

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 40 OF 104

An Understanding Heart

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	1 Kings 1-5
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 29-30
Gospels	Mark 9:14-50
General New Testament	1 Corinthians 7:17-8:13

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to change the measuring stick. Solomon could have asked for anything and asked for a listening heart. The disciples measured greatness by rank and were handed a child. The Corinthians measured maturity by what they knew and were told that knowledge without love merely swells a man. By the end of the week the class should be asking a different question about themselves: not what do I know, and not what position do I hold, but who is better off because of me.

Doctrinally, two things need clear treatment. First, the strong words of Jesus in Mark 9:43-48 about final punishment: teach them plainly, without theatrics, and let the class feel that Jesus considered a soul worth any sacrifice. Second, the liberty principle of 1 Corinthians 8, which must be taught with both edges intact. A Christian gladly surrenders what is merely permitted for the sake of a brother, and he never surrenders what God has commanded in order to please anyone. That distinction, kept clean, will serve your congregation for years.

Formationally, the thread is attention. A listening heart, a father honest enough to name his unbelief, a psalm that admits comfort had made a man careless, a church told that love builds where knowledge only inflates. All of it requires paying attention to God and to people rather than to oneself. Put this question to your class before you dismiss: name one person in this congregation whose situation you genuinely do not know, and tell us when this week you will find out.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up 1 Kings 1-5 first. The dream at Gibeon frames the whole week, and the class will follow Solomon all month. Spend a few minutes on the transfer of the throne, then give the hour to chapter 3, and note the quiet warnings in 3:1-3 before you close.

Second session: Take up Mark 9:14-50 second. It presses the same question about greatness into a congregation's life and contains the hardest words Jesus ever spoke about sin. Plan your time so that 9:33-37 and 9:42-50 both get real attention rather than being rushed at the end.

The other two readings: First Corinthians 7:17-8:13 and Psalm 29-30 carry the week's private reading. Tell the class that chapter 8 is the opening of a three-chapter argument and that they should not settle it in their minds until they have read chapter 10. Encourage them to read Psalm 30 aloud and to notice verse 6.

Solomon Asks for Wisdom

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

First Kings opens with a palace in decline and a nation holding its breath. Adonijah has the chariots, the runners, the older claim, and the support of Joab and Abiathar. What he does not have is the word of God, and the whole first chapter turns on that. Nathan the prophet moves, Bathsheba speaks, David acts, and Solomon rides the king's own mule to Gihon. Adonijah's feast ends in men scattering from the table.

Chapter 2 is hard reading. David's deathbed instructions include unfinished business with Joab and Shimei, and Solomon establishes his throne with a series of executions. Teach it as the narrative presents it, as ancient royal justice in a violent world, and resist both the urge to sanitize David and the urge to make Solomon a villain. The text reports; it does not applaud.

Then comes Gibeon. God says, "Ask what I shall give thee," and everything about Solomon's answer is remarkable: he begins with what God has already done, confesses that he is a little child who does not know how to go out or come in, and asks for a hearing heart to judge God's people. God gives him what he asked and then adds what he did not ask, and the chapters that follow display the result. Keep one eye on the shadows already gathering, because chapter 11 is coming.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- First and Second Kings were originally one book, tracing the monarchy from Solomon's accession to the Babylonian exile and evaluating every king by one standard: faithfulness to the Lord.
- Solomon reigned roughly 970 to 930 B.C. The temple construction begins in the fourth year of his reign (6:1).
- Gibeon held the tabernacle and the bronze altar at this time (2 Chronicles 1:3–5), which explains why Solomon sacrificed there.
- The high places were local hilltop worship sites. Before the temple was built the situation was irregular rather than idolatrous, but they became a chronic snare for Israel and Judah (3:2–3).
- Hiram of Tyre supplied cedar and cypress and skilled labor; Solomon paid in wheat and oil. The temple was built with international trade, forced labor levies, and enormous expense, all of which the writer records without comment for now.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *God offers Solomon anything he wants (3:5). Talk through what he asks for, what he deliberately does not ask for, and what your own answer would honestly be at three in the morning with nobody listening.*

Solomon asks for an understanding heart, literally a hearing heart, to judge the people and discern between good and evil. He explicitly does not ask for long life, riches, or the death of his enemies, and God notes each omission. What makes the request remarkable is that it is not self-focused. He asks for what he needs in order to serve the people God gave him.

