

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 13 OF 104

The Cost of Drawing Near

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Leviticus 1-7
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 15
Gospels	Matthew 13:31-14:12
General New Testament	Acts 14

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to let the class count the cost without flinching, and then to show them that the cost is the best bargain anyone ever made. Leviticus says approach requires blood. Proverbs says God weighs the man before He weighs the offering. Jesus says a man sold everything he had and did it with joy, and in the same breath Matthew tells you what a birthday party cost John the Baptist. Acts says we enter the kingdom through many tribulations. Put those together and you have the honest gospel, which is the only kind worth preaching.

Doctrinally, the sacrificial system carries the weight. Teach Leviticus 1 through 7 as a shadow whose substance is Christ, using Hebrews as your guide: those offerings covered and reminded, and the one offering of Christ takes away and perfects. Be equally clear that the Law of Moses is not binding on Christians, and that we read Leviticus for instruction, not for a pattern of worship. Two other matters need a clear word this week. Acts 14:23 gives you the New Testament arrangement of a congregation, a plurality of qualified men appointed as elders in every church. And Acts 14:22 is the plain corrective to every version of Christianity that promises a comfortable life.

Formationally, the thread is what a person will pay. The Israelite paid with an animal from his own flock, every time. The treasure hunter paid with everything he owned and went home happy. John paid with his life for one sentence about a marriage. Paul paid with his skin and then walked back into the town that had bloodied him. Ask your class this, and let the silence do some work: what has following Jesus cost you in the last twelve months, and if the honest answer is nothing, what does that tell you?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Leviticus 1-7. Most students dread this book, so lead with the connection to the end of Exodus and then organize the hour around the five offerings and one question: how does a sinful man live next door to a holy God? Reserve fifteen minutes for Hebrews 10:1-14 so nobody leaves without the fulfillment.

Second session: Take up Acts 14. It is fast moving and full of scenes, and it lands on two things your congregation needs: the appointment of elders and the promise of tribulation. Spend real time on 14:22 and on the fact that these men walked back into the cities that had expelled them.

The other two readings: Proverbs 15 and Matthew 13:31-14:12 read well on their own. Ask the class to memorize 15:1 and to try it once before Sunday. For Matthew, ask them to read the treasure and the pearl slowly, then read about John's death, and to sit with the two together rather than separating them.

How to Come Near**PASSAGE OVERVIEW**

Leviticus opens with a connection most readers miss. Exodus ended with the glory filling the tabernacle so completely that Moses could not enter. Leviticus 1:1 begins, “Now the Lord called to Moses, and spoke to him from the tabernacle of meeting.” God is now living in the middle of the camp, and the immediate question is how sinful people are supposed to live next door to Him. That is the book’s subject, and it explains everything in it.

The five offerings are not five ways of doing the same thing. The burnt offering went up entirely in smoke, holding nothing back, and made atonement. The grain offering acknowledged God’s provision and required no leaven and no honey but always salt. The peace offering was the only one the worshiper ate, and it turned worship into a meal with God. The sin offering dealt with sins committed unintentionally, with a sliding scale by position and by means. The trespass offering handled wrongs against holy things and against neighbors, and it required repayment plus twenty percent.

Two features should shape how you teach the chapters. First, the cost. Every day, in every family, somebody’s animal died. Sin was never abstract in Israel because it kept costing people livestock. Second, the repetition: chapters 6 and 7 go back over the same offerings from the priests’ side, and the phrase “a sweet aroma to the Lord” keeps returning. God was not merely tolerating these offerings. When they came from an honest heart, He received them with pleasure.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Leviticus is addressed to a nation camped at Sinai, and it belongs to the covenant God made with Israel. Christians are not under it (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8–10).
- The Hebrew word rendered “atonement” carries the idea of covering. These sacrifices covered sin and pointed forward; they did not remove it (Hebrews 10:4, 11).
- The sin offering addresses sins committed unintentionally or in ignorance. Deliberate, defiant sin had no sacrifice under the Law (Numbers 15:30–31).
- Laying a hand on the animal’s head identified the worshiper with the victim, a transfer of association that Isaiah 53:6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 will take up.
- The offerings were expensive. A bull, a ram, or a lamb represented real wealth to a herdsman, which is part of what made the sacrifice meaningful.
- Romans 15:4 tells us these things were written for our instruction. We read Leviticus not for a pattern of worship but to understand holiness, sin, and the cross.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The worshiper laid his hand on the head of the animal and then killed it himself (1:4–5). Why would God require the man to do the killing, and what would a lifetime of that have taught him about his own sin?*

The instruction is easy to read past and impossible to forget once you picture it. The man brought his own animal, laid his hand on its head, and then, with his own hand, cut its throat. The priest handled the blood and the altar; the worshiper handled the knife. Sin was not an idea to be regretted; it was a warm, breathing animal dying because of what he had done.

