

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 43 OF 104

The Lord, He Is God

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	1 Kings 18-22
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 34
Gospels	Mark 11:15-12:17
General New Testament	1 Corinthians 12-13

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to bring the class to a settled answer on the question every reading raises: who has the right to say? Carmel forces a nation to answer it about Baal. The chief priests refuse to answer it about John and therefore about Jesus. Corinth had to learn that even the Spirit's own gifts do not make a man the authority over his brethren. And David, who had exhausted his own cleverness in Gath, simply invites everyone to taste and find out that the Lord is good.

Doctrinally, the weight falls on 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. Teach it plainly: the confirming gifts had a purpose, that purpose was the confirmation of a word not yet complete, and when the complete revelation arrived the partial means passed away. Support it from Mark 16:20, Hebrews 2:3-4, Jude 3, and 2 Timothy 3:16-17, and teach it with the gentleness of a man who knows that many sincere people have been taught the opposite since childhood. Also handle Mark 11:22-24 carefully so that no one leaves believing prayer is a mechanism for getting whatever he names.

Formationally, the thread is what happens after the fire falls. Elijah won the greatest public victory in the Old Testament and was suicidal within a day. The crowd in the temple hung on Jesus' words and did not lift a finger for Him five days later. Corinth had every spectacular gift and could not love each other through a common meal. Ask your class this before you dismiss: what is the most spiritually significant thing that has ever happened to you, and what are you doing now, in an ordinary week, to keep on walking with the God who did it?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up 1 Corinthians 12-13 first and give it the whole hour. It requires a teacher, it raises the week's most important doctrinal question, and 13:8-10 needs to be taught carefully rather than squeezed in at the end. Open with the body in chapter 12 so that love, not argument, frames the discussion of cessation.

Second session: Take up 1 Kings 18-22 second, focusing on chapters 18 and 19. Carmel is the clearest call to decision in the Old Testament, and the broom tree is the most pastoral scene in the life of any prophet. Spend real time on how God cared for an exhausted man before He corrected him.

The other two readings: Mark 11:15-12:17 and Psalm 34 carry the private reading well. Point the class to 12:17 and ask them to consider all week what bears God's image and therefore belongs to Him. Suggest they read Psalm 34 after reading 1 Samuel 21:10-15, so they see the day it came out of.

Fire, Whisper, and a Vineyard

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Carmel is the most public contest in the Old Testament, and Elijah frames it with a question rather than a sermon. How long will you go limping between two opinions? The Hebrew pictures a man hobbling on both sides, and it is a devastating description of a nation that had not renounced the Lord but had simply added Baal to the arrangement. Israel's sin was not atheism. It was hedging.

Note how the day is structured. The prophets of Baal get the whole morning and most of the afternoon, every advantage, and their god is silent through shouting, dancing, and self-mutilation. Elijah then repairs the altar of the Lord that was broken down, using twelve stones for twelve tribes, and floods the trench. His prayer is brief and it asks for one thing: that the people would know the Lord is God and that He has turned their hearts back. The fire falls, and the nation falls on its faces.

Then chapter 19, which is why this man is so useful to a class. One threatening message from Jezebel and Elijah runs two hundred miles and asks to die. God does not rebuke him. He lets him sleep, feeds him twice, asks him twice what he is doing there, shows him wind and earthquake and fire and then speaks in a low whisper, gives him three assignments, and tells him about seven thousand others he did not know existed. Exhaustion lies, and God answers the lie with bread, rest, work, and company.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Ahab reigned in the northern kingdom roughly 874 to 853 B.C., and 16:33 says he did more to provoke the Lord than all the kings before him.
- Baal was believed to control storms and fertility, which is why God's judgment took the form of a three-year drought and why the contest was settled by fire and then by rain.
- Mount Carmel is a ridge overlooking the Mediterranean in the north of Israel; Horeb, where Elijah flees, is Sinai, where God gave the Law to Moses.
- Naboth's refusal to sell was not stubbornness. The Law forbade permanently transferring a family's inheritance (Leviticus 25:23; Numbers 36:7), so Ahab was asking him to break covenant law.
- Elijah and Elisha minister in a period when the northern kingdom was officially given over to Baal, and their miracles confirm them as God's spokesmen in a nation that had rejected His word (compare Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Elijah asks how long Israel will go limping between two opinions, and the people answer him not a word (18:21). What does that silence actually mean, and where do we practice the same silence?*

