significant again in Jacob's life (35:1-15) and later in Israel's history, not always for good.
- The Law of Moses is still centuries away. Draw from these chapters what they teach about God's faithfulness, human scheming, and family life, and do not read later covenants back into them.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of stew (25:29-34), and Hebrews 12:16-17 calls him a profane man for it. Talk through what he actually gave up. Why does an appetite of the moment feel more real to us than an inheritance we cannot see?*

Esau gave up headship of the family through which the promise of God was running. He was not starving, whatever he said; he was a skilled hunter who had missed a meal. What he lacked was the ability to feel the weight of something he could not taste. Hebrews 12:16 calls him profane, a word meaning common or unhallowed, a man who treated a sacred thing as ordinary merchandise. Genesis puts it bluntly in 25:34: "thus Esau despised his birthright."

Ask the class why appetite is so persuasive. Part of the answer is simple physics of attention: the stew is in front of him, hot, and the inheritance is invisible and years away. That is the mechanism behind nearly every sin your class will face this week, from the purchase to the second drink to the late-night screen. Nothing feels as real as what is

right here. Then push into the harder half: Hebrews 12:17 says Esau later sought the blessing with tears and found no place for repentance. Some trades cannot be untraded.

Question 2. *Rebekah and Jacob lie to a blind old man to obtain what God had already promised in 25:23. God kept His word, and the family paid for that morning's deceit for twenty years. How do we hold together God's settled purpose and God's refusal to excuse the sin used to get there?*

Hold both truths without collapsing either. God announced in 25:23 that the older would serve the younger, so Jacob did not need to lie. He was not securing the promise; he was interfering with it. And God never approves the method. Watch the consequences pile up in the narrative itself: Jacob loses his home, his mother (he never sees her again), twenty years of his life, and is then deceived at his own wedding by a man using the very trick he used, substituting the elder for the younger under cover.

This is one of the great lessons of Genesis for a modern class: God's purposes are not fragile, and our shortcuts are not free. He can accomplish His word through crooked people without endorsing the crookedness, and He usually lets the crookedness cost them something. Ask where somebody in the room is currently tempted to help God along with a lie, an exaggeration on a form, a story shaded in their favor. The promise does not need it, and the bill still comes.

Question 3. *Alone and on the run, Jacob wakes at Bethel and says, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it" (28:16). Where have you been so consumed with managing your own escape that you missed God standing there, and what would it take to notice Him this week?*

Jacob is not looking for God at Bethel. He is running from a brother who wants to kill him, with a day's dust on him and a rock under his head. That is precisely when heaven opens. The ladder set up on the earth with angels ascending and descending says that this ordinary patch of ground is connected to the throne of God, and Jesus later applies the image to Himself in John 1:51. God was in that place the whole time. What was new was Jacob's awareness.

Bring the question into an ordinary week without making it sentimental. People miss God not because He is hidden but because they are absorbed in managing an outcome: a deadline, a diagnosis, a child, a payment. Ask what a person would actually have to do to notice. Usually the honest answer involves silence, a slower morning, or simply looking up from the phone. Ask each person to name one specific interruption in their week and to treat it as ground where God might be standing.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every deception in these six chapters and who carried it out. In each case, who ends up paying, and how long does the bill take to arrive?*

Jacob leverages Esau's hunger for the birthright; Isaac tells the men of Gerar that Rebekah is his sister; Rebekah and Jacob together deceive Isaac for the blessing; Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel on the wedding night; and Jacob later out-bargains Laban over the flocks. The one who deceives generally collects the bill years later, and it comes back in the same currency. Jacob traded on a brother's weakness and then served twenty years under a man who traded on his. Genesis never has to editorialize; it simply lets the pattern run.

2. *Read Genesis 25:23 beside Romans 9:10–13. Is God choosing Esau's eternal destiny, or choosing which brother carries the promise? Give your reasons from both passages.*

The Genesis text is about two nations and which line carries the covenant promise, and Romans 9 uses it the same way. Paul is arguing that God has always chosen the line through which He would work, Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, and that physical descent from Abraham never guaranteed anyone a place. The quotation "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated" comes from Malachi 1:2–3, written centuries later about the two nations, not about two infants' eternal destinies. Nothing here teaches that God chose one man for heaven and one for hell before either had done anything. Esau's own choices are on full display in Genesis, and God calls all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

3. Trace the promise God makes to Jacob at Bethel in 28:13–15 and set it beside the promise to Abraham in 12:1–3.

What is repeated word for word, and what is added for a man sleeping outdoors with nothing?

