

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 34 OF 104

To Obey Is Better

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	1 Samuel 9-15
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 18
Gospels	Mark 4
General New Testament	Romans 13-15:7

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to put obedience back in its proper place: not as a means of earning God's favor, but as the only honest response to it. Saul demonstrates the alternative. He kept the religious forms, made a persuasive case for himself, and lost a kingdom over the part he decided not to do. Set that against David, who credits God with everything he has, and against the good soil, which simply receives the word and lets it produce.

Doctrinally, 1 Samuel 13 and 15 are among the strongest passages in the Old Testament on the authority of God's word, including the authority of its silence. Saul was not condemned for breaking a prohibition; he was condemned for acting where God had not authorized him. That principle, taught warmly and without harshness, will serve your congregation for years. Romans 14 supplies the necessary balance, keeping the class from turning a love of authority into a habit of binding personal opinions on brothers.

Formationally, watch what each reading says about the interior life. Saul feared the people and obeyed their voice. David says God's gentleness made him great. The thorny soil is choked by the desires for other things. Paul says the debt of love is never discharged. Put this question to the class before they leave: name the person whose opinion of you has more weight right now than God's word does, and tell us the first thing that changes when that gets corrected.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up 1 Samuel 9-15. It carries the week's central lesson and needs room. Give the first half to Saul's promising start and the sacrifice at Gilgal, and the second half to chapter 15, walking the class through Saul's excuses one at a time until they hear the pattern.

Second session: Take up Romans 13-15:7. It is the most immediately practical reading of the week and the one most likely to touch current tensions. Spend a controlled ten minutes on government, then give the rest of the hour to Romans 14 and the difference between opinion and faith.

The other two readings: Psalm 18 and Mark 4 are well suited to reading at home. Encourage the class to read Psalm 18 aloud, since it was written to be sung, and to sit with the four soils honestly. Mention that Romans 15:9 quotes Psalm 18:49, so two of this week's readings are already talking to each other.

A King Who Almost Obeyed

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Saul begins better than anyone expected. He is tall, modest, and so reluctant that he hides among the supplies when the lot falls to him. God gives him another heart (10:9), prophets meet him on the road, and the Spirit of God comes upon him so that he rescues Jabesh Gilead and unites a fractured nation. Chapter 11 ends with the kingdom renewed at Gilgal and a national celebration. Nothing in the first four chapters of his story suggests what is coming.

The first crack is at Gilgal in chapter 13. Samuel is late, the army is melting away, the Philistines are gathering, and Saul does the reasonable thing: he offers the burnt offering himself. Notice his defense. He does not deny the act; he explains the pressure, and he says he felt compelled. Samuel's reply is that he has acted foolishly and has not kept the commandment the Lord commanded him. The issue is authority. Saul was a king, not a priest, and no emergency converts one into the other.

The break comes in chapter 15. God gives a specific command about Amalek, and Saul keeps the parts he found reasonable and spares the king and the best of the livestock. He then greets Samuel with "Blessed are you of the Lord! I have performed the commandment of the Lord," while the evidence is bleating in the background. Watch the excuses fall in sequence: the people did it, the animals are for sacrifice, I did obey, and finally, I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Only then does he say I have sinned, and even then he asks Samuel to honor him before the elders. Samuel never sees him again.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Saul reigned about forty years (Acts 13:21). These chapters cover the early part of that reign, roughly 1050 to 1030 B.C.
- Only priests from the family of Aaron were authorized to offer sacrifice (Numbers 18:7). Samuel was a Levite and a prophet acting at God's direction; Saul was from Benjamin and had no such authorization.
- The Philistines held a monopoly on ironworking (13:19–22), which is why Israel faced them with farm tools and only Saul and Jonathan had swords. The odds in chapter 14 are meant to look impossible.
- Amalek had attacked Israel from behind at Rephidim, striking the weak and the stragglers (Exodus 17:8–16; Deuteronomy 25:17–19). The command in 1 Samuel 15 is a judicial sentence carried out after centuries of divine patience, not an act of ethnic hostility.
- The statement in 15:11 that God regretted making Saul king is the language of relationship, describing God's response to Saul's change, not a change in God. Verse 29 in the same chapter says God is not a man that He should relent.
- 1 Samuel 13:13 says the kingdom would have been established forever, which shows the promise to Saul was conditional. The unconditional promise waits for David in 2 Samuel 7.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *At Gilgal Saul explains his unauthorized sacrifice by saying he felt compelled (13:11–12). Samuel calls it foolishness and says his kingdom will not continue. Why was doing something God had not authorized treated as seriously as doing something God had forbidden?*

Saul did not do something God had prohibited in so many words; he did something God had never authorized him to do. That is the whole point, and it is the principle your class most needs from this passage. God's instructions carry their own fences. When God says the priests will offer the sacrifices, He has already said that kings will not, without adding a separate prohibition. Hebrews 7:14 makes the same argument about Christ and the tribe of Judah: Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood from that tribe, and the silence settles it.

