

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 20 OF 104

By What Authority

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Numbers 17-23
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 23
Gospels	Matthew 21:1-27
General New Testament	Acts 21:27-22:21

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to help the class see that God's authority is not an abstraction. It touches who may serve, how leaders speak, what a hired prophet can and cannot say, what happens in a temple court, and whether a bleeding man on a stairway is allowed to tell the truth. Every one of these readings puts a person in the position of either submitting to what God has said or looking for room around it, and the class should leave able to name where they are doing each.

Doctrinally, several things are at stake. Aaron's rod teaches that no one takes the honor of service to himself (Hebrews 5:4), which bears directly on how the Lord's church appoints and recognizes men who serve. Moses at the rock teaches that God means the specific thing He says, not the general direction of it, which is the seed of every conversation about scriptural authority in worship and work. The triumphal entry must be taught as the arrival of a King whose kingdom is not political and whose reign began at His resurrection and Pentecost, not as the down payment on a future earthly throne. And Acts 22:16 sets the question of when a believing, praying penitent is forgiven, and answers it.

Formationally, watch the thread of what people do with an answer they already have. Israel already knew who the priest was. Moses already knew what to do with the rock. Balaam already knew what God had said in 22:12. The chief priests already knew where John's baptism came from. In every case the trouble is not information but willingness. Put this question to your class, and give them quiet to answer it: what is the one thing you are certain God has said to you, that you have been managing not to do?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Numbers 17-23. It is the densest reading and the one that carries the week's theme most plainly, from Aaron's rod to Moses at the rock to Balaam's mouth. Give the hour to chapters 17, 20, and 22, and save chapters 18 and 19 for a brief summary.

Second session: Take up Acts 21:27-22:21. It gives you both a searching lesson on rumor among brethren and the clearest verse in Acts on the purpose of baptism. Let the class read 22:16 aloud alongside Acts 2:38 and Romans 6:3-4 before you comment on any of them.

The other two readings: Encourage the class to read Matthew 21:1-27 on Saturday so the King's arrival is fresh for the Lord's Day, and to use the questions on Proverbs 23 at the kitchen table. If you have a few minutes left over anywhere, give them to the picture of the drunkard in 23:29-35.

The Rod, the Rock, the Serpent

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These chapters are a hinge in the book. The generation that refused Canaan is dying off in the wilderness, and Numbers records the last of it. God settles the priesthood question permanently in chapter 17 with Aaron's rod, which does not merely sprout but blossoms and bears ripe almonds in a single night, and the rod is then kept before the testimony as a standing answer to rebels. Chapter 18 spells out what the priests and Levites receive and why they receive no land. Chapter 19 gives the ordinance of the red heifer for cleansing the defilement of death.

Chapter 20 is the heaviest chapter in Numbers. Miriam dies. The people quarrel for water at Kadesh. Moses, commanded to speak to the rock, strikes it twice and says, "Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" God gives the water anyway, and then tells Moses and Aaron that they will not bring this assembly into the land. Edom refuses passage. Aaron dies on Mount Hor with his garments transferred to his son, and the old leadership begins to pass off the stage.

Chapter 21 brings the fiery serpents and the bronze serpent lifted on a pole, which Jesus Himself takes up in John 3:14. Israel then defeats Sihon and Og, and Moab is terrified. Balak, king of Moab, sends a rich delegation to hire Balaam to curse Israel. What follows in chapters 22 and 23 reads like comedy with a knife in it: the celebrated seer cannot see what his donkey sees, and every time he opens his mouth to curse, God fills it with blessing instead.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Numbers spans roughly thirty-eight years, most of them passed over in silence. Between chapter 14 and chapter 20 an entire generation dies in the wilderness under God's sentence.
- Moses is the writer, and he records his own disqualification without excusing it (Numbers 20:12; Deuteronomy 3:23–27; Psalm 106:32–33).
- The red heifer is an Old Covenant purification rite, not a practice binding on Christians. Hebrews 9:13–14 uses it as an argument from the lesser to the greater.
- Balaam is not an Israelite. He is a professional diviner from Pethor on the Euphrates who knows the name of the Lord and works for money. The New Testament remembers him three times, never kindly (2 Peter 2:15–16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14).
- Geography matters here: Kadesh, Mount Hor, the plains of Moab across from Jericho. Israel has arrived at the doorstep of the land, and the book is preparing for the handoff to Joshua.
- All of this stands long before the cross. Draw God's character, human faith, and sober warning from it, and let the New Testament supply the fulfillment where it does so plainly.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *In Numbers 17 God ends a long argument about the priesthood with an almond branch that buds overnight, and then has the branch kept permanently before the testimony. Why answer a rebellion with a sign like that, and what was the rod meant to keep saying to Israel long after the argument was over?*

