

# Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



## WEEK 5 OF 104

*Whom We Answer To*

| THIS WEEK'S READINGS  |                 |
|-----------------------|-----------------|
| General Old Testament | Genesis 31–36   |
| Wisdom Literature     | Proverbs 5–6:19 |
| Gospels               | Matthew 6       |
| General New Testament | Acts 5:17–6:15  |

### TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

The aim this week is simple to state and hard to live: to help your class settle, in advance, whose approval they are living for. Jacob finally got alone with God and stopped negotiating with everybody else. Solomon warned a young man that the Lord was watching a road no neighbor could see. Jesus said the Father sees in secret and that people who perform for people are already paid. And Peter told the supreme court of his nation that their permission was not required. Every reading this week asks the same question from a different direction.

Doctrinally, keep three things straight. First, Matthew 6:10, “Your kingdom come,” was prayed before Pentecost; the kingdom came, and Christ reigns now. Second, Matthew 6:14–15 states a real condition without teaching salvation by merit; a heart clenched shut cannot hold grace. Third, Acts 5:29 is narrow, not a license for any disobedience a Christian prefers; Romans 13 stands, and the apostles took the beating rather than resisting.

Formationally, the thread is a life that is the same in the dark as it is in the light. Jacob was alone at the ford. The adulterer of Proverbs 5 believed no one was looking. The giver, the one who prays, and the one who fasts in Matthew 6 are told to shut the door. The apostles kept preaching when the only witnesses were a hostile council and a locked cell. Ask your class this before they leave: name one thing you did for God this month that nobody knows about, and if you cannot name one, what will you do this week?

### SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

**First session:** Take up Matthew 6. It is the richest hour of the week and it touches money, prayer, forgiveness, and anxiety, which is to say it touches everyone in the room. Do not try to cover the whole chapter evenly; give roughly half the time to 6:1–18 and half to 6:19–34.

**Second session:** Take up Acts 5:17–6:15. Build the hour around Acts 5:29 and Acts 6:1–7. The first settles a question your class will face at work and in the public square, and the second shows a congregation handling a genuine complaint without either denial or division.

**The other two readings:** Genesis 31–36 and Proverbs 5–6:19 fit the extended questions. Warn the class that Genesis 34 is hard reading and tell them plainly that Scripture records the massacre without approving it. For Proverbs, ask them to read 5:15–19 with their own marriage in view rather than someone else's failure.

## Wrestling at the Jabbok

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These chapters bring Jacob home, and they do it the hard way. He leaves Haran in secret because he is still the man who arranges his own escapes, and Laban pursues him for seven days. The parting at Mizpah is not the sweet benediction it has become on plaques; it is two suspicious men setting up a boundary marker and asking God to watch each other. Then Jacob turns south, and the brother he defrauded is coming with four hundred men.

Chapter 32 is the hinge of his whole life. He prays the first recorded prayer of his life that is not a bargain, splits his company, sends waves of gifts ahead, and then sends everyone he loves across the water and is left alone. A Man wrestles with him until the breaking of day, and when the Man cannot prevail by ordinary means He touches Jacob's hip and puts it out of joint. Jacob, crippled, will not let go: "I will not let You go unless You bless me." The heel-grabber is finally holding on to the right thing.

The rest of the reading is the mixed harvest of a life. Esau runs and embraces him, which is one of the tenderest scenes in Genesis. But Dinah is violated, and Simeon and Levi use the covenant sign itself as a weapon to murder a city, a crime Jacob is still condemning on his deathbed (49:5–7). Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin. Reuben sleeps with his father's concubine. Isaac dies at last, and Esau and Jacob bury him together. Genesis never tidies its people up.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Laban's household gods (teraphim) may have carried inheritance rights in that culture, which would explain both Rachel's theft and Laban's frantic search.
- The Jabbok is a tributary running west into the Jordan. Jacob was crossing back into the land of promise, and the crossing cost him something.
- "Israel" means he struggles with God, or God strives. The name is given by God Himself and becomes the name of a nation.
- Chapter 34 turns on the misuse of circumcision, the covenant sign given to Abraham, as a tool of deceit and mass murder. Moses expects the reader to be appalled.
- Chapter 36 is the record of Esau's line, the Edomites, who will be a constant neighbor and frequent adversary of Israel throughout the Old Testament.
- These events are still centuries before the Law of Moses. Read them for what they reveal about God's faithfulness and human character, and do not read later covenant regulations back into them.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Jacob wrestles all night and walks away limping, blessed, and renamed (32:24–32). Talk about what he is actually fighting for, and why God lets the struggle run until daybreak rather than settling it in a moment.*

On the surface Jacob is fighting for a blessing. Underneath, he is fighting the last round of a fight he has been having his whole life, the fight to secure by his own strength what only God can give. Notice the question the Man asks in 32:27: "What is your name?" The last time Jacob was asked his name by someone with the power to bless, he lied and said Esau. This time he tells the truth, and the truth is the confession: I am Jacob, the supplanter, the grabber. The new name comes immediately after.

