

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 28 OF 104

Whose Counsel

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Joshua 9-15
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 1-3
Gospels	Matthew 26:57-27:14
General New Testament	Romans 3:21-4:25

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to get the class to ask where their convictions are actually coming from. Israel accepted a lie because it looked reasonable and never prayed. Psalm 1 says the man who sits down with the scornful will eventually think like them. The council decided the verdict and then went shopping for evidence. Paul says the only righteousness that will hold up is one God provides. By the end of the week, the class should be able to name at least one belief they hold because everyone around them holds it.

Doctrinally, the load this week is in Romans 3:21-4:25, and it must be carried carefully. Say plainly that salvation is by grace, through faith, apart from any system of earning, and say just as plainly that the faith which saves is the faith that obeys, since Abraham's did and since Paul's own letter says so. Do not leave the class with either error. Alongside that, Psalm 2 is your chance to state again that Christ was enthroned at His resurrection and reigns now.

Formationally, the thread is what we do with a promise we cannot see yet. Caleb waited forty five years for a mountain. Abraham waited twenty five years for a son and then climbed a hill with him. David slept in the open while his son hunted him. Jesus stood silent before Pilate because He trusted the One who judges righteously. Ask your class this: what has God promised you that you have quietly stopped expecting, and what would change tomorrow if you started expecting it again?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Romans 3:21-4:25 first and give it the full hour. It is the doctrinal center of the letter and the class will not get another week like it. Write "But now" on the board, work slowly through 3:23-26, and settle the faith and works question before anyone asks it in the parking lot.

Second session: Take up Matthew 26:57-27:14. Read the trial and the denial as one story, since Matthew wrote them that way. Save the last ten minutes for Peter and Judas side by side, and end with 2 Corinthians 7:10 rather than with a summary.

The other two readings: Joshua 9-15 and Psalms 1 through 3 carry the extended questions well. Point the class to Joshua 9:14 as the sentence to remember from a long reading, and encourage them to read Psalm 3 out loud at night this week. Mention that Psalm 2 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament and ask them to find out why.

The Land Taken and Divided

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 9 is the great cautionary tale of the book. The Gibeonites are frightened, and fear makes people clever. They load donkeys with dry crusts and patched wineskins, put on mended sandals, and tell a story designed to be verified by the senses. Israel inspects the bread, which is exactly what the Gibeonites hoped they would do, and verse 14 delivers the verdict of the whole chapter: “they did not ask counsel of the Lord.” Nothing in the deception was hard to expose. Israel simply never asked the one question that would have exposed it.

Chapters 10 and 11 move fast, and the refrain never changes: the Lord fought for Israel. Hailstones kill more men than swords do. The sun stands still at the word of a man, and the writer says there has been no day like it before or since, when the Lord heeded the voice of a man. Kings fall in a list so long it becomes numbing, which is part of the effect. God said He would give the land, and He is giving it, king by king, valley by valley.

Then the pace changes again and the survey begins. Boundaries, towns, inheritance. Modern readers skim these chapters, and they should not, because something quietly enormous is happening: promises made to a wandering herdsman in Genesis are being measured out in actual dirt with actual fence lines. And in the middle of the surveying stands Caleb, eighty five years old, asking for a mountain full of Anakim because God said so forty five years ago and he has not gotten over it.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Gibeon lay only about six miles from Ai, well inside the land, which is why their claim to have come from a far country should have been suspect from the first.
- Joshua 10:13 cites the Book of Jasher, a collection of Hebrew poetry also mentioned in 2 Samuel 1:18. Scripture occasionally quotes existing sources without endorsing everything in them.
- The conquest as narrated is the taking of the land as a whole and the breaking of organized resistance; Judges will show that many pockets remained to be cleared, exactly as Joshua 13:1 already warns.
- The allotments are organized by tribe, with Judah first and largest (chapter 15), anticipating the tribe from which the Christ would come (Hebrews 7:14).
- Caleb was one of the two faithful spies of Numbers 13 and 14, and his request in Joshua 14 is the payoff of a promise made in Numbers 14:24.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Joshua 9:14 says the men took the Gibeonites’ provisions and did not ask counsel of the Lord. Which decisions in your life get made that way, and what part did the evidence in their hands play in keeping them from praying?*

Notice why Israel did not pray. They had evidence. They could touch the bread, look at the sandals, and smell the wineskins, and everything in their hands supported the story they were being told. Prayer feels unnecessary when the data looks conclusive. That is exactly the point at which we are most easily taken, because the deceiver has already arranged the data. Israel had a high priest with Urim and Thummim standing a few yards away and never used him.

