

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 25 OF 104

Ready and Faithful

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Deuteronomy 16-25
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 29
Gospels	Matthew 24:36-25:30
General New Testament	Acts 28

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is faithfulness in the unglamorous middle. Nothing in these readings happens at a dramatic moment. Israel is told how to pay a laborer and what to leave on the vine. Proverbs describes a man who has been corrected one too many times and no longer hears it. Jesus describes servants left alone in a house while the master is somewhere else and no one can say when he will be back. And Paul, who has stood before kings, spends two years in a rented room talking to whoever comes through the door. The class should leave asking what they are doing with the time nobody is watching.

Doctrinally, guard three things. First, Matthew 24:40-41: in Noah's day the ones taken away were the ones destroyed, and Scripture knows one return, one resurrection of the just and the unjust, one judgment, and the end of the world. There is no secret rapture and no earthly millennial reign. Second, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 on divorce must be answered from Matthew 19:3-9, where Jesus says Moses permitted it for hardness of heart and that God's design from the beginning was one man and one woman for life. Third, Acts 28:26-27 says the people closed their own eyes, which is a warning about willful resistance, not a doctrine of unconditional reprobation. Add a plain word about confirming signs: the viper and the healings on Malta confirmed the word and ceased when the revelation was complete.

Formationally, the thread is what a trusted servant does with a delay. The evil servant did not renounce his master; he said in his heart that the master was taking his time. The foolish virgins were not hostile; they simply had not prepared. The one-talent man was not a thief; he was careful. Ask your class this, and give them a full minute of quiet before anyone answers: if the Lord came back on an ordinary Thursday afternoon, what in your life would you wish you had started six months ago? Then ask what is stopping you from starting it Thursday.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Matthew 24:36-25:30. It is the heart of the week and the class will engage it readily. Spend ten minutes on the days of Noah and 24:40-41, correcting the rapture reading from the context, then give the rest of the hour to the two parables and to what each person has buried.

Second session: Take up Acts 28 and close out the book. Read 28:15 and 28:30-31 aloud and let the class feel how Luke ends it. It is a good week to ask the congregation what unhindered preaching looks like from your building in the coming year.

The other two readings: Deuteronomy 16-25 is dense; ask the class to read it with a pencil and mark every law that protects somebody vulnerable, and to bring the list. Warn them ahead of time that 24:1-4 raises the divorce question and that you will answer it from Matthew 19. Proverbs 29 rewards a slow reading of verses 1, 18, and 25.

Justice, Mercy, and Honest Scales

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These chapters are the practical middle of Deuteronomy, and they are worth reading as a portrait of what God wanted an ordinary week in Israel to look like. Chapter 16 sets the calendar and then, almost abruptly, turns to courts: you shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, you shall not pervert justice or show partiality or take a bribe, because a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land. Worship and fairness are not separate subjects here.

Chapter 17 anticipates a king, centuries before Saul, and the requirements are startling. He must not multiply horses, or wives, or silver and gold. He must write for himself a copy of this law in a book, and read it all the days of his life, so that his heart is not lifted above his brethren. Chapter 18 removes the alternatives, banning divination, sorcery, and consulting the dead, and in their place promises a Prophet like Moses whom God will raise up, and to whom they must listen.

From there the legislation turns to the texture of daily life, and the accumulation is the point. Cities of refuge for the man who kills by accident. Nothing settled on one witness. Soldiers sent home for a new house, a new vineyard, a new marriage, or plain fear. A parapet around a flat roof so no one falls. Wages paid before sundown because the man is poor and counting on it. Grain left in the corners and on the ground on purpose. Honest weights. This is what it looks like when love for God comes all the way down into a pocket, a field, and a doorway.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Still Moses preaching in Moab. These chapters are the detailed stipulations of the covenant renewal, following the great appeals of chapters 6 through 11.
- Deuteronomy 18:15–19 is quoted by Peter in Acts 3:22–23 and by Stephen in Acts 7:37, and identified with Jesus. Refusing that Prophet is the one capital matter attached to the promise.
- The requirement of two or three witnesses (17:6; 19:15) is carried into the church by Jesus and Paul (Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19).
- Deuteronomy 24:1–4 does not institute divorce; it regulates an existing practice and forbids a man to take back a wife he divorced who has since married another. Jesus explains the passage in Matthew 19:3–9.
- Many of these laws regulate practices God did not originate, such as slavery, warfare, polygamy, and divorce, limiting harm within a fallen culture. Regulation is not endorsement.
- The whole code is Old Covenant legislation, fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:6–13). We draw God's character and timeless principles from it; we do not bind its statutes on Christians.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Deuteronomy 16:18–20 charges judges to refuse bribes, show no partiality, and follow justice, and only justice. Why is impartiality so difficult for ordinary people who have no gavel, and where are we most likely to shade a judgment because of who is involved?*

Because impartiality requires you to decide against your own interests, and most of us have never had to practice it in a setting where we could be caught. The text names the pressure points exactly: do not pervert justice, do not

show partiality, do not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Notice that it says the bribe blinds the wise. Nobody thinks he is being bought. He thinks he is being reasonable.