God chose a sign nobody could fake or repeat. Twelve staffs, one per tribe, laid up overnight in the tabernacle; only Aaron's comes out bearing buds, blossoms, and ripe almonds all at once, stages of growth that ordinarily take a season. The point is not merely that Aaron won the argument. The point is that life came out of dead wood by God's choice, which is exactly what priesthood is: not a career a man takes for himself, but a service God appoints. Hebrews 5:4 says the same thing centuries later.

Then note verse 10. The rod is to be kept as a sign “against the rebels,” to stop the murmuring before it starts again. God knows how short human memory is. Ask the class what they have been given to keep the memory fresh: the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week, the Scriptures open in the home, the singing on Sunday. Rebellion usually begins with forgetting.

Question 2. *Read Numbers 20:1–13 slowly. God told Moses to speak to the rock; Moses struck it twice and spoke to the people in anger. Why was this such a serious failure in a man who had served God faithfully for forty years, and what does God say the real issue was in verse 12?*

Verse 12 names the failure precisely: “Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel.” Two things went wrong. Moses disobeyed the specific instruction, speaking to the rock had been the command, and Moses struck it, twice, the way he had struck the rock at Horeb forty years earlier. And Moses spoke to the congregation in a way that obscured God: “Must we bring water for you?” Psalm 106:32–33 says it plainly, they provoked his spirit and he spoke rashly with his lips. The sin was public, and so was the loss.

Handle this tenderly but do not soften it. Teachers, elders, preachers, and parents stand where people can see them, and what we model about God carries farther than what we say about Him. James 3:1 warns that teachers receive a stricter judgment. At the same time, do not let the class conclude that God was cruel. Moses still speaks with God face to face, still writes Deuteronomy, and appears with Christ on the mountain of transfiguration. He lost a privilege; he did not lose his God.

Question 3. *Balaam could not curse a people God had blessed, and yet Numbers 31:16 tells us he later found another way to wound them. Which has done more damage to Christians you have known, open opposition or a friendly invitation to compromise?*

Balaam’s oracles are magnificent, and Balaam is a warning. He says all the right things about the word of the Lord (22:18; 23:8, 12, 19–20), and he still leans toward the money the whole time. Notice that the direct assault fails completely. God will not let Israel be cursed. But Numbers 31:16 reveals what came next: Balaam counseled Balak to invite Israel to Moab’s feasts and Moab’s women, and the plague at Peor killed twenty-four thousand. What Balak could not buy, Balaam handed over for free.

Bring it home. Persecution has never emptied the Lord’s church; comfort and compromise regularly do. Revelation 2:14 tells a first-century congregation that it was still holding “the doctrine of Balaam.” Ask the class to name the actual invitations they receive, the friendship that quietly requires silence, the schedule that quietly squeezes out the assembly, the entertainment that quietly retrains the conscience. Then ask what a refusal would cost them this month.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace Aaron through these chapters: his rod in chapter 17, his portion in chapter 18, and his death on Mount Hor in 20:22–29. What does the sequence say about both the honor and the cost of serving God?*

Aaron is vindicated by God in chapter 17, provided for by God in chapter 18 with no inheritance in the land because the Lord Himself is his portion, and then stripped of his garments and buried on a mountain in chapter 20 for the sin at Meribah. Service to God is a real honor and a real weight. He is not permitted to finish on his own terms, and yet his priesthood continues through his son. God’s work outlives the worker.

2. *Numbers 19 prescribes the ashes of a red heifer for anyone defiled by contact with a dead body. Read Hebrews 9:13–14 and write out what the writer says the blood of Christ accomplishes that those ashes never could.*

The ashes of the heifer sanctified “for the purifying of the flesh,” which is to say the rite removed a ceremonial defilement and restored a person to the camp and the worship. Hebrews 9:14 says the blood of Christ, offered through the eternal Spirit, cleanses the conscience from dead works to serve the living God. The ashes dealt with ritual standing; the blood deals with guilt. That is exactly the difference between a shadow and the substance (Colossians 2:17).

3. Read Numbers 21:4–9, then John 3:14–15. List every point of comparison Jesus draws between the bronze serpent and Himself, and then name the point at which the comparison stops.

