

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 32 OF 104

Mercy for Outsiders

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Judges 16-21; Ruth 1-4
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 11-15
Gospels	Mark 1:35-2:28
General New Testament	Romans 9-10

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to let the class feel the contrast between a world where everyone does what is right in his own eyes and a God who keeps working quietly toward redemption anyway. Judges is the darkest stretch of Israel's history, and Ruth happens inside it. Mark shows the Son of God reaching for a leper, a paralytic, and a tax collector. Romans 9 and 10 shows God stretching out His hands all day long. The week is about how God treats outsiders, and about the people who think they are insiders and miss Him.

Doctrinally, two matters carry weight. The first is authority: when Scripture is not the final word, the result is not liberty but Gibeah, and the appendices of Judges make the case better than any argument could. The second is election. Romans 9 is the passage most often used to teach that God unconditionally chooses individuals for salvation, and your class deserves a careful, unhurried treatment: God chose the line through which the promise would come, and He chooses a people in Christ, which anyone may enter by obedient faith. Hold Romans 10:13 and 11:22 in front of them and the system collapses on its own.

Formationally, watch how mercy behaves in these readings. Boaz does more than the law requires. Jesus touches a man nobody had touched in years and sits down at a table nobody respectable would sit at. Paul carries continual grief for people who hate him. Mercy in Scripture always costs the merciful something. Put this question to the class before they leave: name one person you have written off, and tell us the first specific thing you will do about it this week.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Judges 16-21 with Ruth 1-4. It is the longest reading and the one carrying both the heaviest darkness and the sweetest relief. Spend the first half on the collapse and the refrain of 21:25, and give the second half to Boaz, so the class leaves with the redeemer rather than with Gibeah.

Second session: Take up Romans 9-10. It is the most likely reading to raise real questions, and it needs a full hour with unhurried attention to the Jacob and Esau passage and the potter. Announce that Romans 11 comes next week and that the argument is not finished until they have read it.

The other two readings: Psalm 11-15 and Mark 1:35-2:28 carry themselves well in private study. Point the class to Psalm 15 as a Monday morning checklist and to Mark 2:17 as the sentence that explains why Jesus went to Levi's party. Encourage families to read Mark aloud; its pace rewards it.

From Ruin to Redemption

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Judges 16 through 21 is the bottom of the book, and the writer means for it to feel that way. Samson, the strongest man in Scripture, is the weakest man in the book, and he never once asks God what to do until he is blind. Then the two closing sections drop the story down another level. Chapters 17 and 18 show religion collapsing: a homemade shrine, stolen gods, and a Levite for hire who goes wherever the money is better. Chapters 19 through 21 show morality collapsing: a crime at Gibeah worse than Sodom, and a civil war that nearly erases a tribe.

The refrain that stitches it together is the one your class needs to hear: there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. The book is not arguing for a monarchy so much as for a rule outside the self. When each man becomes his own final authority, the result is not freedom. It is Gibeah.

And then Ruth, set in the very same period, tells four chapters of a different story. No armies, no miracles, no prophet. Just a famine, a bitter widow, a foreign daughter-in-law who will not leave, a landowner who does more than the law requires, and a baby. The last five verses pull the whole book into the line of promise: Boaz begets Obed, Obed begets Jesse, Jesse begets David. In the darkest stretch of Israel's history God was quietly keeping a family alive for His own purposes.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Judges covers roughly the three centuries between Joshua and Samuel. The author is unknown; Jewish tradition suggests Samuel. The repeated line about there being no king shows it was written down after the monarchy began.
- The two closing sections (17–18 and 19–21) are appendices, not the end of the timeline. Judges 20:28 puts Phinehas the grandson of Aaron in office, which places the Gibeah horror early in the period, not late.
- Ruth is set “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1) and closes with a genealogy running to David (4:18–22). Matthew 1:5 picks up that same line and carries it to Christ.
- The kinsman redeemer (Hebrew *go'el*) was the nearest relative, responsible to buy back family land, to redeem a relative sold into servitude, and to act as avenger of blood. The levirate provision of Deuteronomy 25:5–10 is related but distinct.
- Ruth is a Moabitess, from the people descended from Lot, a nation Deuteronomy 23:3 kept out of the assembly. That background is precisely what makes her place in David's line so striking.
- Gleaning was Israel's welfare law (Leviticus 19:9–10; Deuteronomy 24:19–22). Boaz keeps it generously, and then goes far past it.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Judges says twice that there was no king in Israel and that everyone did what was right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25). Where do you hear that same standard spoken out loud in our culture, and what does it finally cost a person to live by it?*

The phrase describes a nation that still had the law, still had a tabernacle, still had priests, and still would not submit any of it to actual practice. Every man became his own court of final appeal. Micah's mother dedicates silver to the Lord and has it made into an idol in the same breath, and nobody in the story finds that strange. That is what happens when personal preference becomes the standard: people keep the vocabulary of faith and lose the substance of it.