As for why God lets it go all night, He plainly could have ended it in a heartbeat, and the touch on the hip shows it. God was not trying to win; He was trying to change a man, and change of that kind takes all night. Ask your class about the long fights, the prayers that go for years, the sins fought for decades. The wrestling is not evidence that God is absent. Hebrews 12:11 says the training is not joyful at the time. Ask what someone in the room is in the middle of right now, and whether they are still holding on.

**Question 2.** *Simeon and Levi deceive an entire city and then slaughter it over their sister's violation, and they answer their father with a question he never answers back (34:25–31). Was a real wrong done to Dinah? Where does righteous anger end and vengeance begin, and how do Romans 12:19 and Ephesians 4:26 help us draw that line?*

Begin by naming clearly that a real and terrible wrong was done to Dinah. The text says Shechem took her and violated her, and then the men negotiated over her as though she were property, with her own father passive and her brothers enraged. Anger here was right. Genesis 34:7 says the thing ought not to be done, and it does not correct that judgment. Do not let the class rush past the victim to debate the brothers.

But the brothers' answer was vengeance, not justice. They used the sign of God's covenant as a surgical weapon, they lied in God's name, they murdered men who had no part in the crime, and they carried off the women and children of the city. Jacob condemns it, and God through Jacob condemns it again in 49:5–7 with the sentence that Levi and Simeon would be scattered in Israel. Romans 12:19 says vengeance belongs to God, and Ephesians 4:26 permits anger but sets a boundary on what we do with it and how long we keep it. The useful class question is where a modern person's legitimate outrage turns into something God will not bless: the cutting word, the campaign to ruin a reputation, the years-long refusal to let a matter go.

**Question 3.** *God tells Jacob in 35:1 to go back to Bethel, where he first met Him, and Jacob immediately tells his household to hand over the foreign gods among them. Where is your Bethel, and what would you have to bury along the road to get there?*

Bethel was the place where a runaway with a rock for a pillow saw the ladder and heard the promise. Twenty years later God says, in effect, go back to where this started and build the altar you vowed to build (28:20–22). It is worth noticing that Jacob had been living in Shechem, near trouble, and that only after the disaster of chapter 34 does he move. God's call to return often comes after we have made a mess of staying.

The striking detail is 35:2: before they go, Jacob tells his whole household to put away the foreign gods that are among them, to purify themselves, and to change their clothes. He had been carrying idols in his caravan for years and evidently knew it. Ask the class for their Bethel, the season or place where God was most real to them, and then ask the harder question: what is riding along in your household that would have to be buried under the oak before you could honestly go back?

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *Write out Jacob's prayer in 32:9–12. How much of it appeals to what he deserves, and how much of it appeals to what God has promised?*

He appeals almost entirely to God's promise and God's character. He addresses Him as the God of Abraham and Isaac, quotes God's own command to return and God's own promise to deal well with him, confesses that he is not worthy of the least of all the mercies and truth God has shown him, admits that he crossed the Jordan with only a staff, asks for deliverance from Esau, and then closes by quoting the promise again: "You said, I will surely treat you well." There is one sentence about his unworthiness and not a single claim of merit. This is a different Jacob than the one who bargained at Bethel in 28:20–22.

**2.** *Read Genesis 32:28 beside Hosea 12:3–6. What does Hosea say Jacob did during that night at the ford, and what does the prophet want his own generation to learn from it?*

Hosea 12:4 says he wept and sought favor, and Hosea reads the whole episode as a man who at last stopped struggling against God and began pleading with Him. Hosea then turns to his own generation and says, "So you, by the help of your God, return; observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually." The prophet uses Jacob as a call to repentance: the nation named after the man should learn what the man learned at that ford.

**3.** *Trace Jacob's two names through chapters 32 through 35. When is he called Jacob and when is he called Israel? Notice that the old name never entirely disappears, and consider why.*

God gives the new name in 32:28 and confirms it in 35:10, yet the narrative goes right on calling him Jacob in most places, sometimes alternating in the same paragraph. Both names are true of him and both remain true. That is

honest about the Christian life: the new man is real, and the old habits are still in the room. Second Corinthians 5:17 and Romans 7:15–25 hold the same two truths together.

