

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 7 OF 104

Power to Forgive

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Genesis 44–50
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 8
Gospels	Matthew 8:14–9:8
General New Testament	Acts 7:54–8:40

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

The aim this week is to put the class in front of mercy exercised by someone who had every right to do otherwise. Joseph could have destroyed ten men and instead spoke to their hearts. Wisdom, who was present when the mountains were set in place, stands in the street calling to fools. Jesus, who could have healed a body and sent the man home impressed, forgave him instead. Stephen, with rocks in the air, asked God not to charge it to them. That is what the God of the Bible is like, and it is what He is forming in His people.

Doctrinally, three things want a firm hand. First, Genesis 50:20 with James 1:13: God overrules evil without authoring it. Second, Matthew 9:2–6: the authority to forgive sins belongs to God alone, which makes this an unmistakable claim to deity, proved by a verifiable miracle. Third, Acts 8:13–24: a baptized believer sinned and was told to repent and pray, which means Christians can fall and can be restored. Handle that last one plainly; it is one of the clearest passages in the New Testament on the subject.

Formationally, the thread is what a forgiven person does next. The paralytic got up and carried his own bed home. The Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. The scattered Christians preached wherever they landed. Joseph comforted the men who had sold him. Ask your class this, and ask for names rather than principles: who is waiting on your mercy, and what specifically will you do about it before next Sunday?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Genesis 44–50. It closes the first book of the Bible and it contains the two sentences your class should carry out of this quarter, Genesis 45:5 and Genesis 50:20. Read Judah's speech in 44:18–34 aloud; it is the turning point and it preaches itself.

Second session: Take up Acts 7:54–8:40. It gives you Stephen's death, the scattering of the church, a clear case of a Christian falling and being told how to return, and a conversion account that shows exactly what gospel preaching includes. If time forces a choice, give the second half of the hour to the Ethiopian.

The other two readings: Proverbs 8 and Matthew 8:14–9:8 fit the extended questions. Tell the class that Proverbs 8:22–31 is poetry and that they should read it for its beauty rather than mine it for doctrine about Christ, and ask them to read Matthew 8 and 9 watching for how wide Jesus' authority reaches.

You Meant It for Evil

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 44 is the climax of the whole Joseph narrative, and the test Joseph designs is precise. He recreates the original situation exactly: the favored son of Rachel is in trouble, and the other brothers can walk away free and clear. Twenty-two years earlier they took that deal. This time Judah, the very man who proposed selling Joseph, steps forward and offers his own life instead. He mentions their father fourteen times in that speech. These are not the same men.

What follows is one of the great reconciliation scenes in literature, and the theology in it is as striking as the emotion. Joseph does not minimize what they did; he names it plainly in 45:4, “Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.” And in the same breath he says, “do not be grieved or angry with yourselves... for God sent me before you to preserve life.” Both sentences are true. The second does not cancel the first.

The rest of the reading is the closing of an era. Jacob blesses Pharaoh, which is remarkable when you consider who held the power in that room. He adopts Joseph’s two sons, crosses his hands over them, and speaks the blessings of chapter 49, including the great promise over Judah that the scepter will not depart until Shiloh comes. Then he dies, and a fear surfaces in the brothers that had evidently been under the surface for seventeen years. Joseph weeps that they would think it of him, says the sentence that has comforted the suffering ever since, and asks that his bones be carried home. The book of beginnings ends with a coffin and a promise.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Roughly twenty-two years pass between the pit in chapter 37 and the reunion in chapter 45, and another seventeen before Jacob’s death (47:28).
- Jacob’s blessings in chapter 49 are prophetic statements about the tribes descended from each son, not merely fatherly good wishes. Simeon and Levi are still under the judgment of chapter 34.
- The promise to Judah in 49:10, that the scepter would not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes, is messianic and is fulfilled in Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5; Hebrews 7:14).
- Genesis 47:13–26 records Joseph’s famine administration, in which the Egyptians sold first their money, then their livestock, then their land and themselves, to Pharaoh. The text reports the policy without commending or condemning it.
- Embalming was Egyptian practice, and the seventy days of mourning for Jacob reflect Egyptian custom. Joseph is a Hebrew serving in a thoroughly Egyptian world.
- Genesis ends with the family in Egypt, seventy souls strong, exactly where God told Abraham they would be (15:13–16). The next book opens four centuries later.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Judah’s speech in 44:18–34 is the longest any brother makes in Genesis, and it ends with him offering to be a slave so Benjamin can go home to his father. Set the Judah of 37:26–27 beside the Judah of 44:33. What changed in that man, and what does genuine repentance look like when it finally arrives?*

What changed Judah is traceable in the text. Chapter 38 shows him at the bottom, and it shows the moment he first told the truth about himself: “She has been more righteous than I.” Then in 43:8–9 he offers himself as surety for Benjamin, and here in chapter 44 he makes good on it. His speech is not an argument about justice; it is a plea grounded entirely in what the loss would do to his father, the very father he helped deceive with a bloody coat.