Push the class to hear the modern version rather than merely to condemn the ancient one. “You have to live your own truth,” “nobody can tell me what to do with my life,” and “God knows my heart” are all the same sentence in newer clothes. Then ask what it costs. Judges answers in bodies and burned towns. Ask what it costs a marriage, a teenager, or a congregation when Scripture is consulted for approval rather than for direction.

Question 2. *Samson had strength no man has had since and almost no self-control. Trace the concessions he made long before Delilah ever called for a razor, and talk together about how slow compromise actually works.*

Samson’s collapse did not begin with Delilah. It began with a demand: “Get her for me, for she pleases me well” (14:3). Every step after that is the same step. He takes honey out of a carcass in violation of his own Nazirite separation, he spends a night with a harlot in Gaza, and he plays games with the secret of his consecration three times before he gives it away. Judges 16:20 is the saddest line in the book: he did not know that the Lord had departed from him.

The lesson for your class is not that they might someday pull down a temple, but that no one ever intends to end up blind. Ask what small concession, repeated, is currently making a bigger one thinkable. Note also that Hebrews 11:32 names Samson among the faithful. God commends the faith that finally called on Him in the dark, not the years of self-indulgence that got him there.

Question 3. *Boaz had the legal right to redeem Ruth but no obligation to marry her. Why does he do it anyway, and how does his kindness answer what Naomi said about God in Ruth 1:20–21?*

Boaz is a man who does more than he is required to do. He greets his workers with a blessing, he protects Ruth from harassment, he tells his men to drop extra grain on purpose, he refuses to send her home empty, and when the nearer kinsman backs out because redeeming Ruth would jeopardize his own inheritance, Boaz pays what the other man would not. He calls Ruth a virtuous woman, and he acts like a man who has noticed what God is like.

Set that against Ruth 1:20–21, where Naomi tells the whole town to stop calling her Pleasant and start calling her Bitter, because the Almighty has dealt bitterly with her and brought her home empty. Naomi is not corrected by an argument. She is corrected by a field, a harvest, a redeemer, and a grandson. Ask the class where they are currently waiting for God to explain Himself when He may intend instead to simply be good to them over time.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the specific choices Samson makes in Judges 16 that he had already made in some form in Judges 14 and 15. What pattern emerges, and where does the pattern finally take him?*

He again chooses a Philistine woman, again handles a secret as a game, again assumes his strength is his own, and again talks when he should walk away. In chapter 14 he tells the riddle’s answer to a woman who wept on him for seven days; in chapter 16 he tells the secret of his consecration to a woman who pressed him daily. The pattern is a man who cannot say no to anything he wants, and it takes him to a Philistine grinding room with his eyes put out.

2. *Read Judges 19–21 with 21:25 in front of you. How does the writer want you to feel about these chapters, and why do you think he adds not one word of moral comment?*

Answers will vary in wording, but the intended effect is horror. The writer reports the Levite’s callousness, the mob’s violence, the dismembered body, and the wholesale slaughter of Benjamin with a flat, unblinking voice, and then puts 21:25 at the end like a verdict. The absence of comment is the comment. He is not endorsing anything; he is showing you what a nation looks like when no authority above the self is left, and he lets the silence indict everyone in the account, including the tribes who fix a lawless crime with more lawlessness.

3. *Trace every occurrence of the words redeem, redeemer, and kinsman in Ruth 3 and 4. What did such a man have the right and the power to do? Compare Leviticus 25:25 and 25:47–49.*

The go’el was the nearest able relative. Leviticus 25:25 gives him the right and duty to buy back land a poor relative had sold; Leviticus 25:47–49 lets him redeem a relative who had sold himself into servitude. He restored what a family had lost. In Ruth 4 Boaz redeems both the parcel of land and the widow attached to it, at real cost to his own estate, which is exactly why the nearer kinsman declined.

4. Ruth 1:16–17 is one of the great confessions in the Old Testament. Write it out line by line and note exactly what Ruth surrenders in each phrase.