The silence means they had no answer, which is itself the answer. They could not defend Baal and they would not commit to the Lord, and so they stood there. That is precisely the condition Elijah named. A person who has never formally rejected God but who will not decide anything has already made a decision; he has decided not to choose, and Revelation 3:15–16 says what God thinks of that temperature.

Bring it into the room without lecturing. Where do we go quiet? When a coworker asks what we believe. When a family member's life is coming apart and we say nothing. When a conversation turns and we laugh along. Ask the class to name one conversation they have been avoiding, and note that Elijah did not ask the people to argue; he asked them to choose.

Question 2. *Elijah goes from the greatest day of his life to asking God to take it, within a single chapter. Trace everything God does for him in 19:5–18, in order, and talk about what that reveals about how God handles exhausted people.*

The order is instructive. First an angel touches him and tells him to eat, and there is bread and water; he eats and sleeps and is fed again, because the journey is too great for him. Then a question: what are you doing here, Elijah. Then the wind, earthquake, and fire, and the Lord in the low whisper. Then the question again, then three assignments, and finally the fact that seven thousand have not bowed to Baal.

He needed sleep and food first, and God gave them first. That ordering deserves saying out loud in a class full of tired people. God did not begin with a correction or a theology lecture. He began with a meal. Then note the lie Elijah believed twice, that he alone was left, and how God answered it with a number. Isolation distorts everything. Ask who in the class has been running alone, and who will call them this week.

Question 3. *Ahab wanted a vegetable garden, and it cost Naboth his life and his family their inheritance. Where does ordinary, unremarkable covetousness start doing real damage in our lives, and what actually stops it?*

Covetousness rarely announces itself as theft. Ahab wanted a garden close to the palace, offered a fair price, and went home sulking when he could not have it. He never lifted a hand; he just went to bed with his face to the wall and let his wife handle it. The commandment against coveting is the only one of the ten that regulates a desire rather than an act, and it is there because desires become acts through other people.

Ask where small wanting has already cost something: a purchase that put a family under strain, a comparison that poisoned a friendship, an ambition that has quietly rearranged a household's life around one person's appetite. The stopping point, biblically, is contentment learned deliberately (Philippians 4:11–12; 1 Timothy 6:6–8; Hebrews 13:5). Ask each person to name one thing he will stop looking at, since Ahab's trouble began with a view from a window.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Count everything Elijah does before the fire falls in 18:30–37, including the four barrels poured three times. Why would he go out of his way to make the miracle harder?*

He repairs the broken altar of the Lord with twelve stones, digs a trench around it, arranges the wood, cuts the bullock in pieces, lays it on the wood, and has four barrels of water poured over the sacrifice three separate times until the water fills the trench. He makes the miracle harder because he intends to remove every possible explanation. When the fire falls it consumes the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust, and licks up the water in the trench. Elijah was not staging a demonstration; he was eliminating every alternative.

2. *Compare the prayer of Baal's prophets in 18:26–29 with Elijah's prayer in 18:36–37. List every difference you can find, then read Matthew 6:7.*

Baal's prophets cried from morning until noon, leaped on the altar, cried aloud, cut themselves with knives and lancets until the blood gushed out, and prophesied until the evening sacrifice, and there was no voice, no answer, no one paying attention. Elijah prayed a few sentences, addressed God by covenant name, asked that the people would know who God is and that their hearts would be turned back, and the fire fell at once. Matthew 6:7 warns against vain repetitions, thinking we will be heard for much speaking. Volume, duration, and physical extremity are not what God responds to.