Repeated: the land, descendants like the dust of the earth, spreading out in every direction, and the great promise that in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Added for the runaway: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.” The promise of presence is what a man in Jacob’s situation needed, and God gave it before Jacob asked for anything.

4. Genesis 29:31–30:24 records the births of eleven sons, and every name carries a story. Write out the names and their meanings, and note what those names reveal about life inside that household.

Reuben (“see, a son”), Simeon (“heard”), Levi (“attached”), Judah (“praise”), Dan (“judged”), Naphtali (“my wrestling”), Gad (“a troop”), Asher (“happy”), Issachar (“wages”), Zebulun (“dwelling”), and Joseph (“he will add”). Read straight through, the names tell the story of a competition: an unloved wife naming her sons after her ache to be seen, a barren wife naming hers after a wrestling match with her sister. Polygamy is on full display here, and what it produces is not romance but a house at war. Note that it is out of Judah, the son whose name simply means praise, that the Christ would come.

5. Jacob spent his youth engineering what God had already promised to give him. Name the outcome you are currently maneuvering for, then go a full week praying about it and doing no maneuvering at all, and write down what happens in you.

Answers will vary. Listen for what the week without maneuvering exposes. Most people discover that the scheming is not really about the outcome but about not trusting anyone else with it, God included. Follow up the next week and ask what the silence was like.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Polygamy: Jacob has two wives and two concubines, and the narrative shows exactly what it produced. Scripture records it without commanding it. God’s design was stated in Genesis 2:24 and reaffirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4–6.
- Deception: do not defend Rebekah or Jacob. The Bible’s willingness to tell the truth about its own heroes is one of the marks of its inspiration.
- Romans 9:10–13 will come up. Handle it as covenant purpose, the choice of the line through which the Savior would come, and not as unconditional individual election. Calvinism is not the teaching of the text or of Malachi 1, from which Paul quotes.
- Jacob’s peeled branches in 30:37–43 are not a lesson in animal breeding. Genesis 31:9–12 says plainly that God gave him the increase.

Keep Your Heart With Diligence

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 4 is the most personal of the early chapters. Solomon is not merely instructing; he is remembering. “When I was my father’s son, tender and the only one in the sight of my mother, he also taught me and said to me.” The father teaching here learned it from a father, and the reader is meant to feel the chain. Wisdom in the Bible is almost always passed hand to hand before it is read in a book.

The center of the chapter is verse 7, which in the older translations reads, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom, and in all your getting, get understanding.” The Hebrew has the sense of first thing, the beginning, the thing you secure before you secure anything else. Solomon knows his readers are getting other things: land, money, standing. He is not against any of that. He is saying the order matters.

Then the two paths, and finally the body. Verses 20 through 27 move down a person from the inside out: the heart first, then the mouth, then the eyes, then the feet. That is the actual order of a life. Behavior does not start at the feet. Your class has usually been taught to manage the feet and hope the heart follows, and Solomon says it runs the other way.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Proverbs 1 through 9 is sustained parental instruction rather than short individual sayings, and chapter 4 is the clearest example of the form.
- “Heart” in Hebrew usage is the whole inner person, mind, will, and affections together, not merely the emotions as we use the word.
- The two-paths image runs throughout wisdom literature (Psalm 1) and is picked up by Jesus in Matthew 7:13–14.
- The father speaking is Solomon, and the father he quotes is David. First Chronicles 28:9 and 1 Kings 2:1–4 record David giving Solomon exactly this kind of charge.
- Verse 18, the path of the just shining brighter to the perfect day, is a picture of growth. A proverb like this describes the normal direction of a wise life, not a guarantee of steady feelings.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *In Proverbs 4:3–4 Solomon quotes what his own father David taught him when he was a boy. Three generations stand in that paragraph. What obligation does that put on the adults in this room, and who is actually listening to you right now?*

The obligation is to pass something on deliberately rather than by accident. Notice that David did not leave Solomon to absorb wisdom from the palace atmosphere; he sat him down and said words the boy could still quote decades later. Deuteronomy 6:6–7 commands the same thing for every Israelite household, and Ephesians 6:4 puts it on Christian fathers. The teaching is meant to be spoken, repeated, and specific.