She gives up her homeland (“where you go, I will go”), her household and settled life (“where you lodge, I will lodge”), her people and national identity (“your people shall be my people”), her gods (“your God, my God”), her future (“where you die, I will die”), and her burial with her own family (“there will I be buried”). She seals it with an oath in the name of the Lord. It is a covenant, not a sentiment.

5. Naomi came home empty and ended the book with a grandson in her lap (Ruth 4:16–17). Name one place where you have quietly decided God is finished being good to you, then do one thing this week that a person who believed otherwise would do.

Answers will vary. Listen for the quiet fatalism that sounds spiritual: “I have prayed about that for years.” The step you are looking for is small and concrete, something a hopeful person would actually do, such as writing the letter, attending the class, making the call, or opening the checkbook. Naomi did not get an explanation; she got a harvest, and it came one day of gleaning at a time.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Judges records without approving. Samson’s vengeance, Jephthah’s vow, Micah’s shrine, the Levite’s cruelty, and the abduction of the daughters of Shiloh are reported as history, not commended as models. Say so out loud so no one leaves thinking Scripture approves what it merely records.
- Judges 19 is brutal. In a class with young people present, handle it plainly and briefly, name the evil for what it is, and do not linger over details. The point is the moral collapse of a nation, not the shock of the scene.
- Boaz is a genuine and beautiful picture of redemption, and the line he preserves leads to Christ (Matthew 1:5). But do not over-allegorize. The sandal, the six measures of barley, and the threshing floor are ancient legal custom, not a code to decipher. Let the parallel stand where Scripture itself draws it.
- Ruth 3 requires care. Ruth is doing something bold and culturally legible, appealing to Boaz to exercise his right as redeemer. Boaz treats her honorably and protects her reputation (3:14). Do not let a class read impropriety into a text that goes out of its way to deny it.

Who May Dwell With God

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These five psalms belong together because they all ask the same question from different angles: what does a righteous man do when the ground shifts? Psalm 11 answers with the location of God's throne. Psalm 12 answers with the purity of God's words in a city full of flattery. Psalm 13 answers with honest lament that refuses to end in despair. Psalm 14 answers by naming the root of the trouble, a practical atheism that says there is no God and then lives accordingly. Psalm 15 answers with a portrait of the man who actually walks with God.

Psalm 13 repays slow reading in class. Four times in two verses David says "How long." Then verse 3 turns to petition, and verses 5 and 6 turn to trust and song. Nothing in his circumstances has changed between verse 2 and verse 6. What has changed is that he has said it all out loud to God rather than swallowing it. Scripture gives God's people permission to pray like this, and congregations that never hear such prayers assume something is wrong with them when they need one.

Psalm 15 reads like a liturgy at the gate: a worshiper asks who may come in, and the answer is a life, not a ritual. Notice that every item is ordinary, and most of them concern the tongue and the wallet. The man who may dwell with God is the man who tells the truth when a lie would help him, keeps a promise when it costs him, and will not profit at his neighbor's expense. That is a sermon your class can take to work on Monday.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- All five are ascribed to David. Psalms 11, 12, 13 and 14 are individual laments or wisdom psalms; Psalm 15 is an entrance psalm, a question and answer about who may approach God in worship.
- Psalm 14 appears again, with small variations, as Psalm 53. Paul quotes it in Romans 3:10–12 as part of his case that Jew and Gentile alike stand guilty before God.
- Hebrew poetry works by parallelism, not rhyme. The second line of a couplet usually repeats, sharpens, or contrasts the first. Read a psalm aloud in class and the structure teaches itself.
- "Holy hill" and "tabernacle" in Psalm 15:1 refer to Zion and to the tent of meeting David had pitched there, the place God had appointed for Israel's worship in that era.
- Lament is the largest single category in the Psalter. It is not a failure of faith; it is faith bringing its complaint to the only One who can act on it.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 11:3 asks what the righteous can do if the foundations are destroyed, and David answers in verse 4 by telling you where God is seated. What does that answer change about a frightening week, and what does it honestly not change?*

Verse 4 is the whole answer: the Lord is in His holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven. The counsel of verse 1, flee like a bird to your mountain, is not wicked advice; it is simply advice that assumes God is not seated anywhere. David's reply is not that the danger is imaginary but that the danger is not ultimate. The One on the throne sees, tests, and will act.

Press both halves of the question. It changes fear, because someone competent is in charge and the wicked will not have the last word (11:6–7). It does not change the arrow on the string in verse 2. God's throne is not a promise that this week will be easy. Do not let the class trade real comfort for a false one; the psalm gives the first and never offers the second.