3. *Read 1 Kings 19:5–18 and list what God gives Elijah: food, sleep, a question, a word, a commission, and a fact he did not know. Which of them does he appear to have needed first?*

God gives him food twice, sleep twice, the question "What doest thou here, Elijah," the revelation at Horeb and the still small voice, the commission to anoint Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha, and the information that seven thousand in Israel have not bowed to Baal. He needed the food and sleep first, and that is exactly what he got first. Physical depletion is not a spiritual failure, and God treated it as a real problem before He addressed anything else.

4. *Micaiah stands alone against four hundred prophets in 22:6–28. Trace what he says, what it costs him, and how he answers the messenger who coaches him on the way in. Then read Galatians 1:10.*

Micaiah is told by the messenger that all the prophets are speaking good to the king and that he should do the same, and he answers that he will speak only what the Lord says. He first answers sarcastically, echoing the four hundred, and then tells the truth: Israel scattered like sheep without a shepherd, and the king dead. He is struck in the face by Zedekiah and sent to prison on bread and water. Galatians 1:10 asks whether Paul seeks to please men, and answers that if he still pleased men he would not be the servant of Christ. Micaiah had already settled that question.

5. *Elijah told a nation to quit limping between two opinions. Name the one area of your own life where you are limping, and the decision you will make this week that puts your weight on one foot.*

Answers will vary. Listen for specific limping: a relationship kept just outside the boundary, an entertainment habit kept quiet, a Sunday commitment that bends whenever anything else comes up, a faith never mentioned at work. Press for a decision rather than an intention, and ask what will be visibly different by next Sunday.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The execution of Baal's prophets (18:40) took place under the Law of Moses in a theocracy where idolatry was treason (Deuteronomy 13:1–5). It is reported history, not a pattern for Christians, who wage a different kind of warfare (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; John 18:36).
- Handle Elijah's despair with care. Scripture does not condemn him for it, and God met him with food, rest, and a task. If someone in your class is in that place, do not reduce it to a spiritual failure, and know where to point them for help.
- The still small voice is not a promise of private revelation today. God spoke to Elijah directly because Elijah was a prophet. God now speaks to us in His Son through the completed Scriptures (Hebrews 1:1–2; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- First Kings 22:19–23 pictures a lying spirit in the mouth of Ahab's prophets. Teach it as the vivid throne-room imagery it is: God permitted the deception a determined king had already chosen. God tempts no one (James 1:13), and Ahab had been told the truth plainly by Micaiah before he rode out.

Taste and See

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Read 1 Samuel 21 before you teach this psalm and the whole thing changes color. David had fled Saul, lied to a priest, taken Goliath's sword, and ended up in Gath, the giant's hometown, with the sword in his hand. Recognized and terrified, he scratched on the doors and let saliva run down his beard until the king threw him out as a lunatic. Then he sat down and wrote this. The praise in verse 1 is not the overflow of a good week.

The psalm divides cleanly. Verses 1 through 10 are testimony: I sought the Lord, He heard me, this poor man cried, the angel of the Lord encamps, taste and see, the young lions lack but those who seek the Lord shall not want any good thing. Verses 11 through 22 are instruction, introduced by a teacher's invitation: come, children, listen to me, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

What makes it valuable in a class is that the instruction is concrete and unglamorous. Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it. That is what the fear of the Lord looks like on a Tuesday. And then the promises stack up at the end, including the one that carried David through Gath: the Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The superscription refers to Abimelech, apparently a title for Philistine kings, while 1 Samuel 21 names the man Achish.
- The psalm is an acrostic, like Psalm 25, and one letter is missing, which is common in Hebrew acrostics.
- It is a psalm of thanksgiving that turns into a wisdom psalm, moving from personal testimony to public instruction.
- "The angel of the Lord" encamping around those who fear Him (34:7) is a picture of God's protective presence; compare 2 Kings 6:15–17.
- Verse 20 is applied to Christ in John 19:36, where the soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves but not of Jesus, since He was already dead.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The title connects this psalm to the day David pretended to be insane to escape a Philistine king (1 Samuel 21:10–15). Read that account first, then read verse 1, and talk about what it means to bless the Lord at all times after a day like that.*

It means the praise is a decision rather than a reaction. David does not say he will bless the Lord when things go well; he says at all times, and His praise will continually be in his mouth. He wrote that after a day of terror and humiliation, which means the psalm is not denying the day. Verse 4 says, I sought the Lord and He delivered me from all my fears, and verse 6 calls him this poor man who cried.

