

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 36 OF 104

Some Trust in Chariots

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	1 Samuel 24-31
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 20-21
Gospels	Mark 6:1-29
General New Testament	1 Corinthians 1

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to relocate power. David had two chances to take a throne God had already promised him and refused both, because he believed God did not need his help. Israel sang about chariots and horses and chose to remember a name instead. And Paul told a congregation full of clever people that God saves the world by a cross, which is the one strategy no impressive person would ever have chosen.

Doctrinally, three pressure points sit in this week's readings. Saul at Endor gives you a plain text on seeking guidance anywhere but from God's word, and 1 Chronicles 10:13-14 supplies the inspired verdict. 1 Corinthians 1:17 requires careful handling so that no one walks out believing Paul minimized baptism; teach it in its context of party spirit and pair it with Acts 18:8. And 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 is your best opportunity in months to teach why we refuse human party names, taught humbly, since the group that said "I am of Christ" was quarreling too.

Formationally, watch the restraint. David would not stretch out his hand. Herod could not bear to look weak in front of his guests and killed a prophet over it. The difference between those two men is not courage; it is whose opinion they had decided to live on. Put this question to the class before they leave: name the person or group whose disapproval you are most afraid of, and tell us one thing you would do differently this week if their opinion did not matter.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up 1 Samuel 24-31. Spend the first half on the two occasions when David spared Saul and on Abigail, and the second half on Ziklag and Endor. Close with 1 Chronicles 10:13-14 read aloud as the verdict on Saul's life, and let it sit without comment.

Second session: Take up 1 Corinthians 1. Give a full third of the hour to the divisions of 1:10-17, handling verse 17 carefully and unhurriedly, and the rest to the wisdom of the cross. The chapter begins a long stay in 1 Corinthians, so set the scene of the city and the congregation now.

The other two readings: Psalm 20-21 and Mark 6:1-29 read well at home. Ask the class to memorize Psalm 20:7 this week, since it names the week's theme in one line. Warn them that Mark 6:1-6 stings if read honestly by people who have been in church a long time.

The Lord's Anointed

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These chapters are about a man learning to wait. David has been anointed. Samuel poured the oil years ago. The kingdom has been torn from Saul by God's own word. And twice God hands Saul to him on a plate, once in the dark of a cave and once in a sleeping camp with Abishai whispering that one thrust will finish it. Both times David says the same thing: I will not stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed. He will take the throne when God gives it and not one day sooner.

Between those two scenes sits the Nabal account, and it is there to show us that David's restraint was not a personality trait. Insulted by a rich fool, David straps on his sword and sets out to kill every male in the household by morning, and only Abigail's intercepting him on a mountain path prevents it. The same man who would not touch Saul was perfectly capable of a slaughter over a personal slight. What held him back with Saul was not temperament; it was conviction about who sits on the throne of heaven.

The last chapters are heavy. Samuel dies. David, exhausted by the running, concludes he will perish at Saul's hand and moves to Philistine territory, where he lies to Achish and raids villages, leaving no survivors so that no one can contradict his story. Saul, with the prophet dead and God silent, goes to a medium in the night and hears his own sentence read back to him. Ziklag burns and David's men speak of stoning him, and he strengthens himself in the Lord his God and asks the priest for the ephod. The book ends at Gilboa with Saul falling on his own sword, and with the men of Jabesh Gilead traveling all night to bring his body home, repaying a kindness he had done them forty years earlier.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- En Gedi is an oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea, honeycombed with caves, a natural refuge and exactly the kind of place a fugitive would use.
- Nabal was a Calebite and a wealthy sheep owner. David's men had protected his shepherds, and the request for provisions at sheep-shearing time, a season of feasting and generosity, was entirely reasonable.
- David lived in Philistine territory about a year and four months (27:7), based at Ziklag, a town Achish gave him. Only the intervention of the suspicious Philistine lords kept him from having to fight against Israel at Gilboa.
- Mediums and spiritists were under the death penalty in Israel (Leviticus 20:27), and Saul himself had driven them out of the land (28:3), which is why the woman at Endor is afraid.
- 1 Chronicles 10:13–14 gives the inspired verdict on Saul: he died for his unfaithfulness, for not keeping the word of the Lord, and for consulting a medium rather than inquiring of the Lord.
- The men of Jabesh Gilead risked their lives to recover Saul's body because Saul had rescued their city in 1 Samuel 11. Forty years later, a kindness was still being repaid.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Twice David spares Saul, and both times he gives the same reason (24:6; 26:9–11). Why does he keep calling the man hunting him “the Lord’s anointed,” and what does that tell you about who David believed was actually running his life?*

The phrase “the Lord’s anointed” is doing all the work. David does not say Saul is innocent, and he does not say Saul is safe. He says Saul was placed in that office by God, and that removing him is therefore God’s business, not David’s. In chapter 26 he spells out the theology: the Lord shall strike him, or his day shall come to die, or he shall descend into battle and perish; but the Lord forbid that I should stretch out my hand. David has thought this through. He knows three ways God could do it and he refuses to become a fourth.