Turn the question on the class, but give them a moment of silence first. Most of us, offered anything, would name relief: from debt, from an illness, from a difficult person. Those are not shameful requests, and Scripture is full of them. But ask whether anyone would think to ask for the ability to tell good from evil, and then ask what that says about what we believe our real deficiency is.

Question 2. *David's charge in 2:1-4 ties the future of the throne to keeping God's word. Trace exactly what he tells Solomon the condition is, and discuss why a dying father so often names the very thing he most wishes he had done himself.*

David tells Solomon to be strong, to show himself a man, to keep the charge of the Lord, to walk in His ways, and to keep His statutes and commandments as written in the law of Moses, so that he may prosper in everything, and so that the promise of a descendant on the throne may stand. The condition is obedience, not cleverness or military strength.

The second half of the question is worth real time. David is the man who did not keep himself in the matter of Uriah, and now he tells his son that everything depends on keeping. Fathers often hand their children the lesson written in their own scars. Ask the men in your class what one charge they would leave their children, and whether their children have ever heard it said out loud.

Question 3. *Solomon asks for a listening heart so he can discern between good and evil. Where in your ordinary week do you most need that kind of discernment, and what would you have to quiet in order to hear anything at all?*

The Hebrew asks for a listening heart, which means discernment is first a matter of attention and only then of intelligence. Solomon is not asking for more information. He is asking to be able to tell the difference between what looks right and what is right, which is a skill no amount of data produces.

Press the second half hard, because it is the practical one. Nobody hears anything in a life with no quiet in it. Ask what specifically would need to go, or be turned off, or be declined, for a member of this class to sit for twenty uninterrupted minutes with an open Bible and an honest prayer. Then ask when this week that will happen, and have people name the day.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Chapter 1 opens with Adonijah exalting himself and saying, "I will be king." List everything he does to make it happen, then read 2 Samuel 15:1 and note how much of it he copied from his older brother.*

Adonijah exalts himself, prepares chariots, horsemen, and fifty men to run before him, secures the backing of Joab the general and Abiathar the priest, and throws a sacrificial feast at En Rogel for his supporters while pointedly not inviting Nathan, Benaiah, or Solomon. Absalom did nearly the same thing in 2 Samuel 15:1, chariots, horses, and fifty runners included. The text also notes that his father had never once displeased him by asking why he did anything (1:6), which is its own quiet sermon on parenting.

2. *Read 1 Kings 3:5-14 and list what God gave Solomon beyond what he asked for. Compare the principle Jesus states in Matthew 6:33.*

God gives him a wise and understanding heart such as no one before or after, and adds riches and honor, promising that no king would be like him in his days, along with a conditional promise of long life if he would walk in God's ways as David did. Matthew 6:33 states the principle Jesus taught: seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and these things will be added. The additions come to the person who was not chasing them.

3. *The case of the two mothers in 3:16-28 shows wisdom working in real time. Trace Solomon's method step by step, and explain how he got to the truth without a single witness.*

Solomon calls for a sword and orders the living child divided, knowing that the real mother will surrender her claim before she will watch her son die, and that the false claimant will accept the ruling because her grievance is envy rather than love. The proposal is never carried out; it is an instrument for exposing the heart. He gets to the truth by creating a situation in which love must reveal itself.