Teach this positively rather than as a club. The question behind it is not "what can I get away with?" but "has God authorized this?" Nadab and Abihu offered fire God had not commanded (Leviticus 10:1–2). Uzziah burned incense

because he was strong and his heart was lifted up (2 Chronicles 26:16). In each case a sincere and important man did a religious thing on his own authority. Ask the class where a congregation is most tempted to do that today, and be ready to name specifics kindly.

Question 2. *Samuel tells Saul that to obey is better than sacrifice (15:22), and Saul had in fact obeyed most of the command. Talk about where ninety percent obedience shows up in our own lives, and why we so easily count it as the whole thing.*

Begin by making the class feel Saul's side of it. He struck Amalek from Havilah to Shur. He fought the battle. He obeyed most of a hard command, and what he kept back he intended to give to God as sacrifice, which sounds generous. If you had to write a performance review for Saul, ninety percent would look strong. That is exactly why Samuel's sentence is so severe: partial obedience is simply disobedience that has arranged a good defense.

Then bring it home without scolding. Ninety percent obedience is the man who gives generously and will not forgive his brother, the family that is at every service and never opens a Bible at home, the Christian who has repented of every sin but one and has made peace with it. Ask each person to locate the ten percent rather than to confess it out loud. Note that Saul was not brought down by a scandal. He was brought down by an exception he made for himself.

Question 3. *Read Saul's answers in 1 Samuel 15:13–24 in order. How does a man travel from "I have performed the commandment of the Lord" to "I have sinned," and what finally pushed him there?*

Walk the excuses in order, because the sequence is a lesson by itself. Verse 13: I have performed the commandment of the Lord, which is a flat falsehood spoken with a blessing on his lips. Verse 15: the people brought them, to sacrifice to the Lord your God, which is blame plus piety. Verse 20: I have obeyed, and then a list of what he did do. Verse 21: the people took the plunder, blame again. Only in verse 24 does he say, I have sinned, and the reason he gives is that he feared the people and obeyed their voice.

What pushed him there was not a change of heart but the loss of the argument. Samuel had already told him the kingdom was torn from him, and Saul's next words are a request that Samuel honor him before the elders of the people. Compare this with David in 2 Samuel 12:13 and Psalm 51, where the confession is immediate and names no one else. Ask the class to listen for the difference between a man sorry for his sin and a man sorry he was caught.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace Saul's decline across chapters 13, 14, and 15. Write down what he does wrong in each chapter, and notice how each failure is a little bolder than the one before it.*

In chapter 13 Saul usurps a priestly function under pressure and then defends it. In chapter 14 he binds the army with a rash oath that starves his men, nearly costs Jonathan his life, and drives the exhausted troops to eat meat with the blood in it, all while he consults God and then cuts the consultation short. In chapter 15 he disobeys a direct and specific command, lies about it, blames the people, and finally admits it only when the verdict is already delivered. The progression runs from impatience, to self-will, to open disobedience with a religious explanation attached.

2. *Compare 1 Samuel 13:8–14 with Numbers 18:7 and 2 Chronicles 26:16–21. What pattern emerges when men take up priestly work God never assigned to them?*

Numbers 18:7 restricts the priestly service to Aaron and his sons, with the warning that the outsider who comes near shall be put to death. Saul takes that office on himself in an emergency and loses his dynasty. Uzziah, a genuinely good king, takes the censer into the temple, is resisted by eighty priests, and is struck with leprosy until the day of his death. The pattern is consistent: sincerity, success, and good intentions do not authorize a person to take up work God assigned to someone else.