What it reveals is that David believed God was managing the timing of his life. The cave was not a providential opportunity; it was a test. Push the class toward their own version: the promotion you could get by undercutting someone, the argument you could win by telling the one story you have been saving, the vindication that is within

reach if you are willing to take it yourself. Ask where each person is being invited to grab something God has not yet handed them.

Question 2. *In 1 Samuel 30:6, with Ziklag burned, the families gone, and his own men talking about stoning him, David strengthened himself in the Lord his God. Describe what that looks like in practice for someone who has no one left to call.*

Notice the setting. Everything is gone. The town is ashes, the wives and children are captives, David and his six hundred men have wept until they had no more power to weep, and the men are grieved enough to talk about stoning him. There is no friend to call; Jonathan is not there, Samuel is dead, and his own men have turned. The text says simply, but David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.

Ask what that consisted of, and the next verse gives the answer: he called for Abiathar the priest and the ephod, and he inquired of the Lord. So it was not a mood he talked himself into. It was going to God with a specific question and waiting for an answer. For us it is the word, prayer, and the honest company of other Christians. Ask the class what they actually reach for when the bottom falls out, and be ready for honest answers about food, screens, work, and anger. Then ask what it would take to reach for God first, before the crisis arrives to teach them.

Question 3. *Abigail talks David out of a massacre in 1 Samuel 25:23–35. Read her speech and name what she does well. Who has done that for you, and whose anger might you be the one asked to stand in front of?*

Abigail does almost everything well, and she does it under pressure with four hundred armed men on the path. She moves quickly. She brings provisions, not merely words. She takes blame that is not hers. She does not defend Nabal, and she does not insult him beyond the truth. Most of all, she appeals to David's future rather than to his mercy: when the Lord has done for you all the good He has promised, this will be no grief to you, that you avenged yourself. She helps him see Monday from Friday.

Then ask both halves of the second question. Most Christians can name an Abigail, somebody who got between them and a decision that would have followed them for thirty years. Fewer are willing to be one, because standing in front of an angry man is frightening and he may not thank you. Ask the class who currently needs an Abigail, and what it would cost to load the donkeys and go.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Compare the two occasions when David spared Saul, chapter 24 and chapter 26. List what is identical, what is different, and how Saul responds each time.*

Both times David has a real opportunity, both times his men urge him to take it as from God, both times he refuses on the ground that Saul is the Lord's anointed, both times he takes proof instead of a life, and both times he calls out afterward and makes his case from a safe distance. The differences: chapter 24 happens in a cave and David takes a corner of the robe, and his heart troubles him even for that; chapter 26 happens in a camp at night, and he takes the spear and the water jug and rebukes Abner for failing to guard the king. Saul weeps and blesses David both times and both times goes back to hunting him, which is the saddest repetition in the book.

2. *Read 1 Samuel 27:8–12 with 29:6–11. What is David actually doing while he lives in Philistine territory, and how does the writer report it?*

David raids Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites, leaves no man or woman alive so no one can report what he has done, and tells Achish he has been raiding Judah instead. The writer records it plainly, without a word of praise or blame, and lets the reader draw the conclusion. Scripture is honest about its heroes. This is the same man who wrote most of the Psalms, and these are the months when he was living a lie in a foreign court because he had concluded, in 27:1, that he would one day perish at Saul's hand. Fear makes good men do things faith never would.

3. *1 Samuel 28 records Saul consulting a medium at Endor. Read Deuteronomy 18:9–14, Leviticus 19:31, and Isaiah 8:19–20, and write down what God had already said about seeking the dead.*

Deuteronomy 18:9–14 lists the practices of the nations God was driving out, including consulting mediums and spiritists and calling up the dead, and calls all of it an abomination. Leviticus 19:31 forbids turning to mediums, saying

it defiles. Isaiah 8:19–20 asks why anyone would seek the dead on behalf of the living and directs them instead to the law and the testimony, saying that if they do not speak according to this word, there is no light in them. God had already spoken, clearly, in writing, for centuries.

4. *Trace what 1 Samuel 28:6 says Saul tried before he went to Endor. Why was heaven silent, and what should he have done instead of finding another door?*

1 Samuel 28:6 says Saul inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him, by dreams, by Urim, or by the prophets. The silence was not arbitrary. Saul had killed the priests at Nob, rejected the word of the Lord repeatedly, and never truly repented; 1 Chronicles 10:14 says he did not inquire of the Lord, meaning he never sought Him in the way that seeking requires. What he should have done is what David did at Ziklag in the very next chapter: repent, humble himself, and inquire of God on God's terms. Instead, when God would not say what he wanted, he went looking for another voice.