4. *Notice that 3:1 records a marriage alliance with Pharaoh's daughter and 3:2-3 mentions sacrificing at the high places. Consider why the writer would set those two details immediately before the greatest night of Solomon's life.*

The writer is planting seeds. The Egyptian marriage is the first of the foreign alliances that eventually turn Solomon's heart (11:1-4), and the high places, tolerated here, become the standing indictment of nearly every king who

follows. Placing them just before the dream at Gibeon is deliberate. This is a man genuinely devoted to God, and the compromises that will ruin him are already in the house. Great gifts do not cancel small concessions.

5. Solomon asked for something that would make him more useful to others rather than more comfortable himself.

Write out the prayer you have actually been praying this month, then write the prayer you ought to be praying, and pray the second one every day this week.

Answers will vary, and the gap between the two prayers is the point. Listen for movement from relief to character, from circumstances to discernment, from self to service. If several members admit their prayers have been almost entirely about comfort, do not shame them; point them to James 1:5, which promises wisdom to anyone who asks for it, and note that the promise there is wisdom, not wealth.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Chapter 2 records the executions of Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei, and the removal of Abiathar. Teach these as reported history in an ancient monarchy where a rival claimant was a standing threat. Scripture narrates without endorsing every action, and Christians live under a different covenant and a different King (Matthew 26:52; Romans 12:19).
- Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter is not approved. Foreign marriage alliances were forbidden precisely because of what they did to a king's heart (Deuteronomy 7:3–4), and 1 Kings 11 shows the outcome.
- Do not turn 1 Kings 3 into a formula that God gives whatever a believer asks if he asks unselfishly enough. The account is a historical event with a stated lesson about priorities, not a technique.
- The forced labor levy of chapter 5 is recorded without comment here and becomes a grievance in chapter 12. Let the tension stand; the writer intends it.

Thunder, Then Morning

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 29 begins in the heavenly court and ends in the temple, and in between it moves a storm across the whole map of Israel, from the Mediterranean waters to the cedars of Lebanon to the wilderness of Kadesh. The repeated refrain is the point: seven times the voice of the Lord does something, and every time it is the voice that does it. Israel's neighbors credited storms to Baal. This psalm takes the thunder away from the idols and hands it back to its Owner.

The last verse is where the psalm lands, and it is a surprise. All that power, and the conclusion is that the Lord will give strength to His people and bless His people with peace. The God who snaps cedar trees like kindling is the same God who quiets His own. Teach the storm, but end where the psalm ends.

Psalm 30 is a thanksgiving after a deliverance so severe that David speaks of being brought up from the grave. What lifts it above ordinary gratitude is verses 6 and 7, where he admits that in his easy season he had told himself he would never be moved, and that God simply hid His face and the confidence collapsed. He is not ashamed to say that his security had drifted from God to circumstances. Most of us know that drift and would never put it in writing.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 29 is a hymn of praise, structured around the sevenfold “voice of the Lord,” and it uses the storm as its controlling image.
- The “sons of the mighty” in 29:1 are heavenly beings summoned to give God glory; the psalm begins in heaven and moves to earth.
- Kadesh and Lebanon mark the geographical sweep of the storm, and Sirion is another name for Mount Hermon.
- Psalm 30 carries the title “A Song at the dedication of the house of David,” and is an individual thanksgiving following deliverance from a life-threatening trouble.
- Old Testament believers spoke of the realm of the dead with limited light. Life and immortality were brought fully to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10), so read verses like 30:9 as the honest speech of a man who did not yet have the resurrection of Christ behind him.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The phrase “the voice of the Lord” sounds seven times in Psalm 29. Read them in order and describe the God who emerges, and then talk about what that picture does to the size of whatever you are worried about today.*

The God of Psalm 29 is overwhelming and entirely unbothered. The voice is on the waters, powerful, full of majesty, breaking cedars, splitting flames of fire, shaking the wilderness, twisting the oaks, stripping the forests bare. And while all of that happens, everyone in His temple says, Glory. This is not a God who is managing a difficult situation. He is enthroned over the flood (29:10), which is language that reaches back to Genesis and says He was sovereign over the worst water the world ever saw.