3. *1 Samuel 15:22–23 sets rebellion beside witchcraft and stubbornness beside idolatry. Explain in your own words why God speaks that strongly about a man who kept most of the instruction.*

Witchcraft and idolatry are both attempts to get a result from the spiritual world on your own terms rather than God's. That is precisely what Saul did. He kept the religious form, a sacrifice, and discarded the word that gave the form its meaning. God is not chiefly after our offerings; He is after our submission. A man who will give God anything except his obedience has made himself the authority and God the beneficiary, which is idolatry with better manners.

4. *Read Leviticus 10:1–2 and Hebrews 7:14 alongside 1 Samuel 13:8–14. How should the silence of Scripture shape the way a congregation decides what it will and will not do?*

Nadab and Abihu offered fire which God had not commanded them, and fire from the Lord consumed them. Hebrews 7:14 argues that Christ could not serve as a Levitical priest because Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood from the tribe of Judah; the silence of Scripture excluded it. Put together with 1 Samuel 13, the principle is that God's word authorizes by what it says, and where it has not spoken we are not free to act in His name. Practically, a congregation asks not whether Scripture forbids a practice but whether Scripture authorizes it, by command, apostolic example, or necessary inference.

5. *Name one instruction from Scripture you have been keeping at about ninety percent. Write down exactly what the last ten percent would cost you, and pay it this week.*

Answers will vary. Listen for specifics rather than categories: the apology not yet made, the giving that is comfortable rather than sacrificial, the relationship that everyone knows about, the habit kept in a drawer. The exercise is to name the last ten percent and price it, because Saul's ruin came from an exception he thought was small.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The command to destroy Amalek troubles thoughtful people, and it should be handled rather than avoided. Present it as a judicial sentence on a nation, delayed for centuries (Genesis 15:16 shows the same patience with the Amorites), carried out by God's express command through His covenant people in that era. It authorizes nothing today. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal (2 Corinthians 10:3–5), and Christ's kingdom does not advance by the sword (John 18:36).
- 1 Samuel 15:11 and 15:29 sit in the same chapter and must be taught together. God does not change in character or purpose; the language of regret describes His genuine response to a man who changed.
- Do not teach that Saul was beyond forgiveness. He lost the kingdom, and Scripture never records him repenting as David did. The contrast to press is between remorse over consequences and repentance toward God (2 Corinthians 7:10).
- Keep the authority discussion out of the ditch on either side. Teach the principle warmly, from love for the God who spoke, and be careful not to bind as law a matter of judgment (Romans 14).

My Rock and My Deliverer

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 18 is the longest psalm so far in the Psalter and one of the most exuberant. The heading tells you the occasion: David sang it when the Lord delivered him from all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. That means it is a look back over decades, not a report of one night. Verse 1 is unusual in Hebrew, an intimate word: I will love You, O Lord, my strength. Then comes the torrent of names, seven or eight of them in two verses, every one of them borrowed from the landscape David hid in while Saul hunted him. He had slept in actual caves and on actual rocks, and he means it when he calls God his rock.

The middle section (verses 7 through 19) is a theophany, a poetic picture of God arriving. Smoke from His nostrils, darkness under His feet, cherubim, hailstones, the channels of the sea laid bare. It borrows the language of Sinai and of the song of Deborah, and it is not meant as a weather report. It is David's way of saying that his deliverance was not luck, not politics, and not his own skill with a sling. God came down. And notice the small, tender verse at the center of all that thunder: He sent from above, He took me, He drew me out of many waters.

The second half is a man crediting God for everything he has: God arms him with strength, makes his feet like deer's feet, teaches his hands to make war, and holds him up. Verse 35 is the surprise in a psalm this loud: Your gentleness has made me great. And the last verse reaches past David to the Lord's anointed, to David and his descendants forevermore. Paul quotes verse 49 in Romans 15:9 as proof that the Gentiles would glorify God, which is a striking connection to this week's reading in Romans.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 18 is a royal psalm of thanksgiving and appears in nearly identical form as 2 Samuel 22, where the historical setting is stated.
- The heading dates it to the period after God had delivered David from Saul and from his enemies, a summary song rather than a response to a single crisis.
- The storm imagery draws on God's appearing at Sinai (Exodus 19:16–19) and on Judges 5. Hebrew poetry regularly describes God's intervention in the language of thunderstorm and earthquake.
- Verses 20 through 24 belong to a covenant context: David is claiming faithfulness to God's covenant, not sinless perfection, and specifically innocence with respect to Saul, whom he refused to harm.
- Verse 49 is quoted by Paul in Romans 15:9 as one of four Old Testament proofs that God always intended to gather the Gentiles into His praise.
- Verse 50 closes with God's mercy to His anointed, to David and his descendants forever, language that reaches its fulfillment in Christ (Acts 2:29–36).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 18:1–2 stacks up names for God: strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, shield, horn of salvation, stronghold. Which one of those would you have chosen for the season you are actually in, and what is it about that image that fits?*