The second half of the question is the one that opens up the room. Many adults assume nobody is listening to them, and it is almost never true. Grandchildren are listening. A younger man at work is listening. A new convert is watching how you handle a disappointment. Ask each person to name one specific younger person and one thing they would want that person to be able to quote from them in thirty years. Then ask whether they have ever actually said it out loud.

Question 2. *Verse 23 says to keep your heart with all diligence, because out of it flow the springs of life. Make that practical: what is involved in guarding a heart, and what specifically are you guarding yours from this week?*

Guarding a heart means the deliberate work of controlling what goes into it and what is allowed to take root there. Solomon spells it out in the verses immediately following: put away a deceitful mouth, let your eyes look

straight ahead, ponder the path of your feet. In the New Testament, Philippians 4:8 gives the list of what to think on, and 2 Corinthians 10:5 speaks of bringing every thought into captivity. The word “diligence” implies a guard on a wall, awake, on duty, with authority to turn things away.

Press for specifics or the discussion will stay at the level of a slogan. What does a person actually guard against? Resentment that gets rehearsed on the drive home. Envy fed by thirty minutes of scrolling. Lust invited by what is watched alone. Self-pity. Ask each person for one named thing and one named boundary. A guard with no instructions is not a guard.

Question 3. *Verses 18 and 19 set two roads side by side, one growing brighter toward noon and one so dark that the traveler does not even know what he stumbled over. Which is more dangerous in a person’s life, the sin he knows about or the darkness that keeps him from seeing it, and why?*

Verse 19 is the more sobering of the two because it describes a man who cannot diagnose himself. He stumbles and does not know at what. The sin a person knows about is at least a sin he can repent of; the darkness is the loss of the ability to see. Hebrews 3:13 warns about being hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, and Ephesians 4:18–19 describes people past feeling. That is the danger: not a dramatic fall but a slow dimming.

The remedy in the chapter is light: the path of the just shines, and it shines more as it goes. Practically, light comes through Scripture read honestly and through people allowed close enough to tell you the truth (Proverbs 27:6; Galatians 6:1). Ask the class who in their life has permission to say a hard thing to them. If the honest answer is nobody, that is the finding of the evening.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every part of the body named in 4:20–27 and write down what is commanded of each one. Why would Solomon organize his closing appeal that way?*

The ear is to attend to the words; the eyes are not to let them depart; the heart is to keep them in the midst of it; the mouth is to put away perversity and deceitful lips; the eyes are to look straight ahead; the feet are to be pondered and kept from turning to the right or the left. Solomon organizes it this way because a person is a whole, and because the order runs outward from the inside. What is kept in the heart eventually leaves through the mouth and shows up in where the feet go.

2. *Compare Proverbs 4:23 with Matthew 15:18–19 and Luke 6:45. Where do Jesus and Solomon agree about the source of a person’s behavior?*

Jesus says in Matthew 15:18–19 that what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, and the rest. Luke 6:45 says a good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good, and that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Solomon and Jesus agree completely: behavior is not the problem, it is the readout. Manage only the behavior and you get a Pharisee. Change the heart and the behavior follows.

3. *Verse 7 calls wisdom the principal thing and says to get it with all your getting. Trace through the chapter what wisdom is said to cost a man and what it is said to pay him.*

It costs everything a man has: “in all your getting, get understanding,” and verse 8 speaks of exalting and embracing her. It costs attention, submission to correction, and the willingness to leave a road that other people are enjoying. What it pays, according to the chapter, is promotion and honor (4:8), a graceful ornament and a crown of glory (4:9), length of days (4:10), unhindered steps and a stumble-free run (4:12), life itself (4:13, 22), and health to all the flesh (4:22).

4. *Verses 14 and 15 stack five commands about the path of the wicked: do not enter, do not walk, avoid it, do not travel on it, turn away. Why so many verbs for what sounds like one instruction?*

Because nobody walks onto a wrong road in one stride. The five verbs describe a gradual approach: considering it, stepping onto it, lingering near it, traveling it, and finally being unable to leave it. Solomon is telling a young man to break the chain at the earliest possible link, which is why the strongest command in the sequence is simply “turn away from it and pass on.” First Corinthians 15:33 and 2 Timothy 2:22 give the same counsel: flee, do not negotiate.