Over a lifetime that teaches two things at once. It teaches that sin kills, always, and that something innocent pays. And it teaches personal responsibility, since no one could send a servant to do it. Bring the class to the cross with

this. We speak easily about Jesus dying for our sins. Leviticus asks whether we have ever stood close enough to feel the weight of it. Then read Isaiah 53:6 and 1 Peter 2:24 and let the room be quiet for a moment.

Question 2. *Leviticus makes deliberate provision for a poor man: two birds instead of a lamb, and a measure of flour instead of birds (5:7–13). What does that provision tell you about God, and what does it plainly not mean about how serious the sin was?*

It tells you that God never intended the poor to be shut out of forgiveness. The graded provision in chapter 5 moves from a lamb, to two turtledoves or pigeons, to a tenth of an ephah of fine flour, explicitly for the person who cannot afford the others. Mary and Joseph brought the two birds at Jesus' presentation (Luke 2:24), which quietly tells you the economic situation of the family the Messiah was born into.

What it does not mean is that the sin itself was smaller. The text is careful: "the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin which he has committed, and it shall be forgiven him," regardless of which offering he brought. God adjusted the price to the person, not the sin to the price. Ask the class where a congregation unintentionally sets a price on participation, whether in expectations about clothing, giving, hospitality, or travel, and who might quietly be excluded by it.

Question 3. *Hebrews 10:1–4 says the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins. If that is true, then what were these offerings actually doing during the fifteen hundred years they were offered?*

Several things, and they are worth listing. They were an act of obedient faith, in which a man did what God said rather than what he preferred. They gave an honest, visible confession that he deserved to die. They provided real, God given forgiveness within the covenant, since the text says repeatedly "it shall be forgiven him." And they kept the nation in a state of continual reminder; Hebrews 10:3 says that in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.

Above all they pointed forward. The whole system was a shadow whose substance is Christ (Hebrews 10:1; Colossians 2:17). God was teaching a nation, and through them the world, the grammar of substitution, so that when John pointed and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," the sentence would mean something. Make sure the class sees the contrast in the verbs: the old sacrifices covered and reminded; Christ takes away, once for all.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the five offerings in chapters 1 through 7, and for each one note its purpose and what happened to the animal or the grain.*

The burnt offering (chapter 1) was a bull, sheep, goat, or bird, entirely consumed on the altar, for atonement and total devotion. The grain offering (chapter 2) was fine flour with oil and frankincense, a handful burned and the rest given to the priests, acknowledging God's provision. The peace offering (chapter 3) was from the herd or flock, with the fat burned, a portion for the priests, and the rest eaten by the worshiper, expressing fellowship and thanksgiving. The sin offering (4:1 to 5:13) varied by the sinner's position and means, and dealt with unintentional sin. The trespass offering (5:14 to 6:7) required a ram plus restitution with an added fifth for wrongs against holy things or a neighbor.

2. *Read Hebrews 9:11–14 and 10:1–14 beside this reading, and write down every way the offering of Christ differs from the offerings described here.*

Christ offered Himself rather than an animal; He offered once for all rather than continually; He entered the true holy place in heaven rather than a copy; His offering cleanses the conscience rather than merely the flesh; He was both priest and sacrifice; He was without sin and needed no offering for Himself; and by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. The old priests stood daily; our High Priest sat down.