Get specific with the class about which decisions never get prayed over: job offers that look obviously good, purchases that are clearly affordable, friendships with people who are clearly charming, opinions confirmed by everyone we follow. Ask each person to name one decision facing them in the next month, and to commit to praying about it before the evidence closes the question. Then notice God’s mercy in the outcome: He wove even Israel’s foolish treaty into His purposes, and Gibeonites were still serving at His house centuries later.

Question 2. *Israel kept a treaty that had been obtained by fraud, and generations later God still held them to it (9:18–21; 2 Samuel 21:1–2). Discuss the weight that gives to a promise, and name where keeping your word is presently costing you something.*

The oath had been sworn in the name of the Lord, and the princes refused to break it even when the congregation wanted blood. Their reasoning is in 9:20: “lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath.” They took a consequence they did not deserve rather than let God’s name be treated as negotiable. Centuries later, when Saul violated that ancient treaty, 2 Samuel 21 records three years of famine. God remembered the promise longer than Israel did.

Bring this to where your class actually lives. A promise is cheap to make and expensive to keep, and our culture treats commitments as valid only as long as they remain satisfying: marriages, contracts, church membership, commitments to teach a class or serve a family. Jesus says let your yes be yes (Matthew 5:37), and Psalm 15:4 blesses the man who swears to his own hurt and does not change. Ask who is presently tempted to quit something they said they would do.

Question 3. *Caleb is eighty five and asks for the hill country where the giants live (14:6–14). What has kept that man strong for forty five years, and what would his kind of old age look like in our congregation?*

Caleb’s own answer is in the text and it is worth reading aloud slowly. He has a promise from God, he has a memory of bringing back word as it was in his heart when ten other men lied, and he has strength that he credits directly to God keeping him alive. And notice what he asks for. Not the easy valley, not retirement, but the hill country with the fortified cities and the giants, the very thing that terrified his entire generation.

Then ask what this looks like in your congregation. It looks like people in their seventies and eighties who are still asking for assignments rather than being carried, still teaching, still visiting, still learning. It also looks like younger members treating those people as a resource instead of as an audience. Have the class name two or three older members and say specifically what they have received from them. Say it where those members can hear it.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the Gibeonite deception step by step in 9:3–15. At which point should Israel have caught it, and name precisely what they leaned on instead of God.*

They hear the news, act craftily, load worn sacks and cracked wineskins, put on old garments and patched sandals, take dry and moldy bread, claim a far country, repeat the claim under questioning, and offer their supplies as proof. The moment to catch it was verse 7, when the men of Israel actually voiced suspicion and then let the evidence overrule it. They leaned on their own inspection, their own reasoning, and on flattery.

2. *Joshua 10:12–14 records a long day. Write down exactly what the text claims, and note the explanation the writer gives in verse 14 for the whole episode.*

The text says Joshua spoke to the Lord and then commanded the sun to stand still over Gibeon and the moon over Aijalon, and that the sun stood still about a whole day so the nation could avenge itself on its enemies. Verse 14 gives the writer’s own explanation: there has been no day like it, when the Lord heeded the voice of a man, for the Lord fought for Israel. The miracle is reported as a miracle. Take it as it stands rather than explaining it into a metaphor or defending a particular mechanism.

3. *List the phrases that keep repeating through chapters 10 and 11, such as “utterly destroyed” and “as the Lord commanded Moses.” What is the writer establishing by all that repetition?*

Phrases such as “utterly destroyed,” “he left none remaining,” “as the Lord God of Israel commanded,” and “the Lord fought for Israel” repeat again and again. The repetition establishes two things: that the conquest was obedience to a divine command rather than a land grab, and that the victory belonged to God rather than to Israel’s army.

