

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 27 OF 104

Words and Works

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Joshua 1-8
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 31
Gospels	Matthew 26:26-56
General New Testament	Romans 2:12-3:20

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to widen the gap between claiming and doing until the class feels it, and then to point to the only remedy. Israel could not take Jericho by strategy, Peter could not keep his promise by sincerity, and the man in Romans 2 could not be saved by owning a Bible. Each reading removes a way of standing before God on our own resources. Do not resolve the tension too quickly; Paul waits until next week to say "But now," and so can you.

Doctrinally, this is the week the class needs the relationship between faith and obedience stated carefully, because Romans 2:13 and Romans 3:20 sit a page apart and both mean exactly what they say. Say it three times in three ways: no one earns salvation, and no faith saves that will not obey. Alongside that, take the time to answer the conquest of Canaan honestly, and to guard Romans 3:10-18 from being turned into total depravity.

Formationally, watch the theme of what happens where nobody is looking. Achan digs a hole under his tent. The woman of Proverbs 31 rises while it is still night. Jesus prays in the dark while His friends sleep. The man in Romans 2 preaches against stealing and steals. Ask your class this: if the private hour of your week were played back in the assembly, what would the congregation learn about you that they do not know now?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Matthew 26:26-56 first. It carries the Lord's Supper and Gethsemane, and both deserve an unhurried hour. Read 26:36-46 aloud without stopping, then go back through it slowly. Close by asking where each person most needs to pray the word "nevertheless."

Second session: Take up Joshua 1-8. It is the most vivid narrative of the week and it raises the conquest question, which is better handled deliberately in class than privately by a troubled member. Give the last fifteen minutes to Achan and to what hidden sin costs other people.

The other two readings: Romans 2:12-3:20 and Proverbs 31 work well as extended study. Warn the class in advance that Romans will feel relentless and that it is meant to; next week brings the answer. Tell the men to read Proverbs 31 thinking about someone specific, and to say something out loud about her before Sunday.

GENERAL OLD TESTAMENT **Joshua 1-8**

Crossing Over Into the Land

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Joshua opens with a funeral just past and a river straight ahead. Moses is dead, and the word of God to his successor is repeated like a drumbeat: be strong, be courageous, do not turn from the law to the right hand or the left, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Notice that the courage commanded in 1:7 is courage to obey Scripture, not courage in battle. The hardest bravery Joshua will need is the nerve to do exactly what God said when the veterans in his tent have better ideas.

Chapters 2 through 6 are one long lesson in who fights Israel's wars. A Canaanite prostitute confesses the God of Israel before a single Israelite crosses the river. The Jordan, at harvest flood, stops when priests' feet touch the water. Circumcision is restored and Passover is kept before any fighting happens, and the manna that fed them forty years quietly stops. Then a Man with a drawn sword tells Joshua to take off his shoes. By the time the walls fall, the reader understands that Jericho was never a military problem.

Chapter 7 is the hinge of the book, and it lands hard. Israel has just seen impossible victory, so Ai looks easy and no one asks God about it. Meanwhile a Babylonian garment, silver, and a wedge of gold are buried under one man's tent. Thirty six families bury husbands and fathers. When the sin is dealt with, Ai falls, and the book ends this section where it must: on Mount Ebal, with an altar, and with every word of the law read aloud to all the people, women, children, and strangers included.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Joshua covers roughly the first twenty five years in Canaan, around 1400 B.C. on the earlier dating, and it continues the narrative Deuteronomy left on the plains of Moab.
- Joshua's name means "the Lord is salvation," and it is the Hebrew name behind the Greek "Jesus." Where it is natural, point forward; do not build doctrine on the coincidence of names.
- The conquest is a judicial act of God against Canaanite nations whose iniquity had been accumulating for four centuries (Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:24–28; Deuteronomy 9:4–5). Israel is the instrument, not the author, of that judgment.
- Rahab appears again in Matthew 1:5 as an ancestor of Christ, in Hebrews 11:31 among the faithful, and in James 2:25 as an example of faith proved by action.
- The ceremony at Ebal and Gerizim in 8:30–35 is the direct fulfillment of Deuteronomy 27, which the class read last week.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous three times in chapter 1, and each time He attaches a different reason (1:6, 7, 9). Trace all three, and say honestly which of the three you lean on least.*