Both involve a people dying under judgment they brought on themselves, a remedy God alone provides, something lifted up in plain sight, and life given to everyone who looks in faith. Jesus draws the comparison explicitly: “As Moses lifted up the serpent, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” The comparison stops at the object. The bronze serpent was a piece of metal with no power in itself, and when Israel later burned incense to it Hezekiah smashed it (2 Kings 18:4). Christ is not a symbol of salvation; He is the Savior.

4. God had already told Balaam plainly in 22:12 not to go and not to curse Israel. Trace how Balaam got around that answer in 22:13–21, and compare what the angel says about his way in 22:32.

God said, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.” Balaam sent the first delegation away but invited the second to stay overnight so he could ask again, hoping for a different answer. God finally said go, but only to speak what He would give him. The angel’s verdict in 22:32 is that his way was perverse before God. Asking God repeatedly about something He has already settled is not devotion; it is negotiation. Compare James 4:3.

5. Moses lost the land over one unguarded moment in front of a crowd. Name the specific place this week where you are most likely to speak out of frustration, and decide now, in writing, what you will do instead when you get there.

Answers will vary. Listen for a real place and a real plan: the drive home, the phone call with a difficult relative, the moment a child spills something at the end of a long day. Press for the substitute action, not merely the resolution to try harder. Moses did not intend to sin at the rock either.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Moses at the rock: some classes want to defend Moses, others to make God harsh. Stay with the text. God names the sin in 20:12, and the greater the trust, the greater the accountability (Luke 12:48; James 3:1). Do not let this become a discussion of whether Moses was saved; Matthew 17:3 settles that.
- Balaam: he is not a model prophet. He is a man who knew God’s word and sold what he could of it. Avoid speculating about how much genuine faith he had, and let the New Testament’s three judgments on him stand.
- The donkey: the point of Numbers 22 is that God can put His word in any mouth He pleases and that the seer was blinder than his animal. Do not let the hour disappear into questions about how the donkey spoke.
- The red heifer and the Levitical portions belong to the Old Covenant, which was fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:6–13). Draw the principles, but do not bind the practice.

Appetites and Their Price

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 23 belongs to the section called the words of the wise, and it is organized around desire. Verses 1 through 8 deal with appetite at another man's table, where the food is bait. Verses 9 through 11 turn to the vulnerable, warning against moving an ancient landmark and entering the fields of the fatherless, because their Redeemer is mighty. Verses 12 through 16 speak of instruction and correction in the home. The chapter keeps circling the same point: what you want will set the direction of your life long before your decisions do.

The heart of the chapter is verse 26, "My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways." Everything before and after is commentary on that request. The father is not asking for compliance. He is asking for the affections, because he knows that a son whose heart is elsewhere will find his way to the harlot's pit in verse 27 no matter what rules are in place. Teach this the way a parent would, not the way a policy manual would.

Verses 29 through 35 are a small masterpiece. It opens with six questions, who has woe, who has sorrow, and answers them with those who linger long at the wine. Then comes the warning not even to look at it when it sparkles, then the sting of the serpent, then the disordered vision and speech, then the man lying down in the middle of the sea, then the final and most terrible line: "I will seek another drink." The chapter does not argue. It simply shows you the man.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Proverbs 22:17 through 24:22 is a distinct collection labeled "the words of the wise," addressed to a young man being prepared for adult responsibility.
- Remember the genre. These are general principles about how life normally goes under God's order, not absolute guarantees or a formula for prosperity.
- Ancient landmarks were stone boundary markers. Moving one stole land from a neighbor quietly, which is why the Law condemned it (Deuteronomy 19:14) and why the fatherless are named here.
- The rod language in verse 13 reflects ordinary Hebrew household discipline and assumes a loving father, not a violent one. Read it with 23:15–16 and 23:24–25 in view.
- Wine in the ancient world was common and often diluted, which makes the warnings here and in 20:1 and 31:4–5 all the more pointed. Scripture never once commends drunkenness and repeatedly warns where the road leads.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Proverbs 23:4–5 tells you not to wear yourself out to get rich, because riches make themselves wings and fly away. How would an honest person tell the difference between diligent work, which this book praises, and the exhausting pursuit this verse forbids?*

Proverbs is not against work; it is relentless about work (6:6–11; 10:4; 14:23). The line falls at the word "weary yourself," and at the object of the effort. Verse 4 forbids spending yourself in order to be rich; verse 5 explains why, because you will set your eyes on money and it will be gone, wings and all. The test is not the number of hours but the master. Ask who decides your schedule, your moves, your Sundays, your family's stability.

