

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 12 OF 104

Willing Hearts

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Exodus 31-40
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 14
Gospels	Matthew 13:1-30
General New Testament	Acts 13

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to get the class thinking about the condition of their own ground. Israel gives its gold to a calf and then gives it again, freely and abundantly, to a tabernacle. Proverbs says a road can look right the entire way down. Jesus tells a story in which the seed and the sower never vary and everything depends on the dirt. And in one synagogue, one sermon produces joy in some and envy in others. The week is an invitation to stop asking what is wrong with the preaching and start asking what is wrong with the soil.

Doctrinally, take three things deliberately. First, the golden calf, which is the clearest illustration in the Old Testament that sincerity does not authorize worship; draw the principle and prove it from the New Testament rather than binding Old Covenant practice. Second, the four soils, two of which describe people who truly received the word and then lost it; use them to teach plainly that a Christian can fall away, and do it in a way that produces diligence rather than fear. Third, Acts 13:48, which is regularly quoted to support unconditional election; teach it alongside verse 46, where these very men judged themselves unworthy, and refuse to let a single debated clause overturn the plain invitation that runs through Scripture.

Formationally, the thread is what a willing heart actually does. Exodus 35:21 describes people whose hearts were stirred and whose spirits were willing, and the result was so much giving that it had to be stopped. Antioch's willingness cost it two teachers. The good ground's willingness produced a crop. Ask your class this, and give them time to answer: name the one thing God has been asking you for that you have not yet handed over, and say out loud what is keeping you from it.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Matthew 13:1-30. It is the center of the week and the easiest passage to teach well. Spend twenty minutes walking the four soils honestly, then use the remaining time for the two questions people actually carry home: which soil am I, and can a Christian fall away?

Second session: Take up Exodus 31-40. Lead with the golden calf and Moses' intercession, and then move deliberately to the freewill offering in chapter 35 and the glory filling the tabernacle at the end. The contrast between chapter 32 and chapter 36 is the lesson; do not let the class leave with only the calf.

The other two readings: Proverbs 14 and Acts 13 read well alone. Ask the class to mark 14:12 and to think of one decision they are currently making by feel. For Acts, ask them to outline Paul's sermon as they read, and warn them in advance that verse 48 raises a question worth asking you about.

The Calf and the Glory

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These ten chapters are built on a single devastating contrast. Chapters 25 through 31 are God giving instructions for a dwelling place, ending with the Sabbath sign and two tablets written by the finger of God. Chapter 32 is Israel, at the foot of that very mountain, six weeks into the wait, deciding they need something they can see. Aaron collects the earrings, and the nation that had just promised twice to obey everything God said is dancing before a metal calf.

Moses' response is the heart of the section. He breaks the tablets, destroys the idol, confronts Aaron, and then goes back up the mountain to plead. Read his prayers closely. He appeals to God's investment in these people, to God's reputation among the Egyptians, to God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and finally he offers himself: "If not, please blot me out of Your book." Then in chapter 33 he asks for something no one had asked before, to see God's glory, and God answers by proclaiming His name: merciful, gracious, longsuffering, abounding in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, and by no means clearing the guilty.

The last six chapters are the repair. The people bring their offerings until Moses has to stop them, the craftsmen build, and the text repeats "as the Lord commanded Moses" until the reader can hear it in his sleep. Then the cloud covers the tent and the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle so completely that even Moses cannot enter. The book that began with a nation in chains ends with God living in the middle of the camp. Do not let the class miss that ending.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The calf incident occurs while Moses is on the mountain receiving the very instructions Israel is violating below.
- A calf or young bull was a standard image of strength and fertility in Egypt and Canaan. Israel is not inventing a new religion; they are borrowing the forms they grew up watching.
- The tablets were "written with the finger of God" (31:18) and the second set was written again by God (34:1, 28), underscoring that the covenant terms were His, not Moses'.
- Bezalel and Aholiab are the first people in Scripture said to be filled with the Spirit of God, and it is for artistic and technical skill.
- The Sabbath is repeatedly named as a sign between God and Israel (31:13, 16–17). It belongs to that covenant and is nowhere bound on Christians.
- The book ends with the glory filling the tabernacle, matching the moment Solomon's temple is dedicated (1 Kings 8:10–11) and anticipating John 1:14.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Aaron does not propose worshiping some other god. He builds a calf and then announces "a feast to the Lord" (32:4–5). Why does that distinction matter so much, and what shapes does the same mistake take among us?*

