

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 19 OF 104

Grumbling and Greatness

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Numbers 10–16
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 22
Gospels	Matthew 20
General New Testament	Acts 20:17–21:26

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

The aim this week is to get at two habits that run deeper in most of us than we admit: complaining and comparing. Numbers shows a redeemed people talking themselves out of the promised land one grievance at a time. Matthew 20 shows men who had left everything still calculating rank. Set against them are Caleb, who followed God fully, and Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. If your class can see complaint and ambition as the same disease with two faces, the week has landed.

Doctrinally, Acts 20:17–38 is the richest passage of the quarter on how a congregation is led: elders, overseers, and shepherds are the same men in the same office, plural in each congregation, charged with the flock among them. Hebrews 3 and 4 with Numbers 14 give you the occasion to teach plainly that a people once delivered can fall away through unbelief. Matthew 20:28 with 1 Timothy 2:6 lets you say that Christ gave Himself a ransom for all. And Proverbs 22:6 will need careful, compassionate handling as a proverb rather than a promise.

Formationally, the thread is what a servant looks like when nobody is applauding. Moses prays for the sister who attacked him. Caleb stands with two votes against ten. Paul kneels in the sand and reminds men that he worked with his hands so he could give things away. Ask your class this question before they leave: name the person in your life who most deserves your service and least deserves it in your opinion, and say what you are going to do for them before next Sunday.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Acts 20:17–21:26, and build the hour on the Miletus address. Read verses 28 through 32 aloud twice. Teach the three terms for one office, the plurality of elders, and the warning about wolves. Close with the beach scene; a class rarely forgets grown men kneeling and weeping.

Second session: Take up Numbers 10–16. Do not try to cover every chapter. Give the hour to the complaining of chapter 11, the two reports of chapters 13 and 14 with Hebrews 3:7–19 open, and the rebellion of Korah. End with Aaron standing between the dead and the living.

The other two readings: Matthew 20 and Proverbs 22 are for home reading, but announce two things. First, Matthew 20:25–28 is the best definition of greatness in the Bible, and it is worth memorizing as a family. Second, Proverbs 22:6 is a proverb and not a guarantee, and no parent in this congregation should read it as an accusation.

Complaint, Unbelief, and Rebellion

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 10 is a picture of everything going right. The trumpets sound, the tribes move in the order God assigned, the ark goes before them to search out a resting place, and Moses says, “Rise up, O Lord! Let Your enemies be scattered.” Eleven days from Sinai to Kadesh, and the promise would have been in their hands. Then chapter 11 opens with the people complaining in the hearing of the Lord, and the whole book turns.

What follows is a catalogue of grievance. The rabble craves meat and remembers Egyptian cucumbers with affection. Moses, exhausted, asks God to kill him rather than make him carry this people alone. Miriam and Aaron use Moses’ marriage as a pretext to challenge his standing. Then the spies return, and ten men who saw the same grapes as Caleb describe themselves as grasshoppers. The congregation weeps all night, proposes electing a captain to take them back to Egypt, and threatens to stone the two men telling the truth.

Chapter 16 is the bottom. Korah, a Levite, and 250 leaders of the congregation, men of renown, want the priesthood too. Dathan and Abiram will not even come when called, and they say Egypt was the land flowing with milk and honey. The earth opens, fire consumes the 250, and the next morning the whole congregation blames Moses for it. Aaron runs into the middle of the plague with a censer and stands between the dead and the living. Teach that image. It is the clearest picture of mediation in the Old Testament outside the Day of Atonement.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Israel leaves Sinai on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year (10:11), about eleven days’ travel from the land (Deuteronomy 1:2).
- The spies are sent from Kadesh in the Wilderness of Paran and are gone forty days; the sentence is a year for each day (14:34).
- Korah was a Levite of the family of Kohath, already privileged to carry the holy things. Dathan and Abiram were Reubenites. The rebellion combined a claim to the priesthood with a challenge to Moses’ civil leadership.
- Jude 11 refers to “the rebellion of Korah” as a pattern of ungodliness, and Psalm 106 recounts these chapters as a national confession.
- Paul treats this wilderness material as written for our admonition (1 Corinthians 10:1–12), and Hebrews 3 and 4 use Numbers 14 as the central warning against unbelief.
- The civil penalties in these chapters, including the execution of the Sabbath breaker in 15:32–36, belonged to Israel as a nation under the old covenant.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Israel is three days out from Sinai when the complaining begins (11:1). Trace what they complained about in chapters 11, 14, and 16, and talk about what all of those complaints have underneath them.*