5. *Guarding a heart is a concrete act, not a mood. Name the single input in your life, an app, a program, a friendship, a habit of thought, that is doing your heart the most damage, and remove it or fence it this week.*

Answers will vary. Look for a named thing and a named limit, and be ready for someone to name something that will be genuinely hard to give up. Honor that. Also be alert to the person who names something trivial in order to avoid naming the real one; do not force it in class, but be available afterward.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Verse 18, the shining path, is a general description of growth, not a promise that a faithful Christian will never have a dark season. Read Psalm 88 sometime if the class needs the balance.
- Do not let “keep your heart” drift into the modern idea of simply following your heart. Jeremiah 17:9 says the heart is deceitful; Solomon says guard it, not obey it.
- Verse 7’s call to get wisdom at any cost should not be turned into a promise that education or study alone makes a person wise. The fear of the Lord is still the beginning of it (1:7; 9:10).

Righteousness From the Inside

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The salt and light images come first, and both are about influence that cannot be kept private. Salt in that world preserved meat and made food edible; light does its work simply by being uncovered. Neither exists for itself. Notice the sting in 5:13, salt that has lost its savor is good for nothing, and the direction of 5:16, that men would see your good works and glorify your Father. The Christian is not the point of his own visibility.

Then comes 5:17–20, the doorway to everything else. Jesus is not abolishing God's law; He is bringing it to its intended goal, and He will keep every jot and tittle of it until it is accomplished. The accomplishment came at the cross, where the handwriting of ordinances was nailed (Colossians 2:14) and the old covenant was made obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). But notice that He is speaking before the cross, to Jews still under the Law, and He will not have them think He is a lawbreaker.

The six contrasts that follow are not Jesus versus Moses. They are Jesus versus the reduced, external, loophole-hunting version of Moses that the scribes had built. The Law had always said “you shall not covet” and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus is not adding a heavier burden; He is refusing to let anyone keep the commandment on the outside only. That is why the section ends where it does: be perfect, complete, whole, as your heavenly Father is whole.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to disciples with the crowds listening (5:1–2; 7:28–29), and it is spoken under the Old Covenant, before the cross and before Pentecost, though its teaching about the heart is timeless and is repeated throughout the epistles.
- “The Law and the Prophets” was a standard Jewish way of referring to the entire Old Testament.
- A jot is the smallest Hebrew letter and a tittle the small stroke distinguishing one letter from another. Jesus is asserting the exactness of Scripture.
- “You have heard that it was said” refers to what was taught in the synagogue, including rabbinic additions. Note 5:43: “and hate your enemy” appears nowhere in the Old Testament.
- The Old Law was fulfilled and taken out of the way at the cross (Colossians 2:14–17; Ephesians 2:14–16; Hebrews 8–10). Christians are under the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21), which includes everything the New Testament commands.
- “Be perfect” translates a word meaning complete, mature, or brought to its intended end. The context is loving as God loves, without partiality, not sinless perfection.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. In 5:17–18 Jesus says He did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. Read that alongside Colossians 2:14–17 and Hebrews 8:13. What does “fulfill” mean here, and is a Christian today under the Law of Moses?

To fulfill is to fill full, to bring to the intended goal. Jesus fulfilled the Law by keeping it perfectly, by completing every prophecy and type in it, and by satisfying its demands at the cross. Luke 24:44 has Him saying that all things written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms concerning Him had to be fulfilled. He is not a rebel and He is not a reformer; He is the destination.

And no, the Christian is not under the Law of Moses. Colossians 2:14 says the handwriting of requirements was wiped out and nailed to the cross, and 2:16–17 says therefore let no one judge you regarding food, drink, festivals, new moons, or sabbaths, which were a shadow of things to come. Hebrews 8:13 says the first covenant was made

obsolete. Galatians 5:4 warns that anyone seeking justification by that law has fallen from grace. Be clear and be kind: we honor the Old Testament as inspired and read it for instruction (Romans 15:4) without binding its ordinances, its Sabbath, or its priesthood on Christians.

Question 2. *Six times Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, but I say to you.” Look closely at whom He is correcting and what He is doing to the standard. Is He raising the bar, or uncovering what the bar always was?*

Look at what He is actually correcting. Each formula quotes something the people had heard taught, and the teaching had been trimmed to something a man could satisfy externally. You shall not murder, so as long as I do not kill him I am clean. You shall not commit adultery, so as long as nothing happened I am clean. A certificate of divorce makes it legal. An oath without the divine name is not quite binding. Notice that 5:43 adds “and hate your enemy,” which the Old Testament never said at all.

