

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 6 OF 104

Hearing and Doing

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Genesis 37-43
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 6:20-7:27
Gospels	Matthew 7-8:13
General New Testament	Acts 7:1-53

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

The aim this week is to close the gap between hearing and doing. Your class knows more Bible than they are using, and so does every teacher who has ever stood in front of one. Joseph's brothers heard a dream and hated the dreamer. The young man of Proverbs 7 had a father's warning and a street corner, and chose the corner. Jesus ended His sermon with two men who heard identical words. Stephen told a council that had the Scriptures memorized that they had resisted the Spirit their entire history.

Doctrinally, two passages carry real weight. Matthew 7:21-23 shows that saying "Lord, Lord," and even performing wonders, settles nothing; the test is doing the Father's will, which is fatal to salvation by profession only and to the notion that a believer can never fall. And Acts 7:51 shows that the Holy Spirit can be resisted, which answers irresistible grace directly. Handle both plainly and without heat. Also keep Genesis 50:20 and James 1:13 together so nobody leaves thinking God authors evil.

Formationally, the thread is the small decision made early. Joseph settled his answer to Potiphar's wife before the day he needed it. The young man in Proverbs 7 lost the fight at the street corner, not at her door. The wise builder dug down to rock in fair weather, long before the storm. Ask your class this, and give them time: what did you hear from God in the last month that you have quietly filed away rather than obeyed, and what is the first small thing you will do about it before Sunday?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Matthew 7-8:13. It gives the week its central image and its sharpest doctrinal question. Spend the first part on "judge not," which everyone has an opinion about, then give the heart of the hour to 7:21-27 and the two builders.

Second session: Take up Genesis 37-43. It is the best narrative in the program so far and it teaches providence better than any lecture could. Focus on chapter 39 and the refrain that the Lord was with Joseph, and save Judah and Tamar for a brief, honest word rather than a long detour.

The other two readings: Acts 7:1-53 and Proverbs 6:20-7:27 fit the extended questions. Ask the class to read Stephen's speech with a pen, marking every place God shows up outside the land, and warn them that Proverbs 7 is a scene, not a lecture, and should be read as one.

The Dreamer in the Pit

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The Joseph narrative is the longest sustained story in Genesis, and it is told with unusual literary care. Everything in the first chapter comes back later: the coat, the pit, the silver, the deception of a father by his sons using a garment and an animal's blood. Jacob, who deceived his own father with a goat and a garment, is now deceived by his sons with a goat and a garment. Moses does not comment. He lets the reader feel it.

Chapter 38 looks like an interruption and is not. It is placed deliberately beside chapter 39 so that the reader sees Judah and Joseph side by side: one man who goes in to a woman he takes for a prostitute, and one man who runs from a woman who will not leave him alone. It is also the chapter in which Judah, confronted with his own hypocrisy, says the first honest sentence of his life: "She has been more righteous than I." That change in Judah is going to matter enormously in chapter 44.

Running underneath all of it is a quiet refrain. The Lord was with Joseph in Potiphar's house. The Lord was with Joseph in the prison. Nothing in his circumstances supported that sentence, and Moses keeps writing it anyway. Joseph does not know what God is doing; the reader is told. That is the pastoral gift of this narrative to a class full of people in the middle of stories whose endings they cannot see.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Joseph is seventeen at the start of chapter 37 and thirty when he stands before Pharaoh (41:46), so roughly thirteen years pass between the pit and the palace.
- Twenty shekels of silver was the going price of a slave in that era. Later, under the Law, thirty shekels was the compensation for a slave gored by an ox (Exodus 21:32).
- Egypt at this time was a settled, bureaucratic power with granaries, a court, a prison system, and a practice of elevating capable foreigners.
- Dreams in Genesis are a means of divine revelation before there was written Scripture. God has now spoken finally in His Son (Hebrews 1:1–2), and Christians do not look for guidance this way.
- Chapter 38 explains the origin of the line of Judah through Perez, whose name appears in the genealogy of Christ (Matthew 1:3; Ruth 4:18–22).
- This is still centuries before the Law of Moses. Read these chapters for what they show about God's providence, human sin, and the slow healing of a family.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Genesis 39 is the record of a man who had every reason to think God had forgotten him. Watch for the phrase that keeps returning in 39:2, 21, and 23. How does Moses want you to read Joseph's slavery and imprisonment, and what does that suggest about a hard season you cannot explain?*

The refrain is the key to the chapter: "the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man"; "the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy"; "the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper." Moses attaches those sentences to the two worst addresses in Joseph's life, a slave quarters and a dungeon. Success in this chapter does not mean comfort or vindication; it means that God was present and at work in a situation Joseph would never have chosen and could not escape.