Make the list with them. In chapter 11 they complain about hardship generally, and then about the food, remembering Egypt as though it had been a resort. In chapter 12 Miriam and Aaron complain about Moses’ wife and then reveal the real issue: has the Lord spoken only through Moses? In chapter 14 they complain about the land and the odds. In chapter 16 they complain about who holds office, and after the judgment they complain that Moses killed the people of the Lord.

Underneath all of them is the same thing: a settled suspicion that God is not handling this well. Every complaint is, at bottom, an accusation about God’s competence or God’s goodness, which is why Numbers treats it so severely and why Philippians 2:14 tells Christians to do all things without complaining. Ask the class to name the thing they

complain about most often, and then to state it honestly as what it actually is: a charge against God's management.

Question 2. *Ten spies and two saw the same land, the same walled cities, and the same giants (13:27–33). What made the reports so different, and where does that same difference show up in the decisions you are facing?*

Both reports agree on the facts. The land flows with milk and honey, here is the fruit, the people are strong, the cities are fortified. The difference is the conclusion drawn from identical data. The ten say, "We are not able," and add the revealing phrase, "We were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." Caleb and Joshua say, "If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land." One group measured the giants against themselves; the other measured them against God.

This is not a lesson in optimism. Faith is not the belief that things will go well; it is confidence in God's character and promise. Ask the class where they are currently doing grasshopper math: a conversation they will not have, a service they will not attempt, a sin they have decided is too strong, a person they have decided will never listen. Then ask what the same situation looks like with God factored in.

Question 3. *Korah's argument in 16:3 sounds almost scriptural: all the congregation is holy, so why do you exalt yourselves above them? What was actually wrong with it, and how does a Christian tell honest questioning from rebellion?*

The statement is half true, which is what makes it dangerous. The congregation was holy in the sense that God had set them apart. What Korah drew from it was that therefore no distinction of office could be legitimate, and that the priesthood God assigned to Aaron was a power grab by Moses. Moses' reply is telling: he falls on his face, and then says that the Lord will show who is His. He does not defend his own position; he lets God settle it. Numbers 16:11 names the real target: you and all your company are gathered together against the Lord.

Here is the distinction your class needs, and it must be drawn carefully. The New Testament positively commands examination: the Bereans searched the Scriptures daily, Christians are to test all things and to prove the spirits, and elders are not priests and hold no separate access to God. Asking whether something is scriptural is never rebellion. Rebellion is refusing the arrangement God actually made, resenting the people who hold it, and gathering a following. The test is usually in the method: does the person go to the man, or to a faction? Is he after truth, or after position?

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the complaints recorded in Numbers 11 through 16, and beside each one write the consequence God attached to it.*

The complaint of 11:1 brings fire at the edge of the camp. The craving for meat in 11:4–34 brings quail and a plague at the graves of craving. Miriam's challenge in chapter 12 brings seven days of leprosy. The refusal to enter in chapter 14 brings forty years of wandering and death in the wilderness for everyone twenty and older except Caleb and Joshua. The presumptuous attack that follows brings defeat at Hormah. Korah's rebellion in chapter 16 brings the earth opening, fire on the 250, and then a plague that kills 14,700 more.

2. *Numbers 12:3 calls Moses more humble than all men on the face of the earth. Read 12:1–13 and note carefully what he did and what he refused to do when his own family attacked him.*

Moses does not answer the charge, does not defend his marriage, and does not assert his authority; the text says the Lord heard it, which is the whole point of verse 2. When God vindicates him and Miriam is struck, Moses immediately intercedes with one of the shortest prayers in Scripture: "Please heal her, O God, I pray!" He refuses to defend himself and refuses to enjoy his sister's punishment. That is what biblical humility looks like in practice.

3. *Read Hebrews 3:7–4:11 with Numbers 14 open beside it. Identify what the writer says the wilderness generation failed to do, and what warning he draws from it for Christians.*

Hebrews says they failed to enter because of unbelief, and that the word they heard was not mixed with faith. The warning is explicit and it is to Christians: beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; exhort one another daily. People who had been delivered from Egypt, passed through

the sea, and eaten the manna still fell in the wilderness. A Christian can be lost after having been saved, which is exactly the warning Hebrews is making (3:12–14; 4:11).