Question 2. Psalm 13 travels from “How long, O Lord?” to “I will sing to the Lord” in six verses. Locate the hinge, and discuss whether it is honest to end a prayer that way when nothing outward has improved yet.

The hinge is verse 5: “But I have trusted in Your mercy.” Everything before it is complaint, and everything after it is confidence. Notice how David gets there. He does not talk himself out of his feelings; he tells God the whole of them, including the accusation that God has forgotten him. Then he asks for the one thing he actually needs, which is for God to enlighten his eyes, and then he chooses to remember what God has already done for him.

Ask honestly whether the class thinks it is legitimate to sing in verse 6 when verse 1 has not been answered. It is, because the song is not based on a change in circumstance but on a settled fact: God has dealt bountifully with him. This is worth saying plainly to people in the room who are currently in verse 2 and feel like frauds for being there. Lament is not the absence of faith. It is faith with nowhere else to go.

Question 3. Psalm 15 describes the person who may dwell with God: he speaks truth in his heart, keeps his word even when keeping it hurts him, and will not take money to harm the innocent. Which of those costs the most in the work you actually do, and why?

Walk the list slowly: walking uprightly, working righteousness, speaking truth in the heart, not backbiting, doing no evil to a neighbor, refusing to take up a reproach against a friend, despising what God despises and honoring those who fear the Lord, swearing to his own hurt and not changing, lending without usury, and refusing a bribe against the innocent. Most of that happens at work and in conversation, not in the assembly.

Get concrete quickly. In sales it may be the truthful answer that loses the order. In an office it may be refusing to pass along the story about a colleague that everyone else is repeating. In a trade it may be honoring an estimate after you discover the job will cost you more than you thought. Ask for one situation this week, by category if not by name, and let the class hear that holiness is mostly made of small, expensive honesty.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Write out the qualities listed in Psalm 15:2–5. How many of them concern what a person does with his mouth, and what does that proportion suggest?

Of the roughly ten items, at least four deal directly with speech: speaking truth in the heart, not backbiting with the tongue, not taking up a reproach against a neighbor, and swearing to his own hurt and not changing. Add the refusal of a bribe and you have a portrait dominated by what a person says and what he will do for money. James 3:2 makes the same judgment: the man who does not stumble in word is a mature man.

2. Psalm 12:6 compares the words of the Lord to silver refined seven times. Read Proverbs 30:5–6 and 2 Timothy 3:16–17 beside it, and state in your own words what all three claim about Scripture.

Psalm 12:6 says God’s words are pure, tested like silver refined seven times. Proverbs 30:5–6 says every word of God is pure and warns against adding to them. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 says all Scripture is God-breathed and equips the man of God completely. Together they claim that Scripture is pure, sufficient, and closed. It needs no supplement and tolerates no addition, which is why we ask for book, chapter, and verse rather than for personal impressions.

3. Psalm 14:1–3 says there is none who does good, and Paul quotes it in Romans 3:10–12. Is David saying that no human being is capable of any good act, or is he describing something else? Look at Psalm 14:5 before you answer.

David is describing the condition of a society that has abandoned God, not asserting that every individual is born guilty or incapable of any good. He himself stands inside the psalm, and in verse 5 he says God is with the generation of the righteous, which is nonsense if literally nobody is righteous. The sweeping language is the language of a survey: look out over this world and you will not find a people seeking God. Paul uses it the same way in Romans 3 to show that neither Jew nor Gentile can claim innocence, since all have in fact sinned (Romans 3:23). Guilt comes to each person when he himself sins (Ezekiel 18:20).

4. Trace what God is said to do in Psalm 11:4–7. Where is He, what is He watching, and what does He love?

He is in His holy temple with His throne in heaven; His eyes behold and His eyelids test the sons of men; He tests the righteous; His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence; He rains judgment on the wicked; and He loves

righteousness, so that the upright shall see His face. God is both watching and evaluating, which is a threat and a comfort depending entirely on which side of verse 5 you are standing on.