This is the point most readers miss, and it is the most useful thing in the chapter. Aaron did not lead a defection to a foreign deity. He made an image, said "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt," built an altar, and proclaimed a feast to the Lord by name. In his own mind he was helping people worship the true God in a form they could manage. God calls it corruption and says they have turned aside quickly out of the way He commanded.

The application is close to home and should be made gently. Worship that God has not authorized is not made acceptable by sincerity or by good intentions, and the danger is rarely that a congregation decides to worship a

different God. The danger is that we decide to worship the true God in ways He never asked for, because they move us. Take the class to Matthew 15:8–9, John 4:24, and Colossians 3:17, and let them state the principle themselves: the question is never what we find meaningful, but what God has actually authorized.

Question 2. *Moses intercedes for Israel three times and finally offers to be blotted out of God's book in their place (32:11–14, 30–32; 33:12–17). Trace his arguments one by one. What does his praying teach us about interceding for people who plainly do not deserve it?*

Lay out the three appeals. First, in 32:11–13, Moses appeals to what God has already invested (“Your people, whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt”), to God’s reputation before the Egyptians, and to God’s sworn promise to the patriarchs. Second, in 32:30–32, he names the sin plainly, without minimizing it, and then offers his own place in God’s book. Third, in 33:12–16, he refuses to move at all unless God’s presence goes with them. Notice that he never argues that Israel deserves anything.

This is a model for how to pray for a wayward child, a straying member, or a friend who has thrown his life away. Moses does not excuse the sin; he calls it a great sin. He does not appeal to merit; he appeals to God’s character and God’s promises. And he is willing to be personally costly about it. Ask the class whose name they carry like that, and whether their praying for that person has ever cost them anything but words.

Question 3. *The people brought so much material for the tabernacle that Moses had to issue a restraining order (36:5–7). When did you last see generosity in the Lord's church that had to be restrained, and what would have to change in us before that could happen here?*

Exodus 36:5–7 is one of the more astonishing sentences in the Old Testament: “The people bring much more than enough,” and Moses has to send a command through the camp that no one bring anything further. This is the same crowd that gave its gold to make a calf. The difference is verse 35:21, a stirred heart and a willing spirit. God got their gold both times; what changed was what the heart was aimed at.

Handle this without guilt manipulation. Ask what would have to be true in a congregation before giving had to be capped. Probably three things: people would have to believe the work matters, trust the people handling it, and see clearly what the money and labor are for. Then ask the more personal question: is there anything in your life that you would give to if it were only presented well enough, and is God’s work getting your first portion or your leftover (2 Corinthians 9:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2)?

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the golden calf from 32:1 to 32:6, listing each step from the people's first request to the feast. Identify the exact point at which this became idolatry.*

The steps are: the people see that Moses delays, they gather against Aaron, they demand gods to go before them, Aaron asks for their gold, he fashions a molded calf, he builds an altar, he proclaims a feast to the Lord, and the next morning they offer burnt offerings and sit down to eat and drink and rise up to play. Idolatry had already begun at the demand in verse 1: they wanted something visible to go before them in place of the God who had. Every subsequent step is just the demand taking physical form.

2. *Read Exodus 33:12–23 slowly. Write down what Moses asks God for, what God grants, and what God withholds.*

Moses asks God to show him His way and to confirm that this nation is His people, and then asks outright, “Please, show me Your glory.” God grants His presence going with them, His goodness passing before Moses, and the proclamation of His name, which turns out to be a declaration of His character in 34:6–7. What God withholds is the sight of His face, because no man can see God and live. He gets God’s goodness, God’s name, and God’s presence, which is more than he asked for and less than he requested.