Every name in verses 1 and 2 is concrete, and most of them came out of David's actual experience. A rock is something you get behind. A fortress is somewhere you go when you cannot win in the open. A shield is what you hold up when the arrow is already in the air. A horn of salvation is the strength of an animal that can drive off what is attacking you. David is not being poetic for the sake of beauty; he is naming what God was for him in specific places.

Let the class answer honestly, and press for the reason behind the choice. The person under financial pressure may reach for fortress; the one in grief may want rock; the one facing a hostile workplace may want shield. Then make the point gently: the names are not moods David worked himself into. They are conclusions he drew after God actually did those things. Ask each person to name one time God has been that to them already.

Question 2. *In 18:6–15 David describes smoke, fire, hail, thunder, and the foundations of the world laid bare, all to rescue one man. Discuss why the poetry is so enormous for a deliverance that the history books record as an escape.*

This is a good place to teach your class how Hebrew poetry works, because they will meet it all year. David is not claiming the sky literally blackened on a particular afternoon. He is claiming that when God moved to save him, all the power that shook Sinai was in motion. The size of the imagery is a statement about the size of the rescuer, not an exaggeration of the crisis.

Then draw the pastoral point, which is bigger than the poetry lesson. We tend to describe our deliverances in small, flat language: it worked out, we got lucky, the tests came back clean. David refuses to do that. He insists that the God who parted a sea was personally involved in one man's escape from one man's spear. Ask the class to retell a recent answered prayer in Psalm 18 language and watch what happens to the room.

Question 3. *Psalm 18:35 says, "Your gentleness has made me great." Talk about what gentleness from God has looked like in your own life, and why we usually credit our progress to something else.*

Verse 35 sits in the middle of the most aggressive section of the psalm, surrounded by bronze bows and enemies under his feet, and it says the thing that made him great was God's gentleness. The Hebrew word carries the idea of stooping, God bending low. It is the same instinct as verse 16, where God reaches down and draws him out of the water. David has looked back over a violent life and concluded that what made him is not the battles he won but the patience of God with him.

Get the class to be specific. God's gentleness usually looks like time we did not deserve, a warning that came before the fall, a Christian who told the truth kindly, a consequence that was somehow smaller than it should have been, forgiveness offered again. Ask why we prefer to credit our discipline, our upbringing, or our good decisions. Usually because gentleness received puts us in somebody's debt, and we would rather not be.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Psalm 18 appears almost word for word as 2 Samuel 22. Read the two side by side and note the setting given in 2 Samuel 22:1. Where does this psalm belong in the story of David's life?*

2 Samuel 22:1 says David spoke the words of this song to the Lord on the day the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. In the book of 2 Samuel it is placed near the end, among the closing summaries of David's life, which suggests it is a retrospective: a mature man looking back across the wilderness years, the Philistine wars, and Absalom's rebellion, and naming the God who was under all of it.

2. *List every name David gives God in 18:1–2, then list everything he says God did for him in 18:16–19. How do the names and the actions match up?*

The names in verses 1 and 2 are strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, God, strength again in the sense of a crag, shield, horn of salvation, and stronghold. In verses 16 through 19 God sends from above, takes him, draws him out of many waters, delivers him from his strong enemy, supports him in the day of calamity, and brings him out into a broad place because He delighted in him. The names promise shelter and rescue; the verbs deliver both. The images are static and the actions are personal, and the psalm insists on holding the two together.

3. *Verses 20 through 24 speak of God rewarding David according to his righteousness. Read them with Psalm 51:1–4 in mind. How can the same man honestly say both things?*

David is claiming covenant faithfulness in the matter at hand, not moral perfection. Verses 21 through 23 speak of keeping the ways of the Lord and not departing wickedly from God, and in context the specific issue is his refusal to seize the throne or to harm Saul. Psalm 51 shows the same man pleading for mercy over a sin he could not excuse.

Scripture lets a believer maintain his integrity in a particular matter while confessing that he is a sinner saved by mercy (compare 1 John 1:8–10 with 1 John 3:7).