4. *Read Joshua 11:18–20 alongside Exodus 8:15 and Exodus 9:12, and write out how Scripture speaks about hardened hearts. Who hardens first, and what does God then do?*

Joshua 11:20 says it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel, that He might destroy them utterly. Exodus shows the pattern plainly: Pharaoh hardened his own heart repeatedly (8:15, 32; 9:34) before Exodus 9:12 says the Lord hardened it. God hardens by confirming a rebel in the choice he has already made

and refused to abandon, which is exactly the judgment described in Romans 1:24–28. No one in Scripture is made wicked against his will.

5. *Caleb says three times that he wholly followed the Lord (14:8, 9, 14) after forty five years of waiting on a promise. Name the promise of God you have been waiting on longest, and decide what wholly following looks like for you over the next thirty days.*

Answers will vary. Watch for the difference between waiting and drifting. Caleb spent forty five years in a wilderness and a war without losing the promise, and he arrives at eighty five wanting the hardest assignment available. Listen for a concrete plan over thirty days rather than a general resolve to keep believing.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The destruction of the Canaanites: handle it as you did last week, as a unique judicial act of God through Israel against nations whose iniquity was full, never as a pattern for any nation's warfare now.
- The long day of Joshua 10: teach what the text says and leave the mechanism alone. Do not repeat the popular story about scientists discovering a missing day; it is not true, and a class that catches you repeating it will trust you less on things that matter more.
- Hardening of hearts: state clearly that God does not create rebels. He gives people over to what they have insisted on. Guard against any suggestion of unconditional reprobation.
- The allotment chapters can feel tedious. Their point is that God keeps promises down to the property line, which Joshua 21:45 will say outright next week.

Two Roads and a Throne

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalms 1 and 2 were placed together as the gateway to the whole book, and they belong together. Psalm 1 is about the individual and the two ways: one man planted by streams, one heap of chaff on the threshing floor. Psalm 2 is about the nations and the two ways: kings plotting freedom from God's restraints, and a King already installed on Zion. Personal faithfulness and world history are held in the same frame, and both end at the same place, which is the judgment of God.

Psalm 2 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament, and the apostles are unanimous about what it means. Acts 4:25–28 applies the raging of the nations to Herod, Pilate, and the men who condemned Jesus. Acts 13:33 applies "You are My Son, today I have begotten You" to the resurrection. Hebrews uses it to establish the Son's superiority to angels and His appointment as high priest. The psalm's command, "Kiss the Son," is a call to submit to a King who reigns now, not one who is waiting to begin.

Then Psalm 3 shows you what the first two psalms look like at three in the morning. The heading places it during Absalom's rebellion, which means David is fleeing a coup led by his own son, a disaster he had been told was coming because of his own sin. There is no pretense in the psalm. He counts his enemies, quotes their taunt, and then says God is a shield around him, his glory, and the lifter of his head. And then he sleeps. That is faith with a pulse.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The Psalms are Israel's inspired songbook, gathered over centuries into five books; Psalms 1 and 2 serve as the introduction to the collection.
- Genre matters: Psalm 1 is wisdom poetry, Psalm 2 is a royal and messianic psalm, and Psalm 3 is an individual lament. Teach each according to its own kind.
- Hebrew poetry works by parallelism, saying a thing twice in different words, rather than by rhyme. Watch for the second line restating or sharpening the first.
- The heading of Psalm 3 ties it to 2 Samuel 15–18, David's flight from Absalom.
- "Selah" is most likely a musical or liturgical pause. It marks a breath, not a secret meaning.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 1:1 moves from walking, to standing, to sitting, and from counsel, to path, to seat. Follow that progression and discuss how a person's circle quietly becomes his character.*

The Hebrew builds by stages. Walking in counsel is taking advice; standing in the path is lingering where they live; sitting in the seat of the scornful is settling in as one of them. The company moves from ungodly, to sinners, to scornful, each worse than the last, and the posture moves from motion to permanence. Nobody starts at the seat. Everybody arrives there by walking, and the walking felt harmless.