Push for diagnostics the class can actually use. Does the pursuit require the sacrifice of the assembly, of your children's childhood, of honesty, of rest, of generosity? Is there any number at which you would say enough? Jesus puts the same question in Matthew 6:19–24, and Paul answers it in 1 Timothy 6:6–10. A man can be poor and covetous, and a man can be well paid and free.

Question 2. *Verses 29 through 35 walk a man through an evening and into the next morning, ending with him saying he will seek the drink again. Trace what the passage says alcohol does to his judgment, his perception, his safety, and his will, and discuss why so many people still consider this a small matter.*

Walk the class through the details. Verse 29 lists woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, wounds without cause, redness of eyes. Verse 31 forbids even the admiring look while the wine sparkles in the cup, because desire begins with the eyes. Verse 32 says the end of it bites like a serpent. Verse 33 describes distorted perception and perverse speech. Verse 34 pictures a man asleep on the mast of a ship in a storm, entirely unaware of his danger. Verse 35 shows the will captured: he has been beaten and did not feel it, and his first waking thought is the next drink.

Be pastoral here. Some in your class have buried a relative because of this, and some are quietly worried about themselves or about a son. Do not turn the lesson into a shouting match about whether a single glass is sinful. Set the passage down plainly, add Ephesians 5:18, Galatians 5:21, 1 Peter 4:3, and the influence principle of Romans 14:21, and then ask the honest question: knowing where the road ends, what possible reason is there to take the first step onto it? Make it easy for someone to come talk with you afterward.

Question 3. *In 23:26 the father says, “My son, give me your heart.” Why does he ask for the heart rather than for better behavior, and how does that change the way we raise children and teach new Christians?*

The father asks for the heart because the heart is where behavior comes from. Proverbs 4:23 says to keep it with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life, and Jesus says the same in Matthew 15:18–19. A young man who only surrenders his behavior will comply as long as he is watched and then follow his affections the moment he is not. Verses 27 and 28 name exactly where unwatched affections lead.

Apply this to both parenting and teaching. Rules without relationship produce sneaking. The father here has spent the chapter giving reasons, painting pictures, and telling the truth about consequences, and only then asks for the heart. Ask the class what it would take for their children, or for the new convert they are working with, to actually want what God wants. Then ask what in their own hearts they have never fully handed over.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything in this chapter the son is told not to desire, not to envy, and not to set his eyes on. What do the items on your list have in common?*

The list includes the ruler’s delicacies (23:3, 6), riches (23:4–5), the wine when it sparkles (23:31), sinners themselves (23:17), and by implication the immoral woman of 23:27–28. What they share is that every one of them looks better at the beginning than at the end. Each promises something now and charges later, which is precisely how appetite works when it is not governed by the fear of the Lord.

2. *Proverbs 23:17–18 answers envy with the fear of the Lord and a settled hope. Read Psalm 73:2–3 and 16–17, and identify what changed Asaph’s mind and the exact place where it changed.*

Asaph says his feet had almost stumbled because he envied the prosperity of the wicked. What changed his mind was not new information about them but a new vantage point: “until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.” The change happened in worship. Proverbs 23:17–18 gives the same two medicines, the fear of the Lord continually and a surely existing hereafter. Envy dies when you look at the end rather than the middle.

3. *Read 23:13–14 alongside Ephesians 6:4 and Hebrews 12:5–11. Write one paragraph describing correction that is firm, patient, and free of anger.*

Answers will vary in wording, but the substance should include this: correction is aimed at the child’s life, not at the parent’s temper (23:14); it is consistent rather than explosive; it is explained rather than merely imposed; it never provokes to wrath (Ephesians 6:4); and it is unmistakably an expression of love, since Hebrews 12:6 grounds all godly discipline in love and 12:11 in a harvest of righteousness later. A parent who cannot correct calmly should wait until he can.

4. *Verses 22 through 25 describe what a parent most longs to see in a grown child. Write down what those verses say it is, and compare it honestly with what most parents today say they want for their children.*

Verses 22 through 25 say it plainly: buy the truth and do not sell it; the father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who begets a wise child will delight in him. What the parent wants is a child who is righteous and wise, not a child who is comfortable, admired, or well placed. Most modern parenting aims at achievement and happiness. Proverbs aims at character, and then lets happiness follow where it will.