The three reasons are worth separating. In 1:6 Joshua is to be strong because God has sworn to give this land, so courage rests on God's promise. In 1:7 he is to be strong and very courageous to obey all the law, so courage rests on God's word as the rule of action. In 1:9 he is to be strong because the Lord is with him wherever he goes, so courage rests on God's presence. Promise, word, presence. Between them they cover the future, the path, and the loneliness.

Most of us are strong in one of these and thin in another. Some believe God's promises and still edit His commands when obedience gets expensive. Others obey scrupulously and feel entirely alone doing it. Ask the class which of the three they would have to preach to themselves at two in the morning, and let a few people answer honestly. The answer usually reveals where the real fight is.

Question 2. *Jericho fell after six silent days of walking and one shout. Why would God choose a plan that made His people look foolish to everyone watching from the wall, and where is He asking you to obey without a strategy that makes sense?*

Look at what the plan actually required. Armed men marching in silence, priests blowing rams' horns, a box carried on poles, and the population of Jericho watching from a wall thick enough to build houses on. Every lap made Israel look more absurd. That is the point. Hebrews 11:30 says the walls fell down "by faith," and there was no other way for the first battle in the land to be won, because the first battle set the terms for every battle after it.

Press the class for present tense examples, and refuse vagueness. Forgiving someone who has not apologized looks foolish. Tithing your income when the math does not work looks foolish. Telling the truth when a small lie would end the problem looks foolish. Marching around a marriage in prayer for a year with no visible change looks foolish. Ask who is on lap four and wants to quit, and have the class pray for that person by name.

Question 3. *Achan buried his loot under his tent and thirty six men died at Ai before anyone knew why (7:1-5). How does this passage press on the common idea that what I do privately is nobody else's business?*

Joshua 7:1 says "the children of Israel committed a trespass," and then names one man. God does not treat Achan's sin as a private transaction because covenant life is not private. His sin killed men he never met, and his family knew about the hole under the tent floor. This is a hard text and it is meant to be. Hidden sin in a congregation does not stay where it is buried; it drains strength, and the people losing battles usually cannot tell you why.

Bring it home without turning the class into an inquisition. Ask what the private sins of a Christian actually cost other people: the father whose secret viewing habit shapes how his sons see women, the member whose unconfessed bitterness quietly poisons a class, the elder whose finances are a mess nobody knows about. Then point to the remedy the New Testament gives, which is confession and light rather than stoning (James 5:16; 1 John 1:7-9). The Old Covenant penalty is not ours; the seriousness of the sin is.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Copy out Joshua 1:8 and list what it commands a person to do with the book of the law, and then what it promises. How is that different from simply reading the Bible more often?*

The book of the law is not to depart from his mouth, and he is to meditate in it day and night, in order to observe to do all that is written in it. Then the way is prosperous and he has good success. The distinction is that meditating is not reading for coverage; it is chewing, muttering, turning a text over until it governs a decision. And the stated goal is doing, not knowing. Compare Psalm 1:2 and James 1:22-25.

2. *Rahab's confession in 2:9-11 names what she had heard about God. List the events she mentions, then read Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 and note what each of those verses credits her with.*

She names the drying up of the Red Sea and what Israel did to Sihon and Og, and she concludes that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Hebrews 11:31 says she did not perish with the disobedient because she received the spies in peace, crediting faith. James 2:25 says she was justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way. Both are true of the same act, which is exactly James' point.

3. *Israel stacks twelve stones out of the riverbed (4:1-9, 19-24). Write down the reason Joshua gives, then name the stones of remembrance your own family has set up, or admit that you have none.*

Joshua says they are so that when children ask in time to come, "What do these stones mean?" the fathers can tell them how God cut off the Jordan, that all the peoples of the earth may know His hand is mighty, and that Israel may fear the Lord forever. Answers about family memorials will vary. Listen for anything concrete: a written record of answered prayer, a baptism date remembered annually, a Bible with dates in the margin.