Ask the class to think about their last five years of input: who they listen to in the car, whose videos they watch at night, whose opinions have become their reflexes. First Corinthians 15:33 says evil company corrupts good habits, and Psalm 1 says the same thing more slowly. Then flip it and make it positive, because verse 2 is the alternative: the blessed man has different company, the law of the Lord, and he keeps it near enough to mutter it.

Question 2. *Psalm 2 says the nations rage and the One enthroned in heaven laughs. How do we hear that laughter rightly, so that it steadies us without making us smug about the people God is warning?*

The laughter of Psalm 2:4 is not a sneer at human suffering. It is the response of absolute authority to a mutiny that has no chance. The nations imagine they can break God's bonds, and God's answer is to say, calmly, that He has already set His King on His holy hill. For a persecuted believer, that laughter is oxygen. Whatever power is currently frightening you has an expiration date and does not know it.

Guard against smugness by finishing the psalm. Verses 10 through 12 are an invitation: be wise, be instructed, serve the Lord with fear, kiss the Son. The psalm ends with "Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him." God's laughter aims at repentance, not at gloating. Ask the class how differently they would pray about hostile people and hostile institutions if they truly believed both halves of this psalm.

Question 3. *David wrote Psalm 3 while fleeing from Absalom, with people saying there is no help for him in God. What does he do with that accusation in verses 3 through 6, and how would you answer the same accusation this week?*

He does three things, and they are worth writing on the board. First, he tells God what people are saying rather than arguing with them. Second, he answers the taunt with a confession about God rather than about himself: You are a shield, my glory, the One who lifts my head. Third, he acts on it. He lies down and sleeps, and he wakes up, and he says the Lord sustained him, and then he faces ten thousand.

Bring this into the class's own accusations, which usually sound like this: God is done with you, look at your record, you have no right to pray after what you did. Note that David's situation was in fact his own fault, which makes the psalm more useful rather than less. He does not answer the accusation by denying his history. He answers it with the character of God. Ask who needs to sleep tonight and why they have not been able to.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out the three verbs and the three companions of Psalm 1:1 in order, and describe the movement they trace from casual contact to settled belonging.*

Walking in the counsel of the ungodly, standing in the path of sinners, sitting in the seat of the scornful. The verbs slow down as the company gets worse, and the drift ends with a man comfortably seated among people who mock the very idea of taking God seriously.

2. *List every contrast Psalm 1 draws between the righteous and the wicked, including what it says happens to each in the judgment. Which contrast lands hardest on you?*

The righteous man delights and meditates in God's law, is planted by rivers, bears fruit in season, does not wither, and prospers; the wicked are like chaff the wind drives away, will not stand in the judgment, will not be in the congregation of the righteous, and their way perishes while the Lord knows the way of the righteous. Answers about which contrast lands hardest will vary; look for honesty about fruitfulness and about rootedness rather than about reputation.

3. *Psalm 2 is applied to Jesus in Acts 4:25–28, Acts 13:33, and Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5. Read all four passages and write down who this psalm is finally about and when the New Testament says it was fulfilled.*

The psalm is finally about Christ. Acts 4 identifies the raging kings as those who gathered against Jesus; Acts 13:33 says God fulfilled the promise "You are My Son, today I have begotten You" by raising Jesus from the dead; Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5 use it of His sonship and His appointment as high priest. The enthronement described here happened at the resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:33–36), not at some future date.

4. *Psalm 3:5 says, "I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the Lord sustained me." Given what was happening to David that night, explain why that one sentence is the most remarkable in the psalm.*

David is a fugitive king whose own son is hunting him, with an army in the field and his reputation destroyed. A man in that position does not sleep. That he did, and that he credits it to God sustaining him, is the most concrete evidence of trust in the psalm. Faith is measured in things like appetite and sleep more often than in things like vocabulary.