4. *Genesis 35 records one birth and three deaths. List them in order, and then read what God says to Jacob in 35:9–12 in the middle of all that loss.*

Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, dies and is buried under an oak (35:8). Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin on the road to Bethlehem (35:16–20). Isaac dies at one hundred and eighty and is buried by both his sons (35:28–29). The birth is Benjamin, named by his dying mother Ben-Oni, son of my sorrow, and renamed by his father son of my right hand. And right in the middle of it, at 35:9–12, God appears again, confirms the name Israel, and repeats the whole promise: be fruitful, kings will come from you, and the land given to Abraham and Isaac is yours. God's promises are most often restated in the middle of funerals.

5. *Jacob limped for the rest of his life. Name the weakness God has left in you that keeps you leaning on Him, and this week thank Him for it out loud in prayer instead of asking Him again to take it away.*

Answers will vary. Watch for two wrong turns. Some people will name a sin, but a limp is not the same as a sin; the limp is a weakness or limitation that keeps a person dependent. Others will resist the whole idea. Second Corinthians 12:7–10 is the passage to have ready, where Paul asked three times and was told that grace was sufficient and strength is perfected in weakness.

### **HANDLE WITH CARE**

- Chapter 34 involves sexual violence. Name the wrong done to Dinah plainly and treat her as a victim rather than as a plot device, and be aware that someone in the room may have a history that makes this hour hard.
- The massacre by Simeon and Levi is recorded, not approved. Genesis 49:5–7 is God's own verdict on it.
- Reuben's sin with Bilhah (35:22) is stated in a single sentence and judged in 49:3–4. That is enough; there is no need to speculate further in a mixed class.
- The identity of the Man who wrestled Jacob: Hosea 12:4 calls Him the Angel, and Jacob says he saw God face to face. Say what the text says and resist elaborate speculation.
- Jacob still has two wives and two concubines, and Rachel is still carrying idols. Keep reminding the class that Genesis reports its people honestly and that God's design for marriage is Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:4–6.

## Traps a Man Walks Into

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 5 is the first of three extended warnings about sexual sin in Proverbs, and it is remarkable for two reasons. First, it is honest about the appeal. Solomon does not pretend the temptation is ugly; he says her lips drip honey and her speech is smoother than oil. Any teacher who tells young people that sin is not attractive has already lost them. Second, it refuses to stop at the beginning of the story. It follows the road to the end: wormwood, a two-edged sword, feet going down to death, and a man at the end of his life groaning over what he traded away.

Then comes the passage every married couple should have read to them: your own cistern, your own well, the wife of your youth, a loving deer and a graceful doe, be enraptured always with her love. The Bible is not squeamish about marital affection, and the protection it offers is not merely a fence but a feast. A man satisfied at home is much harder to seduce.

The material in 6:1–19 is a set of short warnings about the ordinary ways people ruin themselves: rash financial entanglement, laziness, and troublemaking. The tone changes but the theme does not. Each of these is a trap a man walks into with his eyes open and small steps: one pledge, a little sleep, a little folding of the hands, one winking, whispering conversation. The closing list of seven abominations puts God’s own evaluation on the whole business.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Proverbs 5, 6:20–35, and chapter 7 form a trio of warnings against adultery, given by a father to a young man.
- Striking hands (6:1) was the gesture of becoming surety for another’s debt, making yourself liable for someone else’s obligation to a third party.
- “Sluggard” appears repeatedly in Proverbs. The word describes settled laziness, not misfortune, illness, or unemployment a person did not choose.
- The numerical form “six things, yes seven” is a standard Hebrew device that puts the emphasis on the last item in the list, in this case sowing discord among brethren.
- Solomon is warning against the very sin that eventually wrecked him (1 Kings 11:1–8), which should keep any teacher humble about the distance between knowing and doing.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Proverbs 5:3–14 follows the adulterer all the way to the end of the story, from honey on the lips to groaning in a ruined life. Trace that progression out loud. Why is the ability to see the end of a road the single most valuable thing a tempted person can have?*

Follow the path with the class rather than summarizing it. Verse 3 is honey and oil, verse 4 is wormwood and a two-edged sword, verse 5 is feet going down to death, verse 6 says she does not even consider the path of life, verses 9 through 11 list what is lost (honor, years, wealth, strength, and finally flesh and body consumed), and verses 12 through 14 put the words in the man’s own mouth: “How I have hated instruction, and my heart despised correction.” Solomon is doing what temptation never does. He is showing the end at the beginning.