5. *Psalm 15:4 honors the man who swears to his own hurt and does not change. Name one promise you have made that has become expensive, and settle this week whether you are going to keep it.*

Answers will vary. Listen for promises people are quietly renegotiating: a marriage vow, a financial commitment to the congregation, a promise to a child, a contract that turned out badly. The psalm does not praise the man who made only easy promises; it praises the man who keeps the costly one. Ask what keeping it will actually require this week.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 14:1–3 is the favorite proof text for total depravity. Teach it as the survey of a godless society that Paul uses in Romans 3, and point out Psalm 14:5, where God stands with the generation of the righteous. Scripture never teaches that infants are born guilty (Ezekiel 18:20; Matthew 18:3; 19:14).
- Psalm 15 is not salvation by character. It describes the life of one already in covenant with God, the kind of person who belongs in God's presence. Under the new covenant we enter through the blood of Christ and obedience to the gospel, and then we live like Psalm 15.
- Psalm 11:5 says God's soul hates the wicked. Handle it honestly. Scripture speaks both of God loving the world (John 3:16) and of His settled opposition to those who love violence. Do not soften the verse, and do not turn it into permission to hate anyone ourselves (Romans 12:19).

He Came for the Sick

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Mark moves fast, and this reading is five scenes in a row with almost no commentary. But notice the shape. It opens with Jesus alone in the dark, praying, and everything else in the passage flows out of that. The disciples arrive with what sounds like good news, that everyone is looking for Him, and He treats popularity as a reason to leave. He came to preach, and He will not be turned into a village healer, however much good that would do.

Then the opposition begins to gather. Mark 2 contains the first four of five conflict scenes that run through 3:6, and they escalate: He forgives sins, He eats with sinners, His disciples do not fast, and His disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath. By 3:6 the Pharisees are plotting with the Herodians to destroy Him. Your class should see that the hostility did not begin with the cross. It began the moment Jesus claimed an authority the religious establishment had reserved for God and for themselves.

The theological center is 2:5–12. Jesus says the harder thing first, forgiving sins, which no one on earth can verify, and then does the easier thing to prove it, telling a paralyzed man to pick up his bed and walk in front of a packed house. The miracle is evidence, not the point. And the phrase He uses of Himself, Son of Man, comes from Daniel 7:13, where one like a son of man is given dominion and a kingdom that shall not pass away.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Mark writes the shortest gospel, probably to a Roman audience, and early witnesses connect it with Peter's preaching. He explains Jewish customs (7:3–4) and uses the word immediately again and again, which gives the book its pace.
- Leprosy in Scripture covers a range of serious skin diseases. The law required the leper to live apart, wear torn clothes, and cry "Unclean!" (Leviticus 13:45–46), so Jesus' touch in 1:41 is startling to every reader who knows the law.
- Capernaum, on the north shore of Galilee, is Jesus' base of operations. Levi (Matthew) sat at a tax booth there, collecting duty on goods moving along the trade road, which is why fellow Jews despised him as a collaborator.
- Scribes were the professional students and copyists of the law; Pharisees were a strict lay movement built around traditional interpretations added to the law. The Sabbath debate in 2:23–28 is about their traditions, not about the written command.
- Son of Man is Jesus' favorite self-designation and reaches back to Daniel 7:13–14, where the figure receives everlasting dominion. It is a claim, not a modest way of saying "a man like me."
- This all takes place under the Old Covenant, while the Law of Moses is still in force. The Law was fulfilled and taken out of the way at the cross (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8–10).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Mark 1:35 finds Jesus praying alone in a dark, deserted place while a whole town is hunting for Him, and verse 38 has Him leaving anyway. What pressure was He under, and what does His answer teach about knowing your own assignment?*

The pressure was success. A whole town had been at the door the night before (1:32–33), sick people had been healed, and the disciples clearly expect Him to go back and do it again. Instead Mark tells us He rose a long while before daylight, went out to a solitary place, and prayed. Then, when Simon says everyone is looking for Him, He says let us go to the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.

Two things are worth pressing. First, the busiest man who ever lived guarded time alone with the Father, and He did it by getting up. Second, He measured opportunity against assignment, not against demand. Ask the class what

good and legitimate request is currently crowding out the thing God has actually given them to do. Most of us are not tempted away from our calling by sin; we are tempted away by the next good thing.

Question 2. *Jesus forgives the paralytic before He heals him, and the scribes are entirely right that only God can forgive sins (2:7). Walk through the argument He makes in 2:8–11 and name exactly what He is claiming about Himself.*

The scribes reason correctly from a true premise. Sin is against God, so only God can forgive it. Their error is not in their theology but in their conclusion, that this man is therefore blaspheming. Jesus does not soften the claim. He asks which is easier to say, and the answer is obvious: anyone can say “your sins are forgiven,” because no one can check. So He does the thing that can be checked, in order to prove the thing that cannot.