Repentance, when it is real, looks like this. It is specific about the wrong. It does not bargain. It is willing to bear cost rather than transfer it. And it shows up years later in a situation where the old choice is available again and is refused. Second Corinthians 7:10–11 lists what godly sorrow produces: diligence, clearing of oneself, indignation,

fear, vehement desire, zeal, vindication. Ask the class what it would look like if a person in this room genuinely repented of the thing they are most known for. Then let the silence sit for a moment.

Question 2. *Joseph says twice, in 45:5–8 and again in 50:20, that God sent him and meant it for good. How can both things be true at the same time, that his brothers did a wicked thing and that God accomplished salvation through it, without making God responsible for their sin?*

Hold both halves firmly. Genesis 50:20 states them in one sentence: “you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good.” The brothers acted freely and wickedly, and the guilt is entirely theirs; Joseph never pretends otherwise, and neither does the narrative. What God did was to take a real evil, which He did not author and did not need, and weave it into a purpose that kept a family and a nation alive. Acts 2:23 says the same thing about the greatest crime in history: delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, and yet “you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.”

The line to guard is this: God is not the author of sin (James 1:13; 1 John 1:5; Habakkuk 1:13). He is sovereign over what sin produces. That distinction is the difference between a God who is good and a God who merely wins. Practically, it means a Christian can say with honesty that what was done to him was wrong, and that God has not wasted it. Romans 8:28 says He works all things together for good for those who love Him. Notice it does not say all things are good.

Question 3. *In 50:19 Joseph asks his terrified brothers, “Am I in the place of God?” That question is the hinge of his forgiveness. Whom are you still holding to account in a way that would have to be released before you could ask Joseph’s question honestly?*

The question in 50:19 is doing real work. Vengeance requires occupying a seat that belongs to God, judging the case, weighing the guilt, and assigning the sentence. Joseph declines the seat. Romans 12:19 says the same thing in New Testament terms: do not avenge yourselves, but give place to wrath, for vengeance is Mine, I will repay. Forgiveness is not pretending the debt was small. It is handing the ledger to the only One qualified to hold it.

Push the second half gently and expect the room to get quiet. Most Christians have a person they have declared forgiven in principle while still keeping the account open in practice: still telling the story, still noting the slights, still enjoying the news of their troubles. Ask what releasing that person would actually cost. And be careful here, because forgiveness is not the same as restored trust or restored access; Joseph forgave men he had also tested thoroughly. Say that plainly for anyone in the room who has been wounded badly.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace every time Joseph weeps from chapter 42 through chapter 50 and list the occasions. What do those tears tell you about a man who had every reason to have gone hard?*

He weeps when he first hears the brothers confess their guilt (42:24), when he sees Benjamin (43:30), when he reveals himself so loudly the Egyptians hear it (45:2, 14–15), when he meets his father (46:29), when his father dies (50:1), and when the brothers send their fearful message after the funeral (50:17). Seven scenes of tears from the second most powerful man in Egypt. The tears say he never armored himself. He held the power to destroy them and he kept a soft heart for twenty-two years, which is a far greater achievement than the administration of the famine.

2. *Read Jacob’s blessing on Judah in 49:8–12, then read Revelation 5:5 and Hebrews 7:14. How did the scepter stay with Judah, and who is the one to whom the obedience of the peoples belongs?*

Jacob says the scepter will not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to Him shall be the obedience of the people. The tribal identity of Judah outlasted the northern kingdom, survived the exile, and was still intact when Jesus was born. Hebrews 7:14 says it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, and Revelation 5:5 calls Him the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who alone can open the scroll. The promise made over a deathbed in Egypt lands in a throne room in Revelation.

3. *Jacob deliberately crosses his hands over Ephraim and Manasseh in 48:13–20 and refuses to be corrected. List the other places in Genesis where the younger has been set ahead of the elder, and consider what God is teaching about how He chooses.*

Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Judah and Joseph over Reuben the firstborn, Perez over Zerah, and now Ephraim over Manasseh. Genesis keeps overturning the culture's automatic ranking. God's choices are not determined by human custom, birth order, or entitlement, and that pattern prepares the reader for a gospel in which the last are first and God chooses the weak things of the world (1 Corinthians 1:26–29).