4. In 5:13–15 Joshua asks the Commander of the Lord's army whose side He is on, and the answer is essentially "neither." Explain what that answer corrects, and compare Isaiah 55:8–9.

Joshua asks a battlefield question, whose side are You on, and receives a correction: "No, but as Commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." God does not take sides; He takes over. The right question is never whether God is with my plan but whether I am with His. Isaiah 55:8–9 says the same thing in different words. Joshua's response, falling on his face and asking what his Lord says to His servant, is the model.

5. Achan tells his own story in 7:20–21 in four verbs: *I saw, I coveted, I took, I hid*. Identify the step at which you can still stop, and decide right now what you will do the next time you reach it.

Answers will vary, but the fourth verb is where almost everyone in your class lives. Achan could have stopped at seeing. He could have stopped at coveting. Once the goods were in his hand the hiding was inevitable. Listen for a specific plan at the level of the eyes and the wanting, not a promise to try harder at the taking.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The destruction of the Canaanites troubles thoughtful people, and it should be answered rather than avoided. God is the Judge of all the earth, the nations had four hundred years of patience (Genesis 15:16), their practices included child sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31), and Rahab shows that any Canaanite who turned to God was received. This was a unique judicial act by divine command, never a pattern for warfare by any nation today.
- Rahab's lie is reported, not commended. Scripture praises her faith and her reception of the spies, not every detail of how she managed it. Do not build an ethic of deception from a narrative.
- Achan's household perishing with him (7:24–25) is Old Covenant civil judgment on a household complicit in the crime. Do not turn it into a doctrine of inherited guilt; Deuteronomy 24:16 and Ezekiel 18:20 stand.
- Avoid making Joshua an allegory in every detail. Draw timeless truths about God, faith, and obedience, and point forward to Christ where the New Testament itself does.

Her Own Works Praise Her

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Two things hold this chapter together, and if your class misses the connection they will treat the second half as an unrelated appendix. The first half is about a man with power who must not waste his strength or dull his judgment, and who is charged to speak for the voiceless. The second half is about a woman whose strength is spent daily on the people in front of her. Both halves describe the same thing from two sides: a life whose works do the talking.

The poem is an acrostic, each verse beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which means it is a portrait, not a schedule. It is the A to Z of a worthy woman, gathered from many lives and many years. Read as a single day it is crushing. Read as it was written, it is a celebration. Note the vocabulary too: the word rendered “virtuous” or “excellent” in verse 10 is a word used elsewhere of an army, of valor and force. This is not a decorative woman.

And notice where the poem ends. Not with her appearance, not with her husband’s promotion, but with the fear of the Lord, the same phrase that opened the book at 1:7. Proverbs began with a father saying that wisdom starts in reverence, and it ends by showing you what that reverence looks like when it has been worked into flour, fabric, fields, and children. Wisdom in this book is never theoretical. It has calluses.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- King Lemuel is otherwise unknown. Verse 1 attributes the chapter to what his mother taught him, one of the rare places in Scripture where a woman’s teaching is preserved as inspired instruction to her son.
- Verses 10 through 31 form an acrostic on the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, a device used for memorization and for signaling completeness (compare Psalm 119; Lamentations 1–4).
- The woman described is a householder in an agrarian economy: she manages land, employees, textile production, trade with merchants, and charity, which is why so much of her work happens outside the home.
- The gates (31:23, 31) were where elders sat and public business was done. Her works are praised in the most public place in the town.
- Proverbs closes where it began, at the fear of the Lord (1:7; 9:10; 31:30), which is the frame around everything in between.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The first nine verses are a mother’s counsel to a king. Walk through her three warnings and discuss what each one has to do with how he will finally use his power.*

Her three warnings are about strength, about wine, and about the mouth. Do not give your strength to women, that is, do not spend on appetite what was given you for leadership. It is not for kings to drink, lest they forget the law and pervert the justice of the afflicted. And then the turn in verses 8 and 9: open your mouth for the speechless. The first two warnings protect the third. A man who has squandered his strength and dulled his judgment will not be defending anyone.