5. *Saul's life ends on Mount Gilboa. Read 1 Chronicles 10:13–14 for the inspired summary of that life, then write one sentence you would hate to have as the summary of yours, and name the one thing you will change this week.*

1 Chronicles 10:13–14 says Saul died for his unfaithfulness, because he did not keep the word of the Lord, and because he consulted a medium for guidance and did not inquire of the Lord. Two sentences cover forty years. Answers to the personal half will vary; look for people naming a pattern rather than an incident, since that is what a summary captures, and press for one concrete change rather than a general resolve to do better.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The medium at Endor will take the whole hour if you let it. State the main points and move on: God forbids consulting the dead; Saul knew it and did it anyway; the medium herself cried out in fear, which suggests something happened that she did not produce; the message delivered was true and came from God. Whether God permitted Samuel to appear or acted in some other way, the passage teaches nothing that encourages anyone to try. Refuse speculation, and do not let this become a discussion of modern spiritism or mediums.
- Saul dies by his own hand. Handle it with care and without a sermon on suicide. Scripture's verdict on Saul concerns a lifetime of rebellion (1 Chronicles 10:13–14), not the manner of his death, and grieving families in your class may be listening.
- David's deception of Achish and the killing of whole villages are reported without approval. Do not defend them; the record of his fear in 27:1 explains them without excusing them.
- "Touch not the Lord's anointed" is sometimes used to shield leaders from any correction. David's conviction concerned a king God had placed on a throne and would remove Himself. It is not a prohibition against rebuking sin. Nathan confronted David, Paul withstood Peter to his face (Galatians 2:11), and elders who sin are to be rebuked before all (1 Timothy 5:19–20).

Chariots or the Name

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 20 reads like a service. The congregation is gathered, the king is about to leave for war, and the people pray over him: may the Lord answer you in the day of trouble, may the name of the God of Jacob defend you, may He send you help from the sanctuary and strengthen you out of Zion, may He remember all your offerings. Then there is a shift in verse 6, and a single voice says, now I know that the Lord saves His anointed. The psalm ends with the congregation together: some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God.

That verse is not a rejection of preparation. Israel had an army and David was an exceptional soldier. It is a statement about where confidence finally rests. Chariots were the advanced military technology of the age, and Israel was usually the side without them. Deuteronomy 17:16 had told Israel's king not to multiply horses. The psalm turns a national disadvantage into a confession: we do not have what they have, and we do not need it.

Psalm 21 is the thanksgiving on the far side of the battle. Read it and notice how relentlessly everything is credited to God: You have given him his heart's desire, You meet him with blessings of goodness, You set a crown of pure gold on his head, he asked life of You and You gave it, his glory is great in Your salvation, You have made him most blessed forever. The king in Psalm 21 does not take a bow. Then verses 8 through 12 turn to God's judgment on His enemies, and verse 13 closes the way both psalms began, with the congregation exalting the Lord in His own strength.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Both are royal psalms, composed for use in Israel's public worship in connection with the king: Psalm 20 before a military campaign, Psalm 21 after a victory.
- "The name of the Lord" in Hebrew thought means His revealed character and all that He has made known of Himself, not merely a label. To remember the name is to remember who He has shown Himself to be.
- Chariots were the decisive weapon of the ancient Near East, and Israel was frequently the weaker force. Deuteronomy 17:16 forbade the king to multiply horses, and Joshua 11:6 had him hamstringing captured horses and burn the chariots.
- "His anointed" (20:6) translates the Hebrew word from which we get Messiah. Language written for David's throne finds its full meaning in David's greater Son (Acts 2:29–36).
- Psalm 21:4, length of days forever and ever, overshoots any Israelite king. Hebrew royal poetry regularly used language larger than the reigning monarch could fill, and the New Testament shows where it lands.
- These psalms model congregational prayer for those in leadership, a practice the New Testament also commands (1 Timothy 2:1–2; Hebrews 13:17–18).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 20:7 sets chariots and horses against the name of the Lord our God. Which chariots do people in our congregation actually trust, and what makes those so believable when God can seem so quiet?*

Get past the obvious answer of money to the ones people do not say out loud. A chariot is anything that makes you feel you will probably be fine. For some it is savings, for others a job title, a family name, good health, a marriage, insurance, a network of powerful friends, or simply competence, the settled sense that you have always managed to figure things out. Chariots are believable because they work, most of the time, for a while. That is precisely their danger.