4. *Genesis ends with an embalmed body in a coffin in Egypt (50:24–26). Read Hebrews 11:22 and Exodus 13:19. Why did Joseph's instruction about his bones matter enough to be remembered for four hundred years?*

Because it was a statement of faith in a promise. Joseph had every honor Egypt could give and could have been entombed among its great men. Instead he made the sons of Israel swear that when God visited them, they would carry his bones up out of that country. Hebrews 11:22 says that by faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel and gave instructions concerning his bones. Exodus 13:19 records Moses doing exactly that on the night of the exodus, four hundred years later. That coffin sat in Egypt as a standing sermon: we are not staying.

5. *Joseph spoke kindly to the men who cost him twenty years, and the text says he comforted them. Name the person you have technically forgiven but never spoken warmly to, and do one kind thing for that person this week without explaining why.*

Answers will vary, and this one should be assigned quietly rather than reported publicly. Note that Genesis 50:21 says Joseph comforted them and spoke kindly to them, literally spoke to their heart. Forgiveness that never becomes warmth is unfinished business. Look for a concrete act, a note, a meal, an invitation, and warn them not to use the act as an occasion to relitigate the old wound.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Providence is not fatalism. Keep Genesis 50:20 next to James 1:13. God overruled the brothers' evil; He did not author it, and they remained guilty of it.
- Genesis 47:13–26, in which the Egyptians end up selling themselves to Pharaoh, is reported without evaluation. Do not defend it as a model of economics or attack Joseph for it; simply note that the text states what happened.
- Jacob's blessings in chapter 49 are prophetic and tribal. Read 49:10 as fulfilled in Christ (Revelation 5:5; Hebrews 7:14), not as a promise awaiting a future political kingdom.
- Forgiveness and reconciliation are related but not identical, and neither one requires a person to return to an unsafe situation. Joseph forgave freely and still tested his brothers thoroughly before he trusted them.

Wisdom Standing at the Gate

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 8 is the high point of the first section of Proverbs. Chapter 1 had Wisdom crying out in the street; here she is given a full chapter, and the tone changes from warning to invitation. Notice the locations in verses 1 through 3: the high hill, beside the way, the paths, the gates, the entry of the city, the doors. In an ancient town the gate was the courthouse, the market, and the council chamber all at once. Wisdom is not in a monastery. She is where people make deals and settle disputes and decide things.

The middle of the chapter makes two claims that a modern reader needs to hear. First, that her words are plain: “they are all plain to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge.” God is not hiding the ball. Second, that she is worth more than every commodity people actually chase. Verses 18 and 19 do not deny that riches and honor are real; they simply say wisdom’s yield is better than fine gold.

Then verses 22 through 31 lift into poetry of the highest order. Before the depths, before the fountains, before the mountains were settled, wisdom was there. And the tone is not cold; it is joyful. She was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world, and her delight was with the sons of men. The universe was made by a God who was not grim about it. That is worth saying out loud to a class that has quietly assumed otherwise.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Proverbs 1 through 9 personifies wisdom as a woman who calls in public, in deliberate contrast to the seductive woman of chapters 5 and 7 who calls in the dark.
- The city gate was the place of legal judgment, commerce, and public counsel (Ruth 4:1–2; Amos 5:15), which is why Wisdom stations herself there.
- Personification is a standard Hebrew poetic device. Wisdom is not a created being, an angel, or a person of the Godhead; she is an attribute of God pictured as a woman speaking.
- Verse 22, “The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way,” is used by some groups to argue that Christ was a created being. The passage is not about Christ directly and the word does not require the idea of creation.
- The New Testament does connect Christ with the wisdom of God, but by direct statement rather than by allegorizing this chapter (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30; Colossians 2:3).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Wisdom takes her stand where the traffic is: the high hill, the crossroads, the city gate, and she calls to the simple and even to fools. What does that say about how available God’s wisdom actually is, and why do so many people still walk past it?*

The locations answer the question. She is on the hilltop where she can be seen, beside the road everyone walks, at the crossroads where choices are made, and at the gate where the business of the city is done. Then verse 4: “To you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men.” And verse 5 addresses the simple and the fools, which is to say the people least likely to seek her out. God’s wisdom is public, plain, and offered to the people who need it most rather than reserved for a qualified few.

Why do people still walk past? Romans 1:20 says the evidence of God in creation leaves men without excuse, and Hebrews 1:1–2 says God has now spoken in His Son. Access has never been the problem. Proverbs 1:24–30 already gave the answer: they refused, they disregarded, they would have none of the counsel. Keep the class from making this a discussion about other people. Ask instead where each of them has heard clearly and not acted, which is the same thing as walking past the gate.