Note too that David's own conduct in 1 Samuel 21 is not held up as an example; he had run without asking God anything, and the account of Doeg and the priests in 1 Samuel 22 is the tragic result. God delivered him anyway. Ask the class whether they can praise God for rescuing them from a mess they made themselves, and what it would mean to start a hard morning with verse 1 said out loud.

Question 2. *Verse 8 says to taste and see that the Lord is good. Why would the psalm use a word about eating rather than a word about thinking, and what exactly is it asking a person to do?*

Because tasting is personal and unavoidable. You can study a loaf of bread from across a room and never know anything about it. The psalm is not asking for an opinion about God; it is asking for an experiment, a decision to

trust Him and find out. Peter takes the same verse and applies it to new Christians who have tasted that the Lord is gracious (1 Peter 2:3).

For your class, the practical form is doing the thing God says and finding out that He was right. Give the tenth and see. Forgive and see. Tell the truth when it costs and see. Ask whether anyone in the class can name a specific time when obedience came first and understanding came afterward, and let those testimonies carry the hour.

Question 3. *Verses 12 through 14 give the recipe for loving life and seeing good days, and most of it concerns the tongue. Where would obeying those three verses cost you something specific this week?*

The instruction is blunt: keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile, depart from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. Notice that three of those four commands govern speech or the pursuit of peace, which means most of what wrecks a life happens in conversation. James builds an entire chapter on the same conviction.

Push for cost. It may mean not repeating the thing you know, not delivering the line you have been rehearsing, not answering the message while you are angry, or going first to someone who wronged you. Ask the class to pick one and to notice, at the end of the week, whether their life felt different. That is precisely the promise of verse 12.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Psalm 34 is an acrostic, one line for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Read it straight through and list every promise made to the person who fears the Lord.*

The promises include that those who seek Him are delivered from all their fears, that they are not ashamed, that the Lord hears and saves out of troubles, that the angel of the Lord encamps around them, that those who fear Him have no lack, that those who seek Him shall not want any good thing, that the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears open to their cry, that He is near the brokenhearted, that He delivers the righteous out of all their afflictions, that He keeps their bones, and that none who trust in Him will be desolate. Read as the general principles of wisdom writing, not as absolute guarantees of comfort.

2. *Peter quotes Psalm 34:12–16 in 1 Peter 3:10–12. Read his use of it and note what he is asking of Christians who are being mistreated.*

Peter applies the psalm to Christians suffering unjust treatment, and he uses it to forbid retaliation: not returning evil for evil or railing for railing, but blessing instead. The psalm's instruction about the tongue becomes the Christian's response to mistreatment. Peter also carries over the promise that the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous and His ears open to their prayers, which is exactly the comfort a mistreated believer needs.

3. *Verse 19 says many are the afflictions of the righteous and then promises deliverance out of them all. Explain how the two halves fit together, then read 2 Corinthians 4:17–18.*

The two halves fit because the promise is deliverance out of afflictions, not exemption from them. The psalm assumes the righteous will have many troubles, and says God brings them through. Second Corinthians 4:17–18 puts it in the largest frame: the light affliction, which is for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we look at what is not seen. Deliverance is certain; its timing and its shape belong to God.

4. *John 19:36 applies verse 20 to Jesus on the cross. Trace the connection, and note what John says was fulfilled and what had to be true for it to be fulfilled.*

The psalm says the Lord keeps all the bones of the righteous, not one of them is broken. John 19:36 says the soldiers did not break Jesus' legs, as they had the two beside Him, and that this fulfilled the Scripture. John connects it to the Passover lamb as well (Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:12). For it to be fulfilled, Jesus had to be dead already when they came to Him, which John records and underlines with the blood and water in verse 34.