3. *Exodus 31:1–6 says God filled Bezalel with His Spirit for design and craftsmanship. Compare Romans 12:6–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, then list the skills in your own congregation that are being used and the ones that are sitting idle.*

Answers will vary. The point worth pressing is that the first Spirit filling recorded in Scripture is for carpentry, metalwork, engraving, and weaving, and God calls those men by name. Congregations tend to recognize only the

visible gifts. Make a list out loud: cooking, bookkeeping, carpentry, hospitality, driving, sitting with the sick, writing notes, teaching children, repairing things. Then ask who has never been asked.

4. *Count how many times chapters 39 and 40 say “as the Lord commanded Moses.” Why would the writer repeat a phrase that many times, especially so soon after chapter 32?*

The phrase appears more than a dozen times in these two chapters. The repetition is the writer’s point: this time, everything was done exactly as God directed. It stands in deliberate contrast to chapter 32, where Israel did what seemed good to them and called it worship. Obedience in the details is the difference between a tabernacle filled with glory and a calf ground into powder and scattered on the water.

5. *Exodus 35:21 says everyone came whose heart was stirred and whose spirit was willing. Name one possession or one skill of yours that the Lord’s work could use, and this week offer it to somebody who can actually put it to work.*

Answers will vary. Listen for offers that are concrete and that the person can actually deliver on. Note the phrase “everyone whose heart was stirred” and the detail that the women spun the goats’ hair with their own hands (35:26). This was not merely money; it was labor and skill, and the entire congregation contributed something.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The golden calf is your strongest opportunity this quarter to teach that God, not the worshiper, determines acceptable worship. Draw the principle, support it from the New Testament, and keep the tone reverent rather than combative.
- Exodus 32:14, that the Lord relented, is covenant language describing God’s dealings with people as they change, not a statement that God is fickle or uninformed. Hold it beside Numbers 23:19 and Malachi 3:6.
- God’s statement that no man can see His face and live (33:20) is not contradicted by 24:10–11 or by 33:11. What men saw was a manifestation of God’s glory, not His unveiled essence (John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16).
- The Sabbath sign in 31:12–17 belongs to the covenant with Israel. Do not carry it over to Christians; the Lord’s Day is not a Christian Sabbath (Colossians 2:16–17; Acts 20:7).

A Way That Seems Right

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 14 is preoccupied with appearances. The clean stall looks like good management and means there is no ox. The road looks right and ends in death. The laughing man may be grieving. The confident young believer will swallow anything he is told. Solomon keeps pulling the reader's eye from the surface of a thing to its end, which is the habit that separates wisdom from cleverness.

Verse 12 is the most quoted line in the chapter and deserves careful handling. It does not say that a way which seems right is always wrong. It says that seeming right is not proof, and that a man's own judgment is not a reliable standard. This is the verse that stands behind every appeal to Scripture as the authority. Solomon repeats it word for word in 16:25, which in a book of rarely repeated sayings is a way of underlining it.

The chapter closes with public matters: a king's honor lies in the multitude of his people, righteousness exalts a nation, and sin is a reproach to any people. Solomon will not allow character to remain private. The same heart that governs a marriage governs a business and eventually a nation, which is why he keeps circling back to what a person is like when nobody is checking.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Part of the Solomonic collection (10:1 to 22:16), overwhelmingly two line contrasts.
- Verse 12 is repeated verbatim at 16:25. Deliberate repetition in Proverbs functions like an underline.
- The wise woman building her house in 14:1 anticipates the portrait in chapter 31 and is not a rebuke aimed at the women in your class.
- Proverbs regularly treats the poor with compassion and warns those who oppress them (14:21, 31; 17:5; 22:22–23), which balances the book's sayings about diligence.
- Verse 34, that righteousness exalts a nation, is a general principle about the moral health of a people, not a political program or a promise to any particular country.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Proverbs 14:12 says there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death. How does a wrong road come to look so right, and what actually protects a person from walking down one?*

A wrong road looks right for ordinary reasons. It usually begins with something legitimate. It is taken one small step at a time, so no single step feels like a decision. It is walked alongside other people doing the same thing. And it delivers real benefits early, which is exactly why it is persuasive. Nobody chooses ruin; people choose a series of reasonable looking turns.