4. *Trace the military language in 18:31–45. What does David credit to God, and what, if anything, does he claim for himself?*

David credits God with everything: God girds him with strength, makes his way perfect, makes his feet like the feet of deer, teaches his hands to make war, gives him the shield of salvation, holds him up, enlarges his path so his feet do not slip, and subdues people under him. What he claims for himself is the pursuing, the striking, and the not turning back, which is to say the actual effort. The psalm is a good corrective in both directions: God does the work, and David still fights the battle.

5. *Psalm 18:19 says God brought him out into a broad place because He delighted in him. Name the narrow place you are in right now, and write one sentence you will pray about it every day this week.*

Answers will vary. The image of the broad place is worth dwelling on: a narrow place is where you cannot maneuver, and God's first act of deliverance is often simply room. Listen for people naming a real constraint, and encourage a prayer short enough to be prayed daily and specific enough that they will know if God answers it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The storm language is poetic theophany, not a description of a literal weather event. Teach genre plainly so the class does not stumble here or in the prophets later.
- Verses 20 through 24 are not a doctrine of salvation earned by good behavior, and they are not a promise that righteous people are always rescued. David himself wrote Psalm 51. Keep the covenant setting in front of the class.
- The section on crushing enemies (18:37–42) belongs to a king under the old covenant fighting Israel's wars. It is not a pattern for personal conduct. Christians are told to bless and not curse (Romans 12:14–21), which is in this week's Romans reading.

Soil, Seed, and Storm

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Mark 4 is the first block of extended teaching in this gospel, and it holds together better than it looks. Everything in it is about the word: how it is scattered, how it is received, how it is not to be hidden, how it grows without our management, and how small a beginning it has. Then the chapter ends with a scene in a boat that asks whether the men closest to Jesus have received the word themselves. The sower goes out to sow, and by verse 41 we find out what kind of soil the disciples are.

The parable of the sower is the one Jesus says you must understand to understand any of them (4:13). Note that the seed is the same in every case and the sower is the same in every case. The variable is the ground. Note also that three of the four soils receive the seed and only one bears fruit, and that two of the three failures happen after a real start: the rocky ground receives the word with gladness, and the thorny ground lets it grow until other things crowd it out. That is a sober word for a class full of people who were all baptized once.

The two seed parables in the middle say two encouraging things about the kingdom. It grows by a power that does not belong to the farmer, so the man sleeps and rises and the earth produces by itself. And it starts absurdly small, like a mustard seed, and ends up sheltering birds. Jesus said this to a handful of fishermen on a lakeshore in a small province of an empire that had never heard of them. Then the storm comes, and the same Lord who commands the soil commands the sea, and the disciples end the chapter with the right question: who can this be?

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- A parable places a familiar picture beside a spiritual truth. It reveals to the person who wants to know and conceals from the person who does not, which is exactly what Mark 4:11–12 and 4:33–34 describe.
- Mark 4:34 says that privately He explained everything to His disciples. The explanation of the sower in 4:14–20 comes from Jesus Himself, so the interpretation is not a matter of guesswork.
- The Sea of Galilee sits about seven hundred feet below sea level in a bowl of hills, and violent squalls drop onto it without warning. At least four of the men in the boat had fished it for a living, which is why their terror is significant.
- The kingdom parables here describe steady, organic growth from a tiny beginning. That kingdom was established in the days of the Roman empire (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Acts 2) and Christians are in it now (Colossians 1:13).
- Mark 4:12 quotes Isaiah 6:9–10, spoken to a people who had already refused to listen. Matthew 13:13–15 gives the same quotation with the causal order made explicit: their eyes they have closed.
- Calming a storm with a word would have carried a particular weight for anyone who knew Psalm 107:23–30 and Psalm 89:9, where it is the Lord who stills the raging sea.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus explains the four soils in Mark 4:14–20. Which of the four best describes how you have received God's word over the last month, and what made the difference?*

Let people answer honestly and do not rush to reassure them. The wayside hearer never really takes it in; the word sits on the surface and is gone by lunch. The rocky hearer takes it in with joy and has no root, so pressure or embarrassment ends it. The thorny hearer keeps it alive alongside the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things, and those things choke it. Most adults in a Bible class are in danger from thorns, not from birds.