The claim is unmistakable: the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. Either He is God in the flesh or He is the blasphemer they think He is; there is no third option in the room. Note as well that Mark 2:5 says He saw their faith, the faith of the four as well as the one, and that the immediate result of the miracle was that the crowd glorified God. Miracles in the gospels confirm the messenger and His message (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4). They were never advertised as a health plan.

Question 3. *Levi threw a party and filled it with tax collectors and sinners, and Jesus went. Who in your week would feel out of place at a table with your friends from church, and what would it take for you to invite him anyway?*

Levi did not slip away quietly. He made a great feast (Luke 5:29) and filled the room with the only friends a tax collector had, which is to say other tax collectors and people the respectable would not touch. Jesus accepted the invitation and ate with them, and the scribes and Pharisees found that more offensive than almost anything else He did. His answer is one of the great sentences in the gospel: those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

Move this straight into the room. Most of us have arranged our lives so that we never share a table with anyone who is not already like us. Ask for an actual name and an actual meal. And add the honest caution: Jesus went to Levi’s party as Jesus, not as a man hoping to fit in. Eating with sinners is not the same as joining them (1 Corinthians 15:33). The aim is that our tables stop being closed.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every person in this reading whom Jesus touches or who touches Him. What did the law require of a leper (Leviticus 13:45–46), and what happens instead when Jesus puts out His hand?*

Jesus takes Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand just before this reading (1:31), and in 1:41 He puts out His hand and touches a leper. The law required the leper to live alone outside the camp, with torn clothes and covered lips, crying “Unclean.” Under that law, touching him would make Jesus ceremonially unclean. Instead the flow runs the other way: the leprosy leaves the man immediately. Jesus is not defiled by contact with uncleanness; He cleanses it. Note also that Jesus then tells the man to present himself to the priest according to Moses, which shows He honored the law while it stood.

2. *Compare Mark 2:1–12 with Matthew 9:1–8 and Luke 5:17–26. Which details does each writer keep, and what does Mark tell you about those four friends that you would miss otherwise?*

All three record the crowd, the forgiveness, the scribes’ objection, and the command to rise and walk. Luke, the physician, adds that Pharisees and teachers of the law had come from every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. Mark alone gives you the four men, the uncovered roof, and the digging through it, and Mark alone says that Jesus saw their faith. Faith in Mark’s account is something you can watch people do.

3. *Read Mark 2:17 slowly. Who exactly are the “righteous” Jesus says He did not come to call, and why is that the most dangerous group in any town?*

He means those who consider themselves righteous, the ones who see no need for a physician. He is not saying there was a category of genuinely sinless people in Capernaum; He is describing self-assessment. They are the most

dangerous group because the one disqualifying condition for receiving grace is the conviction that you do not require any. Compare Luke 18:9–14 and Revelation 3:17.

4. *Jesus answers the fasting question with a bridegroom, a piece of unshrunk cloth, and new wine in old wineskins (2:19–22). Explain what each picture says about the old covenant and the new.*

The bridegroom picture says that while Jesus is present with His disciples, mourning and fasting are out of place; the days will come when He is taken away. The unshrunk cloth and the new wineskins say that what He is bringing cannot simply be sewn onto the old system. The new covenant is not a patch on the Law of Moses. It required new forms, and the attempt to preserve the old alongside the new ruins both (compare Hebrews 8:13; Galatians 5:1–4).

5. *Four men ruined a man's roof to get their friend to Jesus. Name the friend you would carry, and take one concrete step toward him before Sunday.*

Answers will vary. Listen for a real name and a real step: a phone call, a ride to services, an invitation to a meal, a hard conversation. The point of the story is that the paralyzed man contributed nothing to his own arrival. Somebody carried him, and somebody was willing to look foolish and pay for a roof.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The Sabbath discussion (2:23–28) is about Pharisaic tradition, not about Sunday. Do not let the class slide into treating the Lord's Day as a Christian Sabbath. Christians assemble on the first day of the week to break bread and worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2), and the Sabbath command belonged to a covenant now fulfilled and taken away (Colossians 2:14–17).
- Jesus forgives the paralytic directly, during His personal ministry and before the cross. Do not use this scene to argue that people today are pardoned apart from the terms the risen Christ Himself gave through the apostles: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ for the remission of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4).
- The healings are signs confirming who Jesus is. Resist any turn toward present-day healing ministries or the notion that enough faith guarantees physical recovery. The four friends' faith is commended; the sick people Jesus did not heal in every town are also part of the record.
- Fasting: Jesus neither commands nor forbids it for His disciples here. Do not bind it, and do not sneer at it.