5. *Psalm 1:2 describes a man who meditates in God's law day and night. Decide now the time of day, the length, and the passage you will use for meditation this week, and write all three down before you close the book.*

Answers will vary. The point of demanding three specifics is that meditation dies of vagueness. Note that the Hebrew word suggests a low muttering, reading it under your breath until it goes in. Listen the following week for who actually did it, and ask what changed.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 1:3 is wisdom literature, a general principle about how life goes under God's order, not a guarantee of financial or physical prosperity. Job and the cross both stand in the way of that reading.
- Psalm 2: "today I have begotten You" is applied by Acts 13:33 to the resurrection and enthronement. It does not teach that the Son had a beginning (John 1:1; 8:58). The reign it announces is present, not postponed to an earthly millennium.
- Psalm 3:7, about striking enemies on the cheekbone and breaking teeth, is an appeal to God's justice, not a model for personal vengeance (Romans 12:19). Note that David asks God to act and does not act himself, which is precisely the point.

The Night They Judged God

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Matthew wants you to see that the trial was a formality. The council is already assembled at night, the verdict is already settled, and the search is not for truth but for testimony that will hold. Witness after witness fails, which is itself a remarkable testimony: the best case that Jesus' enemies could assemble, with every motive and every resource, amounted to a garbled quotation about the temple. Then Caiaphas, out of options, puts Him under oath, and Jesus does not dodge. He claims to be the Christ, the Son of God, and adds that they will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds.

Matthew interlaces two failures, and the interlacing is deliberate. Inside, the Lord confesses under oath at the cost of His life. Outside, in the firelight, His most confident apostle denies Him to a servant girl. The rooster crows, Peter remembers, and he goes out and weeps bitterly. Matthew does not soften it. Neither should you, because Peter's bitter weeping is the hinge on which his whole future turns, and there are people in your class who need to see it.

Then Judas. He is the other man who is sorry that night, and the difference between the two men is the most important pastoral lesson in the passage. Judas admits the truth, returns the money, calls Jesus innocent, and then goes to a rope. He is sorry, but his sorrow drives him away from God rather than toward Him. The chief priests, meanwhile, scruple about putting blood money in the treasury while holding the hands that paid for a murder, and Matthew lets the irony stand without comment.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Jewish legal custom required capital trials to be held in daytime, to allow a day between conviction and sentence, and to begin with the case for acquittal. This proceeding violated its own rules at nearly every point.
- Caiaphas was high priest from about A.D. 18 to 36, appointed by Rome; the priesthood by this time was a political office.
- The Sanhedrin lacked authority to carry out an execution under Roman rule (John 18:31), which is why Jesus is delivered to Pilate in the morning.
- Blasphemy was the charge before the council, but before Pilate the charge is shifted to a political one, claiming to be a king, because Rome would not care about the first.
- Matthew 27:9–10 connects the potter's field to prophecy, drawing on Zechariah 11:12–13 with the language of Jeremiah 18, 19, and 32.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The council hunted for false witnesses and still could not get two stories to agree (26:59–61). Why does Matthew take the trouble to tell us that, and what does the collapse of the evidence prove about the Man on trial?*

Matthew is answering the question a skeptical reader would ask: was there anything to the charges? He shows a court with unlimited motive, the power to compel witnesses, and a whole night to work, and the result is nothing. Under the law of Deuteronomy 19:15, two witnesses had to agree, and they could not produce it. In the end they convict Him on His own testimony about who He is, which is the only truthful sentence spoken in the room.

Press the class on what that means for us. The earliest and most hostile investigation of Jesus' life found no sin to allege, which is what the New Testament claims everywhere afterward (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; 2 Corinthians 5:21). And notice that the thing they crucified Him for is the thing we confess: that He is the Christ, the Son of God. Ask the class what it costs them today to say that same sentence in the rooms where they spend their weeks.

Question 2. *Peter's denial comes apart in three stages, each one louder than the last (26:69–75). Trace the escalation, and talk about why the second lie always costs less than the first.*

The first denial is a dodge: "I do not know what you are saying." The second is a flat denial with an oath: "I do not know the Man." The third adds cursing and swearing. Each step buys a little more distance and requires a little more force, because a lie has to grow to protect the lie before it. The second is easier than the first for a simple reason: he has already crossed the line, and consistency now feels like loyalty to himself.

Go after the practical mechanics in the class. Peter had followed at a distance, sat down with the wrong crowd, and warmed himself at their fire, and all of that happened before any question was asked. The denial did not begin at the question; it began at the distance. Ask each person where they are currently following at a distance, and what one step back toward the Lord would look like this week.