3. *In the peace offering (chapter 3 and 7:11–21), part was burned, part went to the priests, and part was eaten by the worshiper and his household. Why would God design an offering that ends in a shared meal?*

Because fellowship, not merely pardon, is the goal. The peace offering was the only offering the worshiper ate, and it turned the altar into a table. God was teaching Israel that the point of atonement is restored relationship, and that the restored relationship is meant to be enjoyed with family and priest together. The same instinct runs through

Scripture: a covenant meal in Exodus 24:11, the Passover, and the Lord's Supper, which Christians eat together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 10:16–17).

4. *Leviticus 5:14 through 6:7 requires both a sacrifice and restitution with an added fifth. Explain what that combination teaches about repentance when another person has been wronged.*

It teaches that repentance toward God does not cancel obligation toward the person you wronged. The man brought a ram to the priest and he also carried money back to his neighbor, with interest attached. Zacchaeus understood this instinctively in Luke 19:8. Confessing to God is not a substitute for making it right, and a class should be pressed on the specific forms this takes: a debt repaid, a reputation publicly repaired, a stolen hour of work returned.

5. *The fire on the altar was never to go out, and the priest laid wood on it every single morning (6:12–13). Name the daily, unglamorous thing you must do to keep your own fire burning, and then actually do it every day for seven days.*

Answers will vary. Listen for the small and repeatable rather than the ambitious and unlikely. Notice that in Leviticus 6 the priest's first task each morning was carrying out yesterday's ashes and laying on fresh wood, which is about as unglamorous as service gets. A fire that burns for years is not the product of one great blaze but of somebody showing up before dawn with an armload of wood.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The Law of Moses, including this entire sacrificial system, was fulfilled and taken away in Christ. Teach it with respect, and never bind any part of it on Christians (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 10:9).
- Teach the correspondences to Christ that the New Testament itself draws, especially from Hebrews. Resist the temptation to assign a hidden meaning to every detail of flour, oil, and kidney fat.
- Be careful with the word atonement. Under the Law it covered sin and reminded Israel of it annually; only the blood of Christ takes sin away (Hebrews 10:4, 11–14).
- Someone will ask what happened to a person who sinned deliberately. Answer honestly from Numbers 15:30–31 and then show what Hebrews 10:26–31 says to those who go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth.

A Soft Answer

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 15 keeps two eyes open at once. One watches the household: answers given in anger, a father's instruction despised, a table set with herbs and love or with a fattened calf and hatred. The other watches God: His eyes in every place, His delight in the prayer of the upright, His distance from the wicked, His knowledge of the grave itself. Solomon refuses to let ordinary domestic life and the presence of God occupy separate rooms.

Verse 8 is the theological center. "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is His delight." Two men come to worship. One brings an expensive animal and God finds it repulsive; the other brings words and God is pleased. The difference is not the offering but the man. Isaiah 1:11–17, Amos 5:21–24, and Micah 6:6–8 all say the same thing at greater length, and 1 Samuel 15:22 says it in one line.

The chapter ends where Proverbs always ends up: "The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom, and before honor is humility." Note that the same chapter which contains the gentlest verse in the book, the soft answer, also contains four separate warnings about refusing correction. Gentleness and teachability are not different virtues here. They are the same posture, turned outward and inward.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Part of the Solomonic collection (10:1 to 22:16), mostly two line contrasts.
- Verses 8, 9, 26, and 29 cluster around what God accepts and rejects, making this one of the most theologically weighted chapters in the collection.
- The "better is" sayings of verses 16 and 17 are a recognized wisdom form, comparing two real options rather than an ideal and a disaster.
- Sheol in verse 11 is the realm of the dead. The point is that nothing at all is hidden from God, not even the place living people cannot see.
- These sayings are general principles about life under God's moral order. Verse 29, that the Lord is far from the wicked, describes settled rebellion, not a formula that shuts out a penitent sinner (Luke 18:13–14; Acts 10:34–35).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Proverbs 15:1 says a soft answer turns away wrath. Think of a specific argument you lost control of recently. What would a soft answer have actually sounded like in that moment, and what would it have cost you to give it?*

Get concrete quickly or this discussion will float. A soft answer is not a weak answer, and it is not surrender. It is an answer that lowers the temperature instead of raising it: a question instead of a counterattack, an acknowledgment of what is true in the other person's complaint, a pause before speaking, a tone that does not match theirs. Gideon does it in Judges 8:1–3, and Abigail does it brilliantly in 1 Samuel 25.