The Word Has Not Failed

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Romans 9 through 11 is one sustained argument, and it is answering a question the first eight chapters have raised. If God's promises are so unbreakable that nothing can separate us from His love, then what about Israel, to whom the promises were made and who has largely rejected the Messiah? Has the word of God failed? Paul's answer in 9:6 governs everything that follows: it has not failed, because physical descent never was the thing that made a person a child of promise.

He proves it from Israel's own history. Abraham had two sons, and the promise ran through Isaac. Isaac had twins, and the promise ran through Jacob, chosen before either boy was born so that the choice would rest on God's purpose rather than on human merit or birth order. This is God selecting a line and a role in redemptive history, not God assigning two individuals to heaven and hell. Esau personally received land, wealth, and a nation; what he did not receive was the covenant line through which Christ would come.

Then chapter 10 shows where the real responsibility lies, and it is not with God. Israel had zeal, but it was zeal without knowledge, and they went about establishing their own righteousness instead of submitting to God's. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. Meanwhile the word is near, in the mouth and in the heart, and whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, Jew or Greek, with no distinction. The section closes with God holding out His hands all day long to a disobedient and contrary people. That is not the picture of a God who has locked anyone out.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Paul writes Romans around A.D. 57 from Corinth, to a congregation he has not yet visited, made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Tension between those two groups runs under the whole letter and surfaces openly in chapters 9 through 11 and again in 14 and 15.
- Romans 9, 10, and 11 must be taught as a unit. Chapter 9 emphasizes God's freedom in choosing, chapter 10 emphasizes human responsibility in responding, and chapter 11 holds them together and warns Gentile Christians that they too can be cut off. Taking chapter 9 by itself produces Calvinism; taking all three together does not.
- Paul's quotations are dense: Genesis 21 and 25, Exodus 9 and 33, Isaiah 1, 8, 10, 28, 29, 52, 53 and 65, Hosea 1 and 2, Joel 2, Deuteronomy 30, and Psalm 19. Israel's own Scriptures supply every step of the argument.
- The word election in Scripture usually concerns God's choice of a people and a purpose. God chose Abraham's family to carry the promise, and He chose the church in Christ (Ephesians 1:4), which anyone may enter by obedient faith. He has never chosen particular individuals for salvation apart from their response to the gospel.
- "Calling on the name of the Lord" (10:13, quoting Joel 2:32) is not a sinner's prayer. Ananias tells Saul to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16). Peter quotes the same line of Joel in Acts 2:21 and then answers the question in Acts 2:38.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul says he could wish himself accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his countrymen (9:1–3). What does that kind of grief for lost people actually look like in a week, and when did you last feel any of it?*

Start with the honesty of it. Paul is not performing. He says his conscience bears him witness in the Holy Spirit, and the grief is continual. He is describing a settled sorrow he carries around, about people he cannot save and will not stop loving. Moses said something similar in Exodus 32:32. This is what it sounds like when a man's theology has reached his affections.

Then make it practical without making it sentimental. Grief of this kind shows up in a prayer list with real names on it, in a conversation you were afraid to start, in the willingness to be thought strange at work, in money spent on a gospel meeting or a mission point. Ask the class when they last wept over anyone's lostness, and be prepared for silence. That silence is the lesson. Familiarity with the gospel can make us calm about things that once broke our hearts.

Question 2. *Romans 9:10–13 says God chose Jacob and not Esau before either had done anything. Read it with Genesis 25:23 and Malachi 1:2–3. Is Paul discussing the eternal destiny of two individuals, or which line the promise would travel through? Give your reasons from the text.*

The quotation Paul uses is from Genesis 25:23, and it is explicitly about two nations: “two nations are in your womb, and the older shall serve the younger.” The Malachi passage, written more than a thousand years later, contrasts the nations of Israel and Edom, not two babies. And the thing God says He is protecting in 9:11 is “the purpose of God according to election,” that is, which son the promise would run through. Not one word in the passage addresses where Esau spent eternity.

The “hated” language is a Hebrew way of speaking about strong preference, the same idiom Jesus uses in Luke 14:26 when He says a disciple must hate his father and mother. Say plainly what is at stake: if this passage taught that God assigns individuals to salvation or damnation before birth and apart from their response, then Romans 10:13 and Romans 11:22 would both be nonsense, and the appeals of Scripture would be theater. God chooses lines, purposes, and peoples. Individuals enter the chosen people by obedient faith in Christ (Galatians 3:26–29).