Bring it into the room where your class actually lives. We shade judgments for family, for the person who agrees with us, for the big contributor, for the likable one, for the one whose side we chose years ago. James 2:1–9 says flatly that showing partiality in the assembly is sin, and uses a rich man's ring as the example. Ask each person to think of one conflict, at work, in the family, or in the congregation, where he already knows whose side he is on before he has heard the facts, and what honesty would require of him there.

Question 2. *The law of the king in 17:14–20 forbids him horses, wives, and silver, and requires him to write out his own copy of the law and read it every day of his life. Why would God attach those particular limits to power, and what would the same restraints look like on someone in authority today?*

Each limit blocks a specific path to self-sufficiency. Horses meant military power and, as verse 16 notes, a return to Egypt to get them. Many wives meant political alliances and hearts turned away, which is precisely what happened to Solomon (1 Kings 11:1–4). Silver and gold meant independence from the God who gives the power to get wealth. Strip those three away and a king has nothing to lean on but the Lord. Then the positive requirement: he writes out the whole law by hand and reads it every day, so that his heart is not lifted up above his brethren.

The application reaches everyone who holds authority over anyone: an elder, a father, a supervisor, a teacher. Ask what a modern version looks like. Limits on what you accumulate. Limits on the alliances you form to protect your position. A daily, unhurried, personal intake of Scripture that you copy out rather than skim. And above all, the goal stated in verse 20, a heart not lifted above your brethren. Power is safe only in the hands of a man who is under something.

Question 3. *Deuteronomy 18:15–19 promises a Prophet like Moses whom God will raise up from among their brethren. Read Acts 3:22–23 and John 6:14. What became of that promise, and what consequence does Peter attach to refusing to hear Him?*

Peter settles it in Acts 3:22–23. He quotes this very promise to the crowd in Solomon's porch and applies it to Jesus, adding that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people. John 6:14 shows that the crowds were already watching for Him: this is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world. Moses spoke God's words; the Prophet like him speaks God's words with the same authority, and the Father said at the transfiguration, this is My beloved Son, hear Him (Matthew 17:5).

Draw out the consequence, because it is stated and it is severe. God did not present Christ as one voice among several worth considering. Hebrews 1:1–2 says God, who spoke in times past through the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son. That means every other claimed source of revelation, ancient or modern, stands outside the promise. Ask the class what it means practically to hear Him: not merely to admire His teaching, but to let His words settle questions that our preferences would settle differently.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Work through chapters 24 and 25 and list every law that protects a poor man, a widow, a stranger, an orphan, a hired worker, or even an ox. What kind of God stands behind a legal code with that many protections in it?*

The list is long: return a lost animal and help a fallen one up (22:1–4); build a parapet so nobody falls off your roof (22:8); do not take a millstone in pledge, because that is a man's living (24:6); do not enter a poor man's house to seize his pledge, and return his cloak by sundown (24:10–13); pay a hired servant his wages the same day because he is poor and counts on it (24:14–15); do not pervert justice due the stranger, fatherless, or widow (24:17); leave the forgotten sheaf, the olives, and the grapes (24:19–21); limit a beating to forty stripes so your brother is not degraded (25:1–3); do not muzzle the ox while he treads (25:4). Behind a code like that is a God who notices the people nobody else counts.

2. *Deuteronomy 18:9–14 forbids every form of divination, witchcraft, and consulting the dead. List what is banned, then read Isaiah 8:19–20 and 1 Timothy 4:1, and explain why God treats this so severely.*

Banned are passing a child through the fire, witchcraft, soothsaying, interpreting omens, sorcery, conjuring spells, consulting mediums or spiritists, and calling up the dead. God treats it severely because it is an attempt to get guidance and power from somewhere other than Him, which is treason dressed up as religion. Isaiah 8:19–20 asks why a people should seek the dead on behalf of the living, and says to go to the law and the testimony, for if they do not speak according to this word there is no light in them. First Timothy 4:1 warns of doctrines of demons in later times. God supplies what people go to mediums for: a word from Himself, now complete in Scripture.