Question 3. *Judas felt remorse, returned the money, and said out loud that he had betrayed innocent blood (27:3–5). Where does his sorrow stop short of repentance, and how do we tell those two apart in ourselves?*

Judas has real remorse. He says the true thing, he gives back the money, and he suffers for it. What is missing is God. He confesses to the chief priests instead of to the Lord, he seeks relief rather than mercy, and he ends in despair, which is unbelief wearing the costume of humility. Peter's tears and Judas' tears look identical from the outside; the difference is the direction each man ran.

Handle this tenderly, because somebody in your class has lost a loved one to despair, and somebody else is closer to it than anyone knows. Do not turn Judas into a lecture. Say plainly that worldly sorrow produces death and godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10), that the door was open to Judas as it was open to Peter, and that no sin a person will bring to Christ is too big to be forgiven. Then make sure the class knows who to call at two in the morning.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out the high priest's question in 26:63 and Jesus' answer in 26:64. Identify the two Old Testament passages He weaves together (Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13) and state exactly what He is claiming.*

The question is, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" The answer is, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." He combines Psalm 110:1 with Daniel 7:13, claiming to be both the enthroned Lord at God's right hand and the divine Son of Man who receives an everlasting kingdom. The high priest understood Him perfectly, which is why he tore his clothes.

2. *Set 2 Corinthians 7:9–10 beside Judas in 27:3–5 and Peter in 26:75. Name what separates godly sorrow from the sorrow of the world, and what each kind of sorrow produced.*

Godly sorrow is grief over having sinned against God, and it moves toward Him in repentance, producing salvation with no regret. Worldly sorrow is grief over consequences, shame, and loss, and it moves away from God, producing death. Judas confessed to the wrong people and hanged himself. Peter wept, stayed near the others, met the risen Lord, and spent the rest of his life preaching Him.

3. *List every indignity done to Jesus from 26:67 through 27:14, and note who did each one. How many different groups take part before the sun comes up?*

They spat in His face, beat Him with fists, struck Him with open palms, mocked Him to prophesy who hit Him, bound Him, led Him away, delivered Him to Pilate, and accused Him before the governor. Council members, servants, the high priest, the whole Sanhedrin, and finally Roman authority all take a turn. By sunrise, religious power and political power have both had their hands on Him.

4. *Jesus answers Pilate once and then falls silent (27:12–14). Read Isaiah 53:7 and 1 Peter 2:21–23, and write down what that silence was accomplishing and what it teaches us.*

Isaiah 53:7 said He would be oppressed and afflicted yet not open His mouth, like a lamb led to the slaughter, and Peter says He did not revile in return or threaten but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. The silence

was obedience and it was trust, and 1 Peter holds it up as a pattern for Christians who suffer unjustly. He was not being passive; He was refusing to be rescued.

5. *Peter wept bitterly and later stood up to preach and to feed the Lord's sheep (Acts 2:14; John 21:15–17). Name one failure you have been carrying quietly, take it to God specifically this week, and name one act of service you will do instead of hiding.*

Answers will vary, and this one may be answered privately rather than out loud. What the teacher should listen for is movement toward God rather than away, and a concrete act of service, since shame isolates and service is one of the ways God pulls a person back into the light. Peter was restored by being given sheep to feed.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Guard the class against any hint of hostility toward Jewish people. The New Testament lays the guilt of the cross on human sin, including ours (Acts 2:23; Romans 4:25; Isaiah 53:5–6), and the first thousands of Christians were Jews.
- Judas' suicide should be handled with real pastoral care. Do not speculate about his eternal state beyond what the text says, do not make his death a debating point, and be aware that someone present may be grieving or struggling. Name the hope of Christ plainly.
- Jesus' answer in 26:64 is a claim to deity, not merely to messiahship. Say so clearly; it is the center of the trial and the reason for the verdict.
- Resist the urge to speculate about Pilate's sympathies or his wife's dream beyond what Matthew reports. The text gives us enough.