5. *Verse 3 says, "O magnify the Lord with me," which is spoken to somebody else. Name one person you will invite this week, to a service, to a meal at your table, or to read the Scriptures with you, and set the day.*

Answers will vary, and the value is in the name and the date. Push past "I will invite someone" to a specific person and a specific day. Note that verse 3 is an invitation to shared worship, so a meal followed by a service is often the most natural form. Ask next week who actually asked.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- David's deception in Gath is reported, not commended, and 1 Samuel 22 records the terrible cost of that visit. Do not turn his cleverness into a virtue.
- Statements like "they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing" are general principles in wisdom writing, not a promise of material prosperity. Faithful people have gone hungry (Hebrews 11:37-38), and Christ Himself had nowhere to lay His head.
- Verse 7 is a comfort, not a system. Do not build an elaborate doctrine of personal guardian angels out of a poetic line; say what the verse says and move on.
- Read the acrostic form as a mark of careful composition. As with Psalm 25, David wrote deliberately in a season of fear, which is itself a lesson about prayer.

By What Authority

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The cleansing of the temple is the second act of a two-part message. The withered fig tree is the first: a tree in full leaf, advertising fruit, having none. Mark sandwiches the temple scene inside the fig tree account deliberately, so that the reader understands what Jesus saw when He looked around the evening before. The activity was impressive. The fruit was not there.

What follows is a series of confrontations, and they are all about authority. The chief priests, scribes, and elders come as an official delegation, and their question is fair on its face: by what authority are You doing these things? Jesus answers with a question about John, and their deliberation is one of the most revealing paragraphs in the Gospels. They do not ask what is true. They ask what answer costs least, and end up saying they do not know.

Then the parable of the vineyard, which is Isaiah 5 with a new ending. The tenants beat and kill the servants, and finally kill the son, thinking the inheritance will fall to them. Jesus says the owner will destroy them and give the vineyard to others, and quotes Psalm 118 about the stone the builders rejected becoming the head of the corner. The leaders understood He had spoken the parable against them, and wanted to arrest Him on the spot. The coin question follows immediately, an alliance of Pharisees and Herodians who agreed on nothing except that this man had to go.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The buying and selling took place in the court of the Gentiles, the only part of the temple a non-Jew could enter, which is why Isaiah's phrase "for all nations" is so pointed.
- Temple currency exchange and the sale of approved animals were necessary services that had become a monopoly conducted in the place of worship at a profit.
- Jeremiah 7:11 comes from a sermon warning Judah that the temple would not protect them from judgment; the original hearers of Jesus knew the context.
- Isaiah 5:1–7 identifies the vineyard as the house of Israel, which makes the parable in Mark 12 unmistakable to the leaders.
- The Pharisees opposed Roman taxation and the Herodians supported Herod's Roman-backed rule. The question was designed so that either answer would destroy Him with one group or the other.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus quotes Isaiah about a house of prayer for all nations while standing in the one court a Gentile was allowed to enter. How does that detail sharpen what He was actually angry about?*

It sharpens everything. The market was set up in the only space where a Gentile could pray, which means the commerce was not merely irreverent, it was exclusionary. God had said His house would be called a house of prayer for all nations, and the people running it had turned the nations' courtyard into a stockyard. Jesus was defending the access of outsiders as much as the dignity of the place.

Ask the uncomfortable parallel. Is there anything about the way we assemble that makes access harder for someone outside? Not the gospel, which will always offend some, but our arrangements, our vocabulary, our cliques, the way we handle a visitor who does not know what to do during the Supper. Jesus was fierce about a barrier that had been put up for good reasons and became a wall.

Question 2. *The chief priests demand to know by what authority He acts, and Jesus answers with a question about John's baptism. Look carefully at how they arrive at their answer in 11:31–33. What has happened to men who calculate their theology that way?*

They reason it out completely: if we say from heaven, He will ask why we did not believe him; if we say from men, we fear the people. Truth never enters the discussion. These are men whose theology has become a calculation of consequences, and their final answer, we cannot tell, is a lie they preferred to the two honest answers available.