3. *Read Deuteronomy 25:13–16 on differing weights and measures, then Proverbs 11:1 and Micah 6:10–11. Where does a person today keep two sets of weights in his pocket?*

Two sets of weights is the picture of a man with one standard for himself and another for everyone else. Today it looks like an expense report, a tax return, a resume, a story told two different ways to two different people, a business practice defended because everyone does it, a rule enforced strictly on one child and loosely on another. Proverbs 11:1 says a false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight, which is unusually strong language about something as unremarkable as a scale. God cares about the small measurements because character is made of them.

4. *Deuteronomy 21:22–23 says a man hanged on a tree is accursed of God. Read Galatians 3:13 and 1 Peter 2:24, and write out what Paul does with that verse and why it matters to you personally.*

Paul quotes it in Galatians 3:13: Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, for it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. The verse that made a hanged body a public sign of God's curse became the verse that explains the cross. Jesus took the curse that belonged to lawbreakers, though He had broken nothing. Peter says He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness. That is why a Roman execution device became the center of Christian preaching.

5. *Deuteronomy 24:19–22 commands leaving the forgotten sheaf in the field, the olives on the branch, and the grapes on the vine. Name the modern equivalent of a deliberate margin left for somebody else, and decide the specific margin you will leave this month.*

Answers will vary, and the interesting part is the word deliberate. Gleaning was not charity handed down from a full barn; it was margin designed into the harvest before the first sheaf was cut, and the poor kept their dignity by working for it. A modern equivalent might be a fixed percentage of income set aside before the budget is built, a standing hour each week held open for someone who needs it, an extra seat at the table, hiring someone who needs the chance, or work given rather than money handed. Look for a margin planned in advance, not leftovers.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Divorce: Deuteronomy 24:1–4 will raise questions and must be answered from Jesus rather than from Moses. Jesus says Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of their hearts, but from the beginning it was not so, and that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery (Matthew 19:3–9). Teach God's design plainly, one man and one woman for life, and be prepared to talk privately and compassionately with people whose past is complicated.
- The laws on warfare (chapter 20), the captive wife (21:10–14), slavery, and the rebellious son (21:18–21) belong to a theocratic legal system and regulate, rather than endorse, practices of that world. None of them is binding today, and the rebellious son passage required parents to bring the matter to the elders at the gate; it was never private violence.
- "Eye for eye" (19:21) is a limit on vengeance in a court, not a license for personal retaliation. Jesus governs the Christian's personal conduct in Matthew 5:38–42, and Romans 12:19 leaves vengeance to God.
- Do not bind the feasts, the tithes, the food laws, or the assembly exclusions of chapter 23 on Christians. Isaiah 56:3–8 and Acts 8:26–39 show how thoroughly the gospel opened what that chapter restricted.

The Neck That Will Not Bend

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 29 closes the Hezekiah collection, and it opens with a warning shot. He who is often rebuked and hardens his neck will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy. The image is an animal stiffening against the yoke. The danger is not the first refusal but the pattern, and the tragedy is in the word suddenly. To the man himself the collapse looks like it came from nowhere; in fact it had been building for years, one refused correction at a time.

Much of the chapter concerns authority and its effects. When the righteous are in authority the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan. A king establishes the land by justice, but one who takes bribes overthrows it. If a ruler pays attention to lies, all his servants become wicked, which is a sharp observation about how the character of a leader reproduces itself downward. And the king who judges the poor faithfully has his throne established forever.

The rest is a gallery of familiar failures and their opposites. A fool vents all his feelings; a wise man holds them back. A man hasty in his words has less hope than a fool. An angry man stirs up strife and an furious man abounds in transgression. A man's pride brings him low, but the humble in spirit retains honor. The fear of man brings a snare. And the last word belongs to God: many seek the ruler's favor, but justice for a man comes from the Lord.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Chapter 29 ends the collection copied by the men of Hezekiah (25:1). Chapters 30 and 31 come from Agur and Lemuel.
- The word rendered "vision" in 29:18 means prophetic revelation, a word from God, which is why the second half of the verse sets keeping the law over against having none.
- The verb in 29:18 pictures a people running loose, unrestrained, like a herd with no fence. It is not a promise about corporate strategy or personal ambition.
- Verse 1 uses the language of a stiff neck, the same figure Moses uses of Israel in Deuteronomy 9:6 and Stephen uses in Acts 7:51.
- As always, read these as general principles about the way life usually runs, not as guarantees for any given case.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Proverbs 29:1 describes a man often rebuked who stiffens his neck and is suddenly broken beyond remedy. What has happened inside a person by the tenth refusal that had not yet happened at the first, and why does the proverb call the end sudden?*

What has changed is the capacity to hear. The first rebuke stings and can be argued with; the tenth is met by a settled defense that is already built and well practiced. By then the person has a story that explains every critic, a reason each one was wrong, and a growing list of people he no longer listens to. Hebrews 3:13 describes the mechanism: exhort one another daily, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. Hardening is a process, and it is deceitful, which means it does not feel like hardening. It feels like clarity.