But Now, the Righteousness of God

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Everything since Romans 1:18 has been demolition. Now comes the building. A righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, yet the Law and the Prophets had been pointing at it the whole time. It comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, and Paul immediately explains why there is no other way: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The playing field is level because the ground is uniformly under water.

Verses 24 through 26 are as dense as anything Paul wrote, and they reward slow reading. Justified freely by His grace. Through the redemption in Christ Jesus, a word from the slave market. Whom God set forth as a propitiation, the covering of sin by blood, through faith in His blood. And the purpose clause is the heart of it: that He might be just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. God did not set the standard aside in order to forgive. He satisfied it Himself.

Chapter 4 is Paul's proof, and he chooses the one man every Jewish reader revered. If Abraham had been justified by works he would have had something to boast about, but the Scripture says he believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Paul then notes the timing: that verdict came before circumcision, which makes Abraham the father of believing Gentiles as well as Jews. And he describes the faith itself, which was not a feeling but a settled confidence that God could do what He had promised, held for twenty five years against a body as good as dead.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Romans 3:21–26 is widely regarded as the theological center of the letter, and it answers the problem raised in 1:18 through 3:20.
- “Propitiation” translates a word used of the mercy seat, the lid of the ark where blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). Paul is saying that what the mercy seat pictured, Christ accomplished.
- “Justified” is courtroom language: to be declared righteous, acquitted, set right with God. It is not a statement that sin did not matter but that it has been dealt with.
- Genesis 15:6 is quoted in Romans 4, Galatians 3:6, and James 2:23, and each writer draws out something the others assume.
- Abraham's circumcision came at least fourteen years after Genesis 15:6 (Genesis 17), and the Law of Moses came about four hundred thirty years later (Galatians 3:17). Paul's argument depends on that chronology.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Romans 3:21 begins with “But now.” After everything Paul has said since 1:18, what do those two words change, and why does he insist this righteousness is apart from the law yet witnessed by the Law and the Prophets?*

“But now” marks the turn from what human beings could never accomplish to what God has done in Christ. Everything before it was diagnosis. What changes is not the standard, which stands, and not the verdict on human performance, which stands as well, but the basis on which a guilty person may be set right. Apart from law means that law keeping is not the ground of acceptance. Witnessed by the Law and the Prophets means this was never plan B; the sacrifices, the promises, and the prophets had been pointing here all along.

The line to guard, and to guard warmly, is this one: apart from law does not mean apart from obedience. The same letter says the gospel aims at obedience to the faith (1:5), that they obeyed from the heart the form of doctrine delivered to them (6:17), and that we are baptized into Christ's death (6:3–4). What Paul excludes is a

system in which a person accumulates enough compliance to put God in his debt. What he requires is a faith that takes God at His word and acts on it. Say both halves in the same breath or you will be misheard.

Question 2. *Paul says boasting is excluded (3:27). If salvation is by grace and yet God commands us to obey Him, how do we talk about our own obedience without turning it into a boast?*

Boasting is excluded by what Paul calls the law of faith, because faith by its nature looks away from itself. A drowning man who is pulled into a boat does not brag about how well he grabbed the rope. Romans 4:4 puts it precisely: to him who works, the wages are counted as debt, not grace. Anything that leaves us feeling that God owes us has already gone wrong, no matter how orthodox the vocabulary.

Then answer the practical question honestly, because your class lives with it. Christians do obey, and obedience is commanded, and the New Testament never apologizes for it. The way to talk about it without boasting is the way Jesus taught in Luke 17:10: when you have done everything commanded, say you are an unprofitable servant who has done his duty. Paul does it too, in 1 Corinthians 15:10, where he works harder than all of them and then says it was the grace of God with him. Ask the class to catch themselves this week in the act of comparing their record to somebody else's. That instinct is what Paul is killing.

Question 3. *Abraham was counted righteous in Genesis 15:6, years before circumcision and centuries before the law was given. Discuss what Paul proves by that timing, and what James 2:21–24 adds that we must not lose.*

The timing is the argument. Genesis 15:6 pronounces Abraham righteous while he is still uncircumcised, which means the verdict cannot be a reward for the covenant sign, and it comes four hundred thirty years before Sinai, which means it cannot be a reward for keeping the law. That makes Abraham the father of everyone who believes, in or out of the flesh of Israel, which is exactly the unity Paul is after in a congregation of Jews and Gentiles.