4. *Trace what Caleb says in 13:30 and 14:6–9, then find what God says about him in 14:24. Write down the exact phrase God uses to describe him.*

Caleb says, “Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it,” and later, with Joshua, “If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land. Do not rebel, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread.” God says of him, “My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land.” The phrase to write down is “followed Me fully.”

5. *Complaining is the sin these chapters treat most severely and the one we treat most lightly. Go twenty-four hours this week without a single complaint, and write down what the attempt teaches you about yourself.*

Answers will vary. Most people fail within the first two hours, which is the instruction. Expect reports about traffic, weather, work, family, and church. The point is not to manufacture false cheerfulness or to suppress genuine lament, since the Psalms are full of honest complaint addressed to God. The point is to notice the running current of dissatisfaction that we would never dare to say to God’s face and that we say all day to everyone else.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The judgments in these chapters are severe, and a class will feel it. Teach them reverently as God’s dealings with a covenant nation He had redeemed and warned, and do not soften them or sensationalize them. Note that Scripture itself holds them up as warnings (1 Corinthians 10:11; Jude 11).
- Korah must not be used to shut down honest questions. Elders are not priests, no man stands between a Christian and God except Christ (1 Timothy 2:5), and Christians are commanded to examine teaching (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). Draw the line at method and motive, not at asking.
- Numbers 12 mentions Moses’ Cushite wife. The text does not present the issue as racial and does not say God took offense at the marriage; the real complaint surfaces in verse 2. Do not build a race lesson out of it in either direction.
- Numbers 15:32–36 records a man executed for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. That was civil law in a theocratic nation under the old covenant. Christians are not under the Sabbath (Colossians 2:16–17), and this is not a pattern for punishment today.
- Numbers 14 with Hebrews 3 and 4 is your clearest opportunity to teach that a redeemed people can fall away through unbelief. Handle it as Hebrews does, as a warning meant to produce daily encouragement rather than anxiety.

Train Up a Child

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Proverbs 22 falls into two parts. Verses 1 through 16 finish the long collection of Solomon's individual sayings that began at 10:1, and verse 17 begins a new section, "the words of the wise," a series of longer admonitions addressed directly to the reader. That shift is worth pointing out to a class, because the tone changes from observation to instruction.

The first half is dominated by money and reputation, and it refuses to let the two be confused. A good name is better than great riches. The rich and poor meet together and the Lord is the maker of them all. He who oppresses the poor to increase his riches will surely come to poverty. Wealth is neither condemned nor worshiped here; it is simply put in its place, which is under the fear of the Lord (22:4).

In between stands verse 6, one of the most quoted and most misused verses in Scripture. Teach it as a proverb: the general and reliable truth that early, consistent, God-centered training shapes a life, and that the shaping usually holds. Teach it also with compassion, because in almost every class there is a mother or father who did their best and is grieving a child who walked away. Proverbs is not there to convict them; it is there to encourage parents who still have children at home.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Verses 1 through 16 close the Solomonic collection begun at 10:1. Verse 17 opens "the words of the wise," which runs through 24:22.
- Ancient boundary markers (22:28) were stones, and moving one was a quiet, deniable theft of a neighbor's inheritance, condemned in the law (Deuteronomy 19:14; 27:17).
- Surety (22:26–27) meant pledging yourself for another man's debt, a recurring warning in Proverbs (6:1–5; 11:15; 17:18).
- The phrase "train up" in verse 6 carries the sense of dedicating or starting a child on a course, with the way he should go understood as the way of wisdom and the fear of the Lord.
- These remain general principles about how life ordinarily runs under God's moral order, not guarantees for every case.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Proverbs 22:1 says a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches. Talk about how a person actually builds one over years, and how quickly it can be spent.*

A good name is built the way a stone wall is built, one unremarkable day at a time: bills paid, promises kept, work finished, words that turn out to be true, the same behavior in the parking lot as in the auditorium. Nobody notices it happening. Ecclesiastes 7:1 says a good name is better than precious ointment, and 1 Timothy 3:7 requires that an elder have a good testimony among those outside the church.