The suddenness is real from the inside only. Marriages, ministries, finances, and reputations collapse in a week after eroding for a decade, and everyone involved says they did not see it coming except the people who tried to say something and were dismissed. Ask the class the question that follows: whose warning are you currently explaining away? Then ask the harder version. If three different people have said the same thing to you about the same thing, what are the odds they are all mistaken?

Question 2. *Proverbs 29:18 says that where there is no revelation the people cast off restraint, and then adds that happy is the one who keeps the law. How are those two halves connected, and what happens over a few years to a family or a congregation that quietly stops opening the Book?*

They are connected because restraint has to come from somewhere. Without a word from God a people do not become neutral; they become unrestrained, each person doing what is right in his own eyes, which is precisely what Deuteronomy 12:8 and Judges 21:25 describe. The second half of the verse gives the alternative and calls it happiness: he who keeps the law, happy is he. God's word is not a fence that keeps joy out. It is what makes a life livable.

Then trace the slow version for a family or a congregation, because it is never dramatic. Bibles stop being opened at home. Teaching gets thinner and more anecdotal. Convictions become preferences, then opinions, then embarrassments. Nobody announces a change; the restraint simply is not there anymore when it is needed. Ask your class what specifically they read this past week, and what their children saw them read. Then ask what one change would put the Book back in the center of the house.

Question 3. *Proverbs 29:25 says the fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe. Where has the fear of what people think shaped a decision you made this year, and what would trusting the Lord have looked like in that same moment?*

This is the verse that explains most of the compromises good people make. Peter denied the Lord in front of a servant girl. Pilate washed his hands to satisfy a crowd. Felix left Paul bound to please the Jews. Agrippa stopped at almost with the room watching. Not one of those men was overpowered; each was afraid of an opinion. Proverbs 29:25 calls it a snare, a trap you walk into because the bait is approval.

Get concrete, and go first if you can. Where did the class stay quiet when something should have been said? Where did they let a friend assume something untrue about what they believe? Where did a child's activity schedule get built around what other families would think? The alternative is in the second half of the verse: whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe, literally set on high, out of reach. Galatians 1:10 puts it as a question worth writing down: if I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Collect the verses in this chapter about anger and hasty speech (29:8, 11, 20, 22). Put them together and describe the man who says everything he feels the moment he feels it.*

Verse 8 says scoffers set a city aflame, but wise men turn away wrath. Verse 11 says a fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back. Verse 20 says there is more hope for a fool than for a man hasty in his words. Verse 22 says an angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression. The man who says everything he feels the moment he feels it is treated by Proverbs as more dangerous than the fool and as a source of fire in a whole community. Nothing in Scripture commends unfiltered honesty as a virtue; James 1:19 says be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

2. *Read Proverbs 29:15 and 29:17 with Hebrews 12:9–11. What is correction supposed to produce in a child, and how do the two passages describe the outcome?*

Proverbs says the rod and rebuke give wisdom, that a child left to himself brings shame to his mother, and that correcting your son gives you rest and delight to your soul. Hebrews 12 adds the goal: earthly fathers chastened us as seemed best to them, but God does it for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness, and though no chastening seems joyful at the time, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Correction aims at character and at peace, not at compliance or at the parent's convenience, and its results are not immediate.

3. *Trace the proverbs about rulers and authority in this chapter (29:2, 4, 12, 14, 26). What kind of ruler does God bless, and what does verse 26 say about where a man's judgment finally comes from?*

Verse 2 says the people rejoice when the righteous are in authority and groan when the wicked rule. Verse 4 says a king establishes the land by justice but one who receives bribes overthrows it. Verse 12 says a ruler who listens to

lies will have wicked servants. Verse 14 says the king who judges the poor with truth will have his throne established forever. God blesses the ruler who is just, incorruptible, truthful, and attentive to those with no power. Verse 26 puts every human court in its place: many seek the ruler's favor, but justice for a man comes from the Lord.

4. *Read Proverbs 29:23 alongside Luke 14:11 and James 4:6. Write one sentence explaining the relationship Scripture consistently draws between humility and honor.*

Scripture consistently makes humility the road to honor and pride the road to humiliation, and it puts God Himself behind both outcomes. Proverbs 29:23 says a man's pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honor. Luke 14:11 says everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. James 4:6 says God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. The pattern is not a social observation about how people react; it is a statement about what God actively does.