Draw the application carefully, because it is easily cheapened. This passage does not promise that every hard season ends in a palace; Hebrews 11:36–39 lists faithful people who were sawn in two. What it says is that the presence of God is not measured by the pleasantness of the circumstance. Ask the class to name a season they now understand that they did not understand at the time, then ask, gently, what they might be in the middle of

right now. Most people can look back and see God's hand. The work of faith is trusting it while you are still in the cistern.

Question 2. *Genesis 38 interrupts the Joseph story with Judah and Tamar, an account of broken promises, a widow treated unjustly, and a man caught by his own hypocrisy. Why is that chapter placed right here, and what does Matthew 1:3 eventually do with those names?*

Chapter 38 is there for at least three reasons. First, contrast: Judah goes in to a woman he believes is a prostitute while Joseph, in the very next chapter, flees one. Second, character: Judah is the brother who proposed selling Joseph (37:26–27), and this chapter shows how far down he had gone and where his turn began. When Tamar produces his staff and signet, Judah says, “She has been more righteous than I,” and the man who says that in chapter 38 becomes the man who offers himself as a substitute for Benjamin in chapter 44. Third, lineage: Perez is born here, and the Messiah comes through this line.

Matthew 1:3 puts Tamar in the genealogy of Jesus, one of four women named there alongside Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. God did not pick a clean family tree. Let the class sit with that. The gospel is not a reward for respectable ancestry, and nobody in the room is disqualified by a family history they did not choose. Ask what it does to a person to know that God built the line of the Christ through a chapter like this one.

Question 3. *Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife and asked, “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (39:9). Notice whom he named as the injured party. Where do you need a sentence prepared in advance like that one, and what would running actually look like in your situation?*

Joseph names two offenses and puts them in a striking order. The first is against Potiphar: “he has committed all that he has to my hand... nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife.” The second and greater is against God. Note that the woman was not asking for a lifelong betrayal; she was asking for an afternoon nobody would know about. Joseph answers as if God were a person in the room, because He was.

The practical point is that Joseph clearly had this settled before the day it was needed, because he answers immediately and he answers the same way “day by day” (39:10) until finally he simply runs and leaves his coat behind. Ask each person for their sentence, in their own words, for their own specific temptation. Then ask what running looks like: leaving the room, ending the friendship, changing the route, handing someone else the password. Genesis is clear that the honorable thing occasionally costs you your coat and your reputation for a while.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the coat, the pit, the twenty pieces of silver, and the bloodied garment through chapter 37. Then count the deceptions in chapters 37 through 39 and note who is deceived each time.*

The coat marks him out as the favorite and becomes the instrument of the lie. The pit is empty of water, which is why he does not drown and can be sold. The twenty pieces of silver make the crime profitable, and a reader who knows the rest of the Bible will remember another betrayal for silver. The bloodied garment lets the brothers deceive their father without ever telling an outright lie; they simply ask him to identify it. As for deceptions: the brothers deceive Jacob, Judah deceives Tamar about Shelah, Tamar deceives Judah, and Potiphar's wife deceives her husband with Joseph's garment. Garments and lies keep turning up together in this family.

2. *Read Genesis 50:20 beside Romans 8:28. The brothers meant evil and God meant good. Explain the difference between saying God caused their sin and saying God overruled it, and why that difference matters.*

To say God caused their sin would make God the author of evil, which Scripture flatly denies (James 1:13; 1 John 1:5). Genesis 50:20 says the brothers meant it for evil, and the guilt is entirely theirs. What God did was to weave their free and wicked choice into a purpose that saved many people alive. Romans 8:28 says the same: God works all things together for good for those who love Him. The comfort is real and it is not a denial of evil. God is not the cause of the pit; He is sovereign over what the pit becomes.

3. List every position Joseph is placed in through chapters 39 through 41, from slave to prisoner to administrator, and note what happens to the work in front of him in each one.

Slave in Potiphar's house, then overseer of the whole household; prisoner, then trusted with all the prisoners; interpreter of dreams; and finally second only to Pharaoh over all Egypt. In every case the pattern is identical: he does the work in front of him so well that whoever is over him stops supervising. Joseph never once campaigns for a promotion, and he never sulks over an assignment beneath him. Colossians 3:22-24 is the New Testament version of the same disposition.

4. Genesis 42:21-22 records what the brothers say to each other under pressure, twenty years after the fact. What does their conversation tell you about a guilt that was never confessed and never forgiven?