Then ask why God can seem quiet by comparison. Partly because the name of the Lord does not show up in a statement at the end of the month. But note what the psalm actually says: we will remember. Remembering is deliberate. It means rehearsing what God has already done, which is exactly what David did with the lion and the bear. Ask the class for one specific thing God has done for them that they have stopped mentioning.

Question 2. *Psalm 20 is a congregation praying for its leader out loud before he goes out to fight. When did we last pray for our elders, our preacher, and our teachers with that kind of specificity, and what would change here if we did?*

Make this concrete in the room. The psalm names things: the day of trouble, help from the sanctuary, the desire of the heart, the fulfillment of purpose. Most congregational prayer for leaders runs to a sentence: bless our elders. Ask what our elders are actually facing this month, what our preacher's hardest task is this week, what a Bible class teacher with a difficult class needs. People cannot pray specifically for what they do not know, which is itself the finding.

Then push toward practice. Have the class name three leaders and one specific need apiece before they leave, and ask someone to pray for them out loud right there. Hebrews 13:17-18 asks for exactly this: pray for us, for we are confident that we have a good conscience. Leaders who are prayed for lead differently, and congregations that pray for their leaders criticize them less.

Question 3. *Psalm 21:1-2 says the king rejoices in God's strength and has been given his heart's desire. Discuss the difference between getting what you want and rejoicing in God's strength, and how a person can tell which one he is actually pursuing.*

Both psalms use the language of the heart's desire, and Psalm 20:4 asks God to grant it. But notice the order in Psalm 21: the king rejoices in God's strength first, and in God's salvation, and the gifts follow. The desire of a man whose joy is in God's strength has already been shaped by that joy. That is the difference. One person wants God's help getting what he wants; the other has come to want what God is doing.

Ask how you can tell which one you are. A useful test is what happens when the request is denied. If the answer no collapses the whole relationship, the desire was the point and God was the means. Another test is Psalm 21:6, which says the king is made exceedingly glad with God's presence. Ask honestly whether God's presence, with nothing else added, would count as an answered prayer.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything the people ask God to do for the king in Psalm 20:1-5, then list everything Psalm 21:2-6 says God did. Lay the two lists side by side and note the overlap.*

Psalm 20:1-5 asks that the Lord answer him in the day of trouble, that the name of the God of Jacob defend him, that He send help from the sanctuary and strengthen him out of Zion, that He remember his offerings, that He grant him according to his heart's desire and fulfill all his purpose, and that He fulfill all his petitions. Psalm 21:2-6 answers: You have given him his heart's desire and have not withheld the request of his lips, You meet him with the blessings of goodness, You set a crown of pure gold on his head, he asked life and You gave it, his glory is great in Your salvation, You have made him most blessed forever and glad with Your presence. Nearly every petition has a matching answer, which is the point of reading them together.

2. *Compare Psalm 20:7 with Deuteronomy 17:16, 1 Samuel 17:45, and Zechariah 4:6. What is the consistent testimony of Scripture about where real strength comes from?*

Deuteronomy 17:16 forbids Israel's king to multiply horses for himself. 1 Samuel 17:45 has David telling Goliath that he comes in the name of the Lord of hosts rather than with sword and spear. Zechariah 4:6 says not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. The testimony is uniform: God is not opposed to means, but He refuses to let His people's confidence rest in them. He repeatedly arranges His victories so that no one can credit the equipment.

3. *Psalm 21:8–12 turns toward the king's enemies. Read it as an appeal to God's justice rather than a license for personal revenge, and compare Romans 12:19–21. How do the two passages fit together?*

The psalm asks God to deal with the king's enemies, describing them as those who plotted evil against the anointed and could not perform it. It is addressed to God and leaves the action to God, which is exactly what Romans 12:19 requires: do not avenge yourselves, but give place to wrath, for vengeance is Mine, says the Lord. The two fit together because both assume that justice is real and that it belongs to God. Praying for God to judge is not the same as taking the sword yourself, and the Christian is told, in the same breath, to feed his enemy and leave the verdict alone.

4. *Both of these are royal psalms about Israel's anointed king. Read Psalm 21:4 and ask how much of it was ever true of David himself. Whom do these psalms finally describe? See Acts 2:29–36.*

Psalm 21:4 says he asked life of You, and You gave it to him, length of days forever and ever. David died and was buried, so it was never literally true of him. Peter makes exactly that argument in Acts 2:29–36 from a different psalm: David is dead, his tomb is with us, so he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, whom God has made both Lord and Christ. Royal psalms describe the anointed king in language only the final Anointed One could fill. They finally describe Jesus, who reigns now at the right hand of God.