And it can be spent in an evening. One dishonest deal, one lost temper in public, one message sent that should never have been written, and twenty years of quiet credibility is gone. That is not a reason to live in fear; it is a reason to understand what is at stake in small decisions. Ask the class what their name currently means to the people who work with them, and whether the answer is what they would want.

Question 2. *Verse 6 says train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it. Since this is a proverb rather than a guarantee, how should faithful parents of a wandering child read it?*

Teach the genre first, kindly and firmly. Proverbs states what is generally and reliably true, not what is guaranteed in every case. If verse 6 were an absolute promise, then every wayward adult would prove parental failure, and

God Himself, the perfect Father of Israel, raised children who rebelled (Isaiah 1:2). Ezekiel 18:20 says the son does not bear the guilt of the father, and adult children make their own choices.

So how should such a parent read it? As a reason to keep doing what they did, and to keep hoping. Training is not a machine that produces a guaranteed output; it is the laying down of a path a person knows how to find again. Many prodigals come home to a way they were trained in. Encourage parents to keep the door open, to keep praying, and to stop rereading this verse as an indictment. Then turn to the parents who still have children in the house and ask what training actually looks like this week.

Question 3. *Verse 7 says the borrower is servant to the lender. Where do you see that playing out in ordinary life around you, and what would getting free of it actually require?*

Let the class supply the examples, because they know them: the car payment that dictates the job, the credit card balance that makes a stand at work impossible, the mortgage that both parents work extra hours to cover, the student loan that governs a decade. Debt is not called sin here, and Scripture assumes lending exists. But it does describe the relationship accurately: the lender owns part of the borrower's future.

Getting free requires the unglamorous things Proverbs keeps recommending: a plan (21:5), diligence (22:29), a willingness to live below one's means, and a refusal to measure life by what the neighbors have (Luke 12:15). The spiritual stake is real. A Christian in deep debt is less free to give, less free to serve, and less free to say no to an employer who asks him to compromise. Ask the class what one decision this year would move them toward freedom.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Collect every verse in Proverbs 22 that concerns the poor (22:2, 9, 16, 22–23). Write out what the chapter says God Himself does about the way the poor are treated.*

Verse 2 says the rich and the poor have this in common, that the Lord is the maker of them all. Verse 9 says the generous eye will be blessed. Verse 16 warns the man who oppresses the poor to increase his riches. Verses 22 and 23 forbid robbing the poor because he is poor or oppressing the afflicted in the gate, and then say why: the Lord will plead their cause and plunder the soul of those who plunder them. God takes their case personally, which is the chapter's most striking claim.

2. *Proverbs 22:3 says the prudent foresees evil and hides himself, while the simple pass on and are punished. Give two examples from your own life where you saw it coming, and two where you did not.*

Answers will vary. Prudence in Scripture is not cynicism; it is paying attention. Common examples include seeing a financial squeeze coming and adjusting early, noticing where a friendship or a conversation was heading, or recognizing a temptation in advance and changing the route home. The failures are usually not ignorance but refusal to look. Encourage the class to name one danger they can see right now and are choosing not to address.

3. *Verse 24 warns against making friendship with an angry man. Read 1 Corinthians 15:33 and explain how friendships shape a person far more than he intends or notices.*

1 Corinthians 15:33 says evil company corrupts good habits. The warning about the angry man adds the reason: lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul. Character is contagious, and it transfers without anyone intending it, through tone of voice, through what gets laughed at, through what becomes normal. This is not an argument for isolation from the lost, since Jesus ate with sinners, but for care about who shapes us, whose approval we want, and whose habits we are absorbing.

4. *Verse 29 says a man diligent in his business will stand before kings. Set it beside Colossians 3:23–24 and describe what changes when a Christian works as though for the Lord.*

Colossians 3:23–24 says whatever you do, do it heartily as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance, for you serve the Lord Christ. It changes the audience. A Christian who works for the Lord does the job right when the supervisor is gone, tells the truth on the invoice, and finishes what he started. Proverbs observes that such men tend to rise; Colossians says that even when they do not, the wages are guaranteed from elsewhere.

5. Verse 9 blesses the man with a generous eye who gives his bread to the poor. Identify one need you already know about and have been pretending not to see, and meet it before next Sunday.