They say, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear." Twenty years later the detail that surfaces is his face and his begging, which means they had been carrying that memory the entire time. Reuben adds a bitter, useless "I told you so." Unconfessed guilt does not dissolve with time; it goes underground and resurfaces the moment pressure is applied. Psalm 32:3-5 describes the same experience from the inside, and 1 John 1:9 gives the only real remedy.

5. Joseph interpreted a cupbearer's dream and then sat in a cell two more years because the man forgot him. Name the place where you are currently waiting and feeling forgotten, and decide what faithfulness will look like there this week, before anything changes.

Answers will vary. Listen for the ordinary version of the prison: a job with no recognition, a marriage in a long cold stretch, caring for a parent, an illness, a ministry nobody notices. Faithfulness in that place usually looks small and concrete, doing the work well, refusing bitterness, continuing to serve the people around you. Genesis 40:6-7 is worth pointing out: Joseph, in prison and forgotten, notices that two other men look sad and asks them why.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Genesis 38 is frank. Deal with it honestly and briefly in a mixed class, name the injustice done to Tamar as a widow denied her rights, and do not turn the hour into a study of levirate custom.
- Providence, not fatalism: God did not author the brothers' sin. Keep Genesis 50:20 and James 1:13 together so the class does not come away thinking God arranges evil.
- Joseph is often preached as a type of Christ, and there are genuine parallels the New Testament nowhere draws out. Use them with restraint, and never at the expense of what the text is actually saying.
- Dreams here are revelation in an age before the completed word. Do not leave a class expecting God to guide them by dreams today (Hebrews 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

A Lamp on a Dark Street

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

This reading is the second and third of Solomon's three great warnings about sexual sin, and the method is different in each. Chapter 5 traced the road to its end. Here in 6:20–35 the method is argument: short, blunt questions and a cost analysis. Can a man take fire to his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Nobody steals bread and is despised the way an adulterer is; a thief can make restitution sevenfold, but the man who destroys a marriage cannot pay it back, and the jealousy of a wronged husband will not be bought off.

Chapter 7 abandons argument altogether and simply tells a story. The teacher stands at his window, looks through the lattice, and watches it happen. The observational detail is devastating: it is twilight, in the black and dark night; the young man is among the simple ones; he passes along the street near her corner; he takes the way to her house. Nobody forced him. He walked there, in the dark, with time on his hands.

Then she speaks, and her speech is a study in seduction. She meets him with a kiss and a brazen face. She mentions her peace offerings, which is to say she brings God into it. She flatters him: I came out to meet you, to seek your face diligently, and I have found you. She describes the bed in detail. And she closes with the argument that always closes the sale: my husband is not home, and he will not return until the appointed day. Verse 21 says she seduced him with her many persuasive words. Verse 22 says he went after her immediately, like an ox to the slaughter.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Under the Law of Moses adultery was a capital offense for both parties (Leviticus 20:10), which is part of what lies behind 6:32–35.
- “The lamp” and “the light” language of 6:23 anticipates Psalm 119:105, where God's word is the lamp to the feet.
- The woman of chapter 7 is a married woman, not a professional prostitute, though she is dressed like one (7:10, 19).
- Her mention of peace offerings and vows (7:14) means she has been at the temple that day. Religious observance and sexual sin have coexisted comfortably in every generation.
- Proverbs addresses the son because it is a father's instruction to a young man. The warnings apply fully to both sexes, and every teacher should say so out loud.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Proverbs 6:27–29 asks two questions everyone already knows the answer to. Read them out loud. Why do we keep quietly believing we will be the exception, and what has to happen in a person before the obvious becomes obvious again?*

The questions are rhetorical because the physics are not in dispute. Fire burns. Everyone in the room agrees, and everyone in the room has at some point behaved as though an exception might be made for them. The mechanism is worth naming: sin does not usually present itself as a decision to be destroyed. It presents itself as a small, manageable, private thing that other people mishandled because they were careless and you will not be.

What restores the obvious is usually one of two things: the truth spoken by someone close enough to say it, or the sight of the wreckage in somebody else's life. That is why verse 23 puts reproof in the same sentence as the way of life. Ask the class the practical question: who has permission to say a hard sentence to you, and when did you last let them? A man who has nobody like that has removed the one instrument God ordinarily uses to keep him from the fire.

Question 2. Read 7:6–23 as the scene it is, and notice the details: the hour of the day, the direction he walks, the corner he chooses, and every argument she makes. At what point in that sequence could this have been stopped, and who was in a position to stop it?