The protection is not stronger feelings but an outside standard and outside voices. Psalm 119:105 gives a lamp for the feet rather than a floodlight for the horizon. Proverbs 11:14 gives a multitude of counselors. Hebrews 3:13 gives daily exhortation from other Christians. Ask the class for the last significant decision they made, and who told them no. If no one had standing to say it, the decision was made on the standard verse 12 warns about.

Question 2. *Verse 10 says the heart knows its own bitterness, and a stranger does not share its joy. Where does that leave us when we try to comfort someone who is hurting, and what does it require of us before we open our mouths?*

Verse 10 is honest about the limits of human sympathy. There is a floor to another person's grief that you cannot reach, and a joy you cannot fully share. That is not a counsel of despair; it is a warning against the confident comforter who says "I know exactly how you feel." Job's friends did their best work in the seven days they sat on the ground and said nothing (Job 2:13).

What it requires of us, then, is humility and questions. Ask before assuming. Listen longer than is comfortable. Do not explain someone's suffering to them, and do not hurry them toward a conclusion so that you can feel useful. Then point the class to the one Person who does know the heart's bitterness from the inside, Hebrews 4:15, and note that He is also the reason we never leave a grieving person merely with sympathy.

Question 3. *Proverbs 14:31 says that whoever oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, while he who honors God has mercy on the needy. Read it beside verse 21. What connection is Solomon drawing between how we treat poor people and what we actually believe about God?*

Solomon makes the connection at the level of the Maker. A poor man is made in God's image, so contempt for him is an insult aimed past him at God. Verse 21 puts it from the other side: he who despises his neighbor sins, but he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he. Proverbs 17:5 says the same about mocking the poor, and Jesus takes it further in Matthew 25:40.

Get past the abstraction. Oppressing the poor rarely looks like villainy; it looks like a late paycheck, an interest rate structured to trap, a policy defended because it is profitable, or simply a settled habit of assuming that poor people are poor because they deserve it. Ask the class where the poor people in their county actually are, whether anyone in the room knows one by name, and what the congregation is currently doing that any poor person would notice.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every verse in this chapter that mentions the heart (verses 10, 13, 14, 30, 33). What portrait of a person's inner life do they give when you take them together?*

Verse 10 says the heart knows its own bitterness and no stranger shares its joy. Verse 13 says even in laughter the heart may be sorrowful. Verse 14 says the backslider in heart will be filled with his own ways. Verse 30 says a sound heart is life to the body while envy rots the bones. Verse 33 says wisdom rests in the heart of him who has understanding. Together they describe an inner life that is private, often invisible to others, capable of being at odds with the face we present, and directly connected to our physical and spiritual health. God reads it even when nobody else can (1 Samuel 16:7; Hebrews 4:12-13).

2. *Proverbs 14:15 says the simple believes every word, but the prudent considers his steps. Compare Acts 17:11 and 1 Thessalonians 5:21, and describe how a Christian should handle a claim he cannot verify.*

The Bereans were called noble because they received the word with readiness and then searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Paul says to test all things and hold fast what is good. The pattern for the Christian is neither cynicism nor credulity: receive eagerly, verify carefully, and let Scripture rather than the speaker's confidence settle the matter. That applies to preachers, to books, and to whatever arrives on a screen at eleven at night.

3. *Verse 4 observes that where there are no oxen the trough stays clean, but much increase comes by the strength of an ox. Explain the point in your own words, then name one place where you have chosen tidiness over fruitfulness.*

The point is that productivity is messy. An empty stall requires no shoveling and grows no crops. Anything that actually produces, a business, a family, a congregation that reaches people, generates work and mess and complications. Answers about tidiness over fruitfulness will vary; listen for the man who never has people in his home because of the carpet, the class that will not try anything because it might fail, and the congregation that keeps its building immaculate and its pews empty.

4. *Trace what this chapter says about anger in verses 17 and 29. Who has seen the worst of your temper, and what have they concluded from it about your faith?*

Verse 17 says a quick tempered man acts foolishly, and verse 29 says he who is slow to wrath has great understanding while he who is impulsive exalts folly. Answers will vary, and the second half of the question is the point. The people who see our temper are almost always the people who cannot leave: spouse, children, employees. James 1:19-20 and James 1:26 are worth reading aloud alongside this.