5. *Name the chariot you personally trust: a bank balance, a title, a network of contacts, a skill, a reputation. Decide on one concrete step this week that would make no sense at all unless you trusted the name of the Lord instead.*

Answers will vary, and the step is the assignment. Look for actions rather than attitudes: giving an amount that changes the month, turning down work that would take a family away from the Lord's people, telling the truth in a situation where the lie would protect the account, taking a Sunday that a promotion assumed you would give up. The test of the step is Psalm 20:7 itself: it should look unwise to someone counting chariots.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 20:4, that God grant you your heart's desire, is not a blank check. Read it inside the psalm, where the king's desire is bound up with God's purpose, and beside 1 John 5:14, which conditions confidence on asking according to His will.
- The judgment section of Psalm 21 is an appeal to God's justice, addressed to God. Do not let it become a model for cursing enemies (Romans 12:19–21; Matthew 5:44).
- These are royal psalms of the old covenant, tied to Israel's national life and its wars. Apply their principles to Christ's reign and to our trust in God, and do not transfer promises about a nation's armies to any modern country.
- Guard against reading "some trust in chariots" as a rejection of ordinary preparation, savings, medicine, or hard work. The psalm is about where confidence finally rests, not about presuming on God by neglecting responsibility.

A Prophet Without Honor

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Mark 6 opens with the strangest sentence in the gospel: He could do no mighty work there. Not would not, could not. The context explains it. Nazareth was not neutral; they were offended at Him. They ran through His family, named His brothers, pointed at His sisters still living in town, and reduced Him to the carpenter. They knew too much about Him to learn anything from Him. Miracles in the gospels are signs for people willing to read them, and Nazareth had already decided.

Then the twelve are sent out, two by two, with authority over unclean spirits, and with instructions that are almost comically spare: take a staff, wear sandals, no bread, no bag, no money in your belt, do not take two tunics. They are to stay in whatever house receives them and shake the dust off their feet where they are refused. Mark says they went out and preached that people should repent, cast out many demons, and anointed the sick with oil and healed them. The confirming works accompanied the message, exactly as Mark 16:20 describes.

In the middle of this, Mark does something unusual and tells a story out of order. Herod hears about Jesus and concludes that John, whom he beheaded, has risen. Then Mark backs up and tells you how it happened: a stolen wife, a preacher who said it was not lawful, a woman who nursed a grudge, a birthday banquet, a dance, a reckless oath, and a head on a platter because Herod would not look weak in front of the men at his table. It is Mark's way of telling the disciples, just sent out to preach, exactly what preaching can cost.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Nazareth was a small village in Galilee. Jesus had lived there roughly thirty years, and the people knew His family. Mark 6:3 names four brothers and mentions sisters, natural children of Joseph and Mary born after Jesus.
- The word rendered carpenter covers a builder who worked in wood and stone. It marked Him as a tradesman, not a trained rabbi, which was part of the offense.
- The mission of the twelve here is a limited, temporary commission within Israel. Jesus later changes the instructions explicitly (Luke 22:35–36), so the details about bags and money are not a permanent rule for preachers.
- Herod here is Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, a son of Herod the Great. He had taken Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, which is what John denounced (6:18).
- Anointing with oil (6:13) accompanied miraculous healing in this period. Oil was also used medicinally (Luke 10:34). Neither use establishes a continuing ritual for the church.
- This is the only extended narrative in Mark in which Jesus does not appear. Mark inserts it between the sending of the twelve and their return, framing the mission with the cost of faithful preaching.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Mark 6:5 says Jesus could do no mighty work in Nazareth except lay hands on a few sick people. Read the whole scene and discuss what kept them from receiving Him, and whether familiarity is doing something similar to us.*

What kept them from receiving Him was that they already had Him filed. Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and are not His brothers and sisters here with us? Every fact in that sentence was true, and every one of them was used as a reason not to listen. They were not asking questions; they were closing a file. Notice that they do not deny the wisdom or the mighty works. They say, where did this man get these things, and then take offense rather than follow the question anywhere.

Then turn the question on the room. The people most at risk of hearing nothing on Sunday are the ones who have heard everything. A man who has sat in the same building for forty years can listen to the gospel the way Nazareth listened: nothing new here, I know where this came from, I know the preacher's family. Ask what would have to change for the class to come to a familiar text expecting God to say something. Familiarity is not the enemy; the settled assumption that there is nothing left to receive is.

Question 2. *Jesus sends the twelve out with a staff, sandals, and one tunic, and nothing else (6:8–9). Why would He deliberately make them dependent on other people's hospitality, and where is He asking you to work without a safety net?*

There are at least two reasons and both matter. Practically, the message was urgent and they were to travel fast without logistics slowing them down. Spiritually, He was teaching them to depend, both on God and on the hospitality of the people they served. Men who carry their own provisions can work without ever needing anyone. Men who arrive with nothing have to knock on a door, and the preaching begins at that door.