Walk the class through the sequence slowly, because the point is that nothing dramatic happens for a long time. He is among the simple. He is out at twilight with nothing to do. He walks the street near her corner, which means he knows where she lives. He takes the way toward her house. Only then does she appear. Every link in that chain was breakable, and every link looked harmless: a walk, a route, an hour with nothing scheduled.

As for who could have stopped it: he could have, at any of four or five points. His father tried, and the chapter opens with the instruction that he apparently had and did not use. A friend could have, if he had one who knew where he was going. And the father watching through the lattice could have called out, which raises a good question for parents and for the church. Do not let the class settle for “he should have been stronger.” The biblical counsel is not to be stronger at the door; it is not to be at the door (5:8; 2 Timothy 2:22; Romans 13:14).

Question 3. Verse 6:23 says a commandment is a lamp and reproof is the way of life. In our homes, whose voice is functioning as that lamp for our children, and what are we actually doing this year to make sure the loudest voice in their ears is not the one from chapter 7?

This is the practical heart of the passage for most classes, because most of the adults in the room are more likely to be the father in the story than the young man. The commandment is a lamp only if the child has actually heard it. Deuteronomy 6:6–9 describes a home where God’s word is the ordinary furniture of conversation, and Ephesians 6:4 puts the charge on fathers specifically.

Get concrete, because good intentions are useless here. What does a family actually do? Reading Scripture together, even briefly, at a set time. Talking about what happened at school in moral categories rather than only logistical ones. Knowing what is on the screens. Keeping the home a place where a hard question can be asked without an explosion. And, hardest of all, the parents’ own visible obedience, because children learn far more from what a father does with his phone and his temper than from what he says at the table.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. List everything the father tells the son to do with his instruction in 6:20–22, and note the three times of day or situations in which he says it will be with him.

He tells him to keep his father’s command, not to forsake his mother’s law, to bind them continually on his heart, and to tie them around his neck. Then verse 22 names three situations: when you roam, it will lead you; when you sleep, it will keep you; and when you awake, it will speak with you. Instruction that has been internalized becomes a guide on the road, a guard at night, and a voice in the morning. Notice that all three are times when no other person is present.

2. Proverbs 6:30–35 sets a thief beside an adulterer. Trace the comparison point by point. Why does Solomon say the adulterer’s case is the worse of the two?

A thief who steals because he is starving is not despised in the same way, and if caught he can restore sevenfold, even if it costs him everything in his house. The adulterer, by contrast, destroys his own soul, receives wounds and dishonor, and his reproach is not wiped away. And there is a further factor: the rage of a wronged husband, who will not accept compensation and will not spare in the day of vengeance. Solomon’s point is that this particular sin creates a debt that cannot be paid back. You can replace money. You cannot replace a marriage, a childhood, or a name.

3. Compare the woman’s speech in 7:14–20 with the serpent’s words in Genesis 3:1–5 and with the categories in 1 John 2:16. What methods do the two speeches share?

Both appeal to appetite, both promise pleasure with no mention of consequence, both create a false sense of safety, and both misrepresent the situation. The serpent says you will not surely die; she says my husband is not at home and will come home on the appointed day. Both also use religious or elevated language to smooth the way: the serpent talks about being like God knowing good and evil, and she mentions her peace offerings and her vows. First

John 2:16 names the three doors, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, and her speech uses all three: the bed, the embroidered coverings and fine linen, and the flattery that he in particular was the one she came out to find.

4. *Trace the young man's route in 7:6–9 and list every choice he made before he ever met her. Notice that not one of those choices, taken by itself, looked like sin.*

He was among the simple ones; he was idle; it was evening, in the black and dark night; he passed along the street near her corner; he took the way to her house. Not one of those is a sin in itself. A walk is not a sin. An evening with nothing planned is not a sin. That is exactly the warning. By the time the temptation is standing in front of him with her arms around his neck, the decisive choices are already behind him.

5. *Solomon says her house is the way to the grave (7:27). Write out, in one sentence, exactly what you will say to yourself at the moment of temptation this week, memorize it, and say it out loud to one person who will hold you to it.*

Answers will vary. Look for a sentence that is short enough to actually recall under pressure and personal enough to bite. Joseph's was "how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Others have used Psalm 119:9–11 or simply the name of the person who would be hurt. The requirement to say it to another person is the part most people will skip, and it is the part that gives it teeth.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- This is frank material for a mixed class. Be direct without being lurid, and say explicitly that the warnings apply to men and women alike.
- Do not let the lesson become moralism. Someone in the room has already failed here. First Corinthians 6:9–11 names these sins and then says, "and such were some of you, but you were washed." Preach the way out, not only the danger.
- Proverbs 6:32–35 reflects the seriousness of adultery under the Old Covenant, including the wronged husband's right of vengeance in that culture. Do not bind Old Covenant remedies on Christians; Romans 12:19 and Matthew 5:31–32 govern now.
- Be careful with parents in the room whose adult children have made these choices. The lamp can be lit faithfully and a child can still take the street corner. Proverbs states general principles, not guarantees.