Bring it home without trivializing anyone's trouble. The size of God does not make a hospital report small; it makes it survivable. Ask the class to name, silently, the thing they woke up thinking about, and then read verse 11 aloud over the room. Strength and peace are what this God hands to His own people, and He has plenty of both.

Question 2. In Psalm 30:6 David admits, “In my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved.” Why is comfort so quietly dangerous to faith, and where do you hear that same sentence running under your own thinking?

Comfort does not usually announce itself as a threat. It simply lets a man quietly begin to believe that his stability comes from his arrangements. David had a strong mountain, in his own words, and he mistook it for his own solidity. Deuteronomy 8:11–14 warns Israel about exactly this pattern before they ever entered the land: when you have eaten and are full, beware that you do not forget the Lord.

Ask where this sentence lives in your class: in a retirement account, in a healthy body, in a job that has always been there, in a marriage nobody works on because it has never been in trouble. Then note David’s cure. He did not conclude that prosperity was evil; he concluded that God, not the prosperity, had been holding the mountain up all along.

Question 3. Psalm 30:5 says weeping may last for a night but joy comes in the morning. How can we say that to a grieving friend without cheapening the night that person is actually sitting in?

Begin by making sure the class notices what the verse actually says. It says weeping may endure for a night, which is a real night, not a metaphor for a bad hour. Scripture never rushes grief. Jesus wept at a tomb He was about to open. Romans 12:15 commands weeping with those who weep, and it does not add a time limit.

So the pastoral answer is usually about timing and posture. The promise is true and belongs eventually to the grieving believer, but it is offered best by someone who has been willing to sit through the night with him, not by someone trying to shorten it. Ask the class who has lost someone in the last year, and what people said that helped and what did not. Then let them plan one visit.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Count the occurrences of “the voice of the Lord” in Psalm 29 and list what that voice does each time. Against the storm gods the surrounding nations feared, what is this psalm claiming?

The phrase occurs seven times (29:3, 4 twice, 5, 7, 8, 9). The voice is upon the waters, is powerful, is full of majesty, breaks the cedars, divides flames of fire, shakes the wilderness, and makes the deer give birth and strips the forests. The claim is total: the storm belongs to the Lord, not to Baal or any other weather deity. Israel is to look at the most fearsome thing in nature and recognize the voice of her own covenant God.

2. Psalm 29 closes with the Lord giving strength and peace to His people. Read Mark 4:39 and note who else spoke to wind and water and was obeyed.

Mark 4:39 records Jesus rebuking the wind and saying to the sea, “Peace, be still,” and the wind ceased and there was a great calm. The disciples ask who this can be that even the wind and the sea obey Him. Psalm 29 has already answered that question. The one whose voice commands the waters is the Lord, and the Gospels place Jesus in exactly that role.

3. The title of Psalm 30 connects it with the dedication of the house. Trace the psalm’s movement from crying out, to healing, to dancing, and mark the verse where David admits what he had learned about himself.

The psalm moves from “I cried unto Thee and Thou hast healed me,” to the confession of verses 6 and 7, to the plea of verses 8 through 10, to the closing declaration that God turned mourning into dancing and loosed his sackcloth. Verse 6 is where he admits what he had learned about himself: that in ease he had said he would never be moved. The lesson came out of the trouble, not out of the prosperity.

4. In Psalm 30:9 David argues that dust cannot praise God. Read Psalm 6:5 alongside 2 Timothy 1:10, and explain what an Old Testament believer did and did not yet know about life beyond death.

Psalm 6:5 and 30:9 both reason that the dead do not praise God in the land of the living, which is the perspective of a believer who has limited revelation about what lies beyond. This is honest prayer, not complete doctrine. Second Timothy 1:10 says Christ abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. We read these psalms with information David did not have, which is a mercy, and it is why a Christian grieves differently (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14).