The cost is almost always the same: giving up the last word, and giving up the satisfaction of being proven right in that moment. Ask the class what they were actually protecting in the argument they described. Then read Romans 12:18, James 1:19–20, and 1 Peter 3:9, and ask whether they want to win the exchange or keep the person.

Question 2. Verse 8 says the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, while the prayer of the upright is His delight. How can an act of worship be offensive to God, and what does that mean for the way we walk into the assembly on Sunday?

Worship becomes offensive when the life behind it contradicts it. God is not impressed by ceremony offered by a man who intends to go on doing what he is doing. That is not a minor theme in Scripture; the prophets hammer it. Isaiah has God saying that new moons and appointed feasts have become a burden He is weary of bearing, and then telling them to cease to do evil and learn to do good. Jesus says to leave your gift at the altar and go be reconciled to your brother first (Matthew 5:23–24).

Apply it to Sunday morning carefully, so that it produces repentance rather than paralysis. This is not a demand for sinless worshipers; the prayer of the upright is the prayer of a man who is honest with God, not a man who has never failed. But it does mean that walking into the assembly while nursing a grudge, while holding something back, or while planning the sin we will return to on Monday, is not neutral. Ask what each person needs to settle before next Sunday, and give them a moment of silence to name it to themselves.

Question 3. Verses 16 and 17 both begin with “better is little.” Read them aloud and name the two trades Solomon is describing. Which of those trades is your household currently making, and how would anyone watching know?

Verse 16 trades money for the fear of the Lord: better a little with reverence than great treasure with trouble attached. Verse 17 trades money for love: better a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened calf with hatred. Both assume the trade is real. Solomon is not pretending you can have everything; he is saying that when you must choose, choose peace and love over abundance.

Make the class answer the second half honestly. The trade shows up in a work schedule, in a mortgage, in what a family sacrifices to maintain a standard of living, in whether children see their father. Ask what a neighbor watching their household for a month would conclude they had chosen. Then read Luke 12:15 and 1 Timothy 6:6–8, and note that contentment is described as great gain, which is a financial word.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Trace every verse in this chapter that deals with the tongue (verses 1, 2, 4, 7, 23, 26, 28). What connection keeps surfacing between what is in the heart and what comes out of the mouth?

Verse 1 contrasts a soft answer with a harsh word; verse 2 says the wise use knowledge rightly while the fool pours out foolishness; verse 4 calls a wholesome tongue a tree of life; verse 7 says the lips of the wise disperse knowledge; verse 23 commends a word in due season; verse 26 says the words of the pure are pleasant; and verse 28 says the heart of the righteous studies how to answer while the mouth of the wicked pours out evil. The connection that keeps surfacing is verse 28: the righteous man thinks before speaking because his heart is engaged, while the fool's mouth simply empties whatever is inside. Jesus states the principle in Matthew 12:34.

2. Proverbs 15:3 says the eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. Compare Psalm 139:1–12 and Hebrews 4:13, and explain why that fact is both a comfort and a warning.

It is a comfort because nothing you suffer goes unnoticed, no hidden faithfulness is wasted, and no one is ever beyond His reach or out of His sight. It is a warning because the same eyes see what no one else does, and Hebrews 4:13 says all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. Whether the verse comforts or frightens a person on a given day is itself a useful diagnostic.

3. List everything this chapter says about receiving correction (verses 5, 10, 12, 31, 32). Which of those verses most accurately describes your usual reaction?

Verse 5 says a fool despises his father's instruction, but he who receives correction is prudent. Verse 10 says harsh discipline awaits the one who forsakes the way, and he who hates correction will die. Verse 12 says a scoffer does not love one who corrects him. Verse 31 says the ear that hears the rebuke of life will abide among the wise. Verse 32 says he who disdains instruction despises his own soul. Answers about personal reaction will vary; listen for honesty about the first ten seconds after being corrected.

4. *Verses 13 and 15 tie the condition of the heart to a person's face and to the quality of his days. Describe how someone's inner life shows up in a room before he says a word.*

Answers will vary. Verse 13 says a merry heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken; verse 15 says all the days of the afflicted are evil, but he who is of a merry heart has a continual feast. People read faces before they hear sentences, which means a Christian's settled joy or settled bitterness is preaching before he says anything. Be careful, though, not to shame the grieving; verse 13 also acknowledges the broken spirit as real.