The follow-up question is the useful one: what made the difference? Usually it is something structural and unglamorous. The people who bear fruit are almost always people who put the word somewhere it could not be crowded out: a morning hour, a drive with no radio, a family reading at the table, a class they refuse to miss. Ask the class to name the practical thing that changed the soil, and let them teach each other.

Question 2. *Mark 4:11–12 sounds at first as though Jesus teaches in parables in order to keep people from understanding. Read it with Isaiah 6:9–10 and Matthew 13:13–15 and work out what He is actually saying.*

The construction sounds fatalistic in Mark and is clarified in Matthew, where Jesus says He speaks in parables because seeing they do not see, and quotes Isaiah on people who have closed their own eyes. The order is response first, then judicial hardening. These crowds had already watched Him heal and had already heard the scribes call it Satan's work. Parables are God's mercy to such a crowd: the truth stays available, wrapped in a story, for anyone willing to come and ask, which is exactly what the disciples do in verse 10.

Say plainly what the passage does not teach. It is not a decree that God has predetermined certain individuals to be unable to believe. Scripture says God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), and Mark 4:23 says, if anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. The parable itself is an invitation with a door in it.

Question 3. *The disciples wake Jesus with, "Do You not care that we are perishing?" What does that question reveal about what they believed, and where does the same question surface in our own praying?*

It reveals that they believed He had the power to do something and doubted that He cared. That is worth naming, because it is the more common form of unbelief among faithful people. Nobody in the boat questioned whether Jesus could help; they questioned whether He was paying attention. His sleep, which is the most human detail in the chapter, looked to them like indifference.

Ask where that surfaces in the class's prayers. It sounds like, "I know God can, but He clearly has other priorities," or like praying about the small things and never the one that is actually drowning us. Then note His rebuke in verse 40: why are you so fearful, how is it that you have no faith? He does not scold them for waking Him. He scolds them for concluding that His silence meant His absence, with Him in the boat the whole time.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the four soils and the specific reason the seed fails in each of the first three. Which failure is most dangerous because it looks longest like success?*

The wayside soil: Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown. The stony ground: no root, so when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, the hearer stumbles at once. The thorny ground: the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things come in and choke the word so it becomes unfruitful. The good ground hears, accepts, and bears thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. The thorny ground is the most dangerous, because the plant is green for a long time; nothing dramatic happens, and the fruitlessness is only discovered later.

2. *Mark 4:26–29 describes seed that grows while the farmer sleeps and he does not know how. Read it with 1 Corinthians 3:6–7 and state plainly what is our work and what is God's.*

Our work is to sow and to water, and to keep doing it when we see nothing. God's work is to give the increase, which He does by a power we do not supply and a process we cannot observe. Mark says the earth yields crops by itself and the farmer does not know how. Paul says neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who gives the increase. The practical result is freedom: we are responsible for faithful sowing, not for manufacturing results.

3. *Trace what happens to the word in Mark 4:15–19: who takes it away, what withers it, and what chokes it. Which of those three is most active in your house right now?*

Satan takes the word away from the wayside hearer immediately. Tribulation and persecution wither the plant in the rocky soil, because it has no root in itself. And three things choke the thorny soil: the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things. Answers on which is most active will vary, but for most

households in most congregations it is the third list, and especially the last item, which is broad enough to include almost anything good that has grown too large.

4. *Read Mark 4:35–41 and write down every detail Mark gives about Jesus in the boat. Then read Psalm 107:23–30 and explain what the disciples' question in verse 41 really means.*

Mark tells us they took Him along just as He was, that other little boats went with them, that the waves were already filling the boat, and that He was in the stern asleep on a pillow. He arose, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, Peace, be still. Psalm 107 says of the Lord that He calms the storm so its waves are still and brings sailors to their desired haven. So the disciples' question, who can this be that even the wind and the sea obey Him, has only one answer in their Scriptures. They are standing in front of the God of Psalm 107, and they are beginning to suspect it.

5. *Mark 4:24 warns, take heed what you hear. Name one thing you will stop listening to this week and one thing you will start, and put both on the calendar.*

Answers will vary, and the assignment matters more than the discussion. What we listen to is what gets sown. Listen for choices that are concrete and measurable: a program dropped, a podcast replaced, a commute given to Scripture, a class attended, an hour of news traded for an hour of the gospel of Mark.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The rocky and thorny soils describe people who genuinely received the word and did not continue. Do not let the class resolve that into a doctrine that a saved person cannot fall away (Hebrews 3:12–14; 2 Peter 2:20–22).
- Mark 4:11–12 must not be taught as though God arbitrarily blinds people. Use Matthew 13:13–15, where the people have closed their own eyes, and hold it beside 1 Timothy 2:4.
- The kingdom parables describe the growth of Christ's reign in His church, which began on Pentecost. Do not let mustard seed and harvest language be pulled toward a future earthly kingdom.
- The stilled storm is not a promise that Christians who pray hard enough get calm circumstances. Jesus is in the boat; He is not a weather service. Paul was shipwrecked three times (2 Corinthians 11:25) and was not less loved for it.