5. *Psalm 30 was written to be sung at a dedication, that is, to say publicly what God had done. Write down three specific deliverances from your own life, with dates, and tell one of them out loud to someone this week.*

Answers will vary. The value of the exercise is in the dates, because specific memory resists doubt in a way that general gratitude does not. Encourage the class to keep the list somewhere they will find it during the next hard season. Then follow through on the second half: ask next week who actually told someone.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 29 is poetry. Do not build a doctrine of weather from it, and do not suggest that every storm is a specific message from God.
- The “sons of the mighty” in 29:1 refers to heavenly beings. Note it briefly and move on; the psalm is not teaching angelology and speculation will eat your hour.
- Psalm 30:5 is a general truth about God’s dealings with His people, not a guarantee that every sorrow ends by morning. Say so plainly, especially if someone in the class is in a long night.
- Read 30:9 and similar verses inside their own covenant setting. Old Testament saints had genuine but partial light on life after death; do not read the full New Testament hope back into their words, and do not conclude they had no hope at all.

Help My Unbelief

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The contrast Mark builds is deliberate and brutal. On the mountain there is glory, a cloud, and the Father's voice. At the bottom of the mountain there is a shouting crowd, a defeated group of disciples, a boy convulsing in the dirt, and a father at the end of his resources. Discipleship happens at the bottom of the mountain far more often than at the top.

The father's honesty is the heart of the passage. He says, "If You can do anything, have compassion on us," and Jesus turns the "if" back on him. Then comes the cry: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." Notice that Jesus does not send him away to work up more faith. He heals the boy. Faith that admits its own weakness is still faith, and it is the only kind most of us ever have on a bad day.

The last half of the chapter is about greatness and about seriousness. The disciples, told a second time that their Master will be killed, argue about rank. Jesus sits down, which is the posture of a teacher, and says that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Then He picks up a child, who in that world had no status to lend anyone, and says receiving one such child is receiving Him. The warnings that follow about millstones and hands and eyes are the sharpest language Jesus ever used, and He used it to protect little ones and to save souls.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This is the second of three passion predictions in Mark (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34), and each is followed by the disciples' failure to understand and a lesson on servanthood.
- The word rendered "hell" in 9:43–48 is Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, a place of former child sacrifice and later of burning refuse, which Jesus uses as the name for final punishment.
- Mark 9:48 quotes Isaiah 66:24, the closing verse of that prophet, which gave the image its force for a Jewish hearer.
- Some manuscripts include "and fasting" in 9:29, and verses 44 and 46 are absent from the earliest manuscripts. Mention this only if asked, and note that no doctrine depends on it.
- Capernaum, where the greatness argument is settled (9:33), was the home base of Jesus' Galilean ministry and probably Peter's house.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The father cries out, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (9:24). Is that a contradiction, and what does his honesty teach us about praying when our faith is thinner than we want to admit?*

It is not a contradiction; it is a description. This man believes enough to come, enough to argue, enough to ask, and he knows that his belief has holes in it because he has watched the disciples fail and he has lived with this for years. He does the one thing faith can do with its own weakness: he brings it to Jesus and asks Him to supply what is missing.

Give the class permission to pray that way. Many people believe they must manufacture certainty before God will listen, which means their worst days become their least prayerful days. Point out that Jesus healed the boy immediately after that confession, not after the man improved. Then ask what each of them would say if they were as honest as this father, and note that Jesus can work with that sentence.

Question 2. *While Jesus is telling them He will be killed, the disciples argue on the road about who is greatest. Look at what He does with a child in 9:36–37, and talk about where that same competition runs quietly through a congregation today.*

Jesus answers a question about rank by taking a child in His arms. In that culture a child had no legal standing, no wealth, no influence, and nothing to offer a man climbing a ladder. To receive such a person in Jesus' name, with nothing to gain by it, is to receive Jesus and the Father who sent Him. Greatness in the kingdom is measured by service given where no repayment is possible.

The competition shows up now in familiar clothes: who gets asked to lead, whose name appears on the program, whose opinion carries weight in the fellowship hall, which family sits where. It is rarely spoken aloud, which is exactly how it survives. Ask the class who in this congregation does necessary work nobody sees, and then ask each member to name one act of service this week that no one will know about.