5. Verse 31 ties your treatment of the poor directly to your reverence for God. Identify one struggling person you actually know by name, and do something specific and unadvertised for them this week.

Answers will vary. Insist on a name, an action, and the condition that nobody else be told (Matthew 6:1–4). Guard against the class reducing this to a check written to a fund; the verse is about mercy shown to a person, which requires knowing one.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Keep the general principle rule in front of the class. These sayings describe how life usually runs under God's order and are not guarantees.
- Verse 1, about the wise woman building her house, is easily misheard as a rebuke of the women present. Teach it as honor, and note that Proverbs places equally heavy demands on husbands and fathers.
- Verse 20, that the poor man is hated even by his own neighbor, is an observation about how people behave, not an approval of it. Verses 21 and 31 supply the correction in the same chapter.
- Verse 34 should not be turned into a partisan political lesson. It is a statement about the moral health of any people, and the application belongs first to the people in the room.

Four Kinds of Ground

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Matthew 13 is the third of the five great discourses, and it marks a shift. Opposition has hardened in chapter 12, and Jesus begins teaching the crowds in parables. The setting is vivid: He sits in a boat on the water with the crowd on the shore, using the slope of the shoreline as an amphitheater, and He tells a story that everyone listening had watched happen in a field.

The parable of the sower is really the parable of the soils. The seed is the same in every case and the sower is the same; what differs is the ground. Hard packed path, thin soil over rock, ground already occupied by thorns, and good earth. Jesus names the causes precisely: the wicked one snatches, tribulation and persecution scorch, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke. Only the fourth understands and bears fruit, and even there the yields differ.

Then the disciples ask why He teaches this way, and the answer deserves care. Jesus quotes Isaiah in a form that puts the responsibility where it belongs: “their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed.” Parables reveal truth to anyone willing to come and ask, and they conceal it from anyone content to hear a story and walk away. The same story that opened the disciples’ understanding let the casual listener off the hook, and that is exactly what a hardened heart wants.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Palestinian sowing was broadcast by hand, so seed landing on a footpath, on shallow soil over limestone, and among thorn roots was an everyday occurrence, not carelessness.
- Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah 6:9–10 follows the Greek text and makes the people the agents: they closed their own eyes. God’s word hardens those who refuse it, as it did Pharaoh.
- The weeds of 13:25 are usually identified as darnel, a poisonous grass nearly indistinguishable from wheat until the heads form.
- “The kingdom of heaven” in Matthew is the reign of Christ, established at Pentecost and entered by the new birth (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13).
- The explanation of the weeds comes later in the chapter (13:36–43), so this week’s reading deliberately stops before it. Let the class sit with the question.
- These parables are given to a mixed crowd, and Jesus explains them privately to the disciples, which is itself part of the lesson about who receives understanding.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus explains His use of parables by quoting Isaiah 6:9–10 about people who have closed their own eyes (13:13–15). Is He concealing truth or revealing it, and how do both turn out to be true of the same story?*

Both are true, and the parable itself is the mechanism. A story is completely accessible: anyone can follow it, remember it, and repeat it at supper. But it does not force a conclusion. The person who wants to know what it means has to come and ask, and the person who does not want to know can enjoy the story and go home. Jesus says in 13:12 that whoever has, to him more will be given. The parable gives more light to anyone who takes a step toward it.

Be careful not to teach that God arbitrarily blinds people so they cannot be saved. Matthew’s citation is precise: “their eyes they have closed.” The hardening is the natural effect of persistent refusal, exactly as with Pharaoh. And notice how the paragraph ends, in verse 15: “lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.” The healing was available. God’s stated desire is that all be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

Question 2. *Go through the four soils one at a time (13:19–23). Which one describes the danger you are personally most likely to face, and what would actually have to change for you to be good ground?*

Walk the four honestly, and make the class notice that three of them heard the same word. The path is the person for whom the word never penetrates at all, because he does not understand and has not tried. The rocky ground receives it with joy and has no root, so the first real cost ends it. The thorny ground is the most common in comfortable congregations: nothing dramatic happens, the word simply gets crowded out by good things and worries and money. The good ground hears, understands, and bears fruit.