So He is not raising an arbitrary bar. He is uncovering what the command always meant. Leviticus 19:17–18 already forbade hating your brother in your heart and commanded loving your neighbor as yourself. The tenth commandment already reached into desire. The scribes had made God’s law manageable by making it shallow, and Jesus will not have it. Ask the class where we still do the same thing: which commands have we quietly redefined into something we can keep without being changed?

Question 3. *Jesus traces murder back to anger and adultery back to a look (5:21–30). If He judged you by what happens inside you rather than by what anyone else can see, what would be exposed, and what would change about ten o’clock at night this week?*

Take this slowly and make it safe. The two examples are chosen carefully: anger and lust are the two interior sins that nearly everyone in the room carries and almost nobody discusses. Jesus does not say anger is always sin; Ephesians 4:26 allows for anger without sin, and Jesus Himself was angry in Mark 3:5. What He indicts is contempt, the rehearsed grudge, the word “fool” thrown at a brother, the settled writing off of a person. And the look He indicts is not the first glance but the one that lingers in order to possess.

Ten o’clock at night is where most of this is decided, so name it. For some people the honest answer is the phone in the dark; for others it is lying in bed rehearsing an argument with someone who is not there. Both are heart matters, and both are guarded by decisions made earlier in the day. Verses 29 and 30 use deliberately shocking language: whatever it takes, take it. Ask for one concrete measure, and do not make anyone say out loud what it is for.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the six “you have heard that it was said” statements, and beside each one write what was said and what Jesus said in reply.*

Murder, and He goes to anger and contempt, requiring reconciliation before worship. Adultery, and He goes to the lustful look and to radical removal of whatever causes the fall. Divorce with a certificate, and He limits it to the cause of sexual immorality. Swearing oaths, and He calls for speech so honest that oaths are unnecessary: let your yes be yes. Eye for eye, and He calls for the surrendered right, the other cheek, the second mile. Love your neighbor and hate your enemy, and He commands love for enemies and prayer for persecutors, on the ground that this is what the Father is like.

2. *Read Matthew 5:31–32 with Matthew 19:3–9 and Romans 7:2–3. What cause does Jesus name, and what does He say about the one who marries the person put away?*

Jesus names one cause, sexual immorality, and says that whoever divorces for any other reason causes his wife to commit adultery, and whoever marries a woman who has been put away commits adultery. Matthew 19:9 says the same, adding that from the beginning it was not so, and grounding marriage in Genesis 2:24. Romans 7:2–3 says a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives, and is called an adulteress if she marries another while he lives. Handle this carefully and pastorally; there are wounded people in most classes, and the doctrine is best taught before it is needed rather than in the middle of someone’s crisis.

3. *Salt without savor and a lamp under a basket are useless in the same way. Trace what Jesus says each one is for, and note carefully who receives the glory in 5:16.*

Salt preserves and seasons; if it has lost its savor it is fit only to be thrown out and trodden underfoot. A lamp is lit precisely to be set on a stand so it gives light to everyone in the house. Both are about usefulness to others rather than about self-display, which is why 5:16 ends where it does: that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. The visibility is real and the credit goes elsewhere.

4. *Verses 43 through 47 command love of enemies and prayer for persecutors. List every reason Jesus gives for it, and note what He says about a person who loves only those who love him back.*

The reasons He gives: that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; because He makes His sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust; because loving those who love you earns no reward, since even tax collectors do that; because greeting only your brothers is nothing special, since even Gentiles do that. And He closes by pointing to the completeness of the Father. The argument is not that enemies deserve it. The argument is that this is the family likeness.

5. *Write down the name of the person you least want to pray for. Pray for that person by name every day this week, asking God for their genuine good rather than for their correction, and note what it does to you.*

Answers will vary. What usually happens is that sustained prayer for a person makes contempt hard to maintain, which may be exactly why Jesus commanded it. Ask the following week, gently and without requiring a name, whether anything shifted.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Be plain that the Law of Moses is not binding on Christians (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13; Galatians 5:4) while honoring the Old Testament as inspired and profitable (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- Divorce and remarriage: teach the text, one cause, and teach it calmly. Expect that someone in the room is living with the consequences of a past decision. Be prepared to talk privately and to point people to repentance and to the grace of God without changing what Jesus said.
- Turning the other cheek addresses personal retaliation and the insulted honor of a disciple. It is not a repeal of civil government's use of the sword (Romans 13:1–4), nor a command that a person must allow an abuser to keep harming them or their children.
- "Be perfect" is not sinless perfectionism; the word means complete or mature, and the context is impartial love. First John 1:8–10 keeps this honest.
- Anger is not automatically sin (Ephesians 4:26), and 5:22 is aimed at contempt. Do not leave a class thinking every strong feeling condemns them.