Be careful not to turn this into a rule. Jesus Himself revised the instructions later (Luke 22:35–36), and Paul supported himself with a trade. The abiding principle is dependence, not a prohibition on suitcases. Ask where each person has built a life so well cushioned that faith is never actually required, and what one step of real dependence would look like: a commitment made before the money is in hand, a conversation begun without a script, a gift given that leaves a mark.

Question 3. *Herod protected John, listened to him gladly, and still had him killed to keep face at a party (6:20, 26). Talk about how a man travels from enjoying the preaching to executing the preacher, and what the small steps look like.*

Walk the sequence. Herod took his brother's wife, which was the first step and the root of everything. John told him the truth, and Herod, instead of repenting, imprisoned the man to manage the problem. Then he developed a strange arrangement with his own conscience: he feared John, knew he was a just and holy man, protected him, and heard him gladly, and was perplexed. He enjoyed the preaching without obeying it, for months. That is the deadly middle ground.

Then came a party, alcohol, an audience, a dance, and a boast. Verse 26 says the king was exceedingly sorry, and yet because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. He killed a prophet to avoid embarrassment at dinner. Ask the class where they have been enjoying preaching they have no intention of obeying, and notice that Herod's final act was not a decision to do evil. It was an unwillingness to look foolish in front of people whose opinion he had already decided mattered.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the objections the people of Nazareth raise in 6:2–3. What did they think disqualified Him, and what were they unable to explain away?*

They ask where He got these things, what wisdom this is that is given to Him, and how such mighty works are performed by His hands. Then they answer their own questions with His background: He is the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, and His sisters live here. They thought His ordinary origins and trade disqualified Him. What they could not explain away was the wisdom and the mighty works, which they openly acknowledge in verse 2 and then refuse to follow to any conclusion.

2. *Compare Mark 6:7–13 with Luke 9:1–6 and Matthew 10:5–15. Write down the instructions given to the twelve, and note which of them clearly belonged to that particular mission rather than to all preaching everywhere.*

The twelve are given authority over unclean spirits, sent two by two, told to take a staff and sandals but no bread, bag, money, or second tunic, told to stay in one house in a town rather than moving around, and told to shake off the dust of their feet where they are not received. They preach repentance, cast out demons, and heal. The logistical instructions belong to that mission in that place; Jesus explicitly revises them in Luke 22:35–36. What carries forward is the pairing, the message of repentance, the dependence on God, and the willingness to move on where the word is refused.

3. Trace Herod's decisions in 6:17–28 from the arrest to the platter. At how many separate points could he have stopped, and what kept him from stopping at any of them?

Herod could have stopped at every stage. He could have refused Herodias in the first place. He could have repented when John rebuked him. He could have released John instead of imprisoning him. He could have avoided a reckless oath. He could have refused a request that no oath could honestly cover, since no vow obligates a man to murder. He could have accepted the embarrassment. What stopped him is stated plainly in verse 26: because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him. He was governed by the opinion of men whose respect he had chosen to need.

4. Read Mark 6:6, where Jesus marveled because of their unbelief, then find the only other place He is said to marvel (Luke 7:9). What do the two scenes together teach about faith?

In Mark 6:6 Jesus marvels at unbelief in the town that knew Him best. In Luke 7:9 He marvels at the faith of a Roman centurion, a Gentile soldier, and says He has not found such great faith even in Israel. The two together say that faith is not a product of proximity, upbringing, or religious advantage. The people with every opportunity missed Him, and an outsider with almost no background read Him correctly. Nobody inherits faith, and nobody is disqualified from it by his background.

5. Nazareth knew Jesus better than any town on earth and believed less than most. Name a person or a truth you have stopped really hearing because it has become too familiar, and do one specific thing this week to hear it fresh.

Answers will vary. Watch for the honest ones: a spouse whose words have become noise, the Lord's Supper taken on autopilot, a passage everyone assumes they already understand, a parent's repeated warning. The step should interrupt the routine: reading the familiar text in a different translation, asking the familiar person a question you have never asked, coming to the table on Sunday having read the account of the crucifixion that morning.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- "He could do no mighty work there" does not limit God's power. Jesus works signs to confirm the word among people willing to receive it, and Nazareth had already refused. Compare Matthew 12:38–39 and Luke 16:31.
- Mark 6:3 names Jesus' brothers and sisters. Teach it plainly: they are the children of Joseph and Mary. Do not leave room for a doctrine of perpetual virginity or for the veneration of Mary.
- The instructions to the twelve are for a specific, limited mission. Do not bind the details on preachers or missionaries today, and note Luke 22:35–36 where Jesus Himself changes them.
- John lost his head for saying it was not lawful for Herod to have his brother's wife. That verse teaches that God's law governs marriage even for people outside the covenant community. Divorce and remarriage is a painful subject in most classes. Teach what the text says, point to Matthew 19:3–9, and deal with individual situations privately and gently rather than in open class.
- Anointing with oil in 6:13 accompanied miraculous healing and has no bearing on any continuing ritual. Confirming signs served their purpose and ceased when revelation was complete (1 Corinthians 13:8–10; Hebrews 2:3–4).