Two Gates, Two Houses

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Matthew 7 is the landing of the whole sermon, and it lands hard. After two chapters of the highest standard ever set for human behavior, Jesus does not offer a technique. He offers a choice, and He frames it five different ways. Two gates. Two ways. Two kinds of tree. Two kinds of confession. Two builders. Each pair has a comfortable option and a costly one, and in each case the comfortable one ends badly.

In the middle stand the verses on prayer, and they are placed there on purpose. A standard this high creates exactly the desperation that drives a person to ask, seek, and knock. And Jesus roots the promise not in technique but in fatherhood: if you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him. The sermon that exposes you also tells you where to go with what it exposed.

Then He comes down, and Matthew immediately gives two miracles that illustrate the sermon's last point. A leper, ceremonially unclean and untouchable, kneels and says, "if You are willing." Jesus touches him, which nobody had done in years, and heals him. Then a Roman officer says he is not worthy to have Jesus under his roof and asks only for a word, because he understands authority. Jesus marvels, and He says something that must have shocked the crowd: many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, while the sons of the kingdom are cast out.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The Sermon on the Mount closes at 7:28–29 with the crowd astonished, because He taught as one having authority and not as the scribes, who taught by citing other rabbis.
- The narrow gate imagery would have been familiar; Jewish teaching also spoke of two ways, as do Deuteronomy 30:15–20 and Psalm 1.
- Leprosy in Scripture covers several serious skin conditions. Under the Law a leper was ceremonially unclean, excluded from the community, and required to announce his condition (Leviticus 13:45–46).
- Jesus tells the healed leper to show himself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded (8:4). The Law was still in force; the cross had not yet occurred.
- A centurion commanded roughly eighty to a hundred men. He was a Gentile and a representative of the occupying power, which makes Jesus' commendation of him pointed.
- "Sons of the kingdom" cast out and many coming from east and west is a warning to those who assumed physical descent from Abraham guaranteed them a place (compare Matthew 3:9; Romans 2:28–29; Galatians 3:29).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *"Judge not" may be the most quoted and least understood sentence in the Bible. Read 7:1–5 in full, then read 7:6, 7:15–20, and John 7:24. What is Jesus forbidding here, and what is He plainly requiring elsewhere?*

Jesus is forbidding hypocritical, censorious judgment, the habit of examining other people while remaining unexamined yourself. That is exactly what the illustration says: you cannot get the speck out of your brother's eye while a plank is in your own. Note that He does not say leave the speck alone. He says "first remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye." The goal is still the removal of the speck; the requirement is self-examination first and a genuine desire to help rather than to expose.

And He plainly requires discernment. In the very next verse He tells them not to give what is holy to dogs, which requires deciding who is which. In 7:15–20 He commands them to beware of false prophets and to inspect fruit.

John 7:24 says judge with righteous judgment. Galatians 6:1 has a spiritual person restoring one overtaken in a fault. First Corinthians 5 requires a congregation to act. Say it clearly: “judge not” is not a prohibition of moral evaluation, it is a prohibition of the plank-eyed variety. And say it gently, because the verse is usually quoted by people who have been hurt by someone with a plank.

Question 2. *In 7:21–23 Jesus describes people who prophesied, cast out demons, and did many wonders in His name, and He tells them He never knew them. That ought to unsettle us. What made the difference between them and the people who enter, and how does a person make sure he is not in the first group?*

The difference is stated twice. Verse 21: not everyone who says Lord, Lord, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Verse 23: I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness. The rejected group is not lacking sincerity, activity, or even results. They prophesied, cast out demons, and did many wonders, and Jesus does not dispute the claims. What they lacked was obedience to the Father’s will, and He calls their lives lawlessness even while their resumes were impressive.

This passage does two important things for a class. First, it makes plain that a warm feeling and an active religious life are not the test. Second, it is one of the strongest passages in the New Testament against salvation by profession alone, the “say this prayer and you are done” gospel. The test Jesus gives is doing the will of the Father, which the rest of the New Testament spells out: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized into Christ, and continuing faithfully (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Revelation 2:10). As for how a person makes sure, point to 2 Corinthians 13:5 and 2 Peter 1:10, and urge honest self-examination rather than anxiety.