Boldness and a Lie

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The prayer in 4:24–30 is one of the most instructive prayers in the New Testament, and the instruction is mostly in what is missing. They do not ask for protection, for the removal of the threat, or for their opponents to be judged. They begin with God as Creator, quote Psalm 2, acknowledge that Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and Israel did only what God's hand and counsel had determined would happen, and then ask for one thing: boldness to keep speaking. God answers by shaking the building and filling them with the Holy Spirit.

Then Luke gives a second summary of the church's life, warmer than the first. One heart and one soul, no one claiming his possessions as his own, great power in the apostles' witness, great grace on them all, and not a needy person among them. Barnabas is named as an example, and his nickname, Son of Encouragement, turns out to describe his entire life in Acts.

Chapter 5 is the dark mirror of chapter 4. The contrast is deliberate: Barnabas brought all of it and Ananias brought some of it while claiming all. Peter's question in 5:4 removes every excuse: the land was his, the money was his, no one made him give anything. The sin was not stinginess, it was theatrical lying to God in front of the church. Two people drop dead three hours apart, and Luke says great fear came on all the church and on all who heard it, which is the first time fear is used that way in Acts.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This is still the first months of the church in Jerusalem, and the community is under official pressure from the same council that condemned Jesus.
- Psalm 2 is a royal and messianic psalm. The early church read it as describing the world's opposition to God's Anointed and God's installation of His King, which is exactly what they had just witnessed.
- The shaking of the place in 4:31 is a sign God gave in answer to prayer at a particular moment. It is not presented as a normal expectation for Christian prayer.
- The sharing of goods was spontaneous and voluntary, driven by need in a city where many new converts were far from home. It is not an economic program, and 5:4 says so directly.
- Barnabas is a Levite from Cyprus. He will later vouch for Saul of Tarsus when the church is afraid of him and will go get John Mark after Paul writes him off.
- Apostolic signs, including those summarized in 5:12–16, confirmed the word being preached (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Read the church's prayer in 4:24–30 aloud and pay attention to what they ask for and what they never mention. If our congregation came under the same pressure, what would our prayer list actually sound like?*

Read it slowly and let the class notice the omissions themselves. There is no request for safety, no request that the council be restrained, no complaint about unfairness. There is a large view of God, a Scripture quoted, an honest naming of what has happened, and then, "grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word." They assume the opposition will continue and ask only for the courage to keep going.

The comparison with a modern prayer list is where this gets useful, and it should be made with humility rather than scolding. Most congregational prayer lists are almost entirely about health and comfort, which are legitimate things to pray for; Paul prayed about a thorn in the flesh. The question is whether anything else ever appears. Ask the class to add one request out loud this week that resembles 4:29, and then actually pray it in the assembly.

Question 2. *Ananias and Sapphira fall dead over a lie about money, while plenty of other sins in the New Testament receive patience and correction. Peter says in 5:3–4 that the land was theirs and the money was theirs. So what exactly was their sin, and why did God deal with it that way at that moment in the church's life?*

Peter names the sin three times and it is never greed. In 5:3 it is lying to the Holy Spirit; in 5:4 it is lying to God, not to men; in 5:9 it is agreeing together to test the Spirit of the Lord. The property was theirs before the sale and the proceeds were theirs after it. They could have given half and said so, and nothing would have happened. What they wanted was the reputation Barnabas had without the cost Barnabas paid, and they were willing to stage it in the assembly of God's people.

As for why God acted so severely, note the moment. The church is days or weeks old, its purity is its credibility, and this is the first sin recorded inside it. God has done this before at hinges in redemptive history: Nadab and Abihu at the beginning of the priesthood (Leviticus 10), Uzzah when the ark was moved (2 Samuel 6), Achan at the entry into Canaan (Joshua 7). It is not the pattern for church discipline today; the New Testament gives us Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 for that. But it is a permanent revelation about God's character, and the effect Luke records is fear, not resentment.