5. *Verse 1 speaks of someone rebuked repeatedly. Name the correction you have now heard more than once from more than one person, and decide today, in writing, what you are going to do about it.*

Answers will vary, and the criterion in the question is the useful part: correction heard more than once, from more than one person. That is usually the point at which a person can no longer credit a single critic's bad motive. Look for a written decision with a specific action, and encourage the person to go back to whoever said it and tell them they were right. Nothing softens a stiff neck faster than saying that sentence out loud.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Proverbs 29:18 is widely misquoted as a text about organizational vision or personal ambition. The word means revelation from God, and the second half of the verse settles the meaning. Correct it plainly and kindly.
- The correction of children (29:15, 17) can be misused to justify harshness. Anchor it in Ephesians 6:4 and Hebrews 12:9–11 and keep the class off arguments about methods.
- Verse 1 is not teaching that a person who has resisted correction can never repent. It describes the normal end of a hardened pattern, and Scripture always invites repentance while there is time (Hebrews 3:13, 15).

Watch and Be Ready

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

At 24:36 the subject changes. Jesus has been answering the question about the temple, and He has told them the sign to watch for and the generation that would see it. Now He speaks of “that day and hour” which no one knows, not the angels, and not the Son in the days of His flesh, but only the Father. For the destruction of Jerusalem there were signs. For this there are none. The two are deliberately set side by side so the disciples will stop expecting a countdown.

The illustrations all make the same point from different angles. In Noah’s day people ate, drank, married, and knew nothing until the flood came and took them all away. Two men in a field, two women at a mill, and one of each is taken. A householder who knew the hour of a break-in would have stayed awake. A servant put in charge while the master travels begins to beat his fellow servants and eat with the drunkards because he has decided the master is delaying. In every case the failure is not ignorance of the date. It is what a person does with the waiting.

Then two full parables. Ten young women take lamps to meet a bridegroom; five bring extra oil and five do not, and while they all sleep, the cry comes at midnight. The foolish go to buy, the door shuts, and it is too late to borrow what should have been prepared. And three servants are given five talents, two talents, and one, according to their ability. Two trade and double what they were given and hear identical words of welcome. The third, afraid and resentful, buries his and hands it back, and is called wicked and lazy. Readiness in this chapter is never idle waiting; it is faithful work.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Matthew 24:36 begins the second half of the Olivet Discourse, dealing with the final coming of Christ, for which Scripture gives no signs and no timetable.
- “Nor the Son” (24:36) refers to the voluntary limitation Christ accepted in the incarnation (Philippians 2:5–8). It says nothing against His deity; after the resurrection He declares that all authority is His (Matthew 28:18).
- A talent was a large sum, roughly what a laborer might earn over many years. The parable is not about small change, and the amounts are distributed “to each according to his own ability.”
- Jewish wedding custom had the bridegroom come for the bride, often at night, with the wedding party going out to meet him. Lamps and a supply of oil were ordinary equipment.
- The New Testament consistently describes one return, one general resurrection of the just and the unjust, one judgment, and the end of the physical world (John 5:28–29; 1 Corinthians 15:23–26; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17; 2 Peter 3:10–13).
- The parables of chapter 25 come immediately before the judgment scene of 25:31–46, which is next week’s reading.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus says plainly that no one knows the day or the hour (24:36). Why would God deliberately withhold that information from us, and how would our daily lives actually change if the date were published?*

Because a published date would produce a nation of procrastinators, and God is after something better than a deadline can produce. If we knew the year, obedience would become a scheduling problem; people would live exactly as they pleased until the last possible moment and then repent on time. Instead, God keeps the date to Himself so that faithfulness has to be a way of life rather than a final sprint. Second Peter 3:9 says the delay itself is mercy: He is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish.

There is also the plain matter of our own dates. For most of us, the relevant appointment is not the second coming but the day our own life ends, and that is equally unknown (Luke 12:16–21; James 4:14; Hebrews 9:27). Ask the class what they would change if they knew the date was a year out. Then ask the obvious follow-up question, which is why they are not doing those things now. Be careful not to let this become morbid; the tone Jesus takes is alertness, not dread.

Question 2. *The faithful servant and the evil servant do the same job under the same conditions; what separates them is what each does while the master delays (24:45–51). What does the evil servant say in his heart first, and how does a Christian's private thinking show up in his conduct six months later?*

He says in his heart, "My master is delaying his coming." Everything else follows from that sentence. Notice that he does not say it out loud and probably does not even believe he has said it. He simply begins to act as though nobody is coming back, and the acting looks like abusing the people under him and joining the drunkards at the table. He does not resign his position. He keeps the title and the keys and rewrites the job in private.