The Foolishness of God

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Corinth was wealthy, cosmopolitan, immoral, and proud of its cleverness. The congregation there had every spiritual gift and almost no maturity, and Paul spends sixteen chapters working through problems that all trace back to the same root: they were still thinking like Corinthians. Chapter 1 sets up everything. Notice that before a word of rebuke, Paul thanks God for them, calls them sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints, and says God will confirm them to the end. He is not flattering them. He is reminding them what they are before he tells them how they are behaving.

The first problem is division, and it is not doctrinal. They are lining up behind personalities: Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and a fourth group who apparently made even the name of Christ into a party badge. Paul's three questions in verse 13 end the argument. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? Each one exposes the absurdity of attaching yourself to a man. He then says he is thankful he personally baptized only a few of them, precisely so nobody could claim to have been baptized into his name.

From verse 18 on, Paul digs under the divisions to the pride that produced them. The message of the cross is foolishness to the perishing. Jews want a sign, Greeks want wisdom, and God gives them a crucified Messiah, which is a stumbling block to one and nonsense to the other, and is in fact the power of God and the wisdom of God. Then he tells them to look around at their own membership list: not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble. God chose the foolish, the weak, the base, and the despised, that no flesh should glory in His presence. A congregation that understands verse 29 cannot stay divided over who preaches best.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Paul writes from Ephesus around A.D. 55, about five years after establishing the congregation at Corinth (Acts 18). The letter answers both a report from Chloe's household and a list of questions the Corinthians had sent.
- Corinth was a major commercial port with a reputation for immorality and a deep admiration for rhetoric and philosophy. Public speakers drew followings the way athletes did, which explains the party spirit around preachers.
- Apollos was an eloquent Alexandrian Jew, mighty in the Scriptures (Acts 18:24–28). Cephas is Peter. Neither man encouraged a faction; the problem was in the hearers.
- Crucifixion was a slave's death, deliberately humiliating. To announce a crucified Messiah in that world was to announce something shameful, which is exactly Paul's point in 1:23.
- 1 Corinthians 1:2 calls them the church of God at Corinth, sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints, together with all who call on the name of the Lord in every place. The New Testament names God's people by their relationship to Him.
- The "calling" of 1:26 comes through the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14). God calls by the preached word, and people answer it or refuse it (Acts 2:40–41; Matthew 22:14).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The Corinthians were dividing over preachers they admired (1:11–13). Paul answers with three questions in verse 13. Work through them one at a time, and then name the modern version of "I am of Paul."*

Take the three questions in order, because each dismantles a different assumption. Is Christ divided? The body of Christ is one, so a party spirit is an attack on the body itself. Was Paul crucified for you? Only one person bought them, and it was not the preacher. Were you baptized in the name of Paul? Baptism is into Christ (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3), which settles whose they are. Every party in Corinth collapses under one of those questions.

The modern versions are easy to find and uncomfortable to name. Loyalty to a preacher rather than to the Lord's church. Congregations that split over a personality rather than a doctrine. Christians whose whole identity is attached to a favorite writer, lectureship, school, or podcast. And the fourth Corinthian party is worth pausing on, the ones who said, I am of Christ, and apparently used it as a weapon. It is possible to turn even the right name into a party badge. Ask the class where our loyalties are actually placed, and whether anyone here would follow a man out of this building if he left.

Question 2. *1 Corinthians 1:17 says Christ sent Paul not to baptize but to preach the gospel. Read it alongside Acts 18:8, Acts 2:38, and Romans 6:3–4. What is Paul saying here, and what is he plainly not saying?*

Handle this verse carefully, because it is regularly used to teach that baptism is optional, and Paul never says that. Notice the setting: the whole paragraph is about people claiming to belong to the man who baptized them. Paul says he is thankful he personally immersed only a few of them, so nobody could say they were baptized in his name. He does not say the Corinthians were unbaptized; Acts 18:8 says the Corinthians hearing believed and were baptized, and he assumes their baptism in Romans 6:3–4 and 1 Corinthians 12:13.