Question 3. *In 9:43–48 Jesus speaks of cutting off a hand and tearing out an eye. He is plainly not commanding self-mutilation, so what is He commanding, and what would obeying it actually cost you this week?*

He is commanding decisive, costly removal of whatever is carrying a person into sin. The hand, the foot, and the eye are not the culprits; they are the instruments, and Jesus names them because we defend our instruments. The command is to cut off access, to take the drastic step rather than the gradual one, because the alternative He names is unquenchable fire. He is not exaggerating about the stakes; He is being merciful about the cost.

Make the class be specific or this becomes a pleasant abstraction. What device goes out of the bedroom. What friendship ends. What route home changes. What account gets deleted. What time does the phone go in a drawer. Then acknowledge the honest objection: it will hurt, it will be inconvenient, and people will ask why. Jesus already granted all of that. He simply weighed it against a soul and found it light.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the father's words through 9:17–24. Notice how his request moves from "if You can do anything" to his final cry, and note the sentence of Jesus that came between the two.*

He begins by describing the problem to Jesus and reporting that the disciples could not cast it out. Then he says, "If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Jesus answers, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him that believes," putting the question of ability back where it belonged. Immediately the father cries out with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." The turning point is the moment the man stops assessing Jesus and starts confessing himself.

2. *Read Mark 9:35 with Mark 10:43–45 and Philippians 2:5–8, and then state the kingdom's standard of greatness in one sentence of your own.*

Mark 9:35 says whoever desires to be first shall be last of all and servant of all. Mark 10:45 grounds it in Jesus Himself, who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many. Philippians 2 shows Him emptying Himself, taking the form of a servant, and becoming obedient to death. In one sentence: in the kingdom, greatness is measured by how far down you are willing to go for people who cannot pay you back.

3. *In 9:38–41 John reports that they stopped a man casting out demons in Jesus' name because he was not one of their group. List the reasons Jesus gives for not forbidding him, and consider how party spirit still shows itself among Christians.*

Jesus says no one who works a miracle in His name can lightly speak evil of Him, that whoever is not against them is on their side, and that even a cup of water given in His name will not lose its reward. John's objection was not doctrinal, it was proprietary: the man was not following us. That instinct still operates whenever a congregation measures faithfulness by likeness to itself rather than by the Scriptures. Note carefully that Jesus is dealing with a man acting in His name during His earthly ministry, not establishing a principle that doctrine does not matter (compare 2 John 9–11).

4. *Jesus warns about causing one of these little ones to stumble (9:42). Read Romans 14:13 and 1 Corinthians 8:12, and list concrete ways an older Christian can trip a younger one.*

Romans 14:13 says to resolve not to put a stumbling block in a brother's way; 1 Corinthians 8:12 says wounding a weak conscience is sinning against Christ. Concrete examples: exercising a liberty in front of someone who cannot yet handle it, careless speech about a sin the younger Christian is fighting, cynicism about the church spoken where a new convert can hear it, inconsistency between Sunday and Monday that a watching young person files away permanently. Mark 9:42 measures all of it by a millstone.

5. *Jesus says to have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another (9:50). Name the one relationship in this congregation where you are not at peace, and the specific step you will take toward it before next Sunday.*

Answers will vary and this one should not be shared aloud. The step must be specific: a phone call, a note, a visit, an apology with no defense attached. Warn the class against the counterfeit, which is deciding to forgive someone privately and never speaking to him again. Matthew 5:23-24 puts the responsibility on the one who remembers the problem, regardless of who started it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Teach 9:43-48 plainly. Punishment after death is real, it is conscious, and Jesus spoke of it more than anyone else in Scripture. Do not sensationalize it, do not soften it, and do not use it to frighten children into a decision.
- Do not bind fasting on the congregation from 9:29. Fasting appears in Scripture as a voluntary practice, not a command to Christians, and the manuscript question at that verse is worth a brief honest word if it arises.
- Mark 9:38-41 is not an endorsement of denominational division or of the idea that doctrine is secondary. Keep the passage in its setting and let John's party spirit, not the man's independence, be the lesson.
- The casting out of demons in this account belongs to the ministry of Christ and the confirming work of the first century (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3-4). Handle questions about the miraculous today from that framework rather than from anyone's experience.