Take this to the class's ordinary life, because this is the most searching paragraph in the reading. What a person concludes in his heart today shows up in his conduct months later, and usually in how he treats people with less power than he has. The husband who has decided in private that his marriage is a disappointment starts speaking differently. The Christian who has quietly concluded that God is not paying attention starts making small exceptions. Ask each person what he has concluded privately in the past year that he has never said aloud, and whether he would be willing to say it to God directly.

Question 3. *The one-talent servant did not steal, lose, or waste anything. He returned exactly what he had been given (25:24–30). Why is that treated so severely, and what has God put in your hands that is currently buried in a safe place?*

Because the master did not give him money to store; he gave it to be used. The servant's own explanation gives him away: I knew you to be a hard man, and I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. He has turned a trust into a risk to be managed and his master into a threat to be appeased. The master's reply is severe, wicked and lazy servant, and it exposes the excuse: if you truly believed I was that demanding, you would at least have put it in the bank.

Then press the gentler question underneath. Most people who bury something are not lazy; they are afraid of being inadequate. The five-talent man was not asked to produce ten from two; the master's words to the two-talent man are word for word the same as to the five. Ask what each person is sitting on: a class he could teach, a study he could start with a neighbor, hospitality he could offer, money he could give, a young Christian he could take with him. Then ask for one step this week, and someone to tell, because a step announced is a step taken.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read 24:37–41 about the days of Noah and the two in the field. In the flood, who was taken away and who was left behind? Compare Genesis 7:21–23 and Luke 17:26–37, and state what "taken" means in this passage.*

In Noah's day the ones taken away were the ones destroyed: the flood came and took them all away, and Genesis 7:23 says everything was destroyed and only Noah and those with him remained. The ones left were the ones saved. Read in that light, "one will be taken and the other left" in 24:40–41 describes the sudden, ordinary-looking separation of the day of judgment, not a secret removal of the church. Luke's version makes the point sharper still: when the disciples ask where they are taken, Jesus answers with a proverb about vultures and a body. Whatever else it means, it is not a comfortable image.

2. *List everything the wise virgins did that the foolish ones did not (25:1–13). Identify the one thing that could not be borrowed at the last minute, and explain why.*

All ten took lamps, all ten went out to meet the bridegroom, and all ten slept when he was delayed. The wise took oil in their vessels along with their lamps; the foolish took no oil with them. The one thing that could not be borrowed was preparation itself. At midnight the foolish asked for oil and were told to go and buy, and while they were gone

the door was shut. Some things simply cannot be transferred at the last minute: your own faith, your own obedience, your own relationship with the Lord. A godly parent, spouse, or preacher cannot lend you his.

3. *Compare the master's words to the first two servants in 25:21 and 25:23. Note what is identical and what is different, and write what that says about how God measures faithfulness.*

The words are identical: well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things; enter into the joy of your lord. The only difference is the amount each had been given and had gained, and the master does not mention it. God measures faithfulness against what He entrusted, not against what someone else received. That should quiet both the man who feels insignificant and the man who feels impressive. The praise is for faithfulness, and it is available in full to the person with the smallest assignment in the congregation.

4. *Read 24:45–47 with 1 Corinthians 4:2 and 1 Peter 4:10. What is a steward, what does he own, and what is the single thing required of him?*

A steward is a manager who runs another man's household and owns none of it. He decides nothing about what he has been given, only what he does with it. First Corinthians 4:2 states the single requirement: it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. Not successful, not impressive, faithful. First Peter 4:10 adds that each one has received a gift and is to minister it to others as a good steward of the manifold grace of God. Everything in your hands, time, money, ability, influence, children, and the gospel itself, belongs to Someone else and is due an accounting.

5. *Name the ability, opportunity, or resource God has given you that you have been sitting on because you were afraid of failing with it. Take the first concrete step this week, and tell one person that you have taken it.*

Answers will vary, and the fear named in the question is usually the real obstacle. The one-talent servant said, "I was afraid." Listen for concrete assignments: teaching, visiting, opening a home, beginning a study, giving, taking a young person along on the work. Then hold them to the two parts, a step this week and a person told. The parable is severe precisely because burying something feels so responsible while it is happening.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Matthew 24:40–41 is a favorite proof text for a secret rapture. Answer it from the context: in Noah's day those taken away were destroyed. Scripture teaches one return, one resurrection of both just and unjust, one judgment, and the end of the world (John 5:28–29; 1 Corinthians 15:23–26; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17; 2 Peter 3:10–13). There is no second chance and no earthly millennial reign to follow.
- "Nor the Son" in 24:36 must not be used against the deity of Christ. It describes what He voluntarily accepted in becoming flesh (Philippians 2:5–8; Hebrews 2:17).
- Do not allegorize the oil in the parable of the virgins into a specific doctrine such as the Holy Spirit or grace. The point Jesus draws is stated in verse 13: watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour. Some preparation cannot be borrowed.
- Verse 51 and 25:30 speak of weeping and gnashing of teeth and outer darkness. Teach the reality of final punishment soberly and without relish, and let it drive the class toward urgency rather than fear.