That is exactly why foresight is the tempted person’s great asset. In the moment, sin presents only the first frame of the film. Every person in your class has watched someone they know lose a marriage, a ministry, a family, or a reputation, and none of those people intended any of it on the first day. Ask the class to practice the discipline out loud: name a specific temptation and then say honestly where that road ends for a real person. Numbers 32:23 and Galatians 6:7–8 say the same thing in fewer words.

**Question 2.** *Verses 15 through 19 are strikingly warm: drink water from your own cistern, rejoice with the wife of your youth, be captivated by her love. How does genuine delight in your own marriage protect a person better than willpower alone, and what would actually feed that delight this week?*

Willpower is a fence, and fences fail eventually because they only say no. Verses 15 through 19 say yes to something. The husband is commanded, not merely permitted, to find real delight in his own wife, and the language is deliberately sensual. A man who is genuinely satisfied and genuinely known at home has far less appetite for a counterfeit. First Corinthians 7:3–5 makes the same argument in the New Testament, and it warns explicitly that prolonged neglect gives Satan an opening.

The practical half deserves real time. What feeds delight is not romance in the abstract; it is attention. Conversation that is not about logistics. A standing evening that does not get cancelled. Praying together, which most couples in your class do not do. Physical affection that is not always a transaction. And, for many couples, repentance for years of low-grade contempt. Ask each married person for one concrete thing this week, and be careful to say something kind and useful to the single people and widows in the room rather than leaving them out of the hour.

**Question 3.** *Proverbs 6:16–19 lists six things the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to Him. Read them one at a time. Which of the seven is most quietly tolerated among good church people, and why do we let that one pass?*

Run the list: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren. Notice the arrangement: it begins at the eyes and works through the whole body, and the seventh item, set in the emphatic position, is the one about damaging relationships among God's people.

Most classes will land on the last one, and they will be right. Murder and false testimony are not our besetting congregational sins; whispering is. A pride that presents as standards, a lie that presents as discretion, a rumor that presents as a prayer request. Ask why we tolerate it: usually because it is enjoyable, it feels like being informed, and it never quite feels like an abomination. Then read the list again and let the word abomination sit there. Titus 3:10 and Romans 16:17 show how seriously the New Testament takes the divisive person.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *List the seven things of 6:16–19 and mark how many of them involve the tongue. Then read James 3:5–10 and note what James says a tongue can accomplish.*

A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren. At least three of the seven are directly about speech (lying tongue, false witness, sowing discord), and the proud look and wicked heart usually reach the world through the mouth as well. James 3:5–10 says the tongue is a small member that boasts great things, that it sets on fire the course of nature, that no man can tame it, and that from the same mouth come blessing and cursing, which ought not to be.

**2.** *Proverbs 5:21–23 says a man's ways are before the eyes of the Lord and that his own iniquities take him captive. According to the passage, who does the trapping, and what finally kills the fool?*

The man's own iniquities do the trapping: "His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, and he is caught in the cords of his sin." Verse 23 says he dies for lack of instruction and goes astray in the greatness of his folly. Notice that God is not described as ambushing him. The verse before says the Lord sees everything he does and ponders all his paths, but the snare is one the man wove himself. Sin is its own executioner, and the tragedy is the lack of instruction, or rather the refusal of it.

**3.** *Read Proverbs 6:1–5 about striking hands in a pledge for a neighbor, then compare 11:15, 17:18, and 22:26–27. Is Scripture forbidding generosity here, or forbidding something else? Support your answer.*

Scripture is not forbidding generosity; it is forbidding the assumption of a liability you cannot control and do not understand, particularly for someone you do not know well. Proverbs 11:15 says he who is surety for a stranger will

suffer, and 22:26–27 asks why your bed should be taken out from under you. The Bible commands open-handed giving everywhere (Deuteronomy 15:7–8; Galatians 6:10; 1 John 3:17). The difference is between giving what you have and pledging what you do not have against another person's behavior. The urgency of 6:3–5 is striking: go, humble yourself, plead, do not sleep until you are free of it.

4. *Go to the ant (6:6–11). List everything the ant does and everything the text says it does not have. Then note the exact way poverty arrives in verse 11.*

The ant provides her supplies in the summer and gathers her food in the harvest, and she does it with no captain, overseer, or ruler. Nobody makes her; she simply does the work when the work is possible. Poverty in verse 11 comes not by catastrophe but by installments: a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest. Then it arrives “like a prowler,” all at once, as though from nowhere, though it had been walking toward him the whole time.