5. *Choose the appetite in this chapter that has the strongest hold on you, whether money, food, drink, status, or something else, and name one concrete limit you will put on it before next Sunday, along with the person you will tell.*

Answers will vary. Listen for a limit that is measurable and a person who will know about it. Vague intentions die by Wednesday. A number, a time, an accountability partner, and a definite starting point are what turn conviction into obedience.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Alcohol: teach verses 29 through 35 fully and let them land. State plainly that Scripture condemns drunkenness (Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:18) and warns against even the admiring look (23:31), and make the case for abstinence from wisdom, influence, and love of neighbor (Romans 14:21). Do not go beyond what is written, and do not embarrass anyone who is struggling.
- Correction of children: do not let this become a debate over methods, and do not let anyone use verse 13 to excuse harshness or anger. Anchor it in Ephesians 6:4 and Hebrews 12:5–11.
- Keep reminding the class how a proverb works. Verse 18 promises a hereafter, not a comfortable next quarter.

The King Enters His City

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Everything in this passage is deliberate. For most of the gospel Jesus has told people to keep quiet about who He is. Now He stages a public claim, sending two disciples for a donkey and a colt so that Zechariah 9:9 is fulfilled in front of a Passover crowd. He is declaring Himself King, and He is defining the kingship in the same motion. No war horse, no army, no seizure of the governor's palace. He comes lowly, riding on a borrowed animal, and the city is shaken, asking, "Who is this?"

The temple scene follows immediately. The outer court, the only place a Gentile could pray, had been turned into a market with an exchange rate. Jesus drives out the sellers and the money changers and joins two prophets in one sentence: God had said His house would be called a house of prayer for all nations, and the people had made it a den of thieves. Then, in the cleared space, the blind and the lame come to Him and He heals them, and children take up the cry of Hosanna while the chief priests seethe.

The withered fig tree is an acted parable. A tree in full leaf that carries no fruit is advertising what it does not have, which is precisely the indictment of the nation's leadership in the chapters that follow. Then comes the confrontation: "By what authority are You doing these things?" Jesus answers with John's baptism, and traps them in their own politics. They will not say "from heaven," because they never obeyed John; they dare not say "from men," because the crowd is standing right there.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This is the first day of the last week. Matthew 21 through 25 all take place in Jerusalem within a few days of the cross.
- Passover swelled Jerusalem with pilgrims, which explains the size of the crowd and the nervousness of both the priests and the Romans.
- "Hosanna" is a cry from Psalm 118:25-26 meaning "save now," and "Son of David" is an outright messianic title. The leaders understood exactly what was being said.
- The money changers served a real need, exchanging foreign coin for temple currency and supplying approved animals, but the business had colonized the court of the Gentiles and had become profitable.
- The temple and its sacrifices belong to the covenant that Christ was days away from fulfilling and taking out of the way (Colossians 2:14-17; Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:9).
- Matthew's readers already knew the temple was gone, destroyed in A.D. 70, which gives the fig tree and the confrontation a long shadow.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus has avoided public acclaim for most of His ministry, and now He deliberately arranges the donkey, the colt, and the crowd (21:1-11). Why this moment, and what kind of king is He announcing by the manner of His arrival?*

Timing is the point. Jesus has controlled the schedule all along, saying repeatedly that His hour had not yet come. Now it has. He chooses Passover week, the feast of the lamb, and He chooses a form of arrival that quotes Scripture out loud. Zechariah 9:9 had promised a king who is just, having salvation, lowly, riding on a donkey, and the next verse promises that He will speak peace to the nations and His dominion will reach to the ends of the earth. Jesus is claiming all of it.

Be careful and clear about the nature of the kingdom here, because this is where many go wrong. He did not come to restore a political throne in Jerusalem, then or later. He told Pilate plainly that His kingdom is not of this world

(John 18:36). Peter announced on Pentecost that God had raised Him and seated Him on David's throne (Acts 2:29–36), and Paul says Christians have already been transferred into His kingdom (Colossians 1:13). The King rides in this week to be enthroned by way of a cross and an empty tomb.

Question 2. *In the temple courts Jesus overturns tables and then heals the blind and the lame in that same space (21:12–14). What had the temple become in practice, and what did He restore it to in a single afternoon?*

In practice the temple had become a marketplace with a religious veneer. The trade itself was not the offense; the location and the extortion were. This was the court of the Gentiles, the one place in the whole complex where a seeking foreigner could come to pray, and it had been filled with livestock, coins, and commerce. That is why Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7 with its full phrase, a house of prayer for all nations. The people most likely to be seeking God had been crowded out by the people most comfortable with God.