Question 3. *The centurion was a Gentile, a soldier, and an outsider, and Jesus said He had not found faith like his in all Israel (8:10). Look at what the man understood about authority. Where would that kind of confidence change the way you pray this week?*

The centurion understood authority as a chain of command. He says, in effect, I am a man under authority with soldiers under me; I say go and he goes. He concluded that Jesus’ word carried the same kind of force over sickness that a Roman officer’s word carried over a soldier, and therefore that presence was unnecessary. Only speak a word. That is faith reasoning correctly from who Jesus is, and Jesus marvels, one of only two times the Gospels say He marveled.

The application to prayer is direct and a little convicting. Much of our praying is hedged, vague, and quietly braced for nothing to happen. The centurion asked one specific thing of one authoritative Person and expected it to be done. Ask the class to name one specific request they will make this week and then pay attention to whether they are actually expecting an answer. Pair it with Hebrews 4:16 and James 1:6–8, and be honest that confidence in God is not the same as certainty about the outcome; the centurion asked, he did not dictate.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the contrasting pairs in 7:13–27: two gates, two ways, two trees, two claims, two builders. In each pair, note what the two have in common as well as what separates them.*

Two gates and two ways: both are entered and both are traveled, but one is wide and easy with many on it and leads to destruction, and one is narrow and difficult with few finding it and leads to life. Two trees: both are trees and both bear fruit, but the fruit reveals the nature of the tree. Two claims: both say “Lord, Lord,” and only one does the will of the Father. Two builders: both hear the same words, both build houses, and both face the same storm, but one dug down to rock and one did not. Notice how much the pairs have in common. The difference is never obvious from the outside until the storm.

2. *Compare Matthew 7:7–11 with James 4:2–3 and 1 John 5:14–15. Does “ask and it will be given to you” mean God grants every request? State your answer and your reasons from all three passages.*

No. Matthew 7:7–11 is a promise that a good Father gives good things to children who ask, and the emphasis in the Greek is on persistent asking. James 4:3 says you ask and do not receive because you ask amiss, to spend it on your pleasures. First John 5:14–15 supplies the governing condition: this is the confidence we have, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. So the promise is real and it is not a blank check. God reserves the right to give

what is good rather than what is requested, which is precisely what a good father does (compare 2 Corinthians 12:7–9).

3. In 7:24–27 both men hear the same words and both houses meet the same storm. Write down the one difference between them, then read James 1:22–25 and note the picture James uses for the same failure.

The difference is that one heard the sayings and did them, and the other heard them and did not. That is the entire distinction; the storm is identical and the hearing is identical. James 1:22–25 uses the picture of a man who looks at his face in a mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what he looked like. Hearing without doing is not a lesser form of obedience. Jesus calls the man who does it foolish, and his house falls, and great is its fall.

4. The leper says, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean” (8:2). Note carefully what Jesus does before He says anything. Why would that particular action matter so much to a man in his condition?

Jesus put out His hand and touched him, and then said, “I am willing; be cleansed.” He could have healed with a word, as He does with the centurion’s servant in the very next paragraph, so the touch was chosen. A leper under the Law lived outside the camp, kept his clothing torn and his head uncovered, and cried “Unclean!” to warn people away. He had likely not been touched by another human being in years. The healing cured his body; the touch answered the isolation, and it told him what Jesus thought of him before He said a word.

5. Jesus ends the sermon by saying the difference is doing. Choose one specific command from Matthew 5, 6, or 7 that you have admired for years without obeying, and obey it this week.

Answers will vary. The point of the question is to convert admiration into obedience, so press for something specific from the sermon itself: reconciling with a brother before worship (5:23–24), the second mile (5:41), praying for an enemy (5:44), giving in secret (6:3–4), forgiving a debt (6:14–15), or treating someone the way they would want to be treated (7:12). Ask them to report back.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- “Judge not” will come up and is usually weaponized. Teach the whole context, including 7:6, 7:15–20, and John 7:24, and be careful to distinguish moral discernment from condemning hearts and motives, which belongs to God alone.
- Matthew 7:21–23 is a strong corrective to “faith only” and to “once saved, always saved,” and it should be taught plainly. It is also a passage that can frighten sincere Christians into doubting their standing. Pair it with 1 John 5:13 and 2 Peter 1:10–11 so the hour ends in assurance grounded in obedience, not in anxiety.
- Those in 7:22 claim miraculous works. Note that impressive works prove nothing by themselves (compare 2 Thessalonians 2:9), which bears directly on evaluating claims of miracles today.
- Jesus sends the leper to the priest under the Law of Moses (8:4). This is before the cross. Do not use it to bind Old Covenant practice on Christians.
- Matthew 8:11–12 concerns Gentiles being received and presumptuous Israelites excluded. Handle it as fulfilled in the church, where there is neither Jew nor Greek (Galatians 3:26–29), not as a prediction about a future political Israel.