5. *Verse 23 says a word spoken in due season, how good it is. Identify one person who needs a timely word from you, and speak it this week, before the season for it passes.*

Answers will vary. The phrase "in due season" is the heart of it: the right word at the wrong time does little, and the right word at the right time can change a life. Listen for urgency. Most people intend to say the good thing eventually, and eventually keeps arriving after the funeral.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Verse 29, that the Lord is far from the wicked, describes settled rebellion. Do not let it be heard as saying God ignores the prayers of a struggling Christian or a penitent sinner (1 John 1:9; Luke 18:13–14).
- Verse 8 can produce needless anxiety in tender consciences. Teach that God delights in the worship of honest, repentant people, not only the worship of the flawless.
- A soft answer is not a command to avoid confronting sin. Jesus, Paul, and the prophets all spoke sharply when the occasion required it. Gentleness governs the manner, not the content.
- Keep the general principle rule in view; these are descriptions of how life normally runs under God's order, not guarantees.

Treasure Worth Everything

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The remaining parables of chapter 13 come in pairs. The mustard seed and the leaven both address size: something negligible at the start that ends up sheltering birds or permeating the whole lump. The treasure and the pearl both address worth: two very different men, one stumbling on it by accident and one searching professionally for years, and both liquidating everything without hesitation. The dragnet, like the weeds, addresses the end: everything gathered, then sorted.

Matthew notes that Jesus taught the multitudes in parables and explained things privately to His disciples, fulfilling Psalm 78:2. The explanation of the weeds deserves a careful reading, because Jesus identifies each element and lands hard on the end of the age, when the angels gather out of His kingdom all things that offend and those who practice lawlessness. Then, strikingly, He closes with the righteous shining like the sun. Judgment and glory in the same breath.

The last paragraphs are a hard landing. Jesus goes to Nazareth, where the people run through His family list, take offense, and receive almost nothing. Then Matthew flashes back to the death of John. Herod, trapped by a public oath made in front of dinner guests, has the greatest prophet of the old order executed and delivered on a platter to a girl. Set that beside the pearl and the treasure and you have the full picture of the chapter: the kingdom is worth everything, and following its King has cost some people everything.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The kingdom of heaven in Matthew is the reign of Christ, established at Pentecost and entered now by the new birth (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Acts 2:47; Colossians 1:13).
- Mustard seed was proverbial among Jews for the smallest thing a farmer handled, and the plant could reach eight or ten feet.
- Leaven is usually a negative image in Scripture, which is part of why this parable surprises; here it pictures quiet, pervasive, unstoppable influence.
- Buried treasure was a real feature of an unstable world with no banks. Finding it in a rented field and then buying the field was a recognized legal maneuver.
- Nazareth was a small town; the villagers knew Jesus' mother, His brothers, and His sisters by name (13:55–56), which is also plain evidence that Mary had other children.
- Herod Antipas had taken Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. John's condemnation of that marriage is what put him in prison at Machaerus.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The mustard seed and the leaven both describe something almost invisible that ends up everywhere (13:31–33). What are these parables claiming about the kingdom, and how does that compare with the kind of kingdom Israel had been hoping for?*

Both parables claim that the kingdom begins small and ends vast, and that its growth is organic rather than military. A seed does not conquer a garden; it grows. Leaven does not overpower dough; it permeates it. Israel was expecting a restored political kingdom with a throne in Jerusalem and Rome driven out, which is exactly the expectation the apostles still had in Acts 1:6.

This is your opening to state plainly what the kingdom is. It began on Pentecost with a hundred and twenty people in an upper room and three thousand baptized in a day (Acts 2). Colossians 1:13 says Christians have already been conveyed into it, and Daniel 2:44 said it would never be destroyed. There is no future earthly political kingdom

awaiting establishment. The mustard seed has been growing for two thousand years, and the leaven is still working.

Question 2. *The man who found the treasure and the merchant who found the pearl each sold everything he owned, and Matthew says the first one did it with joy (13:44–46). What separates sacrifice that is grim from sacrifice that is glad, and which of the two have you been offering God?*

The difference is what the person believes he is getting. The man in the field is not making a sacrifice in his own mind; he is making the best purchase of his life, and Matthew says he sold all he had with joy. Grim sacrifice comes from a sense of loss, from feeling that God is charging too much for something you are not sure you want. Glad sacrifice comes from having actually seen the value of the field.