What has happened to such men is that they have lost the ability to be taught. Jesus therefore refuses to answer them, not out of pique, but because more evidence does not help a man who has already decided that truth is negotiable. Ask the class where they have caught themselves deciding what they believe by what it would cost them to believe it. This is a sin that mostly afflicts the religious, which is why Jesus aimed it at the professionals.

Question 3. *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's (12:17). Work out what goes in each hand, and talk about where that line actually runs for a Christian today.*

Jesus does not divide life into a sacred half and a secular half. He acknowledges that the state has genuine claims, taxes among them, and Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17 spell out the Christian's obligation to civil government. But the second half of His answer is the larger one. The coin bore Caesar's image, so give it back to him. A human being bears God's image, so give yourself back to God.

Work the line carefully with the class. Christians pay taxes, obey laws, honor officials, and pray for them. Christians also refuse when a government commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands (Acts 5:29; Daniel 3). Keep partisan politics out of the discussion entirely; the point of the text is not which Caesar but which claim is ultimate.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List what Jesus overturned and what He refused to allow in 11:15–16. Read Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11 and note the two passages He joined together.*

He cast out those who sold and those who bought, overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. He joined Isaiah 56:7, which promises that God's house will be called a house of prayer for all nations, with Jeremiah 7:11, which accuses the people of making it a den of robbers. The first names what it was supposed to be; the second names what they had made it.

2. *Trace the parable of the vineyard in 12:1–11 and identify the owner, the vineyard, the servants, the son, and the others who receive the vineyard. Then read Isaiah 5:1–7.*

The owner is God, the vineyard is Israel, the servants are the prophets sent over the centuries and mistreated, the son is Jesus Himself, and the others who receive the vineyard are those who will bear its fruit, which the New Testament identifies as the church gathered from Jews and Gentiles (Matthew 21:43; 1 Peter 2:9–10). Isaiah 5:1–7 supplies the imagery and states plainly that the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. Note that the son is killed last, after every patience has been exhausted.

3. *Jesus ties prayer and forgiveness together in 11:25. Read Matthew 6:14–15 and state plainly what He says is at stake for the person who will not forgive.*

Jesus says that when you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. Matthew 6:14–15 states it both ways: if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. What is at stake is your own forgiveness. There is no way to hold a grudge and be right with God at the same time.

4. *The coin carried Caesar's image, so Jesus told them to give it back to him. Read Genesis 1:27 and consider what carries God's image and therefore belongs to God.*

Genesis 1:27 says God created man in His own image, male and female. The coin carried Caesar's likeness and inscription and belonged to him; the person holding the coin carries God's likeness and belongs to God. Jesus' answer therefore concedes the small claim and asserts the total one. Caesar may have your money. God has you.

5. *Name the one thing you have been rendering to Caesar, or to an employer, or to a hobby, that actually belongs to God. Decide what you will hand back this week, and when.*

Answers will vary. Common honest answers include the best hours of every day given to work with nothing left for family or service, weekends entirely consumed by a hobby, attention given to a screen that used to belong to prayer, and money committed so thoroughly that generosity has become impossible. Ask for one specific handback with a date, and ask again in a month.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Mark 11:22–24 is not a blank check. Prayer that moves mountains is prayer according to God's will (1 John 5:14–15), offered by people who forgive (11:25) and who ask rightly (James 4:3). Do not let this passage be read as a formula for getting what we want.
- Jesus' action in the temple does not license personal anger. His was deliberate, prepared overnight, and aimed at a violation of God's stated purpose for His house. Ephesians 4:26 and James 1:19–20 govern ours.
- The vineyard given to others is the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Matthew 21:43; Galatians 3:28–29; 1 Peter 2:9–10). Do not let this be turned into a prediction about a future national restoration of Israel.
- Keep the Caesar discussion out of current partisan politics. Teach the principle: Christians submit to civil authority and obey God rather than men when the two conflict (Romans 13:1–7; Acts 5:29).