Answers will vary. The phrase “pretending not to see” is the pressure point. Most of us know about a need and have developed a way of not thinking about it: a widow’s yard, a family behind on utilities, a single parent who needs a night off, a member nobody has visited. Look for an action this week rather than an intention, and remember Galatians 6:10, especially toward those who are of the household of faith.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Verse 6 must be taught as a proverb and taught with compassion. Faithful parents in your class are grieving wayward children. Say plainly that this verse is not a formula and not an accusation, and that each person answers for himself (Ezekiel 18:20).
- Verse 15 mentions the rod of correction. Teach it alongside Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21. Scripture never authorizes discipline administered in anger, and a teacher should say so clearly.
- Verse 4, which connects humility and the fear of the Lord with riches, honor, and life, is a general principle and not a prosperity promise. Job, Jeremiah, and Paul are enough to settle that.
- The warnings about surety are wisdom, not law. A Christian may sometimes rightly help a brother, but he should do it with his eyes open and with money he can afford to lose.

The Last Shall Be First

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The parable of the laborers answers a question Peter asked at the end of chapter 19: we have left all and followed You, so what shall we have? Jesus answers with a story about a landowner who keeps going back to the marketplace all day long, and who at evening pays the eleventh-hour men first and in full view. The all-day workers get exactly the denarius they bargained for, and they complain, not because they were cheated but because someone else was treated generously.

The landowner's reply is the center of the parable: Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good? Nobody in the story receives less than justice, and several receive far more. What the grumblers want is not fairness; it is comparison, and Jesus will not allow it in His kingdom.

Then comes the third and fullest prediction of the crucifixion, and then the request for thrones. The contrast is almost unbearable: He speaks of being mocked, scourged, and crucified, and they discuss seating. Jesus does not humiliate them. He speaks of a cup they will indeed drink, and turns the world's pyramid upside down. The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over people; it shall not be so among you. The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many. Two blind beggars, ignored by the crowd, then receive exactly what they ask for.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- A denarius was a standard day's wage for a laborer, enough to feed a family for a day, which is why the men still standing in the marketplace at five o'clock were in real trouble.
- Day laborers gathered in the marketplace hoping to be hired; being unhired at the end of the day meant a hungry household, not laziness (20:7).
- This is Jesus' third and most detailed passion prediction (compare 16:21; 17:22–23), and it is the first to name crucifixion and the Gentiles.
- Mark 10:35 has James and John making the request themselves; Matthew records their mother asking. Both are true; she spoke, and verse 22 shows Jesus answering them.
- The "cup" is a common Old Testament image for a portion appointed by God, whether of blessing or of suffering (Psalm 16:5; Isaiah 51:17), and Jesus uses it of His own suffering in Gethsemane (26:39).
- Jericho is the last stop before the ascent to Jerusalem, so this healing takes place days before the triumphal entry.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The workers who bore the burden and heat of the day received exactly what they had agreed to, and they were still furious (20:10–12). What was really bothering them, and when have you felt the same way about somebody else's blessing?*

What bothers them is not their pay; it is the comparison. They say it plainly: you made them equal to us. The moment the eleventh-hour men were paid, the denarius that had looked like a fair day's wage in the morning looked like an insult in the evening, and nothing about it had changed except what someone else received. The landowner names the disease exactly: is your eye evil because I am good?

Everyone in the room has felt it. The brother converted late in life who is welcomed with joy while we have been faithful for forty years. The coworker who gets the promotion. The family whose children all stayed in the church. The prodigal who comes home to a party, as in Luke 15:25–32, where the elder brother makes this identical

complaint. Ask the class to name the person whose blessing has been hard for them to celebrate, and then ask what they have actually received from God that they did not earn.

Question 2. *The mother of James and John asks for the two best seats in the kingdom immediately after Jesus describes His own crucifixion (20:17–21). What does that sequence expose about the disciples, and how does Jesus redefine greatness in 20:25–28?*

It exposes how completely they were still thinking in worldly categories. He speaks of betrayal, condemnation, mockery, scourging, and crucifixion, and what registers with them is the kingdom that follows and who will sit where. The other ten are indignant, which Matthew notes drily, and their indignation is not piety but competition. This was not a one-time failure; they are still arguing about it in the upper room (Luke 22:24).