Question 2. *In 8:22–31 Wisdom speaks of existing before the mountains and the depths, and of rejoicing in the world and delighting in the sons of men. This is poetic personification, not a separate person of the Godhead. How should we read this passage carefully, and what do 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30 and Colossians 2:3 allow us to say about Christ?*

Read the passage for what it is: magnificent Hebrew poetry in which an attribute of God is given a voice. The literary device runs through the whole first section of Proverbs; wisdom speaks, calls, laughs, invites, and builds a house (9:1). Nobody thinks there is a literal woman standing at the gate of Jerusalem. So verse 22 is not making a statement about the origin of a divine person, and verse 30 is not describing a second being working beside God. The point of the passage is the antiquity, the necessity, and the joy of God's wisdom: the world you live in was built by it, so ordering your life by it is not optional advice.

Then say what we can say about Christ, and say it from passages that actually speak of Him. First Corinthians 1:24 calls Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God; 1:30 says He became for us wisdom from God; Colossians 2:3 says in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. John 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:16–17 teach directly that the Word was in the beginning with God, was God, and made all things. That is a far firmer foundation than allegorizing Proverbs 8, and it keeps you out of an argument you do not need to have.

Question 3. *Verses 35 and 36 draw a stark line: whoever finds wisdom finds life, and whoever sins against her loves death. Nobody in this room would say he loves death. Where do our actual choices this week say something different from what we would claim with our mouths?*

Verse 36 is one of the most arresting sentences in Proverbs: "all those who hate me love death." Solomon is not saying that fools consciously desire to die. He is saying that a settled preference for folly is, in its effects, a preference for death, and that the person making it has never done the arithmetic. It is the same logic as Romans 6:23 and Galatians 6:7–8. You do not have to intend the harvest to reap it.

So push the class toward evidence rather than intention. A calendar is evidence. A bank statement is evidence. What we do with the first waking hour and the last hour of the day is evidence. Ask each person to name one pattern in their actual week that, if a stranger examined it, would not look like the life of someone who believes what they say they believe. That is not a call to despair; verse 35 is in the same paragraph, and whoever finds wisdom finds life and obtains favor from the Lord.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Wisdom says about her own speech in 8:6–9. How many of those same claims could be made about the word of God, and which passages would you use to support them?*

She speaks excellent things; the opening of her lips is right things; her mouth speaks truth; wickedness is an abomination to her lips; all the words of her mouth are with righteousness; nothing crooked or perverse is in them; they are all plain to him who understands and right to those who find knowledge. Every one of those claims is made of Scripture elsewhere: Psalm 19:7–9, Psalm 119:105 and 130, Proverbs 30:5, 2 Timothy 3:16–17, and 2 Peter 1:20–21. The plainness claim is worth dwelling on. God did not write a book only experts can use.

2. *Proverbs 8:13 defines the fear of the Lord by what it hates. Write out the four things named. Which of the four is easiest for a religious person to hold on to without noticing?*

Pride, arrogance, the evil way, and the perverse mouth. The one a religious person keeps most easily is pride, precisely because it can be disguised as conviction, standards, or discernment. Note that the verse begins, "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil," which means reverence for God is not merely an attitude toward Him but a settled attitude toward sin. Compare Proverbs 6:16–17, where a proud look heads the list of what God hates.

3. *Compare Proverbs 8:22–31 with John 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:16–17. What is genuinely alike in these passages, and what difference of literary genre has to be kept in mind so that the comparison is not pressed too far?*

All three passages speak of a wisdom or a Word present before creation and involved in the making of everything. John 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:16–17 make direct, prose, doctrinal statements about a Person: the Word was God, all things were made through Him, and in Him all things consist. Proverbs 8 is poetry using personification, and its

purpose is to commend God's wisdom, not to describe a member of the Godhead. Build your doctrine of Christ on John and Colossians, and let Proverbs 8 do what it was written to do. The two are in harmony, because God made the world wisely and the Christ is the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24).

4. *Trace the language of value through 8:10–19: better than silver, better than rubies, better than choice gold. According to those verses, what does Wisdom actually hand out to those who find her?*

She says to take her instruction rather than silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold, because wisdom is better than rubies and nothing desirable compares with her. What she hands out: prudence, knowledge and discretion, the fear of the Lord, counsel, sound judgment, understanding and strength, just government for kings and rulers, love returned to those who love her, riches and honor, enduring wealth and righteousness, and fruit better than fine gold. Remember the genre: these are the general returns of a wise life under God's order, not a guarantee schedule.