What He restores it to is visible in verse 14: the blind and the lame come to Him, and He heals them. The very people the old ceremonial restrictions kept at a distance are now received in the cleared court. Ask the class the uncomfortable version of this question. What have we allowed to fill the space where an outsider would have to stand? Not tables and doves, but habits, cliques, assumptions, and unwelcoming familiarity. And be careful not to turn this into a lesson about buildings; under the new covenant the temple is the church itself (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; Ephesians 2:19–22).

Question 3. *The chief priests ask by what authority He acts, and Jesus answers with a question about John's baptism (21:23–27). Watch them calculate the cost of each possible answer and then plead ignorance. Where are we tempted to say "I don't know" about something we already know is true?*

Watch the machinery of their refusal. They do not ask what is true. They ask what each answer will cost. If John's baptism was from heaven, then they stand condemned for ignoring it; if they say it was from men, they fear the crowd. So they say, "We do not know," which is a lie told in the temple by the men in charge of the temple. Jesus does not owe an answer to men who will not deal honestly with the last answer God gave them.

This is a mirror, not a museum piece. Every one of us has an area where the honest answer would obligate us, so we manage not to look at it. The passage of Scripture we keep not getting around to studying. The conversation with an estranged brother we keep not having. The giving, the temper, the screen, the schedule. Ask the class directly and gently: where are you saying you are not sure, when the truth is you are not willing yet? Then give them a minute of silence to answer God rather than you.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read Zechariah 9:9 and compare it with Matthew 21:4–5. Which details did Matthew see fulfilled, and what does the prophecy itself say about the character of this King?*

Matthew sees the lowliness, the donkey, and the colt fulfilled. Zechariah 9:9 describes the King as just, having salvation, lowly, and riding on a donkey rather than a war horse. Every word of it works against the expectation of a military deliverer. The King is righteous in Himself, He brings salvation rather than merely announcing it, and He arrives in humility. Zechariah 9:10 goes on to say He will speak peace to the nations, which Matthew's whole gospel ends up demonstrating in the Great Commission.

2. *Trace the words "Hosanna" and "Son of David" in 21:9 and 21:15. Note who says them in each verse and who objects, and explain why the second group's objection is so revealing.*

In 21:9 the crowds of pilgrims cry it on the road; in 21:15 the children cry it inside the temple courts, and the chief priests and scribes are indignant. What makes the second scene so revealing is that Jesus does not correct the children. He defends them from Psalm 8:2, out of the mouth of babes God has perfected praise. The religious professionals object to worship they cannot control, offered by people they do not consider qualified, to a King they will not receive.

3. *Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11 in verse 13. Look up both passages in their own settings and describe what each original context adds to the charge He is making.*

Isaiah 56 is about foreigners and outcasts being gathered to God, and the phrase in context is “a house of prayer for all nations,” which indicts exactly what the market had done to the court of the Gentiles. Jeremiah 7 is the temple sermon, where Jeremiah tells people who were stealing, murdering, and swearing falsely that they could not treat the temple as a hideout between sins. Put together, Jesus is saying they have shut out the nations and turned the house of God into a shelter for the guilty.

4. *The fig tree in 21:18–22 had a full canopy of leaves and no fruit at all. Compare Luke 13:6–9. What is the tree standing for, and what warning does it carry for a church or a Christian who looks alive?*

The tree stands for fruitless profession, and behind that, for a nation and a leadership that displayed the full foliage of religion with nothing on the branches. Luke 13:6–9 gives the same picture with a season of patience attached, the vinedresser asking for one more year of digging and fertilizing. The warning is that God finally acts. Leaves cost nothing; fruit costs a season of growth. Attendance, vocabulary, and reputation are leaves, and a church can have a great many of them.

5. *The same city that shouted Hosanna on Sunday shouted Crucify by Friday. Identify one place where your enthusiasm for Christ has outrun your obedience, and name the single act of obedience you owe Him before this week is over.*

Answers will vary. Listen for specificity and for cost. The useful answers name a person, a time, and an action: the apology to be made, the sin to be confessed, the neighbor to be invited, the money to be given. If someone cannot think of anything, ask what he was most convicted about the last time he was convicted, and whether he ever did it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Verse 21 and the mountain: this is figurative language about the power of prayer offered in faith, spoken to apostles who were given miraculous confirming power for a limited purpose (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4). It is not a blank check. Balance it with 1 John 5:14 and James 4:3, and do not let anyone leave thinking faith is a technique for getting what he wants.
- The cleansing of the temple is not a general license for anger. This is the Son acting with authority in His Father’s house, in fulfillment of Malachi 3:1–3. Ephesians 4:26 and James 1:19–20 still govern us.
- Guard the kingdom question. The triumphal entry is not the beginning of an earthly political reign, and there is no future earthly throne in Jerusalem still awaiting Christ. He reigns now (Acts 2:33–36; 1 Corinthians 15:24–25; Colossians 1:13).
- Avoid making this a lesson about church buildings and reverence in the auditorium. The application is real, but the text is about the covenant temple and about shutting out the seeking outsider.