Question 3. *Romans 10:14–17 runs a chain backward: calling, believing, hearing, preaching, sending. Trace each link, then talk honestly about the weakest link in our congregation right now.*

Work the chain backward as Paul writes it: whoever calls will be saved; but they cannot call on One they have not believed; they cannot believe in One they have not heard; they cannot hear without a preacher; and no one preaches unless he is sent. Then Paul lands it in verse 17: faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. This is the death of the idea that people are saved by a direct, private operation of the Spirit apart from the word. God saves people through preached truth.

Now ask where the chain breaks in your congregation. Usually it is not at the preaching; it is at the sending and at the ordinary Christian's willingness to open his mouth. Ask what would need to change for one person in the community to hear the gospel this month because of somebody in this room. Then ask who will do it, and write it down.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the privileges Paul names for Israel in Romans 9:4–5. Which of them did Israel misread, and how does 9:6 explain that having the privileges was never enough?*

Paul names the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, the promises, the fathers, and the Christ Himself according to the flesh. Israel misread nearly all of them as guarantees of standing rather than as gifts creating responsibility. Verse 6 is the corrective: the word of God has not taken no effect, because they are not all Israel who are of Israel. Having the covenant documents in your hands is not the same as being a child of promise.

2. *Romans 9:6 says that not all who are of Israel are Israel. Compare Romans 2:28–29 and Galatians 3:26–29. Who, in Paul's definition, are Abraham's real children today?*

Romans 2:28–29 says the real Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter. Galatians 3:26–29 says that all who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ, and that if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. Abraham's real children today are Christians, Jew and Gentile alike, who have come into Christ through obedient faith.

3. Read the potter passage (9:19–24) carefully, and note the difference in wording between verse 22 and verse 23. Who is said to have prepared the vessels of mercy, and what does the text stop short of saying about the vessels of wrath?

Verse 23 says God “had prepared beforehand” the vessels of mercy for glory. Verse 22 says the vessels of wrath were “prepared for destruction,” and Paul pointedly does not say God prepared them; the form of the word allows that they fitted themselves for it, which matches 2 Peter 2:1 and 2 Peter 3:9. Note also that verse 22 says God endured them with much longsuffering, which is strange behavior toward vessels He created for the purpose of destroying. The passage is about God’s right to shape nations and purposes as He wills, as Jeremiah 18:1–10 says explicitly, and Jeremiah adds that God will relent toward a nation that repents.

4. Romans 10:2–3 says Israel had zeal without knowledge and set about establishing a righteousness of their own. Give one current example of religious zeal that runs ahead of what Scripture actually authorizes.

Answers will vary. Look for examples that are sincere rather than cynical, since that is Paul’s point: sincerity is not the standard. Common examples include worship practices adopted because they move people rather than because they are authorized, church programs built on results rather than on the New Testament pattern, and personal convictions bound on others as though they were God’s law (Romans 14).

5. Romans 10:14 asks how they shall hear without a preacher. Write down the name of one person you know who has not heard, and decide the specific thing you will say or do this week so that he does.

Answers will vary, but the question is not finished until there is a name and a date. Listen for the small, doable step: handing someone an invitation, asking a coworker a real question, offering a study at a kitchen table. Paul’s chain means that the gospel travels by people who open their mouths. Somebody once did this for every Christian in the room.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- This is the chapter Calvinism is built on, so be clear, calm, and textual. Election in Romans 9 is God’s choice of the covenant line and of a people for a purpose, not the unconditional selection of individuals to be saved or lost. The same letter ends this argument with “whoever calls” (10:13) and with a warning that branches which do not continue in God’s goodness will be cut off (11:22).
- Pharaoh’s hardening (9:17–18) must be read alongside Exodus, where Pharaoh repeatedly hardens his own heart (Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34) before the text says God hardened him. The same sun that softens wax hardens clay. God’s word and God’s patience harden the man who resists them.
- Romans 10:9–10 is regularly used to teach salvation by faith alone or by a sinner’s prayer. Let Paul interpret Paul. The same writer says in 6:3–4 that we were baptized into Christ’s death, in 10:16 that not all obeyed the gospel, and in 16:26 that the gospel is made known for obedience to the faith. Confession is part of an obedient response, not a substitute for it.
- Do not let this passage be turned into a prediction of a future earthly kingdom for national Israel. Paul’s argument is that the promise never ran on physical descent, and it lands on Christ and the church, in which there is no distinction between Jew and Greek (10:12).

NEXT WEEK’S READING: 1 Samuel 1–8 • Psalm 16–17 • Mark 3 • Romans 11–12

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