Ask the class where they see leaders lose their edge, and then turn it toward home, where every father and every elder holds some kind of power. The mother’s logic is that self indulgence is never merely personal in a person with responsibility; it always gets paid for by somebody weaker. That is a sobering and useful sentence for a class of ordinary adults who lead somebody.

Question 2. *Proverbs 31:8–9 tells the king to open his mouth for those who cannot speak for themselves. Who in your town has no voice, and what would opening your mouth for them actually cost you?*

The categories in verse 8 are those appointed to destruction, and in verse 9 the poor and needy. In any town that includes the unborn, the elderly who have outlived their advocates, children in foster care, the immigrant who cannot read the paperwork, the widow being quietly cheated. Note that the command is not to have a right opinion but to open the mouth, which is riskier and slower and requires knowing somebody's name.

Ask what it would cost: awkwardness, time, money, the good opinion of people who prefer the subject not be raised. Then ask the class to name one specific person rather than a category, and to say what speaking up would look like this month. Keep it out of politics as a team sport and keep it in the territory of actual neighbors, which is where the verse lives.

Question 3. *The poem ends by saying charm is deceitful and beauty is vain (31:30). Which qualities of this woman does our culture celebrate, which does it overlook, and where does the church quietly agree with the culture instead of with the text?*

Our culture celebrates her enterprise, her strength, and her independence of judgment, and it is right to. It overlooks almost everything else: that her husband's heart safely trusts her, that she rises while it is night for other people, that her arms are strengthened for work nobody photographs, and above all that her final praise is for fearing God. The church agrees with the culture whenever it evaluates its women by visibility and its families by appearance.

Handle this warmly. There are women in your class exhausted by this chapter because someone once preached it as a standard they are failing. Tell them plainly what verse 30 says: the durable thing is reverence for God, and everything else in the poem grows out of that soil over decades. Then ask the men in the room when they last praised out loud, in front of the children, the unseen work being done in their house.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Go through 31:10–31 verse by verse and list everything this woman actually does. How many of those things happen inside her house, and how many happen outside it?*

She seeks wool and flax, works willingly with her hands, brings food from afar, rises while it is night to feed her household and her servant girls, considers a field and buys it, plants a vineyard from her earnings, girds herself with strength, perceives that her merchandise is good, works the distaff and spindle, extends her hand to the poor, clothes her household in scarlet, makes her own coverings and dresses in fine linen and purple, supplies sashes to the merchants, opens her mouth with wisdom, watches over her household, and eats no bread of idleness. Roughly half of it happens beyond her front door.

2. *Verse 30 says the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised. Set that beside 1 Peter 3:3–4 and 1 Timothy 2:9–10 and write down what all three passages agree on.*

All three locate a woman's real adornment in character rather than in appearance, and all three assume that character will be visible in conduct. Peter names a gentle and quiet spirit as precious in God's sight; Paul names good works as the proper adornment of a woman professing godliness; Proverbs names the fear of the Lord. None of the three despises beauty. All three refuse to rest anything on it.

3. *Notice what her husband and her children say about her (31:23, 28–29). When did you last say out loud, to the person who serves your household most, something like verse 29?*

Her husband is known in the gates because of her, and her children rise up and call her blessed, and her husband says many daughters have done well but she excels them all. Answers on personal practice will vary. Press for a plan: who will be told, and when, and in whose hearing. Gratitude that is only felt is not what verse 28 describes.

4. Verse 20 puts her hand out to the poor right in the middle of her business dealings. Explain what the writer is refusing to separate, and compare James 1:27 and 1 John 3:17.

He refuses to separate competence from compassion. She is shrewd about a field and open handed toward the poor in the same breath, and the poem sees no tension. James 1:27 and 1 John 3:17 make the same connection: means without mercy is not godliness. Prosperity in this chapter is a tool, never a trophy.

5. This poem is an alphabetical portrait, not a checklist for a single Tuesday. Choose one quality from it, name the specific habit that would build it, and start that habit this week.