Jesus does not tell them ambition is wrong. He redirects it. You want greatness? Then serve. Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave. And He grounds it in Himself rather than in a principle: the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. Ask the class what would change in the congregation if every member sought the lowest job rather than the visible one. Then ask what would change in their homes.

Question 3. *Jesus asks the blind men the same question He had just asked James and John: what do you want Me to do for you (20:21, 32)? Compare the two answers, and consider what your own honest answer would be this week.*

James and John, through their mother, ask for position: grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom. Jesus says they do not know what they are asking. The blind men ask for mercy and then, when pressed, for sight: Lord, that our eyes may be opened. Jesus has compassion, touches their eyes, and they follow Him on the road. One request He declines; the other He grants immediately.

The difference is that one pair asked out of ambition and the other out of need. Put the question to the class in the second person, because that is how Jesus asked it. If He stopped the procession and asked you tonight what you want Him to do for you, what would you actually say? Most of us would be embarrassed by the honest answer, which is exactly why the question is worth asking.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the five times the landowner goes out to hire and note exactly what he promises each group (20:1–7). Notice which group had a wage agreed in advance.*

He goes out early in the morning and agrees with the first group for a denarius. At the third hour he tells the next group, whatever is right I will give you. He does the same at the sixth and ninth hours. At the eleventh hour he finds men still standing idle, sends them into the vineyard, and promises them nothing specific at all. Only the first group had a contract; the rest trusted the owner's word about what is right. That distinction is the hinge of the whole parable.

2. *Read Matthew 20:28 with Mark 10:45 and 1 Timothy 2:5–6. Explain what the word “ransom” claims about what the cross actually accomplished, and for how many.*

A ransom is the price paid to secure the release of a captive. Jesus says He gives His life as a ransom for many; 1 Timothy 2:6 says He gave Himself a ransom for all. The cross was not merely an example or a demonstration but the payment that secures release from sin (1 Peter 1:18–19; Ephesians 1:7). The offer is universal: God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; John 3:16). The limit is not in the price but in who will come.

3. *Jesus asks James and John whether they are able to drink His cup. Trace what became of those two men in Acts 12:2 and Revelation 1:9, and note how the Lord's answer came true.*

James was killed with the sword by Herod in Acts 12:2, the first apostle to be martyred. John writes Revelation as a companion in tribulation, exiled on Patmos for the word of God. Jesus said, “You will indeed drink My cup,” and both did, one quickly and violently, the other over a long lifetime of hardship. The thrones they asked about were not His to give; the suffering they did not ask about was given to them both.

4. *Matthew 20:18–19 is the most detailed of the predictions of the crucifixion. List every specific detail, and then check each one against Matthew 27.*

He says they are going up to Jerusalem, the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and scribes, they will condemn Him to death, they will deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify, and the third day He will rise again. Matthew 27 records the betrayal, the condemnation by the council, the delivery to Pilate, the mocking by the soldiers, the scourging, and the crucifixion, and Matthew 28 the resurrection. He told them in advance, in order, and they still did not understand it until afterward.

5. *Jesus says whoever desires to be great among you must be your servant. Name one act of service this week that will be genuinely inconvenient and that nobody will see, and do it.*

Answers will vary. The two qualifiers are the whole exercise: inconvenient and unseen. Watch for people who choose something they were going to do anyway. Suggest examples if the class stalls: taking a meal to someone who will not reciprocate, cleaning something nobody knows needs cleaning, sitting with a difficult person, giving up an evening for a family that is struggling.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The parable of the laborers is about God's generosity and the danger of comparison, not about wages, labor policy, or a doctrine of unconditional election. Keep it anchored in Peter's question at 19:27 and in the landowner's reply.
- Matthew 20:28 says "a ransom for many," which some use for a limited atonement. Read 1 Timothy 2:6 with it: He gave Himself a ransom for all. Christ died for every person; not every person will come.
- Jesus says the seats at His right and left are for those for whom they are prepared by His Father. Do not speculate beyond that. The passage settles the question of ambition, not the seating chart.
- Be careful not to turn the healing of the blind men into a lesson that persistence obligates God. They asked for mercy, and He had compassion. The initiative is His.