No One Forbidding Him

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Malta gives us one of the warmest scenes in Acts. The natives show unusual kindness, build a fire in the rain and cold, and take in two hundred and seventy-six soaked strangers. Paul, an apostle and a prisoner, gathers sticks like everybody else, which is worth pausing over. A viper drives out of the heat and fastens on his hand, and the islanders read it as justice catching up with a murderer who survived the sea. When nothing happens to him, they swing to the other extreme and decide he is a god. Paul uses the opening to heal Publius's father and then the sick of the whole island.

Three months later they sail on an Alexandrian ship with the Twin Brothers for a figurehead, and come at last to Italy. Then comes the human moment Luke could not leave out. Brethren in Rome, who had received Paul's letter to them a few years earlier and had never met him, walked out as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns, some forty and some thirty miles, to meet a prisoner on the road. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. The apostle who wrote Romans needed the sight of a few Christians on a highway.

In Rome he is allowed to live by himself with a soldier guarding him, and within three days he has called the leaders of the Jews together. He explains his chain, they ask to hear his views, and on an appointed day he spends from morning to evening expounding the kingdom of God and persuading them concerning Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Some believed; some did not. He quotes Isaiah about a people who have closed their own eyes, announces that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and then Luke ends the book with two years of preaching and one final word: unhindered.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Malta lies about sixty miles south of Sicily. The "natives" of 28:2 were Punic-speaking, which is why Luke calls them barbarians in the older sense, meaning people who did not speak Greek.
- The healings on Malta are apostolic confirming signs, the kind of miracle promised in Mark 16:17–18 and explained in Mark 16:20 and Hebrews 2:3–4 as confirmation of the word being preached.
- The Forum of Appius was about forty-three miles from Rome and Three Taverns about thirty-three, both on the Appian Way. The church at Rome already existed and had received Paul's letter around A.D. 57.
- Paul's custody was the lighter form, a private rented residence with a soldier attached, which allowed visitors and teaching. The Prison Epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, come from this period.
- Isaiah 6:9–10 is quoted six times in the New Testament, always of people who have shut their own eyes, not of people God has blinded against their will.
- Acts ends without telling us the verdict. Early tradition holds that Paul was released, traveled again, and was later executed under Nero.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *On Malta the islanders conclude Paul is a murderer when the snake bites him and a god when he shakes it off (28:4–6). How quickly do people swing between those two verdicts about a Christian, and how should we hold both the criticism and the praise without being moved by either?*

Almost instantly, and on the same evidence. Notice that nothing about Paul changed between verse 4 and verse 6; only the crowd's interpretation changed. The same thing happened to him in Lystra, where they tried to sacrifice to him one day and stoned him the next (Acts 14:11–19). People form fast verdicts from circumstances, and

circumstances move. If you take your identity from what people conclude when things go badly, you will also have to take it from what they conclude when things go well, and neither one is reliable.

Give the class the practical handle. Paul neither argued with the murder charge nor accepted the divine honors; he simply shook the snake into the fire and went on serving. First Corinthians 4:3–4 says it is a very small thing to be judged by men or by any human court, and that even Paul did not judge himself, since the One who judges him is the Lord. Ask where each person is currently living on somebody's approval, or flinching under somebody's criticism, and what it would mean to hand both verdicts to God and keep gathering sticks.

Question 2. *In 28:15 brethren walk out thirty and forty miles to meet Paul on the road, and Luke says that when he saw them he thanked God and took courage. Why would the simple presence of a few Christians do that for a man like Paul, and who needs you to make that walk this week?*

Because Paul was a man, and because the previous six months had been brutal: a riot, a plot, two years in custody, a hearing before a king, a hurricane, a shipwreck, and a long walk up a Roman road toward a trial that could end in execution. Luke is careful to say that the sight of brethren produced two things, thanksgiving to God and courage. Not information, not a solution, just faces. Paul had written to these very people that he longed to see them so they could be mutually encouraged by each other's faith (Romans 1:11–12), and here it happened on a highway.

Then make it a practical assignment. Somebody in your congregation is about to walk into something hard: a diagnosis, a hearing, a funeral, a wayward child, a move. Encouragement in this passage is not a text message; it is people who traveled a distance to be physically present with somebody who could do nothing for them. Ask each person to name one name and one specific act, a visit, a drive, a meal eaten together, a seat beside them in a waiting room, and to do it before next Sunday.