Owe No One But Love

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Romans 13 begins where Romans 12 left off, with the Christian's life among people who are not Christians. Government is God's arrangement, a minister of God for good and an avenger to execute wrath on evildoers. Christians pay taxes, pay customs, give fear and honor where they are owed. Remember who the emperor was when Paul wrote this. He is not commending the Roman administration; he is establishing that civil order is God's idea and that the Christian is not an anarchist.

Then the hinge in verse 8: owe no one anything except to love one another. Every debt can be paid off except that one. Paul runs through the second table of the law, adultery, murder, theft, covetousness, and says love does no harm to a neighbor and therefore fulfills all of it. And because the night is far spent and the day is at hand, he says to cast off the works of darkness, walk properly, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ. That phrase is worth pointing out: the same verb Paul uses in Galatians 3:27 of those who were baptized into Christ.

Romans 14 and the first verses of 15 handle a real fight in a real congregation. Some Christians, mostly with a Jewish background, would not eat meat that might have come through a pagan market and still observed certain days. Others had no such scruple. Paul does not settle the question of who is right about food; he settles the question of how they will treat each other. Do not judge, do not despise, be fully convinced in your own mind, do not put a stumbling block in your brother's way, pursue what makes for peace, and receive one another as Christ received you, to the glory of God.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Romans was written around A.D. 57, during Nero's reign and before the persecutions of the 60s. The counsel about government is given to people whose government would later kill many of them.
- The specific dispute in Rome concerned meat, likely because much of the meat available in the city had been offered to idols, and the observance of certain days, probably Jewish festival days. Both groups were Christians and both are addressed as brothers.
- Romans 14 deals with matters of opinion and conscience, not with doctrine or sin. Paul draws lines elsewhere without hesitation (Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:11; Galatians 1:8–9). The two are not in conflict.
- "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (13:14) uses the same clothing verb as Galatians 3:27, where those baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Paul is calling Christians to live in the identity they received.
- The kingdom of God in 14:17 is a present reality experienced now in righteousness, peace, and joy, consistent with Colossians 1:13 and Hebrews 12:28.
- Romans 15:1–7 introduces the letter's closing argument, that Jew and Gentile together glorify God with one mind and one mouth, and leads into the Old Testament quotations of 15:9–12, one of which comes from this week's Psalm 18.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Romans 13:1–7 was written while Nero ruled Rome. Read it carefully, then read Acts 5:29 and Daniel 3:16–18. How do those passages fit together, and where exactly does the line fall?*

Establish the rule first. Government is ordained by God, the Christian submits, pays taxes without cheating, speaks respectfully of officials, prays for them (1 Timothy 2:1–2), and honors the office even when he cannot admire the man. Paul, who wrote this, also used his citizenship and appealed to Caesar, so submission is not passivity. Peter says the same thing from a prison-shaped life (1 Peter 2:13–17).

Then find the line, which Scripture draws clearly and narrowly. When the command of men requires disobedience to the command of God, we obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Daniel's friends would not bow. Daniel kept praying with the windows open. Peter and John kept preaching. Notice what all of them did next: they accepted the penalty without violence and without contempt. The line is not personal inconvenience, disagreement with policy, or disliking the party in power. It is being required to sin.

Question 2. *Romans 14 forbids two opposite sins: the weak brother judging and the strong brother despising. Which of the two are you more prone to, and what does your version of it actually sound like out loud?*

Have the class say the two sins out loud in modern words. The weak brother's judgment sounds like, "A real Christian would never do that," applied to something Scripture never addressed. The strong brother's contempt sounds like, "Those people are twenty years behind," or a joke at a brother's expense in the parking lot. Paul treats both as serious, and he tells both groups the same thing: your brother is God's servant, and to his own master he stands or falls.