The construction is a Hebrew way of stating priority, the same idiom as Hosea 6:6, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, where God plainly wanted both. Paul's assignment was to preach; others could and did do the immersing. What he is not saying is that baptism is unnecessary, which would contradict Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Galatians 3:27, and 1 Peter 3:21, and would contradict Paul's own conversion. Say it plainly, kindly, and without a note of combat.

Question 3. *1 Corinthians 1:26–29 says God chose the foolish, the weak, and the lowly so that no one could boast before Him. Where does a congregation still quietly prefer the impressive, and what would actually change if we stopped?*

Begin with the verse's own method, which is to look at the membership. Paul tells them to look at their calling: not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble. That was a description of the actual congregation in Corinth, and it is a description of most congregations. God's deliberate strategy was to choose the sort of people the world overlooks so that when something happens, no one can credit human resources.

Then ask where the preference for the impressive still operates. It shows in whom we recruit to teach, whose opinion carries weight in a meeting, which visitors get followed up, who is invited to lunch, whose children are excused. It shows in what a congregation thinks it needs in order to grow. Ask what would change if the class genuinely believed that God does His best work with unimpressive people, and then ask who in this congregation has been quietly overlooked for exactly that reason.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Paul says about the Corinthians in 1:4–9 before he says a single word of correction. What does that order teach about how to confront people you love?*

He thanks God always for them, for the grace given them in Christ, says they were enriched in everything by Him in all speech and knowledge, that the testimony of Christ was confirmed in them, that they come short in no gift while eagerly waiting for the revelation of the Lord Jesus, and that God will also confirm them to the end so that they may be blameless. The order teaches that honest affirmation comes before correction, and that it must be true rather than flattering. Paul is not softening them up; he is reminding them who they are in Christ so the rebuke lands on people with an identity to live up to.

2. *Trace the words wise, wisdom, foolish, and foolishness through 1:17–31. Count them, then state in one sentence the argument Paul is building.*

The word group appears more than twenty times in those fifteen verses, wisdom and wise on one side, foolish and foolishness on the other, with weakness and strength running alongside. The argument is that God has deliberately chosen a method of saving people that human wisdom would never have devised and cannot respect, so that salvation is received as a gift rather than achieved as an accomplishment, and so that no one can boast in His presence.

3. Read 1 Corinthians 1:2 and note carefully what Paul calls these Christians. Compare Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 2:9–10, and write down the names Scripture uses for God's people.

1 Corinthians 1:2 calls them the church of God which is at Corinth, those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints, joined with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Acts 20:28 calls it the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 1 Peter 2:9–10 calls them a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, the people of God. Every designation describes a relationship to God or to Christ. None of them honors a founder, a doctrine, or a movement, which is exactly why we ought to be content with the names Scripture uses.

4. 1 Corinthians 1:18 says the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. Read Acts 17:32 and Acts 26:24 for two reactions Paul actually received. Why is a crucified Savior so offensive to human pride?

In Acts 17:32 the Athenians mocked when Paul mentioned the resurrection of the dead. In Acts 26:24 Festus interrupted to say that much learning had driven him mad. A crucified Savior offends because it declares that the hearer cannot save himself, that the best of human wisdom did not see it coming, and that the way in is repentance and submission rather than achievement. Nothing wounds pride like being helped when you had planned to manage.

5. Paul refused to preach with wisdom of words, so that the cross would not be emptied of its power. Name one place where you have softened the gospel to make it easier to hear, and say the harder, truer thing to that person this week.

Answers will vary and this one costs something. Softening the gospel usually looks like leaving out the part about repentance, letting someone assume he is fine, agreeing that all roads lead to the same place because the conversation was getting tense, or preaching around a subject a family member does not want to hear. Look for a specific person and a specific sentence, and remind the class that Paul's aim was not bluntness but clarity, so the cross would not be emptied of its power.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- 1 Corinthians 1:17 is the most commonly misused verse in the chapter. Teach the context, the idiom, and the plain testimony of Acts 18:8 and Acts 22:16. Paul is guarding against a party spirit, not diminishing baptism, which he elsewhere calls the point at which we are baptized into Christ's death (Romans 6:3–4).
- 1:10–13 is the clearest New Testament word against wearing human names and forming parties. Use it to teach the plea for Scriptural designations, and be careful to teach it with humility. The fourth Corinthian group had the right name and the wrong spirit.
- The word called in 1:24 and 1:26 refers to those who have responded to God's call through the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14). Do not let it be read as an unconditional inward call that overrides a person's will.
- God choosing the foolish things does not commend ignorance or careless preparation. Paul was a trained man who reasoned in synagogues and marketplaces. What he refuses is the substitution of rhetorical polish for the message of the cross.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: 2 Samuel 1–10 · Psalm 22–23 · Mark 6:30–7:13 · 1 Corinthians 2–3

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