Stephen Tells Their Own Story

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

At first reading Stephen's speech looks like a man refusing to answer the charge. It is nothing of the sort. He is answering it precisely, and the council knows it. The accusation was that he spoke against this holy place and the Law. So Stephen retells their history in such a way that every major figure meets God somewhere other than the temple: Abraham in Mesopotamia before he ever saw Canaan, Joseph in Egypt, Moses at a bush in the Midian desert, the nation in the wilderness with a portable tent. God has never been confined to a building.

The second thread is more pointed. Twice Stephen tells the story of a God-sent deliverer rejected by his own brothers and then vindicated. Joseph's brothers sold him, and God made him the savior of the family. Moses came to his brethren supposing they would understand, and they said, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" and forty years later God sent that same man back as ruler and deliverer. Stephen lays the pattern down twice and then lets the council finish the sentence themselves.

Then comes the turn in verse 51. It is abrupt, and some readers think Stephen lost his temper. He did not; he reached his conclusion. The charge is that this council stands exactly where their fathers stood: resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets, killing those who announced the coming of the Just One, and now betraying and murdering Him. They had the Law delivered by angels and did not keep it. It is the sharpest sermon conclusion in the New Testament, and it cost him his life.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Stephen is one of the seven appointed in Acts 6, a man full of faith, wisdom, and the Holy Spirit, and he is the first Christian put to death for the faith.
- The audience is the Sanhedrin, the same body that condemned Jesus and that had twice warned the apostles to stop speaking.
- Stephen's speech contains several details drawn from Jewish tradition and from the Greek Old Testament, including the number seventy-five in 7:14 and the involvement of angels in giving the Law (7:53; compare Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2).
- The temple was the center of Jewish national identity. To suggest that God's purposes were not tied to that building was, to this council, an attack on everything.
- "Uncircumcised in heart and ears" is not Stephen's invention; it is the language of Jeremiah 6:10 and 9:26 and Leviticus 26:41. He is indicting them with their own Scriptures.
- Saul of Tarsus is standing nearby, and the coats of the witnesses will be laid at his feet in the verses immediately after this reading (7:58).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Stephen was charged with speaking against the temple and the Law. Follow his answer and notice where God met Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. What is he demonstrating about where God can be found and worshiped?*

Follow the geography with the class; it is the backbone of the argument. The God of glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, before Haran and long before Canaan. God was with Joseph in Egypt, in a household and then a prison belonging to idolaters. God spoke to Moses at a burning bush in the Midian wilderness and told him the ground there was holy, which is a striking thing to say about a patch of desert far from Jerusalem. The tabernacle itself was a tent that moved.

The conclusion Stephen draws in 7:48–50 is Isaiah's, not his own: the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands. Heaven is His throne, earth is His footstool, and what house will you build Me? Stephen is not attacking the temple; he is refusing to let anyone treat it as God's address. Bring this forward to the class. Christians can make the same mistake about a building, a location, a set of traditions. John 4:21–24 settles it: neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, but in spirit and in truth.

Question 2. *Stephen tells two stories with the same shape: a deliverer rejected by his brothers the first time and vindicated the second. Read 7:9–10, then 7:23–35, and then 7:51–52. What is he saying about Jesus long before he ever says the name?*

The pattern is deliberate and repeated. Joseph: the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold him into Egypt, but God was with him and made him governor, and in the second visit his brothers came and he was made known to them. Moses: he supposed his brethren would understand that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not; they rejected him with “Who made you a ruler and a judge?”; and Stephen underlines it in 7:35, “This Moses whom they rejected... is the one God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer.” Twice the pattern is rejection first, deliverance second.

Then 7:51–52 collapses the whole argument onto them. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers. Stephen never has to argue that Jesus is the Messiah; he lets their own history make the case. The application for a class is uncomfortable and useful: God's messengers are usually rejected first by the people who should have recognized them. Ask who in the room has been resisting correction from someone God plainly sent.

Question 3. *Stephen ends with, “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you” (7:51). We resist God in quieter ways than stoning a preacher. Where have you been resisting something you already know God has said?*

Acts 7:51 is a doctrinally weighty sentence and worth pausing on. If a person can always resist the Holy Spirit, then the Spirit's work is not irresistible, and the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace does not stand. God draws men, and men can refuse. The Spirit works through the word preached (Ephesians 6:17; Romans 10:17), and Stephen's audience was resisting the word they were at that moment hearing.