Answers will vary, and that is the point. Listen for a single, small, repeatable habit rather than a sweeping resolution: a set hour for the work she rises early to do, one act of generosity budgeted monthly, one hour a week given to a skill. Character in this poem is built the way linen is woven, a thread at a time.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- This chapter has been used to crush women. Say plainly that it is a poetic portrait, not a daily scorecard, and that its own conclusion rests everything on the fear of the Lord rather than on output.
- Do not use the chapter either to overturn or to caricature the New Testament pattern for the church and the home. Scripture assigns the oversight and public teaching of the assembly to qualified men (1 Timothy 2:11-12; 3:1-7), and it also shows women of enormous strength, enterprise, influence, and voice. Teach both without embarrassment.
- Verses 6 and 7 about giving strong drink to the perishing are not a recommendation of drinking. They are a bitter contrast with verses 4 and 5, and the whole New Testament teaching on sobriety stands (1 Peter 5:8; Ephesians 5:18).
- Resist the urge to make this woman an allegory of the church. The text is about a real kind of life, and it is more useful left that way.

The Cup He Did Not Refuse

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The Supper is instituted in four short verses, and every word is deliberate. He took bread, blessed, broke, gave. He took the cup, gave thanks, gave. “This is My body.” “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” Two things are being announced at once: a covenant is ending and a covenant is beginning, and the price of the new one is the blood of the Man holding the cup. They are eating the Passover, and He is telling them that the true Lamb is at the table with them.

Then the walk to the garden, and the most human paragraph in the Gospels. Matthew says He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed, and Jesus tells His friends His soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. He falls on His face. He asks three times. He is not staging a lesson in submission for our benefit; He is genuinely asking, and He genuinely submits, and the two are not in conflict. Hebrews 5:7–9 says He offered up prayers with vehement cries and tears, and learned obedience by the things He suffered.

The arrest exposes everyone. Judas arrives with a kiss, the standard greeting of a disciple to his teacher, which is its own kind of horror. Peter swings a sword and takes off an ear, courage aimed in exactly the wrong direction. Jesus heals the damage, according to Luke, and reminds them that twelve legions of angels are one request away. And then the sentence Matthew lets stand without comment: “Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled.” The Man who would be left alone on a cross was already alone in the dark.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This is Thursday evening of Passover week. The meal is the Passover, and Jesus reshapes it around Himself.
- “The new covenant in My blood” points back to Jeremiah 31:31–34 and forward to Hebrews 8–10, where the first covenant is declared obsolete and taken away in Christ.
- The hymn of 26:30 was almost certainly part of the Hallel, Psalms 113 through 118, sung at Passover.
- Gethsemane means “oil press,” an olive grove on the slope of the Mount of Olives across the Kidron from the temple.
- A Roman legion numbered about six thousand men; twelve legions would be something over seventy thousand angels, more than enough to end the night differently.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus hands them bread and a cup and tells them exactly what each one means (26:26–29). How should His own words shape what goes through your mind when the tray reaches you on the first day of the week?*

Start with the words themselves, because familiarity has worn them smooth. The bread is His body, given. The cup is His blood of the covenant, shed for many, for the remission of sins. That last phrase is the one to sit on. The Supper is not a memorial to a good man’s death but the sign of the blood that actually takes sins away, which is why Paul says that in eating and drinking we proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Then make it Sunday morning practical. Ask what the class actually thinks about during the Supper, and let people be honest; most minds wander to the afternoon. Offer a discipline: one minute on the bread thinking about His body given, one minute on the cup thinking about one specific sin of your own that the blood covers, and then thanksgiving. And teach the pattern plainly: the first day of every week, with the disciples gathered (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

Question 2. *Peter promises he will die before he denies, and he means every word of it (26:33–35). Where does confidence in our own loyalty fail us, and what would honest preparation have looked like for Peter that night?*

Peter is not lying. That is what makes this so useful. He loves Jesus, and he honestly believes his loyalty will hold, and within hours he is cursing in a courtyard. The failure is not a lack of love but a lack of self knowledge, plus an unwillingness to receive a warning. Jesus tells him plainly what will happen, and Peter argues with the prophecy. First Corinthians 10:12 is the summary: let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

Honest preparation would have looked like the thing Jesus told all of them to do and none of them did: watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. Ask the class what they are sure they would never do, and then ask what they have actually put in place to make sure. Conviction is not a plan. Accountability, distance from the occasion, and prayer before the hour of testing are a plan.