A Defense on the Stairs

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Paul had come to Jerusalem with a contribution for poor saints and a willingness to be misunderstood. On James's advice he joined four men in a purification vow to show that the rumors about him were false. It did not work. Jews from Asia who knew him from Ephesus saw him in the temple, saw that he had been in the city with Trophimus, a Gentile, and concluded that he had taken him past the barrier that warned foreigners of death. The whole city is stirred, the doors are shut, and they are beating him in the street when the Roman commander comes down with soldiers.

Notice how completely God overrules. The very soldiers who arrest Paul save his life, and the chains on his wrists give him a platform. He asks the commander for permission to speak, in Greek, which surprises the man into listening, and then addresses the mob in Hebrew, which surprises them into silence. Paul spends the rest of his life in Roman custody, and from that custody the gospel reaches a Roman governor, a king, a ship's crew, and finally the capital of the empire.

His defense is his testimony, and it is carefully built for this audience. He is a Jew, born in Tarsus, brought up in this city, taught by Gamaliel, zealous for the law, a persecutor who held the letters from the high priest. Then the light, the voice, the blindness, and a devout man named Ananias, well spoken of by all the Jews in Damascus, who tells him what he must do. The account stops just before the word Gentiles sets the crowd off again, which is next week's reading.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke, a companion of Paul, is writing history he largely witnessed. The "we" sections of Acts place him nearby for much of this.
- The temple had a low wall with inscriptions in Greek and Latin warning that any foreigner who passed it had only himself to blame for his death. Archaeologists have recovered two of those inscriptions.
- Roman citizenship, which Paul holds by birth (22:28), is about to become the hinge of the next several chapters.
- The vow of 21:23–26 was a Jewish practice Paul joined voluntarily among Jews, not a re-imposition of the Law of Moses on Christians (1 Corinthians 9:19–22; Galatians 5:1–4).
- Paul recounts his conversion three times in Acts (chapters 9, 22, and 26), each time shaped for a different audience. The differences are emphasis, not contradiction.
- This is roughly A.D. 57, some twenty years after Paul's conversion and near the end of his free ministry.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The riot begins with an assumption that turns out to be false (21:28–29). Trace how fast a guess became a charge and a charge became a mob, and talk about where that same sequence still happens among brethren today.*

Follow the chain in the text. They saw Trophimus with Paul in the city (21:29). They supposed Paul had brought him into the temple. They shouted it as fact. The crowd ran together, the man was seized, and within minutes people who knew nothing at all were beating him. Luke says a few verses later that the commander could get nothing certain because some shouted one thing and some another. That is what a mob is: a great many people certain about something none of them has verified.

Bring this down to church life, gently but honestly. Congregations have been split by a supposed, a heard, and a repeated. Ask the class what would have stopped this at the first step. One person asking Paul directly. Jesus gives the procedure in Matthew 18:15, Proverbs 18:13 says answering a matter before hearing it is folly and shame, and

Proverbs 18:17 says the first to plead his case seems right until his neighbor examines him. Ask each person to name the last time he repeated something he had not verified.

Question 2. *Paul had seen the Lord, believed Him, called Him Lord, prayed, and fasted three days before Ananias arrived and said, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (22:16). If Paul’s sins were still there to be washed away at that point, what does that settle about when a penitent believer receives forgiveness?*

It settles the timing. On the road Paul saw the Lord, addressed Him as Lord, asked what he should do, and obeyed to the extent he was told, going into the city. For three days he neither ate nor drank, and Acts 9:11 says he was praying. By any modern account he was already saved. Yet Ananias, sent by the Lord, says, “Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” The sins were still there. Baptism is where they were washed away.

Teach this plainly and kindly, because many sincere people have been taught otherwise. Put the passages side by side: Acts 2:38, baptized for the remission of sins; Romans 6:3–4, baptized into His death and raised to walk in newness of life; Galatians 3:26–27, baptized into Christ and clothed with Christ; 1 Peter 3:21, baptism now saves us. Note also that “calling on the name of the Lord” is not a prayer prior to baptism here; it is what Paul does in the act of obeying. The power is in the blood of Christ, not in the water, but God has told us where He applies it.