So the real question is not whether a person is giving enough but whether he has seen anything. Paul writes in Philippians 3:7–8 that he counted his impressive religious résumé as loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ, and calls it rubbish, and the tone is not martyrdom but relief. Ask the class where their obedience currently feels like a fee being paid, and whether the problem might be that they have never sat down and calculated what they were handed.

Question 3. *Jesus did not do many mighty works in His hometown because of their unbelief (13:58). How does familiarity produce that kind of blindness, and where have we grown too accustomed to something holy to be moved by it?*

Familiarity flattens things. The people of Nazareth could account for Jesus: they knew the trade, the mother, the brothers by name, the sisters. Their catalogue was complete, so nothing about Him could be extraordinary, and when wisdom and mighty works showed up, the contradiction offended them rather than convinced them. Notice Matthew's wording: He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. Not that He could not, but that He would not pour out signs on people who had already decided.

Turn it on the class gently. People who have attended services since childhood can sit through the Lord's Supper without one thought of the body and blood, hear the gospel preached and check the time, and sing about the cross while planning the afternoon. Ask each member to name one holy thing that has gone flat for them, and to name one deliberate thing they will do to see it again: reading the crucifixion account slowly before Sunday, praying before the assembly, or sitting in a different place with a different purpose.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace Jesus' explanation of the wheat and the weeds in 13:36–43 and identify each element: the sower, the field, the good seed, the weeds, the enemy, the harvest, and the reapers.*

The sower is the Son of Man; the field is the world; the good seed are the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the wicked one; the enemy is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are the angels.

Note carefully that the field is the world, not the church, and that the sorting is done by angels at the end of the age, not by us now.

2. *The dragnet in 13:47–50 ends much like the wheat and weeds. List what both parables say about the final separation, when it happens, and who carries it out.*

Both say that good and bad exist together until a fixed end point, that the separation is certain, that it happens at the end of the age, and that angels carry it out. Both end with the same phrase about the furnace of fire and weeping and gnashing of teeth. The dragnet adds the detail that the net gathers some of every kind, which means a mixed catch is expected rather than a failure.

3. *Read Matthew 13:52 about the scribe who brings out of his treasure things new and old. Describe how that verse should shape the way a Christian handles both Testaments.*

The scribe instructed about the kingdom brings out of his treasure things new and old. A Christian teacher is not to choose between the Testaments. The Old Testament was written for our learning (Romans 15:4) and is where we learn who God is, what sin does, and what the sacrifices were pointing toward. The New Testament is the covenant

we live under and the authority for how we worship and serve. Discard the old and you cannot understand the new; bind the old and you nullify the new (Galatians 5:4).

4. *Set the response of Nazareth (13:54–57) beside the response of Herod (14:1–2). Explain what each reveals about the way familiarity and guilt distort how people see Jesus.*

Nazareth says, in effect, we know exactly where He came from, so He cannot be anything special; their obstacle was familiarity. Herod says, this is John, whom I beheaded, risen from the dead; his obstacle was guilt. One man's conscience turned Jesus into a ghost, and a whole town's assumptions turned Him into the carpenter's boy. Neither group was reasoning from evidence. Both were protecting something.

5. *John the Baptist told a king the truth about his marriage and it cost him his head (14:3–12). Name one truth you have been softening because of what saying it plainly might cost, and say it this week.*

Answers will vary. Listen for real content rather than a vague resolution to be bolder: a conversation with an adult child, a stand at work, a conviction never voiced to a friend. Note also how John died: not in a blaze of public confrontation but quietly, in a cell, because of a party and an oath. Faithfulness does not always get a dramatic ending, and Jesus called him the greatest born of women anyway.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Use the mustard seed and the leaven to teach that the kingdom is present and growing, not future and political. This is a natural place to settle the question briefly and clearly.
- The weeds and the dragnet both teach a final separation carried out by angels at the end of the age. They do not forbid congregational discipline, which the New Testament plainly commands (1 Corinthians 5; Matthew 18:15–17).
- Matthew 13:58 is not a statement that Jesus lacked power. It describes His deliberate response to settled unbelief, consistent with Matthew 12:38–39.
- Herod's marriage will raise the subject of divorce and remarriage. Note that John lost his life for saying a marriage was unlawful, teach Matthew 19:3–9 as the standard, and handle the people in your class with patience and privacy rather than settling individual cases in a class discussion.
- The reference to His brothers and sisters in 13:55–56 shows that Mary had other children after Jesus was born (Matthew 1:25). Say it plainly and briefly, without making it the lesson.