Then bring it home quietly. Our resistance is rarely violent. It is the sermon we admire and file away. The command we have decided is culturally dated. The reconciliation we have postponed for three years. The giving we intend to increase when things settle down. Hebrews 3:12–15 speaks of an evil heart of unbelief that develops through the deceitfulness of sin and urges, “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” Ask each person to name their own “today,” and be ready to name your own.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Make a list of every person Stephen names from Abraham to Solomon, and note for each one where he was when God worked in his life. How many of those places are outside the land of Israel?*

Abraham in Mesopotamia and then Haran; Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs; Joseph in Egypt; Moses in Egypt, then in Midian, then at Sinai; Joshua bringing in the tabernacle; David; and Solomon. Count the settings: Mesopotamia, Haran, Egypt, Midian, Sinai, the wilderness. Almost every decisive encounter with God in the list happens outside the promised land and every one of them happens outside the temple, which is not built until the very last name on the list. That is Stephen's point, made entirely with facts his accusers already believed.

2. *Acts 7:37 quotes Deuteronomy 18:15 about a Prophet like Moses. Compare it with Acts 3:22–23 and Hebrews 1:1–2. Why does that one Old Testament promise keep appearing in apostolic preaching?*

Because it establishes that Moses himself pointed forward to someone greater and commanded Israel to hear Him. Deuteronomy 18:15–19 promises a Prophet from among their brethren with God's words in His mouth, and warns that God will require it of anyone who will not hear Him. Peter uses it in Acts 3:22–23 and adds that every soul who will not hear that Prophet will be utterly destroyed. Hebrews 1:1–2 states the conclusion: God, who spoke in times

past through the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son. To honor Moses and reject Christ is to disobey Moses.

3. *Acts 7:44–50 traces the tabernacle and the temple and then quotes Isaiah 66:1–2. Follow the argument, then read John 4:21–24. Where and how is God worshiped now?*

The tabernacle was made according to the pattern God showed Moses, carried in with Joshua, and stood until David, who asked to build a house. Solomon built it. Then Stephen quotes Isaiah: heaven is God's throne and earth His footstool, and no house built by human hands contains Him. John 4:21–24 completes the answer: the hour has come when true worshipers worship the Father neither at Gerizim nor at Jerusalem, but in spirit and in truth, because God is spirit. Worship now is not located; it is directed by truth, offered by the church wherever it gathers (Hebrews 10:24–25; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Acts 20:7).

4. *Stephen says in 7:53 that they received the law by the direction of angels and did not keep it. Read Galatians 3:19 and Hebrews 2:2, and explain what role the Law is playing in Stephen's charge against them.*

Galatians 3:19 says the Law was added because of transgressions, appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator, until the Seed should come. Hebrews 2:2 calls it the word spoken through angels, which proved steadfast, and argues that neglecting the greater salvation is far more serious. Stephen's charge uses the Law as the measure: you received it from God's own hand through angels, the highest possible credentials, and you have not kept it. The people most confident that they were defending the Law were the ones breaking it, which is the sharpest thing he says to them.

5. *Stephen, under arrest and on trial, preached the whole Old Testament from memory. Choose one Old Testament book you have never read carefully, and read the first ten chapters of it this week.*

Answers will vary, and the aim is simply to get Bibles open. Suggest a book that carries the story forward, such as Exodus or Joshua, or one they are unlikely to have read, such as Amos or Ruth. Ask them to bring one observation back to class.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Acts 7:51 teaches that the Holy Spirit can be resisted. Use it plainly against the doctrine of irresistible grace, and teach that the Spirit works through the revealed word (Romans 10:17; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12).
- Stephen's harsh words are a prophet's indictment of a particular council, in the tradition of Jeremiah and the prophets, not a license for contempt toward Jewish people. Say so, plainly, if the tone of the chapter troubles anyone.
- A few details in the speech, such as the seventy-five persons in 7:14 or the burial in Shechem in 7:16, differ from the Hebrew text of Genesis. These are honest questions with reasonable explanations. Acknowledge them calmly and do not let them consume the hour or shake anyone's confidence.
- The temple's obsolescence: Stephen is not despising the temple but denying that God is contained by it. Christians should hear the same warning about buildings, traditions, and locations of their own.
- Do not let the class conclude that the Old Testament is unimportant. Stephen's entire defense is built on it, and Romans 15:4 says it was written for our learning.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Genesis 44–50 · Proverbs 8 · Matthew 8:14–9:8 · Acts 7:54–8:40

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