Question 3. *Paul spends an entire day expounding the kingdom of God and persuading them concerning Jesus from Moses and the Prophets, and Luke says some were persuaded and some disbelieved (28:23–24). What does that outcome teach us to expect, and how do you keep teaching faithfully when the results are mixed?*

It teaches us to expect exactly this. Paul reasoned all day from the Scriptures those men already accepted, with the finest mind in the early church and firsthand knowledge of the risen Christ, and the result was a divided room. If that was Paul's outcome, then a mixed response is not evidence of failure in the teacher. Jesus told the parable of the sower for this very reason, and Isaiah spent a lifetime preaching to a people who would not hear.

So how do we keep going? First, by remembering what we are responsible for. Paul says elsewhere that one plants, another waters, and God gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6–7). Our assignment is faithful, patient, scriptural teaching, not the harvest. Second, by noticing the ones who did believe; Luke says some were persuaded, and that is not nothing. Third, by keeping the door open, which is what Paul did for two more years. Ask the class who they have quietly given up on, and whether the giving up happened because that person said no or because we got tired of being told no.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace Paul's activity from the moment he reaches shore to the end of the chapter, and note every act of service he performs. Then note what he does first after settling in Rome, and what that priority says about him.*

He gathers sticks for the fire like everyone else, shakes off the viper without fuss, prays and lays hands on Publius's father and heals him, then heals the rest of the sick on the island, and receives the honors and provisions the islanders give for the voyage. Once in Rome, the first thing he does, after only three days, is call together the leaders of the Jews to explain himself and to preach Jesus. The priorities are unmistakable: ordinary work without pretension, service to whoever is in front of him, and the gospel first at the earliest possible moment.

2. *Read Acts 28:26–27 and then Isaiah 6:9–10 and Matthew 13:14–15. Whose eyes are shut in that passage, and who shut them? Be careful to quote the text exactly.*

The text says their own ears are hard of hearing and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them. They shut their own eyes. God is not described as blinding people who wanted to see; He is describing a people who refused to look and

therefore could not be healed. Matthew 13:14–15 quotes it the same way. The verse is a warning about willful resistance, not a doctrine of arbitrary divine hardening, and the ending clause shows God's desire was to heal them.

3. *Acts ends with Paul preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him. Why might Luke have ended his book there instead of telling us how Paul's trial turned out?*

Because the book was never about Paul. Luke has been writing the account of what Jesus continued to do and teach through His church, beginning in Jerusalem and reaching the end of the earth exactly as Acts 1:8 said. The last word in the Greek text is the word translated “unhindered,” and it is the perfect ending: the gospel has arrived at the capital of the empire, and nobody can stop it. Paul's verdict is a detail. The story of the kingdom goes on, and the reader is meant to understand that he is now part of it.

4. *Count how many times chains or bonds are mentioned in Acts 28. Then read Philippians 1:12–14 and 2 Timothy 2:9, and write out what Paul concluded about his imprisonment.*

Bonds or chains are mentioned in 28:17 and 28:20, and Paul's custody frames the whole final section. His conclusion is in Philippians 1:12–14, written from this house: the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard that my chains are in Christ, and most of the brethren have become much more bold to speak the word without fear. Second Timothy 2:9 states it even more compactly: I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains, but the word of God is not chained.

5. *Paul was under guard in a rented house and still received all who came to him (28:30). Name your own current limitation, whether health, schedule, money, or circumstance, and name one person you will invite into it this month.*

Answers will vary. The point of the question is that Paul's ministry in Rome consisted largely of receiving people in a room he could not leave, and four New Testament letters came out of it. A limitation is not a disqualification. Look for a real invitation into a real constraint: a meal at a kitchen table, a study in a living room, a phone call from a hospital bed, a young person invited along on errands. The person who thinks he must wait until his circumstances improve has misread this chapter.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The viper and the healings are apostolic confirming signs (Mark 16:17–20; Hebrews 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:12), given to confirm the word while revelation was being delivered. Say plainly that they are not a pattern for handling snakes or for miraculous healing today, and that the signs ceased when the revelation was complete (1 Corinthians 13:8–10).
- Isaiah 6:9–10 as quoted in 28:26–27 must not be taught as God arbitrarily hardening individuals. The text says their eyes they have closed, and God's stated desire is to heal them.
- “Preaching the kingdom of God” in 28:23 and 28:31 is present-tense preaching about a kingdom that already existed. Use it to reinforce that the kingdom is the church, established at Pentecost, with Christ reigning now (Acts 2:33–36; Colossians 1:13).
- Do not speculate at length about Paul's later movements or death. Tradition is not Scripture; say what is known and leave it there.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Deuteronomy 26–34 • Proverbs 30 • Matthew 25:31–26:25 • Romans 1:1–2:11

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