Liberty and the Weaker Brother

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The paragraph beginning at 7:17 states a rule Paul says he lays down in all the churches: let each person walk as the Lord has assigned and as God has called him. He applies it to the two great social divisions of his world, Jew and Gentile, slave and free. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing; what matters is keeping God's commandments. That is a stunning sentence from a former Pharisee, and it relocates a Christian's identity entirely.

His counsel about singleness deserves care. Paul is not teaching that the unmarried state is holier. He says plainly in verse 35 that he is speaking for their profit, not to put a leash on anyone, and that he wants them free from distraction and attentive to the Lord. Marriage is honorable and singleness is honorable, and the question for each person is where he can serve without divided attention. Some in your class are single and tired of being treated as incomplete. Let this passage give them dignity.

Chapter 8 opens a discussion that runs through chapter 10. The Corinthians had written asking about meat sold or served after being offered in a pagan temple, and some of them had the theology exactly right: an idol is nothing, there is one God. Paul agrees, then tells them their knowledge is not the deciding factor. Some brothers, recently out of paganism, cannot eat that meat without their conscience dragging them back. To press them is to wound them, and wounding a brother for whom Christ died is a sin against Christ.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Meat from pagan sacrifices was routinely sold in Corinth's markets and served at civic banquets, so this was a weekly practical question, not an abstraction.
- Corinth had many recent converts out of idolatry; for them the sight of a Christian eating in a temple dining room carried a meaning no argument could erase.
- Slavery in the Roman world was widespread and not race-based. Paul regulates the Christian's conduct within it and tells a slave who can gain freedom to take it (7:21); the gospel's principles eventually dissolved the institution (Philemon 15–16; Galatians 3:28).
- The "present distress" of 7:26 points to pressure on the church at the time of writing and shapes Paul's practical advice about changing one's situation.
- First Corinthians 8:6 is one of the New Testament's clearest confessions: one God the Father, of whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Three times in 7:17–24 Paul tells the Corinthians to remain where God called them. How is that different from resignation, and where do we burn energy wishing for a different life instead of serving God in the one we have?*

Paul is not telling anyone to stop improving his circumstances; he explicitly tells a slave to take freedom if he can get it. He is saying that your standing before God does not depend on your social situation, so you may serve Him fully starting today, exactly where you are. That is the opposite of resignation. Resignation says nothing matters; Paul says everything matters right here.

The application is sharp for a discontented class. People postpone obedience until the better job, the right spouse, the move, the retirement. Ask what each person is waiting for before he starts serving seriously, and then ask what Paul would say about that particular waiting. God called you in the life you have. Begin there.

Question 2. *Paul writes in 8:1 that knowledge puffs up but love builds up. Describe a time you have watched that happen, and talk about how a congregation can be well taught and humble at the same time.*

Knowledge inflates a man's sense of himself; love enlarges someone else. Paul adds a stinging line in 8:2: if anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know as he ought to know. The measure of real understanding is not how much a person can explain but what his understanding does to his treatment of people.

A congregation stays both taught and humble when its teaching keeps ending in service. Ask the class to name the most knowledgeable Christian they have known who was also the gentlest, and what made him that way. Then ask honestly whether our Bible discussions have ever been used to win rather than to build, and whether anyone has been embarrassed in a class because someone needed to be right.

Question 3. *Paul says he would give up meat permanently rather than trip a brother (8:13). Which of your own liberties would you surrender for someone whose conscience is weaker, and what makes that surrender so difficult?*

Notice what Paul is willing to give up and why. Meat was not a small thing in his world, and his right to eat it was genuine. He surrenders it, permanently if necessary, for the sake of one brother's conscience. He will not use a liberty as a battering ram. What he refuses to surrender, as chapter 10 shows, is anything God has actually commanded or forbidden.