Question 3. *Standing before a crowd that had just tried to kill him, Paul begins with his own story rather than with an argument. Why does he start there, and how would you tell the story of what God has done in you to someone convinced you have abandoned something?*

Paul starts with his story because his story is the argument. Everything he says in 22:3–5 builds identification: I am a Jew, I was raised here, I sat under your best teacher, I was as zealous as any of you, and I hunted these people down. He does not begin by telling them they are wrong. He begins by telling them he was them. Only then does he describe what happened on the road, and he keeps Ananias in the frame as a devout man with a good reputation among the Jews of Damascus.

For your class, the application is practical. Most Christians will never win an argument with a relative, but almost anyone can say what God has actually done in his life. Ask them to sketch three sentences: what I was before, what happened, what changed. Then ask who most needs to hear it. Keep 1 Peter 3:15 in front of them, a defense given with meekness and fear, and note that Paul’s respectful “men, brethren, and fathers” came out of a mouth that was still bleeding.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the specific charges the crowd brings against Paul in 21:28. Mark which were false outright, which were distortions, and then note in 21:29 exactly how the crowd arrived at them.*

The charges in 21:28 are that Paul teaches all men everywhere against the people, against the law, and against this place, and further that he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled it. The last charge is simply false, as Luke explains in 21:29, and it rests on a guess. The first three are distortions of something real: Paul did teach that Gentiles are received in Christ without the Law of Moses (Galatians 3:26–29; Ephesians 2:14–16). Half-truths shouted loudly enough will start a riot.

2. *Compare Paul’s account in 22:6–16 with Luke’s narrative in Acts 9:1–19. Write down what each account supplies that the other leaves out, and why Paul might have emphasized what he does before this audience.*

Acts 9 is Luke’s narrative, supplying the three days of blindness and fasting, Ananias’s own vision and hesitation, and the scales falling from Paul’s eyes. Acts 22 adds that it was about noon, that Paul’s companions saw the light but did not hear the voice intelligibly, that Ananias was devout according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews there, and that Paul was told he would be a witness to all men. Before this audience Paul stresses his Jewish credentials and the Jewish credentials of the man God sent to him.

3. Read Acts 22:16 together with Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3–4, Galatians 3:26–27, and 1 Peter 3:21. In one sentence of your own words, state what the New Testament says baptism is for.

Answers will vary in phrasing, but the substance should be clear: baptism is an immersion into Christ and into His death, in which the penitent believer's sins are washed away by the blood of Christ and he is raised to a new life and added to the Lord's body. It is not a symbol of a salvation already received; every one of these passages ties it to the moment forgiveness is received.

4. Paul says in 22:3 that he was zealous toward God, and in 22:4 that he persecuted this Way to the death. Read Romans 10:1–3 and explain how a person can be completely sincere and completely wrong at the same time.

Paul was sincere, energetic, religious, and devastatingly wrong. Romans 10:1–3 says of his countrymen that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own. Sincerity cannot supply truth; it can only supply energy. That is why Paul, who had been sincerely wrong, spent the rest of his life preaching a message rather than an experience.

5. Paul spoke respectfully to people who had just beaten him. Name one person in your life who would find your faith unwelcome, and decide on one specific and respectful thing you will say or do for that person this week.

Answers will vary. Look for a real name and a concrete, respectful act: a meal, a note, a visit, an honest answer to a question already asked. Discourage confrontation for its own sake. Paul's respectful address and his patient identification with his hearers are the model here, not volume.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Acts 22:16 is one of the clearest verses in Scripture on the purpose of baptism. Teach it plainly, with the parallel passages, and with kindness toward those taught differently. Avoid sarcasm about other groups; make the case from the text.
- Paul's vow in the temple (21:23–26) must not be used to argue that Christians may keep the Old Law. Paul acted as a Jew among Jews for the gospel's sake (1 Corinthians 9:19–22) while insisting that justification never comes by law (Galatians 2:16; 5:1–4).
- Paul's vision on the Damascus road is unique, an appearance of the risen Christ to the last of the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:8). It is not a pattern for conversion experiences today, and nobody should be waiting for a light and a voice. We are converted by the gospel that is already revealed (Romans 10:17; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- Do not let the class use the mob as a reason to despise the Jewish people. Paul himself says in Romans 9:1–3 that he would be accursed for their sake.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Numbers 24–29 • Proverbs 24 • Matthew 21:28–22:14 • Acts 22:22–23:35

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