Now bring in James, and do not treat him as an opponent to be managed. James 2 says Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac, and that the Scripture of Genesis 15:6 was fulfilled by that act, and that a man is justified by works and not by faith only. That is the only place in the Bible where the words faith and only appear together, and there they appear with a "not." Paul excludes meritorious law keeping; James excludes dead, inactive belief. Together they describe one thing: a trusting obedience that God accepts on the ground of Christ's blood. Hebrews 11:8 says that by faith Abraham obeyed, and that sentence holds both apostles together.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Explain in your own words, from 3:24–25, what "justified," "redemption," and "propitiation" mean. Say each one the way you would say it to a fifteen year old.*

Justified means declared right with God, acquitted, the charges dealt with rather than ignored. Redemption means bought out, the way a slave was purchased and set free, and the price named here is the blood of Christ. Propitiation means the covering of sin by a sacrifice so that God's holy wrath against it is satisfied rather than waived. Put simply: God is not pretending the sin never happened; He paid for it Himself.

2. *Romans 4:3 quotes Genesis 15:6. Read Genesis 15, then Genesis 22:1–18 and Hebrews 11:8–19, and trace what Abraham's faith actually did over the course of his life.*

In Genesis 15 Abraham believes God's promise about a son and offspring beyond counting when he has no child at all. In Genesis 22 he rises early, takes the boy up the mountain, and raises the knife on the son the promise depended on, because, Hebrews says, he concluded that God was able to raise him from the dead. Hebrews 11:8 says that by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out. His faith left home, waited twenty five years, and climbed a mountain. It was never merely mental.

3. *List everything Romans 4:18–22 says about Abraham's faith when his body and Sarah's were long past hope. Which of those descriptions is furthest from your own praying?*

He contemplated his own body as good as dead and Sarah's womb as dead, and did not waver at the promise through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, being fully convinced that what God had promised He was able to perform. Against hope he believed in hope. Answers about personal praying will vary; most of us are furthest from "fully convinced," and the honest admission of that is a good place for a class to end.

4. Set Romans 3:28 beside James 2:24 and write out how both statements are true, paying close attention to what each writer means by the word “works.”

Paul says a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law, and by “works” he means law keeping performed to earn a standing before God, the kind that would make salvation a wage. James says a man is justified by works and not by faith only, and by “works” he means the acting out of faith in obedience, like Abraham on the mountain and Rahab at the window. Both deny that a bare, inactive belief saves; both deny that God owes anybody anything.

5. Romans 4:25 says *He was delivered for our offenses and raised for our justification*. Read Romans 6:3–4 and Acts 22:16. If you have never been buried with Christ in baptism, settle it this week; if you have, name one person you will tell what it meant.

This question is deliberately direct. Romans 4:25 ties our justification to the resurrection, and Romans 6:3–4 says how a person gets into that death and resurrection: baptized into Christ Jesus, baptized into His death, buried with Him, raised to walk in newness of life. Ananias told Saul to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord. If someone in the class has never obeyed that, the teacher should make it easy and immediate to do so.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- This is the passage most often used to teach salvation by faith only. Meet it directly and kindly: Paul excludes works of merit, not the obedience the gospel commands, and James 2:24 is the only verse in Scripture containing the words “faith only,” where it says “not by faith only.”
- Do not let justification be presented as a legal fiction that leaves a person unchanged. Paul anticipates that misreading himself in Romans 6:1–2, which the class reads next week.
- Abraham’s faith included obedience from the start (Genesis 12:1–4; Hebrews 11:8) and at the end (Genesis 22). Keep that in front of the class the whole hour, and the faith and works question largely answers itself.
- Guard against a merely mental definition of faith. Biblical faith believes God, trusts Christ’s blood, and acts on what God says, which is why the New Testament can speak of obeying the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17).

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Joshua 16–24 • Psalm 4–6 • Matthew 27:15–56 • Romans 5–6

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com