5. *Wisdom stands at the gate, where in that world the decisions of a city were made (8:3). Name the one real decision in front of you this month, and before you decide it, take it first to Scripture and then to one wise Christian, in that order.*

Answers will vary. The order matters and should be insisted on. Most people reverse it, gathering opinions first and then looking for a verse that supports the decision already made. Look also for whether the wise Christian they name is someone likely to tell them the truth or someone likely to agree with them.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not let personified Wisdom become a created being or a separate person of the Godhead. It is a poetic device. Where Christ is in view, use the passages that name Him (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30; Colossians 2:3; John 1:1–3).
- Proverbs 8:22 is used by some groups to argue that Christ was created. Be ready with a calm answer: the passage is poetry about an attribute of God, and the deity of Christ rests on John 1:1–3, Colossians 1:16–17, and Hebrews 1:8.
- Keep reinforcing the genre. The riches and honor of 8:18 describe the general tendency of a wise life, not a promise of prosperity.
- “I love those who love me” (8:17) is not a statement that God's love must be earned. It describes the reciprocal nature of a relationship with wisdom, and it should not be pressed against passages like Romans 5:8.

Authority Over Storm and Sin

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Matthew has just given three chapters of unmatched teaching; now he gives a run of demonstrations, and they are arranged with a purpose. Jesus' authority reaches a fever, a crowd of the sick and demon-oppressed, the wind and sea, a pair of violent men no chain could hold, and finally the guilt of a paralyzed man. Each realm is wider and deeper than the last. The scribes in 9:3 understood the pattern perfectly, which is why they reacted the way they did.

In between the miracles Matthew drops two conversations about following, and they are placed there on purpose. An enthusiastic scribe says he will follow wherever Jesus goes and is told that the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. A disciple asks to bury his father first and is told to let the dead bury their own dead. The crowds are growing, and Jesus keeps telling people what it costs. He has never been interested in a following He has not been honest with.

The storm scene deserves its own moment with a class. He is asleep in the stern of a boat filling with water, which tells you something about His humanity and about His peace. The disciples wake Him with a prayer that is both faithful and panicked, and He rebukes the wind first and their fear second. Then the men in the boat ask the question that governs the entire section: "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" Matthew answers it three paragraphs later, when the Son of Man forgives sins on earth.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Peter is married (8:14), a fact Paul also mentions in 1 Corinthians 9:5, and it bears on later claims about a celibate clergy.
- The Sea of Galilee sits about seven hundred feet below sea level in a bowl of hills, and violent squalls come up quickly. Several of these men were professional fishermen and were still terrified.
- The region east of the lake was largely Gentile, which explains the presence of a large herd of swine. Mark and Luke focus on one of the two demoniacs, probably the more prominent; Matthew mentions both.
- Demon possession appears concentrated in the Gospels and Acts during the ministry of Christ and the apostles. Scripture does not teach that it continues today, and it should not be confused with mental or physical illness.
- "Son of Man" is Jesus' favorite self-designation and draws on Daniel 7:13–14, where one like a son of man is given dominion and a kingdom.
- Under the Law only God could forgive sins against Himself (Isaiah 43:25; Psalm 51:4). The scribes' theology was right; their conclusion about Jesus was wrong.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Matthew stacks these accounts deliberately: fever, storm, demons, paralysis, and sin all give way to Him. Trace the progression. What is Matthew proving about Jesus, and why does he finish the sequence with forgiveness rather than with another miracle?*

Follow the widening circle with the class. A fever yields to a touch. The whole city's sick and demon-oppressed are healed with a word in a single evening. Wind and sea, which no human authority touches, obey Him. Two men so violent that no one could pass that road are freed, and the demons themselves acknowledge Him. Then the paralytic, where the healing is almost an afterthought to something greater.

Matthew ends with forgiveness because forgiveness is the point. A healed body still dies; a calmed sea will storm again. The deepest human problem is not sickness, weather, or even oppression by evil; it is guilt before God. And forgiveness is the one thing on that list that belongs to God alone, which is exactly why Jesus performs the visible

miracle in 9:6, “that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins.” The healing is evidence for the claim. Ask your class which of those five they came to Jesus for, and which one they actually needed most.

Question 2. *In 9:2 Jesus tells a paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven before He says one word about his legs, and the scribes immediately think “blasphemy.” They were right about the principle. What is actually at stake in their objection, and how does Jesus settle it in 9:5–6?*

The scribes were right that only God can forgive sins committed against God. A person can forgive a wrong done to himself, but no one can absolve a man of his offense against heaven. So when Jesus says, “Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you,” there are only two possibilities, and the scribes named one of them correctly: either this is blasphemy, or this man is God in the flesh. There is no third option, and Matthew wants his reader in that same corner.

Jesus’ answer is brilliant and simple. Which is easier to say? Obviously it is easier to say “your sins are forgiven,” because no one can verify it. So He does the harder, verifiable thing in order to prove the invisible one: rise, take up your bed, and go home. The man walks out carrying the mat he was carried in on. That is how the New Testament always presents miracles, as evidence for a claim (John 20:30–31; Acts 2:22; Hebrews 2:3–4), and it is worth pointing out that the crowd’s response in 9:8 is to glorify God for giving such authority to men.