Through Many Tribulations

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Iconium establishes the pattern that will repeat across the rest of Acts. They go to the synagogue, speak boldly, a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks believes, the unbelieving stir up the Gentiles, the city divides, and when an assault is prepared they move on. Luke says they stayed “a long time,” which is worth noticing: they did not flee at the first resistance, and they did not stay until they were killed.

Lystra is the strangest scene in the book. A man lame from birth is healed, and a crowd speaking Lycaonian concludes that Zeus and Hermes have come down, with Barnabas as the dignified Zeus and Paul, the talker, as Hermes. The priest of Zeus arrives with oxen and garlands, and the apostles tear their clothes and run into the crowd shouting, “We also are men with the same nature as you.” The little sermon that follows is a model of preaching to people with no Scripture: God made heaven and earth, He has not left Himself without witness, and the rain and the harvests and the food and the gladness have been His testimony all along.

Then the turn. Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrive, persuade the crowds, and Paul is stoned and dragged out of the city as a corpse. The disciples gather around him, he rises, and he goes back into the city. The next day he walks roughly sixty miles to Derbe. And then, having made many disciples there, these two men walk back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening souls and appointing elders. That is the sentence that should be underlined in every class: they went back.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe lie in the Roman province of Galatia; the churches planted here are almost certainly the recipients of the letter to the Galatians.
- Lystra was a Roman colony but the local population spoke Lycaonian, which is why Paul and Barnabas did not immediately grasp what the crowd was saying.
- A local legend held that Zeus and Hermes had once visited the region unrecognized and been turned away, which helps explain the crowd’s eagerness.
- Timothy was from Lystra (Acts 16:1–2) and may well have witnessed this stoning as a young man.
- Elders, also called overseers and shepherds, are always plural in a congregation in the New Testament, always men, and always qualified according to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.
- The appointment of elders here, with prayer and fasting, occurs on the return visit, months after the churches were planted.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The same crowd that tried to offer sacrifices to Paul at Lystra helped stone him a short while later (14:13, 14:19). What does that say about the worth of popular approval, and how should a Christian handle being praised?*

Luke puts the two scenes within a few verses of each other for a reason. The garlands and the stones came from the same crowd, and it did not take long. Paul and Barnabas refused the praise as vigorously as they endured the violence, tearing their clothes and insisting they were men of the same nature. Praise and hostility are both external verdicts, and neither one tells you whether you are pleasing God.

For a class, this cuts both ways. Some members are paralyzed by criticism, and this passage says the critics can turn out to be the same people who cheered last month. Others are quietly addicted to being well thought of, and the danger there is subtler. Ask what a person does with a compliment: deflect it dishonestly, absorb it, or redirect it the way these two did, by pointing hard and fast at God. Then read Galatians 1:10 and John 12:42–43.

Question 2. Compare Paul's message to pagans in 14:15–17 with his synagogue sermon in 13:16–41. What changes, what stays the same, and what does that teach us about speaking to people who share none of our assumptions?

The differences are instructive. In the synagogue Paul begins with Israel's history, argues from the prophets, quotes Psalms and Habakkuk, and moves to Jesus as David's promised descendant. At Lystra there is no Old Testament, no covenant history, and no quotation, because the audience has none of it. He starts instead with creation, providence, rain, harvest, and the gladness of full hearts, and works from there toward the living God who made it all.

What stays the same is the destination: turn from these useless things to the living God. Paul adjusts the starting point and never the message. That is the model for talking with neighbors and coworkers who do not accept the Bible as authoritative. Begin where they actually are, with creation, conscience, longing, or death, and then move to Christ. Ask the class to name the assumptions their own neighbors do not share, and to practice out loud how a conversation might start.