Draw the line carefully with the class, because this is where the principle gets misapplied in both directions. A weak conscience is one that has not yet grasped its freedom, not one that enjoys being offended and using that as leverage. And the principle covers matters genuinely indifferent; it never authorizes a Christian to alter what God has revealed about worship or morals in order to please someone. Ask what liberty each person could lay down this month, and who would benefit.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the advantages Paul names for remaining unmarried in 7:32–35, and note carefully the reason he gives in verse 35 for saying any of it.*

Paul says the unmarried man cares for the things of the Lord and how to please Him, while the married man cares for the things of the world and how to please his wife, and the same is said of women. The unmarried person is undivided. Verse 35 supplies the motive: he speaks for their own profit, not to cast a snare upon them, but so they may serve the Lord without distraction. It is counsel about usefulness, not a ranking of holiness.

2. *Paul says an idol is nothing in the world (8:4). Read 1 Corinthians 10:19–20 and explain how both of those statements can be true at the same time.*

Both are true because they answer different questions. An idol has no real existence as a god; the carved thing is wood and the deity it represents is not there (8:4; Isaiah 44:9–20). But 10:19–20 says that what the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, so the worship itself is not empty of spiritual danger. The statue is nothing; the false worship is something, and a Christian has no business at that table.

3. *Trace the word conscience through 8:7–12. What happens to a weak conscience when it is pressured, and against whom does Paul say the stronger brother is sinning?*

Paul says not everyone has that knowledge, and some, being accustomed to the idol, eat the meat as though it were truly offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Pressed further, the weak brother is emboldened to act against his own conscience, and he is destroyed, the one for whom Christ died. Paul says that when you sin against the brethren this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. The offense runs straight past the brother to the Lord.

4. *Compare Romans 14:1–4 with 1 Corinthians 8. Who is called weak in each passage, and what does the stronger Christian owe him?*

In Romans 14 the weak brother is the one who eats only vegetables and regards certain days; in 1 Corinthians 8 he is the recent convert who cannot separate the meat from the idol. In both cases the weak brother is the one with the narrower conscience, and in both cases the responsibility falls mainly on the stronger: receive him without disputing,

do not despise him, do not put a stumbling block in his way, and please your neighbor for his good and edification (Romans 15:1-2). Strength in Scripture is measured by what it will give up.

5. *Name one thing you do that is genuinely permitted but that a younger or weaker Christian could easily misread. Decide this week whether love asks you to lay it down, and tell one person what you decided.*

Answers will vary. Listen for real liberties in genuinely indifferent matters, and steer the class away from using this question to bind personal scruples on everyone else. The healthiest answers involve someone specific: a new convert who is watching, a young person in the family, a brother recently out of a destructive habit. Love that has a name attached to it is the only kind Paul is talking about.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Paul's instructions to slaves regulate a Christian's conduct inside a wicked institution; they do not endorse it. Note 7:21, where he tells a slave to use freedom if he can obtain it, and Philemon, where the gospel quietly dismantles the whole arrangement.
- Do not teach that singleness is spiritually superior or that marriage is a concession for the weak. Both are honorable (Hebrews 13:4; 1 Timothy 4:1-3), and 7:39 adds the standing requirement that a Christian marry "only in the Lord."
- Guard the weak brother principle from misuse in both directions. It does not permit a professional objector to govern a congregation by taking offense, and it does not permit a Christian to set aside anything God has commanded or forbidden. It governs matters that are genuinely indifferent.
- Chapter 8 does not authorize participation in false worship. Paul says so directly in 10:14-22, which your class will read next week; you may want to signal that now so nobody leaves with half the argument.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: 1 Kings 6-10 · Psalm 31 · Mark 10:1-31 · 1 Corinthians 9:1-10:22

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