5. *Solomon tells a man to keep his way far from her door (5:8). Name the door you have been walking past “just to look,” and change the route this week: the app, the drive home, the account you follow, the friendship you keep warm for the wrong reason.*

Answers will vary. Look for a specific door and a specific change of route, not a resolution to be more careful. Note that Solomon's counsel is not “stand at the door and resist”; it is keep far from it. Second Timothy 2:22 says flee, and Romans 13:14 says make no provision for the flesh. Removing the opportunity is a spiritual act, not a sign of weakness.

## HANDLE WITH CARE

- This is frank material for a mixed class. Teach it plainly and without embarrassment, but do not linger on the vivid details. The warning is aimed at both sexes; do not let it become a lesson about dangerous women.
- Proverbs is general principle, not guarantee. A faithful person can be poor, and diligence is not a promise of wealth. Do not let the sluggard passages become a rebuke of the unemployed, the ill, or the disabled.
- The surety passages are not a prohibition of generosity or of helping family. Keep the distinction clear, and remember 1 Timothy 5:8.
- “The wife of your youth” can sting a widow, a divorced person, or someone in a hard marriage. Say something deliberate and kind to the whole room, not only to the comfortably married.

## Your Father Who Sees

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 5 dealt with the reach of God's commands; chapter 6 deals with motive. Jesus takes the three most visible acts of Jewish piety, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, and treats each one identically: here is what the hypocrites do, here is the reward they get, here is what you should do, and here is what your Father does. The word translated "have their reward" was a commercial term meaning paid in full, receipt given. The applause was the payment. There is nothing further coming.

The model prayer sits inside the section on prayer, and its structure teaches as much as its words. Three petitions concerning God come first: His name, His kingdom, His will. Then three concerning us: bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from temptation and the evil one. Before a single request for ourselves, the prayer has already put God's honor and God's purpose ahead of our needs. Most of our praying reverses that order, and the reversal shows.

Then the second half of the chapter, which is really one argument in three movements: where your treasure is your heart will be, a divided eye darkens the whole body, and no one can serve two masters. From there Jesus moves straight to anxiety, which is not a change of subject at all. Worry is what happens when the treasure is somewhere it can be lost. The answer He gives is not positive thinking but a Father who feeds birds, clothes fields, and already knows what you need.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were the three great pillars of Jewish devotion in the first century, which is why Jesus chooses these three.
- The synagogues and street corners were public places where a person could be seen. Jesus is not forbidding public prayer (Acts 4:24; 1 Timothy 2:8) but performance.
- Jesus says "when you fast," not "if," speaking to Jews under the Old Covenant for whom fasting was customary. Fasting is never commanded of Christians as a rite in the New Testament, though it appears (Acts 13:2–3; 14:23).
- "Your kingdom come" was prayed before Pentecost, when the kingdom was still future. It came with power in Acts 2 (Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). A Christian today does not pray for the kingdom to arrive; he prays for the reign of Christ to be honored and extended.
- "Daily bread" uses a rare word meaning bread for the coming day. The request is deliberately modest, and it matches the manna in Exodus 16.
- The section on anxiety addresses food, drink, and clothing, that is, genuine necessities. Jesus is not scolding people for caring about real needs; He is redirecting where they look for them.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Three times in 6:1–18 Jesus says of the hypocrites, "they have their reward." Talk about what that sentence means. Why is a human audience such a poor trade, and where are the people in this room most tempted to make it?*

To have your reward is to be paid in full. The hypocrite wanted to be seen by men, and he was seen by men. The transaction closed. Jesus is not saying the giving did no good for the poor; He is saying the giver got exactly what he purchased and there is nothing in heaven waiting for him. It is one of the most chilling things in the sermon precisely because it is so calm.

The poor trade is obvious once you name what each currency buys. Human approval is thin, short, and has to be renewed constantly; the Father's approval is settled and eternal. As for where we are tempted, do not let the class

point at televangelists. Ask about the small things: the giving that quietly wants to be known, the public prayer shaped for the listeners, the ministry that stops being satisfying when nobody notices, the social post about a good deed. Ask a diagnostic question: what have you done for God in the last month that no one but God knows about?

**Question 2.** *Walk through the model prayer in 6:9–13 one phrase at a time. What comes first, what comes second, and how does that order compare with the way most of us actually pray? Then look at what Jesus chooses to underline in 6:14–15.*

Take the phrases in order. Our Father in heaven puts relationship and reverence together in five words. Hallowed be Your name makes God's honor the first request. Your kingdom come and Your will be done put God's purpose ahead of ours. Only then: give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one. Ask the class to compare that with a typical prayer, which usually opens with needs and stays there. This is not a rule about word order; it is a discipline of attention.