This passage also has doctrinal weight, so name it. Two of these soils represent people who genuinely received the word and then did not endure. That is precisely what Hebrews 3:12–14, Galatians 5:4, and 2 Peter 2:20–22 describe. A Christian can fall away. Teach that plainly and then turn it toward diligence rather than anxiety, as Peter does in 2 Peter 1:10.

Question 3. *In the parable of the weeds, the servants want to go pull them up and the owner tells them to wait until harvest (13:28–30). What does that teach about the church in this present age, and where exactly is the line between that patience and tolerating sin in the congregation?*

The field in this parable is the world (13:38), not primarily the congregation, so the first application concerns living in a mixed world rather than purging the church. Jesus is teaching patience with a situation His disciples would find intolerable: evil persisting alongside good, apparently unaddressed. The answer is that the harvest is coming, the separation is certain, and it belongs to the angels and not to us. That is a comfort and a restraint at the same time.

The line matters, so draw it clearly. The New Testament plainly instructs a congregation to address sin among its own members: Matthew 18:15–17, 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, 2 Thessalonians 3:6, and Titus 3:10 all describe discipline exercised by the church over those inside it. What this parable forbids is the attempt to produce a perfectly pure body by rooting out everyone we suspect, and the assumption that we can read hearts. Patience with people is not the same thing as indifference to sin.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out the four soils with what happens to the seed in each, and name the specific cause of failure in each of the first three.*

By the wayside: the seed is heard without understanding and the wicked one snatches it away. On stony places: it is received immediately with joy but has no root, and it withers when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word. Among thorns: the word is heard, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke it so it becomes unfruitful. On good ground: the word is heard and understood, and it bears fruit at thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. The three failures are a failure to understand, a failure to take root, and a failure to clear competing growth.

2. *The seed is the word of the kingdom (13:19). Read Luke 8:11 and 1 Peter 1:22–25, and describe what those passages say about how a person comes to new life.*

Luke says plainly, “The seed is the word of God.” Peter says we have been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, and then quotes Isaiah about the word that endures. New life comes through the word, which means the single most important thing anyone can do for a soul is get the Scriptures into that person’s hearing (Romans 10:17; James 1:18).

3. *Jesus says the good ground bears thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold (13:23). Why would He name three different yields, and what does that suggest about measuring ourselves against other Christians?*

The yields differ because people differ in capacity, opportunity, and circumstance. Jesus makes the same point with the talents in Matthew 25:14–30, where the man with two is commended in exactly the same words as the man with five. Fruitfulness is required; a particular quantity is not. That frees a class from two errors at once: despising the person with a small visible contribution, and excusing ourselves because somebody else does more.

4. *Trace the thorns in 13:22, the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. List the specific thorns growing in your own calendar right now.*

Answers will vary. Push past general categories to actual entries on a calendar and actual lines in a budget. Note Jesus' precise phrase, "the deceitfulness of riches." Money does not announce itself as a rival; it presents itself as security and as responsibility. Thorns do not attack the plant. They simply grow in the same soil and take what the plant needed.

5. *Good ground is not an accident; it is ground somebody has broken up. Read Hosea 10:12, then name one hard place in your own heart and one specific thing you will do this week to break it open.*

Answers will vary. Hosea says to break up the fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord till He comes and rains righteousness on you. Fallow ground is not barren ground; it is good ground that has been left unplowed until it packs hard. Listen for specific, plowing sort of actions: a confession made, a relationship reopened, a practice restarted, an hour cleared.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The Isaiah quotation is sometimes used to teach that God unconditionally blinds some people. Matthew's wording locates the closing of the eyes in the hearers themselves, and verse 15 shows God's desire that they turn and be healed. Teach it that way.
- The second and third soils describe people who received the word and did not endure. Use them to teach plainly, and without harshness, that a Christian can fall away (Hebrews 3:12–14; 6:4–6; Galatians 5:4; 2 Peter 2:20–22).
- The wheat and weeds must not be used to argue that a congregation should never exercise discipline. The field is the world; the New Testament commands the church to address sin among its members (1 Corinthians 5; Matthew 18:15–17).
- Keep the kingdom clear. In Matthew it is the reign of Christ, established at Pentecost and entered now, not a future earthly political arrangement.