Question 3. *Two would-be followers appear in 8:19–22, and both receive a hard answer instead of encouragement. What is Jesus protecting them from? And what have you been telling yourself you will do for the Lord as soon as one more thing is settled?*

He is protecting them from a decision made on incomplete information. The scribe volunteers on a wave of enthusiasm, and Jesus tells him the truth: foxes have holes and birds have nests, and the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. The second man asks to bury his father first. Whether that means a funeral that week or waiting until an aged father eventually died, the answer is the same: the kingdom does not wait in line behind other loyalties. Jesus is doing what Luke 14:28 says to do, telling them to count the cost before they build.

The second half of the question is where it gets personal, so be specific with the class. Almost everyone is waiting for something: when the kids are older, when work settles, when the house is finished, when I get healthy, when I retire. The waiting is rarely a lie; it is usually sincere. It is also usually permanent. Ask each person to name the condition they have attached to their obedience, and then ask what one piece of that obedience could begin this month, unconditionally.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Peter’s mother-in-law is healed and immediately gets up and serves them (8:15). List everyone healed or delivered in this reading, and note what each one does next.*

Peter’s mother-in-law is healed and rises to serve them. Many who were demon-oppressed are delivered and all who were sick are healed in one evening. Two demoniacs are freed, and Mark 5:18–20 adds that one of them wanted to go with Jesus and was sent home to tell what the Lord had done. The paralytic rises, takes up his bed, and goes to his own house, and the crowds glorify God. The pattern is worth naming: healing in the Gospels almost always issues in service, testimony, or worship. Nobody is healed and then disappears into private comfort.

2. *Matthew 8:17 quotes Isaiah 53:4. Read Isaiah 53 in full and then 1 Peter 2:24. Is Matthew teaching that bodily healing is guaranteed to Christians in the atonement? Answer from both contexts.*

No. Matthew applies Isaiah 53:4 to the healing ministry of Jesus during His earthly life, and the context of Isaiah 53 as a whole is the bearing of sin: He was wounded for our transgressions, the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all, He bore the sin of many. First Peter 2:24 quotes the same chapter and states its application plainly: “who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree... by whose stripes you were healed,” and the healing there is from sin, since the verse begins with dying to sins and living for righteousness. Christians still get sick and still die (2 Corinthians 12:7–9; Philippians 2:26–27; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20). What is guaranteed in the atonement is forgiveness.

3. *In the boat the disciples cry, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" and Jesus calls them of little faith (8:25–26). Trace what they got right in that sentence and what they got wrong.*

They got the right address and the right verb. They went to Jesus, and they asked Him to save them, which is more than many people do. What they got wrong was their estimate of the danger to Him and to themselves. He was in the boat; the boat was not going to sink. Their panic assumed that His sleeping meant His indifference, which is the same assumption behind most of our own anxious praying. "Of little faith" is a gentle rebuke, not a harsh one; He answers the prayer first and corrects them afterward.

4. *The people of the region asked Jesus to leave after the demoniacs were freed (8:34). List what the encounter cost them and what it gained them, and consider why they weighed it the way they did.*

It cost them a herd of swine, which was a real financial loss, and it disrupted a community that had arranged itself around two men it had given up on. What it gained them was the presence of the Son of God and two neighbors restored to their right minds. They weighed it the way people usually do, by the visible loss rather than the invisible gain, and they asked Him to leave. It is one of the saddest sentences in the Gospels. Ask what a modern equivalent looks like when Jesus disturbs an arrangement that was costing us something we had stopped noticing.

5. *Matthew says Jesus saw "their faith" (9:2); read Mark 2:3–5 for the detail Matthew leaves out. Name the person you would carry to Jesus if you were willing to be genuinely inconvenienced, and take one concrete step toward them this week.*

Mark says four men carried him and, finding the house impassable, uncovered the roof and lowered him down. Matthew's phrase "their faith" covers the whole group. Answers on the second half will vary. Look for a name and a step: a visit, an invitation, an offer to drive them, a conversation begun. Note that the friends did something physically difficult and socially embarrassing, and that Jesus counted it as faith.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Matthew 8:17 and Isaiah 53:4 are the foundation of much "healing in the atonement" teaching. Address it kindly and clearly: the atonement guarantees forgiveness of sins, and faithful Christians in the New Testament remained sick (Philippians 2:27; 2 Timothy 4:20).
- Demon possession: teach what the text says without sensationalism, and do not equate it with mental illness or leave a class expecting exorcisms today. The miraculous confirmed the word and ceased when revelation was complete (Mark 16:20; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10).
- "Let the dead bury their dead" is not a repeal of honoring parents (Matthew 15:4–6) or of caring for family (1 Timothy 5:8). It is a statement of priority in an urgent moment, addressed to one man.
- Jesus' authority to forgive sins is an implicit claim to deity, and the scribes understood it. Do not let the passage be reduced to a kindness story.
- Peter's marriage (8:14) is a simple textual fact and can be noted gently if the subject of a celibate priesthood arises. Do not make the lesson about someone else's church.