Question 3. *Acts 5:11 says great fear came upon all the church. That is not language we use much anymore. How is fearing God different from being afraid of Him, and what would a recovery of that fear change about the way you come to the Lord's table this Sunday?*

The difference is the difference between a child and a criminal. Being afraid of God is the dread of someone who expects harm from Him. Fearing God is reverent awe before someone of overwhelming holiness whom you also love and belong to. Hebrews 12:28–29 puts both together: serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire. The early church was not cowering; verse 14 says believers were added all the more.

Bring it to the table because that is where the New Testament brings it. First Corinthians 11:27–29 warns about eating and drinking unworthily and about examining oneself. A congregation that has lost the fear of God takes the Supper as a routine and leaves unchanged. Ask the class to do one thing this Sunday: arrive with one specific thing examined and confessed before the bread is passed.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *The church prays Psalm 2 back to God in 4:25–26. Read Psalm 2 in full and write down what these Christians heard in it about Herod, Pilate, and Jesus.*

Psalm 2 opens with the nations raging and the rulers taking counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, and it ends with God setting His King on His holy hill and telling the kings of the earth to kiss the Son. The Christians heard Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel in the raging of verse 1, and they heard the enthronement of Jesus in what follows. Note that the psalm gave them not just an explanation but a perspective: the opposition is loud, and it is also futile.

2. *Trace what the believers did with their property in 4:32–37, then read 5:4 slowly. Was the sharing commanded or voluntary, and what in the text settles it?*

Voluntary. Acts 4:32 says no one said that any of the things he possessed was his own, which describes an attitude rather than a rule, and 4:34 says that those who were owners of lands sold them as need arose. Then Acts 5:4 settles it beyond argument: "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?" Nobody was under compulsion. Second Corinthians 9:7 gives the abiding principle: each one as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity.

3. *Barnabas is introduced with a nickname in 4:36–37. Follow him through Acts 9:26–27, 11:22–26, and 15:36–39, and write down what kind of man the apostles saw in him.*

He is generous with property in chapter 4. In 9:26–27 he is the one man willing to take the risk on Saul of Tarsus when the whole Jerusalem church is afraid of him. In 11:22–26 he is sent to Antioch, sees the grace of God, is glad, encourages them all, and then goes to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him into the work. In 15:36–39 he is willing to

fracture a partnership with Paul rather than give up on John Mark, and the later record suggests he was right about the young man (2 Timothy 4:11). The apostles saw a man who saw what people could become.

4. *Set the request of 4:29 beside the results in 4:31 and 4:33. What did God give them, and just as importantly, what did He not give them?*

He gave them a shaken building, the filling of the Holy Spirit, boldness in speech, great power in the apostles' witness to the resurrection, and great grace upon them all. He did not give them safety, relief from the council, or the removal of their enemies. In fact chapter 5 will end with the apostles beaten. God answered exactly what they asked and nothing they did not ask, which tells you something about praying for the right things.

5. *Ananias wanted a reputation for total devotion at a discount. Name one place where you have been accepting credit for a godliness you have not actually paid for, and tell the truth about it to one person this week.*

Answers will vary, and this one will make people uncomfortable, which is appropriate. Common examples include being thought of as a person of prayer, or a generous giver, or a Bible reader, when the reality is thinner than the reputation. Do not press for public confession. Encourage one honest conversation with one trustworthy person, and let the Lord handle the rest.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Ananias and Sapphira: guard both errors. Do not soften it into a cautionary tale about being stingy, and do not turn it into a pattern for how congregations should discipline members today (see Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1).
- Acts 4:28, that they did whatever God's hand and purpose determined before to be done, refers to God's foreordained plan of redemption through the cross (Acts 2:23), not to God decreeing the personal guilt of Herod and Pilate. Those men acted freely and were accountable.
- The shaking of the place and the signs of 5:12–16 are apostolic confirmation of the word, not a promise of similar experiences today (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10). Say it plainly and graciously.
- The sharing of possessions is not a mandate for communal ownership. Acts 5:4 forecloses that reading, and 2 Corinthians 9:7 gives the New Testament standard for giving.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Genesis 31–36 · Proverbs 5–6:19 · Matthew 6 · Acts 5:17–6:15

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