Sent from Antioch

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 13 turns the book. Until now the center of gravity has been Jerusalem and Peter; from here forward it is Antioch and Paul. Notice how the sending happens. The church is ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit speaks, and they fast and pray again, lay hands on the two men, and send them away. A congregation that had been receiving teachers for a year now becomes a congregation that supplies them.

On Cyprus the pattern of the whole book appears in miniature: opposition from a man who traded on religion, a sign confirming the word, and a thoughtful Gentile official who believes. From this point Luke calls Saul by his Roman name, Paul, and the order of the names flips from “Barnabas and Saul” to “Paul and his party.” Then John Mark leaves, and Luke records it without explanation, which will matter a great deal two chapters later.

The sermon at Pisidian Antioch is Paul’s first recorded sermon and is worth studying as a model. He begins where his audience already stands, in the history of Israel, moves through the wilderness and the judges to David, and then leaps directly from David to Jesus, David’s promised descendant. He preaches the crucifixion as the fulfillment of what the prophets read every Sabbath, the resurrection as attested by witnesses, and forgiveness of sins through this Man. The final sentence is the one that lit the fuse: justification from everything the Law of Moses could never handle.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Antioch of Syria sends; Antioch of Pisidia receives. They are different cities, roughly four hundred miles apart.
- Paul’s standard practice was to begin in the synagogue, where he had a hearing, an Old Testament, and an audience already expecting a Messiah (Romans 1:16).
- Sergius Paulus was a Roman proconsul, the senior official on Cyprus, and his conversion is the first recorded conversion of a Roman official of rank.
- Saul and Paul are simply his Hebrew and Roman names. The change in Luke’s usage is not a mark of conversion; he had been a Christian for years.
- The laying on of hands at Antioch (13:3) is the congregation’s commendation of these men for a particular work, not an ordination to an office.
- Shaking the dust from the feet (13:51) follows Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 10:14 and marks the hearers, not the preachers, as responsible for the outcome.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The church at Antioch sent away its two most capable teachers (13:1–3). What did that cost that congregation, and what does it say about how a healthy church ought to think about the people it has?*

Count what Antioch gave up. Barnabas, the man who had built the congregation, and Saul, the most gifted teacher in the first century, both walked out the door at the same time. Luke names three others who remained, and life went on. There is no hint of reluctance in the text, and there is a good deal of prayer and fasting.

The lesson for a congregation is that people are not assets to be held. A church that will not send anyone anywhere will eventually have nothing worth sending. Ask the class directly: if the two most useful people here were called away to preach somewhere else, would we bless them or resist them? And then ask the harder question, which is whether the congregation is currently developing anyone worth sending.

Question 2. *Paul's sermon ends with a claim that would have staggered his hearers: by Jesus everyone who believes is justified from all things from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses (13:38–39). Walk through what the Law could not do and what Christ does instead.*

Paul is precise, so be precise with him. The Law of Moses could define sin, expose it, and condemn it, and it provided sacrifices that covered but never removed (Hebrews 10:1–4, 11). What it could not do was justify, because it demanded perfect obedience and every person had already failed (Galatians 3:10–11; Romans 3:20). Paul does not attack the Law. He says it was holy and good and that it functioned as a tutor leading to Christ (Romans 7:12; Galatians 3:24).

What Christ does is justify from all things. Note the word “all” and let it sit. Then, because Acts is where the response is always spelled out, make sure the class does not stop at “everyone who believes.” The same book defines believing faith by its obedience: Acts 2:38, Acts 8:36–38, Acts 16:30–33, and Acts 22:16. Paul is not setting faith against obedience; he is setting Christ against the Law of Moses as the ground of forgiveness.

Question 3. *Two groups heard the identical sermon in that synagogue, and one group was glad and glorified the word while the other filled up with envy and contradicted it (13:45, 13:48). What made the difference, and where do you watch both responses play out today?*

Luke tells us exactly what drove the second group: “when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy.” The problem was not the doctrine. It was the crowd. The same men who had invited Paul back the week before could not tolerate what happened when the whole city showed up. Envy is capable of turning a person against a message he agreed with seven days earlier.