The More Excellent Way

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These two chapters answer a congregation that had turned God's gifts into a social ladder. Paul's first move is to trace every gift back to one source. There are diversities of gifts but the same Spirit, differences of ministries but the same Lord, diversities of activities but the same God, and the Spirit distributes to each one individually as He wills. A man who did not choose his gift has nothing to boast about, and a man who wanted a different one is arguing with God.

The body image occupies the center of chapter 12, and Paul works it both directions. The foot cannot resign because it is not a hand; the eye cannot dismiss the hand because it is not an eye. Then he says something that church would never have said: the members which seem to be more feeble are necessary, and the parts we consider less honorable receive greater honor. God composed the body that way on purpose, so that there would be no division and so that the members would care for one another. Verse 26 is the test: if one member suffers, all suffer; if one is honored, all rejoice.

Chapter 13 is not a poem dropped into an argument. It is the argument's conclusion. Tongues without love are noise. Prophecy, knowledge, mountain-moving faith, giving away everything, even martyrdom, without love are nothing. Then Paul says plainly that love never fails while prophecy, tongues, and revealed knowledge will all come to an end, because they are partial and something complete is coming. Teach that plainly, and teach it graciously, because many sincere people have been taught the opposite all their lives.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Corinth had an unusual concentration of miraculous gifts (1:7), and the letter shows them being used competitively and chaotically, which chapter 14 addresses directly.
- Miraculous gifts came through the laying on of the apostles' hands (Acts 8:14–19; 19:6; Romans 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:6), which limited their duration to that generation.
- The purpose of signs is stated in Scripture itself: they confirmed the word (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4; Acts 14:3).
- The Greek word rendered "perfect" in 13:10 means complete or mature, standing over against "in part"; the same family of words is used in James 1:25 of the perfect law of liberty.
- First Corinthians 13:13 says faith, hope, and love abide, in contrast with the gifts of verse 8 which do not.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul says the same Spirit distributed the gifts as He willed, not as men chose (12:11). How does that one sentence dismantle both envy and pride in a congregation?*

It removes the ground from both. Envy says God should have given me what He gave him; pride says my gift proves something about me. Paul's sentence answers both at once: the Spirit distributed as He willed. Later he adds the same point about the body, that God set the members in the body as it pleased Him (12:18). Nobody was consulted, and nobody was overlooked.

Apply it beyond miraculous gifts, since that is where your class lives. The man who can teach did not manufacture his mind; the woman who can quietly comfort the grieving did not invent her heart. Ask the class who they have been quietly comparing themselves to, and then ask what work God has actually put in front of them that they have been neglecting while they compared.

Question 2. *Paul insists the members that seem weaker are necessary and that the less honorable receive more honor (12:22–24). Who in a congregation fits that description, and how does a church actually practice verse 26?*

In every congregation there are members whose service is invisible: the person who sets up and cleans up, the shut-in who prays through the directory, the widow who has nothing to give but presence, the member with a disability, the one who cannot speak in public and has never missed a hospital visit. Paul says God arranged it this way deliberately so that the impressive parts could not run the body alone.

Verse 26 is practiced, not admired. It looks like a congregation that knows who is in the hospital, that shows up for the funeral of a member nobody knew well, that celebrates a baptism as though it happened in their own family. Ask the class to name one member they have not thought about in six months, and to do something about it before Sunday.

Question 3. *First Corinthians 13:8–10 says prophecies will fail, tongues will cease, and knowledge will vanish away when that which is perfect comes. Work carefully through what “in part” and “perfect” mean in this context, and what follows for the church today.*