Scattered, and Still Preaching

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Stephen's death is told with deliberate echoes of the death of Jesus. He commits his spirit to the Lord, he kneels and cries with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin," and Luke says he fell asleep. The one detail that is not an echo is the most striking: he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Everywhere else in the New Testament Christ is seated. Here He is on His feet.

Then Luke does something no one in Jerusalem could have seen coming. The church is scattered by a great persecution, and Acts 8:4 says those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. The apostles stayed. The ordinary members went, and they took the gospel with them. The very thing designed to destroy the church spread it, which is the pattern Acts will repeat over and over: every attempt to stop the word ends up carrying it farther.

The two halves of chapter 8 belong together. Philip preaches Christ in a Samaritan city with great joy as the result, and a celebrated sorcerer named Simon believes and is baptized. Then Simon sees the apostles conferring miraculous gifts by the laying on of hands and offers money for the ability, and Peter's answer is one of the sharpest in the New Testament. After that, Philip is sent to a desert road. A man of great authority under the queen of the Ethiopians is reading Isaiah 53 aloud in his chariot and cannot make sense of it. Philip begins at that Scripture and preaches Jesus, and the very next thing the reader hears is, "See, here is water." Philip had evidently preached baptism, because the man asked for it.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Stephen is the first Christian martyr. Saul of Tarsus is introduced holding the witnesses' garments and consenting to his death (7:58; 8:1; 22:20).
- The Samaritans were descendants of the mixed population of the old northern kingdom, despised by the Jews, and their inclusion here is the second stage of Acts 1:8 exactly on schedule.
- Philip is not the apostle Philip but one of the seven of Acts 6, later called Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8).
- The miraculous gifts were conferred through the laying on of the apostles' hands (8:14–18; Romans 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:6). Philip could work miracles himself but could not pass the ability on, which is why apostles had to come.
- The Ethiopian is a court official of Candace, a title rather than a personal name, and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, so he was either a Jew of the dispersion or a Gentile proselyte.
- Acts 8:37, the eunuch's confession, is absent from the oldest manuscripts and appears in a footnote or bracket in many translations. The confession it records is taught plainly elsewhere (Romans 10:9–10; 1 Timothy 6:12).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. Acts 8:1–4 says the church was scattered by persecution and that those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. What does that tell us about who does the preaching in the New Testament, and about what God does with what we would have called a catastrophe?

It tells us that in the New Testament the spread of the gospel was not the work of a professional class. Acts 8:1 says everyone was scattered except the apostles, and 8:4 says those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. The people doing the preaching are the ones with no title at all. They were not sent by a committee; they went because they were driven out, and they talked about Jesus in every place they landed.

As for what God does with a catastrophe, Acts is a running commentary on Genesis 50:20. The stoning of Stephen, the scattering of the church, the imprisonment of Paul, the shipwreck, all of it advances the word. That is not a

promise that every hard thing will produce a visible good in our lifetime, and a class should not be told that it is. It is a promise that God is not stalled by opposition. Ask your class what would happen to the teaching of the gospel in your community if your building were closed tomorrow. The honest answer is usually uncomfortable, and useful.

Question 2. *Simon believed, was baptized, and continued with Philip, and then Peter tells him he is poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity and must repent and pray (8:13, 20–24). Work through what this account settles about whether a Christian can fall, and about how a Christian who has sinned is restored.*

Take the account exactly as Luke writes it. Simon believed, he was baptized, and he continued with Philip. Luke uses the same words for him that he uses for everyone else in the city. Then he sinned, seriously, and Peter tells him his heart is not right in the sight of God, that he is poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity, and that he has neither part nor portion in this matter. A man who was never saved cannot fall; a man who has no part cannot have lost one. This passage is a plain refutation of the doctrine that a Christian can never fall away, and it stands alongside Galatians 5:4, Hebrews 6:4–6, Hebrews 10:26–31, and 2 Peter 2:20–22.

Notice also the remedy, because this is where the passage becomes pastoral rather than merely doctrinal. Peter does not tell Simon to be baptized again. He tells him to repent of his wickedness and pray God that the thought of his heart may be forgiven. That is the New Testament pattern for an erring Christian: repentance, prayer, and confession (1 John 1:9; James 5:16; Acts 8:22). And Simon's response, asking Peter to pray for him, sounds like a frightened man rather than a defiant one. Be careful not to slam a door Scripture leaves open.