Then note what Jesus singles out in 6:14–15. Of everything in the prayer, He circles back to forgiveness, and He states it both positively and negatively: forgive and you will be forgiven; refuse and you will not be. That is not salvation by works, and it is not a denial of grace. It is a statement about what kind of heart can receive grace at all. A person unwilling to release a debt has not understood the size of the one he was released from, which is precisely the point of the parable in Matthew 18:21–35.

**Question 3.** *Jesus commands us not to worry three times (6:25, 31, 34) and supplies reasons rather than just orders. Which of His reasons lands hardest on you, and what is the specific worry you would have to hand over this week in order to obey Him?*

The reasons are worth listing on the board, because Jesus argues rather than simply commands. Life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Your heavenly Father feeds the birds, and you are worth more than they. Worrying cannot add a single cubit to your stature, so it is useless. The lilies outdress Solomon without effort. The Gentiles, who have no Father, chase after these things; you have a Father, and He knows you need them. Seek His kingdom first and these will be added. And tomorrow will have its own trouble, so stop carrying it today.

Ask which reason lands, and expect different answers. Some people are moved by the futility argument, some by the birds, and some by the simple fact that a Father knows. Then get to the specific worry, because worry is never general. It has a name: a diagnosis, a child, a job, a checking account, an aging parent. Philippians 4:6–7 and 1 Peter 5:7 give the practical mechanism: the worry is converted into a specific prayer with thanksgiving, and the peace is what God gives back. Ask for the name of the worry and for a time each day this week when it will be prayed instead of rehearsed.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *List the three acts of righteousness in 6:1–18. For each one, write down what the hypocrites do, what Jesus commands instead, and what the Father does in response.*

Giving: the hypocrites sound a trumpet in synagogues and streets to be honored by men, and they have their reward; Jesus says do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, and the Father who sees in secret will reward you. Prayer: the hypocrites love to stand and pray in synagogues and on street corners to be seen, and Gentiles use vain repetition; Jesus says go into your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father in secret, who sees and rewards. Fasting: the hypocrites look gloomy and disfigure their faces so men will notice, and they have their reward; Jesus says wash your face and anoint your head so that only the Father sees, and He will reward you. The pattern is identical three times: hidden from men, seen by God.

**2.** *Compare Matthew 6:14–15 with Matthew 18:21–35 and Ephesians 4:32. What is the stated relationship between being forgiven by God and forgiving other people?*

Matthew 6:14–15 makes God's forgiveness of us conditional on our forgiveness of others. Matthew 18:21–35 gives the reason in story form: a servant forgiven a debt he could never repay throttles a fellow servant over a trifle, and his master reverses the pardon. Ephesians 4:32 sets the standard and the motive together, forgiving one another

even as God in Christ forgave you. The relationship is not that our forgiving earns God's; it is that a heart still clenched around someone else's debt has not actually received or understood God's forgiveness. Grace that does not flow through was never received.

3. Trace the word "treasure" through 6:19–21. Write down the three things Jesus says about treasure stored on earth, and note which direction He says the heart travels.

He says moth and rust destroy it, thieves break in and steal it, and where it is, the heart follows. Note the direction carefully: Jesus does not say put your heart in the right place and your treasure will follow. He says put the treasure there and the heart will go after it. That is why giving changes people. The account you fund is the account you begin to care about, which is a mercy and a warning at the same time.

4. Verses 22 and 23 speak of the eye as the lamp of the body, and they sit between the paragraph on treasure and the one on two masters. Explain how the eye connects those two ideas.

In Hebrew idiom a "good" or single eye is one that is generous and undivided, while a "bad" or evil eye is stingy and grasping (compare Proverbs 22:9 and 28:22). So the eye paragraph is not an unrelated aside about vision. Sandwiched between treasure and masters, it says that how you look at money determines whether your whole inner life is full of light or full of darkness. A divided eye cannot aim at two treasures; a grasping eye darkens everything. Then verse 24 states the conclusion bluntly: you cannot serve God and mammon.

5. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (6:33). Look honestly at where your first hour, your first dollar, and your first thought went yesterday, then change one of the three this week and keep a record of what happens.

Answers will vary. The three items are deliberately chosen to be measurable. Look for a real change, moving the contribution to the front of the pay period, moving prayer to before the phone, or naming the first thought that occupies them on waking. Ask the following week what it cost and what changed.