Farewell at Miletus

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The Miletus address is the only sermon in Acts preached to Christians, and specifically to elders, which makes it enormously valuable. Paul does three things: he reviews his own example, he announces his departure, and he charges them with the flock. Every line repays slow reading. He served with humility and tears and trials. He kept back nothing that was helpful. He taught publicly and from house to house. He testified to Jews and Greeks alike, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

The charge itself is the passage that shapes how a congregation is led. Take heed to yourselves first, and then to all the flock. The Holy Spirit made you overseers. Shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Then the warning: wolves will come in from outside, and men will arise from among yourselves, drawing away disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. They kneel, they pray, they weep, and they sorrow most over the words that they would see his face no more.

The last part of the reading is a slow walk toward chains. At Tyre disciples tell him through the Spirit not to go up. At Caesarea, Agabus binds his own hands and feet with Paul's belt and says the Jews will do this to the man who owns it. Everyone weeps and pleads. Paul answers that they are breaking his heart, and that he is ready to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. The brethren stop arguing and say the sentence that ends every honest dispute among Christians: the will of the Lord be done.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Miletus lay about thirty miles south of Ephesus; Paul was hurrying to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16) and sent for the elders rather than going himself.
- Three terms describe one office in this passage: elders (presbuteros, 20:17), overseers or bishops (episkopos, 20:28), and the work of shepherding or pastoring (poimaino, 20:28). Peter uses all three the same way in 1 Peter 5:1–2.
- Note the plural. Each congregation had elders, not a single pastor, and their oversight extended to the flock among them (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:2).
- Agabus appears earlier in Acts 11:28 foretelling a famine. Prophecy in this period was direct revelation from God, given before the New Testament was complete (1 Corinthians 13:8–10).
- Philip's four daughters prophesied (21:9). The gift was given to women as well as men (Acts 2:17–18), and its exercise was governed by the apostolic instructions given to the churches (1 Corinthians 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:11–12).
- The vow of Acts 21:23–26 was a Jewish vow being completed in the temple. Paul's participation was an accommodation to Jewish brethren, consistent with 1 Corinthians 9:20, and not a return to the law for justification (Galatians 2:16).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *In Acts 20:17 Paul sends for the elders, and in 20:28 he calls those same men overseers and tells them to shepherd the flock. Look at all three words together and talk about what they settle regarding the leadership of a congregation.*

The three words describe one office from three angles. Elder speaks of maturity and proven character. Overseer, sometimes translated bishop, speaks of the work of watching and administering. Shepherd, or pastor, speaks of

feeding, leading, and protecting. They are used interchangeably here and in 1 Peter 5:1–2 of the same men, which means there is no separate office of pastor above the elders and no bishop over a group of congregations.

Two other things follow. First, the plural: a congregation is led by a group of qualified men, not by one man, which protects both the church and the men. Second, the scope: they shepherd the flock among them, their own congregation, and no more. Add 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 for the qualifications, and your class has the whole New Testament pattern for congregational leadership in about ten minutes. End by asking what members owe such men (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13).

Question 2. *Paul says he is innocent of the blood of all men because he did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God (20:26–27). What gets quietly left out when a preacher, a teacher, or a parent shrinks back, and why is that temptation so strong?*

What gets left out is always whatever costs the most to say. For a preacher it might be the parts of the gospel a community finds offensive: what Jesus said about marriage and divorce, the necessity of baptism, the reality of judgment, the requirements for worship, the sins that are common and comfortable in his own congregation. For a parent it is the conversation that will strain the relationship. For a teacher it is the question he hopes nobody asks.

The temptation is strong because silence is invisible. Nobody complains about a sermon that was not preached. Paul's phrase is worth memorizing: I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Not the parts that go over well. Not the parts that confirm what everyone already thinks. All of it. Ask the class what subject they have heard least about in twenty years of Bible classes, and whether they can honestly say why.

Question 3. *Paul is warned in city after city and goes to Jerusalem anyway, saying he is ready not only to be bound but to die (21:13). How do you tell resolve from stubbornness, and what did the brethren finally say when he would not be persuaded?*

Begin with the text, because it is often misread. In 21:4 the disciples told him “through the Spirit” not to go up, and in 21:11 Agabus says only what will happen, not that Paul must not go. What the Spirit revealed was the outcome; the urging was the loving conclusion the brethren drew from it. Paul, who had said in 20:22 that he was going bound in the spirit, understood the same revelation and drew a different conclusion. He was not disobeying God.