Then push toward self-examination rather than diagnosis of others. Ask who has actually been hurt by our version of it. And add Paul's hardest instruction, in 14:22: have your faith to yourself before God. There are convictions a Christian should hold firmly and not press on everyone in the building. That restraint is not weakness; it is love with its hands tied on purpose.

Question 3. *Romans 14:15 says do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. Name a liberty you genuinely have, and talk about what would make you willingly give it up for somebody else.*

Get concrete about what a liberty is: something God has not forbidden and has not commanded, where a Christian has freedom. What a person eats and drinks, how he spends a Saturday, what entertainment he chooses, how he celebrates a holiday. Paul's own position is clear in 14:14, that he is convinced nothing is unclean of itself. And then he says that if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love.

The standard he sets is not comfort but the brother's soul: do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. Ask the class to weigh a real liberty against a real person. The question is not whether you have the right. The question is what the right is worth compared to the man Christ died for. And be careful not to let this become a tool for the loudest conscience in the congregation to control everyone else; Paul is addressing love, not leverage.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Romans 13:1–7 says a Christian owes the civil government. Compare 1 Peter 2:13–17 and 1 Timothy 2:1–2 and note what is added there.*

Romans 13 says the Christian owes subjection, taxes, customs, fear, and honor, and says that resisting the authority is resisting the ordinance of God. 1 Peter 2:13–17 adds that we submit for the Lord's sake, that doing good silences ignorant men, and that we are to honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, and honor the king. 1 Timothy 2:1–2 adds the duty of prayer: supplications and thanksgivings for kings and all in authority, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

2. *Romans 13:8–10 says love fulfills the law. Write down which commandments Paul names, and explain how love keeps each one without needing a separate rule.*

Paul names adultery, murder, theft, false witness in some manuscripts, and covetousness, and then says all of them are summed up in loving your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor, so a man who genuinely loves his neighbor does not need a separate rule telling him not to take his wife, his life, his property, his reputation, or his goods. Law describes the outer boundary; love keeps a person well inside it.

3. *Read Romans 14:1–12 and work out the difference between a matter of opinion and a matter of faith. Give two current examples of each from congregational life, and state how you can tell them apart.*

A matter of opinion is something Scripture neither commands nor forbids, where a Christian may be fully convinced in his own mind and another Christian may land elsewhere: the kind of building, the time of a class, the food at a fellowship meal, personal holiday customs, matters of dress that are not immodest. A matter of faith is something

Scripture has spoken to: how a person is saved, the worship of the church, moral purity, the qualifications of elders. The test is whether you can produce book, chapter, and verse. Where you can, Romans 14 does not apply; where you cannot, it does.

4. *Romans 14:17 says the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Compare Colossians 1:13 and Mark 9:1. When did the kingdom begin, and who is in it now?*

Colossians 1:13 says Christians have already been delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son, and Mark 9:1 says some standing there would not die before seeing the kingdom come with power, which happened at Pentecost in Acts 2. So the kingdom began in the first century, and the people in it now are Christians, those who have been born of water and the Spirit (John 3:3-5). Romans 14:17 describes the present experience of that kingdom: not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy.

5. *Romans 15:1-3 says the strong ought to bear the scruples of the weak, because even Christ did not please Himself. Name one preference you will surrender this month for a brother's sake, and then do it without announcing it.*

Answers will vary, and this one is meant to cost a little pride as well as a little liberty. Listen for a specific preference in a specific relationship rather than a general resolution to be nicer. The instruction not to announce it is deliberate. A sacrifice that is reported is no longer entirely a sacrifice (Matthew 6:1-4).

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Romans 13 needs both halves taught. Submission is the rule; Acts 5:29 is the exception, and it is narrow. Guard against a class that turns the hour into politics in either direction. The passage is about the Christian's conduct, not about anyone's party.
- Romans 14 is regularly stretched to cover doctrinal error and sin. It does not. Paul is addressing matters of opinion between brothers who are both trying to honor the Lord. Say this clearly and give examples, or someone will leave with the idea that everything is an opinion.
- The days of Romans 14:5 are not the first day of the week. The Lord's Supper on the first day is a matter of apostolic practice and command (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26), not personal preference.
- Romans 13:14, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, is spoken to people who had already been baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3-4). Use it to call Christians to live out their identity, not as an appeal to the unbaptized to accept Christ apart from obedience to the gospel.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: 1 Samuel 16-23 · Psalm 19 · Mark 5 · Romans 15:8-16:27

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