## HANDLE WITH CARE

- The model prayer is a pattern, not a required liturgy (Luke 11:2 gives it in a shorter form). It is not wrong to pray these words, but Jesus has just warned against vain repetition; the point is content and order, not recitation.
- Matthew 6:14–15 must not be softened. At the same time, do not let it be heard as salvation by works. Forgiveness is God's gift, and an unforgiving heart is evidence that the gift has not been received.
- "Do not lay up treasures on earth" is not a prohibition of saving, planning, or insurance. Scripture commends the ant's forethought (Proverbs 6:6–8) and requires providing for one's household (1 Timothy 5:8). The issue is where the heart is anchored.
- Fasting: Jesus assumes it among Jews under the Old Covenant. It is never bound on Christians. If someone chooses to fast, let it be as this passage says, unannounced.
- "Your kingdom come": be clear that the kingdom came on Pentecost and Christ reigns now. This is a good, quiet opportunity to correct premillennial assumptions without a debate.

## We Must Obey God

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The pressure escalates in this reading, and so does the courage. The Sadducees arrest the apostles publicly, and God empties the jail overnight without a sound. Notice what the angel tells them to do: not run, not hide, but “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.” They are back teaching at daybreak. The captain has to fetch them without violence because he is afraid of being stoned by the crowd.

The council’s complaint in 5:28 is almost comic: you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and you intend to bring this Man’s blood on us. Peter’s answer is the great charter of Christian conscience, and it is worth noting what it is not. It is not a claim that Christians may ignore any law they dislike. It is the narrow and absolute claim that when a human authority forbids what God commands, the Christian obeys God and accepts the consequences, which the apostles promptly do. They are beaten and they rejoice.

Then Luke records the first internal trouble: the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. What follows is a model of how a healthy congregation handles a legitimate complaint. The apostles do not deny it, do not scold the complainers, and do not abandon their own work to fix it. They put the matter before the whole body, set the character qualifications, let the congregation select the men, and pray over them. Verse 7 says the word of God spread and the number of disciples multiplied greatly. Conflict handled well is not a setback.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The Sadducees, who controlled the temple and denied the resurrection (Acts 23:8), are the driving force behind this opposition.
- Gamaliel was the most respected rabbi of his generation, a Pharisee, and the teacher under whom Saul of Tarsus studied (Acts 22:3).
- The beating in 5:40 was almost certainly the synagogue flogging of thirty-nine stripes, the same punishment Paul later received five times (2 Corinthians 11:24).
- The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews; the Hebrews were Aramaic-speaking. The friction was cultural and linguistic inside one congregation, not doctrinal.
- The seven are never called deacons in Acts 6, though the related verb for serving appears. Whether or not they held that office, the qualifications and the principle of appointing qualified men to practical work stand (1 Timothy 3:8–13).
- Stephen is the first of the seven named, and his arrest at the end of the reading sets up the sermon and the stoning of chapter 7.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** Peter answers the council in 5:29 with a single sentence: “We ought to obey God rather than men.” Talk about where that principle applies and where it does not. How do we hold it together with Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17?

The principle is narrow and it is absolute. When a governing authority commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, the Christian obeys God. That is the whole of Acts 5:29, and the examples in Scripture are consistent: the midwives in Exodus 1, Daniel at his window, the three men before the furnace, the apostles here. Notice what the apostles do not do. They do not resist arrest, they do not deny the council’s authority, they do not organize a rebellion, and they accept the beating without complaint.

Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17 command submission to governing authorities as ordained by God, honor for the king, and the paying of taxes, and both were written while Rome was ruled by men no Christian admired. Put the two together and you get the pattern: broad, cheerful submission, narrow and costly exception, and no violence. Ask the class where the line might actually fall for them, and steer away from politics as such toward the real cases: being told to falsify a record, being pressured to affirm what Scripture denies, being told to stop speaking of Christ at work.

**Question 2.** *The apostles walked out of a flogging rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for His name (5:41). That is not a normal human response to a beating. What had changed in those men, and what would have to change in us before that sentence could be written about our congregation?*

What had changed was their understanding of whose name they bore. Luke says they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name. Shame was the point of a public flogging, and they took it as an honor because it associated them with Jesus. Compare Matthew 5:11–12, which they had heard from His own mouth, and Philippians 3:10 and 1 Peter 4:13–16. This is not a personality trait; it is the natural result of believing that the crucified Man is on the throne.

Be careful with the second half. Do not let the class romanticize persecution or manufacture it; there is a difference between suffering for Christ and being disliked for being obnoxious. But do press the honest question: most of us adjust our speech, our schedule, and our associations to avoid mild embarrassment. If a little awkwardness silences us, what would a flogging do? The path from here to there is not heroism; it is small faithfulness practiced now, and a settled conviction about who Jesus is.