Question 3. *Three times Jesus asks that the cup pass, and three times He submits (26:39–44). Talk about what it means for us that our Lord asked to be spared, and what it means that He went anyway.*

That Jesus asked to be spared tells us the cup was real and that dread is not sin. He was not pretending. Whatever that cup held, and it held the wrath against sin that He would bear in His body, He recoiled from it as anyone would, and He said so out loud to His Father. This is enormous pastoral comfort for anyone in your class praying about a diagnosis, a child, or a marriage. Asking is permitted. Asking three times is permitted.

That He went anyway tells us what obedience is made of. “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” is the sentence on which our salvation hangs, and it is spoken by a man on His face in the dirt, sweating, alone, with His friends asleep forty yards away. Do not let the class make peace with a Christianity that never costs anything. Ask each person to name the prayer where they most need to say “nevertheless” this week, and then be quiet for a moment.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write down every phrase Jesus speaks at the table in 26:26–29. Note what He says the cup is and for what purpose it is poured out, then compare 1 Corinthians 11:23–26.*

“Take, eat; this is My body.” “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” Paul’s account adds “Do this in remembrance of Me” and “you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.” Note that Jesus Himself calls the contents the fruit of the vine.

2. *Jesus says He will not drink of the fruit of the vine again until He drinks it new with them in His Father’s kingdom (26:29). Read Acts 2:42, Acts 20:7, and Colossians 1:13, and say when and where His people keep this feast now.*

The kingdom came with power at Pentecost (Mark 9:1; Acts 2), and Colossians 1:13 says Christians have already been conveyed into it. So the Lord’s people keep this feast now, in the kingdom, on the first day of the week when the disciples come together (Acts 20:7), continuing steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42). Nothing here waits on a future earthly reign.

3. *Make two columns. In one, list everything Jesus says and does in Gethsemane; in the other, everything the disciples say and do. Then look at the two columns together.*

Jesus takes three with Him, tells them His sorrow, asks them to watch, prays three times, submits, returns three times, finds them sleeping, warns about the spirit and the flesh, and finally says, “Rise, let us be going.” The disciples follow, sleep, sleep again, sleep again, swing a sword, and run. The contrast is not there to shame them but to show us who was actually holding the world together that night.

4. *In 26:53 Jesus says He could ask His Father for more than twelve legions of angels. Work out roughly how many that is, then explain in your own words why the request was never made.*

A legion was about six thousand, so twelve legions is roughly seventy two thousand angels, and one angel had once killed one hundred eighty five thousand men in a night (2 Kings 19:35). He did not ask because the Scriptures had to be fulfilled (26:54) and because rescue for Himself would have meant no rescue for us. Power restrained by love is the whole story of the cross.

5. *The disciples could not watch with Him for one hour (26:40–41). Choose a real day, a real time, and a real place this week to pray for one unhurried hour, and write all three down before you close the book.*

Answers will vary, and the specificity is the assignment. Look for a written day, hour, and place. If someone says an hour is impossible, that is worth a gentle conversation about the arithmetic of a week. Jesus' words in verse 41 are not a rebuke of weakness but a description of it: the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak, so make a plan that assumes both.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The bread and cup: Jesus is standing there holding His own body, and He calls the contents of the cup the fruit of the vine. Teach the emblems as emblems, plainly and without mockery of those taught otherwise.
- This is the institution of the new covenant. Say clearly that the Law of Moses is fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:13; 10:9–10), and that Christians are under the law of Christ.
- Gethsemane must not be used to suggest a conflict between the Son and the Father or any deficiency in Jesus' deity. He is fully God and fully man, and the prayer shows a real human will submitted, not a divided God.
- Jesus' words about the sword in 26:52 are about His kingdom not being advanced by force (John 18:36). Be careful not to turn the verse into a broad political argument in either direction.