Question 3. Paul and Barnabas told brand new disciples that we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God (14:22). How does that square with the way Christianity is often presented today, and what should a person honestly expect when he obeys the gospel?

Notice when this was said. These were brand new Christians, converted within the past year, in towns where the missionaries had been beaten and expelled, and the strengthening message they were given was that entering the kingdom involves many tribulations. Paul did not hide the cost until people were committed; he built it into the foundation. Compare Jesus in Luke 14:28–33, where He tells a crowd to count the cost before starting.

Set that beside the way Christianity is often marketed: come to Jesus and your marriage will improve, your finances will stabilize, your anxiety will lift. Some of that may happen, and none of it is promised. What is promised is 2 Timothy 3:12, that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution, and John 16:33, tribulation in the world and peace in Him. Ask the class what a new convert in your congregation is actually told to expect, and whether it matches Acts 14:22.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Trace the return route in 14:21–26. Why would these two men deliberately walk back through the very cities that had just run them out?

They returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, then went through Pisidia to Pamphylia, preached in Perga, went down to Attalia, and sailed back to Antioch of Syria. They went back because the disciples they had left behind were young, frightened, and leaderless, and because a convert made is not a work finished. The easier route home lay in the other direction, through Paul's home region, and they chose the hard road for the sake of the churches.

2. Acts 14:23 says they appointed elders in every church. Read 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9, and list the qualifications God requires of the men who serve in that work.

The New Testament requires an elder to be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy, gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous, one who rules his own house well with faithful children in submission, not a new convert, having a good testimony among outsiders, not self willed, not quick tempered, a lover of what is good, just, holy, self controlled, and holding fast the faithful word so that he can both exhort and convict. These are the qualifications God gave, they are not suggestions, and the work is described as shepherding and overseeing the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–3).

3. List the three things Paul and Barnabas did for the new disciples in 14:22–23, and explain what each one accomplishes for a young congregation.

They strengthened the souls of the disciples, they exhorted them to continue in the faith while telling them the truth about tribulation, and they appointed elders in every church with prayer and fasting. The first supplies encouragement, the second supplies realistic expectations so that trouble does not feel like evidence that God has

failed, and the third supplies ongoing local leadership so that the congregation does not depend on visiting preachers. Every young congregation needs all three.

4. *Set Paul's stoning in 14:19 beside 2 Corinthians 11:24–28 and Galatians 6:17. Add up what following Christ actually cost this man over his lifetime.*

Beyond the stoning at Lystra, Paul lists five times receiving thirty nine lashes, three beatings with rods, three shipwrecks, a night and a day in the deep, constant travel, perils from rivers, robbers, his own countrymen, Gentiles, false brethren, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, cold, and nakedness, and the daily pressure of concern for all the churches. In Galatians he says he bears in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus. The man who wrote that rejoicing is possible in all circumstances was not writing from comfort.

5. *Paul got up after being stoned and walked straight back into the city that had done it (14:20). Name one place where you quit after being embarrassed or hurt, and decide what walking back in would look like for you this week.*

Answers will vary. Be careful not to let this become a demand that everyone confront everyone. Listen for specific retreats: a class someone quit teaching after a criticism, a relative no longer spoken to about the Lord, a service refused since an embarrassment. Note that when Paul went back into Lystra he was not being reckless; the disciples were there, and he left the next morning.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The healing at Lystra was an apostolic sign confirming the word (Hebrews 2:3–4; Mark 16:20). Teach it as such, and be prepared to explain kindly why such signs are not given today (1 Corinthians 13:8–10).
- Acts 14:23 is a foundational text on church organization. Teach a plurality of qualified men in each congregation, appointed according to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and shepherding the local flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–3). Do not bring in later human arrangements the New Testament never authorizes.
- Acts 14:22 is the plain answer to prosperity teaching. Use it, and use it pastorally: tribulation is promised, and so is the presence of Christ in it.
- Paul and Barnabas refuse worship and insist they are men of like nature (14:14–15), just as Peter does in Acts 10:25–26. This is the place to say that no man is to be venerated and that there is one Mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5).

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Leviticus 8–13 · Proverbs 16 · Matthew 14:13–15:9 · Acts 15

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