**Question 3.** *Acts 6:1–7 records a real complaint in a growing church, brought into the open instead of buried or gossiped about. Look closely at how the apostles handled it. What does this teach us about complaints, about delegation, and about what leaders must refuse to be pulled away from?*

Notice the sequence. The complaint was real and it was voiced. The apostles did not treat the complainers as troublemakers, and they did not dismiss the grievance as a minor matter, because a neglected widow is not a minor matter (James 1:27). But they also refused to solve it themselves at the cost of their own assignment. They named the priority out loud in 6:2 and 6:4 and then organized the work so that both things got done.

Three things to press with the class. First, complaints brought into the open can be solved; complaints carried around the parking lot cannot. Second, the men chosen had to meet a character standard before anyone asked about their competence: of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom. Third, the apostles knew what they were for. Preachers and elders who let themselves be turned into building managers and event planners will eventually have a congregation that is well organized and poorly fed. Ask what your congregation currently expects of its leaders that Acts 6:4 would question.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *Trace what the angel tells the apostles to do in 5:20 and what they actually do in 5:21, 5:25, and 5:42. Where are they teaching, and how often?*

The angel says, “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.” They enter the temple at daybreak and teach (5:21). The officers report that they are standing in the temple teaching the people (5:25). After the beating, 5:42 says that daily, in the temple and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. So it is the most public place in the city and also every private home, and it is daily. Note that the flogging changed the location count not at all.

**2.** *Gamaliel’s advice in 5:34–39 sounds wise and has been quoted for two thousand years. Read it carefully. Where is he right, and where would his rule be dangerous if a person adopted it as a general principle?*

He is right that no human plan can overthrow what God is doing, and he is right that patience is often wiser than panic; his counsel spared the apostles that day. He is also right in 5:39 that fighting this movement might mean fighting God. Where the rule breaks down is as a general test of truth. Success is not proof of divine approval, and failure is not proof of error, as Gamaliel’s own examples show only partially and as history shows repeatedly; false

movements have lasted for centuries and faithful preachers have died with few converts. Truth is decided by the word of God (Acts 17:11), not by how a movement polls in fifty years. Gamaliel's neutrality also let him avoid the one decision that mattered, which is its own warning.

3. *List the qualifications required of the seven men in 6:3 and compare them with 1 Timothy 3:8–13. What kind of man does the Lord's church need for its practical work, and why do character requirements come before ability?*

Seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom. First Timothy 3:8–13 adds reverence, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience, tested first, husbands of one wife, ruling their children and houses well, and it speaks of their wives as well. Character comes first because the work is handling other people's money, food, and dignity, and because a congregation that puts capable but untrustworthy men into service will pay for it. Ability can be trained; character has to be proven.

4. *Acts 6:4 contains the apostles' own statement of their priorities. Write it out word for word. What did they refuse to be pulled away from, and why does that still matter for preachers and elders today?*

"But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." They refused to leave the word of God to serve tables, not because serving tables is beneath a Christian (Jesus washed feet) but because their particular assignment could not be delegated and this one could. It matters today because the drift is constant. Prayer and the word are the first things squeezed out of a preacher's week, and they are the two things nobody else can do for the congregation.

5. *The seven were chosen so that no widow would be overlooked. Name the person in our congregation most likely to be overlooked this month, and do one specific thing for that person before Sunday.*

Answers will vary. Push past the obvious. The widow everyone already visits is not the one being overlooked. Ask about the new family that has attended six weeks and been invited nowhere, the member in a care facility across town, the single mother who leaves quickly, the teenager who sits alone. One specific action before Sunday: a meal, a visit, a phone call, a seat saved.

## HANDLE WITH CARE

- Acts 5:29 is regularly stretched to justify disobeying any law a Christian dislikes. Keep it narrow: it applies where God commands what men forbid, or forbids what men command. Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 remain in force, and the apostles accepted the penalty without violence.
- The angel opening the prison and the signs of this period confirmed the word (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4). Teach their purpose, and do not build expectations of similar deliverances today.
- The seven of Acts 6 are described as men, chosen by the congregation and appointed by the apostles. If the role of women comes up, answer it kindly from 1 Timothy 2:11–12 and 3:8–13 and move on rather than letting it consume the hour.
- Gamaliel's counsel is reported, not endorsed. Do not let a class adopt "wait and see whether it succeeds" as a test of truth.
- The charges against Stephen in 6:13–14 involve the temple and the Law, and they are called false witness. What Stephen evidently taught, that Christ would change the customs of Moses, was true. Keep the distinction clear; it sets up chapter 7.

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**NEXT WEEK'S READING:** Genesis 37–43 • Proverbs 6:20–7:27 • Matthew 7–8:13 • Acts 7:1–53

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