Every Mouth Stopped

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Paul is building a legal case, and this section is where he closes off the last exits. If a man has no law, he is not thereby innocent, because conscience and the work of the law written on the heart accuse or excuse him. If a man has the law, possessing it is worth nothing unless he does it. Verse 13 is blunt: the hearers are not justified, the doers are. That is not a rival gospel; it is the standard by which law always operated, and Paul is about to show that nobody has met it.

Then he takes on the most respectable man in the room. Romans 2:17–24 is a portrait of someone who rests in the law, boasts in God, knows His will, approves the excellent things, and sets himself up as a guide to the blind and a teacher of babes. Paul does not deny a single one of those claims. He simply asks whether the teacher teaches himself, and then quotes Isaiah: the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. Privilege without practice does not merely fail to help; it does damage.

The catena of quotations in 3:10–18 is drawn mostly from the Psalms and Isaiah, and Paul aims it at people who assumed those Scriptures described somebody else. His conclusion in verses 19 and 20 is the point of the entire argument since 1:18: every mouth stopped, all the world guilty before God, no flesh justified in His sight by the deeds of the law, because by the law comes the knowledge of sin. The law was a mirror, never a shower. Next week Paul finally says “But now.”

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Romans 1:18 through 3:20 is one sustained argument establishing universal guilt: the pagan world (1:18–32), the moralist (2:1–16), and the Jew with the law (2:17–3:8), ending in the verdict of 3:9–20.
- “The deeds of the law” means law keeping as a system of earning standing before God, primarily the Law of Moses. It is not Paul’s phrase for obedience to the gospel, which he everywhere requires (1:5; 6:17; 16:26).
- Romans 3:10–18 is a chain of quotations from Psalms 14, 5, 140, 10, and 36, and Isaiah 59, a common rabbinic method of stringing texts together.
- Circumcision of the heart is not a new idea Paul invented; it is Old Testament language (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4).
- Paul is writing to a mixed congregation, and the pastoral point underneath the argument is that neither group may look down on the other.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul says the hearers of the law are not just before God but the doers of the law will be justified (2:13), and then says the deeds of the law justify no one (3:20). How do you hold those two verses together without weakening either?*

Both verses are true because they are answering different questions. Romans 2:13 says that under any law, standing is determined by doing, not by hearing; a man who actually kept God’s law perfectly would indeed be justified by it. Romans 3:20 says that no such man exists, so that door is shut. Paul is not contrasting obedience with disobedience. He is contrasting two ways of getting right with God: earning it by a flawless record, which nobody has, and receiving it on God’s terms through the blood of Christ.

This is the place to say clearly what the church has always had to guard on both sides. Salvation is never earned; no one piles up enough good deeds to put God in his debt (Luke 17:10; Titus 3:5). And salvation is never received by a faith that refuses to obey; the same letter says the gospel aims at obedience to the faith (1:5), that we were

delivered when we obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine (6:17), and that we were baptized into His death (6:3–4). Faith only and works of merit are both excluded by Romans, and for the same reason.

Question 2. *Romans 2:17–24 describes a religious man who teaches everyone but himself. Where are we most likely to do that, and what warning signs would tell us it is already happening?*

Paul's list is of genuine advantages: instruction, confidence, the ability to teach. The danger is baked into the advantages. A man who spends his life explaining the text to others develops a reflex of hearing every passage as a message for someone else. Preachers and Bible class teachers are the highest risk group in the room, and so are long time members who have answered the same questions for thirty years.

Give the class concrete warning signs, because the drift is invisible from the inside. You hear a sermon and immediately think of who needed it. You can name the sins of your culture more readily than one of your own. You have not confessed anything specific to God in months. Someone's correction of you makes you think about their motives rather than about whether they are right. Then ask, as Paul does, what the people outside the church would say about God based on watching us.