The difference between resolve and stubbornness is usually visible in three things: whether the person is pursuing something God has actually said, whether he can explain his reasons calmly to people who love him, and whether he is willing to bear the cost himself rather than impose it on others. Paul passes all three. And note how it ended: when he would not be persuaded, they ceased and said, “The will of the Lord be done.” They did not withdraw from him, and they did not keep arguing. That sentence is the right end to a great many disagreements among brethren.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Paul says in 20:18–21 about the way he conducted himself among the Ephesians for three years, including what he taught and where he taught it.*

He says he was with them from the first day he came to Asia, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials that happened to him through the plotting of the Jews. He kept back nothing that was helpful. He proclaimed and taught them publicly and from house to house. He testified to Jews and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice the combination: personal example, complete content, both public and private teaching, and the same message for every kind of hearer.

2. *Acts 20:28 says the Holy Spirit made them overseers of the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood. Read 1 Peter 5:1–4 and 1 Timothy 3:1–7, and write out what an elder is, what he does, and what he must be.*

An elder is a shepherd of the flock of God among him, serving as an overseer, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, not lording it over those entrusted to him but being an example. He must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach, not given to wine or

violence, gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous, ruling his own house well, not a novice, and of good testimony among outsiders. Character first, ability second, ambition never.

3. *Paul warns that savage wolves will come in, and that from among their own selves men will rise up speaking perverse things (20:29–30). Follow that warning into 1 Timothy 1:3 and Revelation 2:1–7 and see what became of Ephesus.*

Paul tells Timothy to remain at Ephesus to charge some that they teach no other doctrine, which shows the wolves arrived exactly as predicted. Revelation 2:1–7 finds the Ephesian church still testing false apostles and hating evil practice, and still rebuked for leaving its first love, with a warning that the lampstand could be removed. The warning was accurate, the church fought well, and it still needed the call to repent. Sound doctrine alone was not enough.

4. *Acts 20:35 quotes a saying of Jesus that appears nowhere in the four gospels. Write it out, and note what Paul had just been talking about when he quoted it.*

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Paul had just reminded them that he coveted no one’s silver, gold, or apparel, that his own hands provided for his needs and for those with him, and that by laboring this way they must support the weak. The saying is quoted in the context of working hard in order to have something to give away, which is exactly how Ephesians 4:28 puts it.

5. *Paul could say he had coveted no one’s silver or gold and had worked with his own hands to support others. Name one specific way you will give this month that genuinely costs you, and do it without telling anyone.*

Answers will vary. Look for a figure or an act, not a sentiment, and honor the anonymity. Some will need permission to give in ways other than money: a skill, a truck, a Saturday, childcare, a ride to every appointment for a month. The standard Paul sets is not an amount but a direction, giving rather than receiving, and a willingness to work in order to be able to do it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Acts 20:28 is your best text of the quarter on church leadership. Teach the three terms as one office, teach the plurality of elders in each congregation, teach the qualifications from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and note that these are men appointed to shepherd their own local flock.
- The phrase “the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” magnifies both the value of the church and the deity of Christ (compare Ephesians 5:25; Titus 2:13–14). Some translations read “the church of the Lord.” Do not get lost in the textual question; teach what the verse plainly says about what the church cost.
- Acts 21:4 is sometimes read as though Paul disobeyed a direct command of the Spirit. The Spirit revealed what awaited him (20:23; 21:11); the pleading was the brethren’s own loving response. Teach it carefully, and notice how they resolved it in 21:14.
- Philip’s daughters prophesied, and some will ask about women preaching. Answer plainly and kindly: prophecy was a miraculous gift given to both men and women in that era, and its exercise was regulated by the instructions Paul gave the churches regarding the assembly (1 Corinthians 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:11–12). Both facts belong in the same answer.
- Paul’s participation in the vow (21:23–26) was an accommodation to Jewish brethren, not a reinstatement of the law as a means of justification (1 Corinthians 9:19–23; Galatians 2:16). Note also that it did not produce the peace James hoped for, which is worth a sober word about expediency.

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Numbers 17–23 · Proverbs 23 · Matthew 21:1–27 · Acts 21:27–22:21

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com