Work the contrast Paul himself sets up. He does not contrast the partial with heaven; he contrasts the partial with the complete, in a passage about prophecy and revealed knowledge. They knew in part and prophesied in part because revelation was arriving in pieces, through one prophet here and another there. When the whole of it had come, the piecemeal means of delivering it would be done away, as the scaffolding comes down when the building is finished. Compare James 1:25 and Jude 3, which speaks of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Then say the conclusion plainly and kindly. The confirming gifts served to confirm the word (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4), they were conveyed through the hands of the apostles, and they ceased when their work was done. We have something better than a partial word; we have the completed Scriptures, able to furnish us completely (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Do not mock anyone, do not caricature what others believe, and do not let the hour become a debate. State the text, give the reasons, and leave the class with the last verse of the chapter, which is where Paul left them.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the nine gifts named in 12:8–10 and then the offices and functions named in 12:28. Mark which of them are miraculous and which are not.*

The nine in 12:8–10 are the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. In 12:28 God set in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, administrations, and varieties of tongues. Most of the list is miraculous; helps, administrations, and ordinary teaching are not, and it is worth noticing that Paul placed the unspectacular ones in the same list without apology.

2. *Trace Paul’s questions in 12:29–30. What answer does the grammar of each question expect, and what does that settle about the claim that every Christian should speak in tongues?*

Each question in 12:29–30 is framed in Greek so as to expect the answer no. Are all apostles? No. Are all prophets? No. Do all speak with tongues? No. Do all interpret? No. That settles the question directly: even in a congregation where miraculous gifts were present, not everyone had them, and no gift was the mark of genuine conversion or of spiritual superiority. Paul is dismantling exactly the assumption that produced the Corinthians’ ranking system.

3. *Read Mark 16:20 and Hebrews 2:3–4 and state the stated purpose of miraculous signs. Then read Ephesians 4:11–14 and Jude 3 and consider whether that purpose has been accomplished.*

Mark 16:20 says the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs. Hebrews 2:3–4 says the salvation first spoken by the Lord was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness with signs, wonders, various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The purpose was confirmation of a message not yet written down and not yet established. Ephesians 4:11–14 says those gifts were given until we all come to the unity of the faith and to a mature man, and Jude 3 says the faith was once for all delivered to the saints. The word is confirmed and delivered; the scaffolding has served its purpose.

4. Write out 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 and read it with your own name in the place of the word love. Which line is hardest to read that way, and why that one?

Answers will vary, and this exercise is more powerful than any lecture on the chapter. Most people stumble at “is not easily provoked,” “thinks no evil,” or “does not seek her own.” Encourage each person to pick the hardest line and pray it back to God every morning this week. Then note the one name that can be substituted in every line without a lie, and let the class say it themselves.

5. Paul says that without love the most spectacular gift is nothing. Name the one relationship where you have been technically right and genuinely unloving, and name what you will do about it this week.

Answers will vary and stay private. Listen for the specific combination Paul warns about: correct doctrine delivered without patience, a stand taken at the cost of a relationship that did not need to be lost, being right with a family member in a way that has produced years of distance. The step is usually a visit or a call in which no argument is made and no position is surrendered, only kindness offered.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- This is the week to teach clearly that the miraculous gifts were confirmatory and have ceased. Give the reasons from Scripture: their stated purpose was to confirm the word (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4), they were imparted through the apostles' hands (Acts 8:14–19; 19:6), and Paul says plainly they would cease when the partial gave way to the complete (13:8–10). Say it plainly, say it kindly, and do not ridicule sincere people who have been taught otherwise.
- Be careful not to reduce chapter 13 to a wedding reading. It is Paul's correction of a congregation that valued ability over character, and its sharpest line is that the most spectacular gift without love is nothing.
- First Corinthians 12:13 says we were all baptized into one body by one Spirit. Connect it with Galatians 3:27 and Romans 6:3–4: the Spirit revealed the terms, and a penitent believer is baptized into Christ and thereby into His one body. Do not let it be confused with the baptism of the Holy Spirit promised to the apostles (Acts 1:4–5).
- Guard the body image from misuse in both directions. It does not mean every member may do whatever he pleases, since God arranged the roles (12:18, 28; 1 Timothy 2:11–12; 3:1–7), and it does not permit a congregation to treat any faithful member as unnecessary (12:21–25).

NEXT WEEK'S READING: 2 Kings 1–8 • Psalm 35–36 • Mark 12:18–13:13 • 1 Corinthians 14

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