Question 3. *Paul piles up six quotations to prove that none is righteous (3:10–18). Why go to that much trouble, and what is he determined to shut down before he says one word about grace?*

He goes to that trouble because the hardest people to convince of guilt are religious people holding Scripture, and he wants the conviction to come from their own Bible rather than from his argument. Notice the totality of the language: none righteous, none who understands, none who seeks, all turned aside, together become unprofitable. He is dismantling the last possible claim, that at least my group is the exception.

Be careful how you state what this proves and what it does not. Paul is saying that every accountable person has sinned (3:23) and that no one can be justified by law keeping. He is not saying that human beings are born guilty or that they are incapable of responding to God, since the very next section calls the whole world to believe, and since Ezekiel 18:20 and Matthew 18:3 stand. Verse 19 gives the purpose: every mouth stopped. Not every person destroyed. Silenced, so that they will finally listen to what God has done.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Romans 2:17–20 says the religious man was confident of, then list the questions Paul fires back in 2:21–23. Look at how the two lists mirror each other.*

He is confident that he is called a Jew, rests in the law, boasts in God, knows His will, approves the excellent things, is instructed out of the law, and is a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth. Then the questions: do you not teach yourself, do you steal, do you commit adultery, do you rob temples, do you dishonor God by breaking the law. Every credential in the first list becomes an indictment in the second.

2. *Romans 2:28–29 defines a real Jew and a real circumcision. Compare Philippians 3:3, Colossians 2:11–12, and Galatians 6:15, and write out what circumcision of the heart is and how a person receives it.*

A real Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is from God rather than from men. Philippians 3:3 says we are the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit. Colossians 2:11–12 identifies the circumcision made without hands with the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh, and ties it directly to baptism, buried with Him and raised with Him through faith in the working of God. That is how a person receives it.

3. *In 3:1 Paul asks what advantage there is in being a Jew. Give his answer from 3:2, then read Romans 9:4–5 and note what responsibility came bundled with that privilege.*

Much in every way, chiefly that to them were committed the oracles of God. Romans 9:4–5 adds the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, the promises, the fathers, and Christ according to the flesh. Every item on that list is a trust rather than a trophy. To whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48), which is precisely why Paul has been pressing them so hard.

4. Trace the parts of the body named in 3:13–18, from throat to tongue to lips to mouth to feet to eyes. What portrait of a whole person is Paul assembling, and where does he say it all starts?

Throat an open tomb, tongues practicing deceit, the poison of asps under the lips, a mouth full of cursing and bitterness, feet swift to shed blood, destruction and misery in their ways, no peace known. And then the summary in verse 18: there is no fear of God before their eyes. Paul is showing a whole person given over to sin, and he tells you the source is not the mouth or the feet but the eyes that have stopped fearing God.

5. Romans 3:20 says that by the law comes the knowledge of sin. Name one command of Christ that has recently shown you something about yourself you would rather not have seen, and say what you will do about it before next Sunday.

Answers will vary. This question is doing in miniature what Romans 3:20 says the law does: it holds up a mirror. Listen for something specific, a temper, a tongue, a habit of resentment, a stinginess, and press for a concrete first step. The knowledge of sin is useless if it stops at knowledge, which is exactly what Paul will say next week when he gets to “But now.”

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Romans 3:10–18 is the standard proof text for total depravity. Answer it directly: Paul is quoting descriptions of the wicked to prove that all have sinned, not teaching that people are born guilty or unable to respond. Sin is universal because sinning is universal (3:23), and the passage ends with mouths stopped so that people will hear and believe.
- Guard the meaning of “the deeds of the law.” It refers to law keeping as a means of earning righteousness, chiefly under Moses. Do not let it be stretched into a denial of the obedience the gospel itself commands (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:17).
- Romans 2:13 will sound to some ears like salvation by works. Explain the argument’s structure before you explain the verse, and the problem disappears.
- The Law of Moses is not binding on Christians. Where the class asks about the Sabbath, the feasts, or circumcision, answer from Colossians 2:14–17 and Hebrews 8–10 rather than from custom.

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Joshua 9–15 • Psalm 1–3 • Matthew 26:57–27:14 • Romans 3:21–4:25

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com