Question 3. *The Ethiopian asks, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Philip had started at Isaiah 53 and preached Jesus to him. How does a man get from a passage about a suffering servant to a chariot stopped beside water, and what does that tell us about what gospel preaching must include?*

Follow the road from Isaiah to the water. Philip begins at Isaiah 53:7–8, the sheep led to slaughter who opened not His mouth, and "preached Jesus to him." That is all Luke says, and it is all Luke needs to say, because we know what the man asked for next. Somewhere between the prophecy and the puddle, Philip told him who Jesus is, what He did, and what a person must do about it, including baptism. The man did not invent the idea on the roadside.

So gospel preaching that stops short of telling a person what to do is not what Philip did. Compare Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6:3–4, and Galatians 3:26–27. Note the physical details Luke includes: they both went down into the water, and they came up out of the water. This was immersion, which is what the word means. And note the result: he went on his way rejoicing. The joy comes after the obedience, not before it. Ask your class how many people they know who have heard about Jesus for years and have never once been told plainly what to do.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Set Stephen's last two prayers (7:59–60) beside the words of Jesus in Luke 23:34 and 46. List the parallels, and note what Stephen calls the moment of his death.*

Stephen says, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," which parallels "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." He kneels and cries with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin," which parallels "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Luke says he fell asleep, the New Testament's tender word for the death of a Christian (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14; John 11:11). Note also that Stephen prays directly to Jesus, which he would not do if Jesus were not divine.

2. *Trace the spread of the gospel in this reading against the outline Jesus gave in Acts 1:8. Which stage has been reached here, and who is actually carrying it forward?*

Acts 1:8 gave Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth. Chapters 1 through 7 were Jerusalem; here in chapter 8 the gospel moves into Judea and Samaria, and with the Ethiopian it starts down a road toward Africa. The ones carrying it are scattered ordinary Christians and Philip, one of the seven appointed to serve tables in Acts 6. The apostles remain in Jerusalem. God advanced His work through people whose names we mostly do not know.

3. Read Acts 8:14–19 carefully. Why did Peter and John have to come down from Jerusalem, and what do Hebrews 2:3–4 and 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 say about why those gifts were given and how long they were to last?

Philip preached and baptized and worked miracles himself, but the Samaritan converts had not received the miraculous gifts, and Philip could not confer them; only the apostles could (compare Romans 1:11 and 2 Timothy 1:6). Hebrews 2:3–4 says God bore witness to the message with signs, wonders, various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, which identifies the purpose as confirmation of the word. First Corinthians 13:8–10 says prophecies will fail, tongues will cease, and knowledge will vanish away when that which is perfect, the complete revelation, has come. With the apostles gone and the ability to confer these gifts gone with them, and with the revelation complete, the confirming signs finished their work.

4. List everything the Ethiopian does from 8:27 through 8:39, in order. At what point in that sequence does the text say he went on his way rejoicing?

He had gone to Jerusalem to worship; he was returning; he was reading Isaiah aloud; he invited Philip to sit with him; he asked whom the prophet was speaking of; he heard Jesus preached; he saw water and asked what hindered him from being baptized; he commanded the chariot to stand still; he went down into the water with Philip; he was baptized; he came up out of the water; and then, and only then, Luke says he went on his way rejoicing. The joy is recorded after the baptism, not after the sermon.

5. Philip left a whole city that was full of joy in order to stand on a desert road for one man. Name the one person God has put on a road with you, and have the conversation with him this week rather than next.

Answers will vary. Press for one name and one week. Notice in the text that Philip ran to the chariot (8:30) and that he began where the man already was, with the passage in front of him and his own question. Most Christians are waiting for a perfect opening; Philip used the one that was there.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Simon the sorcerer is one of the clearest refutations of “once saved, always saved.” Teach it plainly from the text, together with Galatians 5:4 and Hebrews 10:26–31, and teach the remedy in 8:22 just as plainly.
- The laying on of the apostles’ hands is the key to the miraculous gifts in this chapter. Handle the cessation of those gifts carefully and graciously (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10). Be firm on the text and gentle with people.
- Acts 8:37 is missing from the earliest manuscripts and is bracketed or footnoted in many translations. Do not build the necessity of confession on this verse alone; Romans 10:9–10 and 1 Timothy 6:12 teach it independently, and someone in the class will have a translation that omits it.
- Stephen seeing Jesus standing at God’s right hand is a unique moment given to a dying man. Do not turn it into a promise of visions for Christians today.
- The baptism of the Ethiopian is a clear picture of immersion: they went down into the water and came up out of it. Note it, and note that he rejoiced afterward.

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Exodus 1–8 · Proverbs 9–10 · Matthew 9:9–38 · Acts 9

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