And notice where Paul puts the responsibility in verse 46: “you judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life.” Nobody was excluded except by his own decision. Ask the class where they see the same two responses now, and be willing to make it local: a congregation that resents another congregation's growth, a member who cools when a newer Christian is asked to lead, a family that will not hear a truth because of who is saying it.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Outline Paul's sermon in 13:16–41. Note where he begins, how much time he spends on Israel's history, where he turns to Jesus, and how he closes.*

He begins by addressing both the Israelites and the God fearing Gentiles present. He covers roughly a thousand years of Israel's history in seven verses: the choosing of the fathers, Egypt, the wilderness, Canaan, the judges, Samuel, Saul, and David. He pivots at verse 23, “From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior, Jesus,” then covers John's preaching, the condemnation by the rulers of Jerusalem, the crucifixion that fulfilled prophecy, the burial, the resurrection, and the witnesses. He closes with the promise fulfilled, forgiveness preached through this Man, justification beyond what the Law could give, and a warning from Habakkuk.

2. *Acts 13:46 says these men judged themselves unworthy of everlasting life, and 13:48 says as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. Read both verses carefully and work out how they fit together.*

Verse 46 is decisive for the interpretation: their exclusion was self inflicted, by their own judgment. Whatever verse 48 means, it cannot mean God had decreed that these men could not be saved, or Paul's charge against them would be empty. The Greek verb in verse 48 can carry the sense of those who had been disposed or set in order toward eternal life, and the phrase also reads naturally as a description of God's appointment of who receives eternal life, namely those who believe. God appointed the terms; each person chose whether to meet them. Hold the verse beside 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9, and Revelation 22:17, and never let one debated clause overturn the plain teaching of the whole book.

3. *Trace the itinerary of this first preaching tour. List every place Barnabas and Saul go, in order, from Antioch to the end of the chapter.*

Antioch of Syria, then Seleucia, then by ship to Salamis on Cyprus, across the island to Paphos, then by sea to Perga in Pamphylia where John Mark left, then inland and uphill to Antioch of Pisidia, and at the chapter's end toward Iconium. It is worth tracing on a map, and worth noticing that this is rough country and long distances on foot.

4. John Mark left them at Perga and went back to Jerusalem (13:13). Read Acts 15:37–39, Colossians 4:10, and 2 Timothy 4:11, and trace what eventually became of him.

Mark's departure later caused a sharp disagreement that split Paul and Barnabas, with Barnabas taking Mark and Paul taking Silas. But that is not the end of it. Colossians 4:10 has Mark with Paul and commended to the Colossians, and in 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul asks for him by name: "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry." A young man who quit early became useful again, which is a word somebody in your class needs to hear.

5. Paul and Barnabas went where they were sent and shook the dust from their feet where they were refused (13:51). Name one person you quit talking to about Christ because it got discouraging, and take one step back toward them this week.

Answers will vary. Be careful with this one: the shaking of the dust follows sustained preaching and outright expulsion, not one awkward conversation. Listen for people who have confused discouragement with a closed door. Note also what verse 52 says about the disciples they left behind: filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Acts 13:48 is a Calvinist proof text and needs careful, unhurried handling. Verse 46 in the same paragraph places the responsibility on the hearers, who judged themselves unworthy. Teach the passage as a whole and avoid both dodging the verse and overclaiming about it.
- Justification "by faith" in 13:39 must be taught as the book of Acts itself teaches it, with the obedience of faith included (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 1:5; 6:17–18), and without setting faith against baptism.
- Do not disparage the Law of Moses. Paul says it could not justify, not that it was bad. It was holy, just, and good, and it served its purpose until Christ.
- The striking of Elymas was an apostolic sign confirming the word (Acts 13:11–12; Hebrews 2:3–4). It is not a pattern for dealing with opponents today (2 Timothy 2:24–26).

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Leviticus 1–7 · Proverbs 15 · Matthew 13:31–14:12 · Acts 14

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