

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 49 OF 104

A Kingdom Without End

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	1 Chronicles 12-19
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 45-46
Gospels	Luke 1:1-38
General New Testament	2 Corinthians 4:1-5:10

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to show a class where the promise of a permanent kingdom was made, how it was kept, and what it costs the people who carry it. God told David that He would build him a house and establish a throne forever. A psalmist sang, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever," and Hebrews says the Father was speaking to the Son. Gabriel stood in a village house and said that of His kingdom there will be no end. And Paul, carrying that kingdom in a body he compared to a clay pot, said he did not lose heart. Four readings, one promise, and one very ordinary set of carriers.

Doctrinally, this is the week to settle the kingdom question if it is not settled already. First Chronicles 17:11-14 makes the promise, Luke 1:32-33 announces it, and Acts 2:29-36 declares it fulfilled at the resurrection and ascension. Christ reigns now, His kingdom is His church, and 1 Corinthians 15:24-26 says He delivers it up at His coming rather than setting one up then. There is no future earthly throne in Jerusalem. Alongside that, 1 Chronicles 13 and 15 give you a plain lesson on approaching God on His own terms, Luke 1:1-4 lets you talk honestly about evidence and faith, and 2 Corinthians 5:10 puts the judgment seat in front of everybody, Christians included.

Formationally, the thread is what God does with fragile people and unlikely places. A shepherd who wanted to build a temple got a dynasty instead. An old priest who asked for proof lost his voice and got a son who would prepare the way. A girl in a village nobody respected said, "Let it be to me according to your word." And Paul said the treasure is in clay pots on purpose. Ask your class this: name the thing about yourself that you think disqualifies you from being useful to God, and then say out loud what 2 Corinthians 4:7 does to that objection.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Luke 1:1-38. Introduce Luke briefly, since the class is coming out of Mark, and spend the first ten minutes on the preface and why it matters. Then give the rest of the hour to the two annunciations, comparing the two questions, and settle 1:32-33 with Acts 2:29-36 before you close.

Second session: Take up 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:10 and build the whole lesson on the clay pot. Read 11:23-28 aloud before you read 4:17, so the class hears what Paul meant by light affliction. Leave ten minutes for 5:9-10 and let people write their answer to the last question rather than say it.

The other two readings: First Chronicles 12-19 and Psalms 45 and 46 carry the extended questions. Tell the class to read chapters 13 and 15 back to back and to look for what changed, since that comparison teaches itself. Point out that Psalm 45:6 is quoted in Hebrews 1:8 about Christ, and let them find it before you tell them what it proves.

The Ark and the Promise

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 12 is a roll call of the men who came to David, tribe by tribe, and the Chronicler lingers over them because his readers needed to know that all Israel, not just Judah, had once gathered around this king with a loyal heart. Tucked into the list is a description that has outlived every other line in the chapter: the sons of Issachar, who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. Two hundred men, and their qualification is not strength or numbers but discernment.

Then the ark, and the two attempts are meant to be read together. The first is enthusiastic, popular, and wrong. David consults the captains and the whole assembly, everyone agrees, and they set the ark on a new cart, which is exactly how the Philistines had moved it (1 Samuel 6:7). The oxen stumble, Uzza puts out his hand, and he dies. David is angry and then afraid, and the ark sits at the house of Obed-Edom for three months. The second attempt begins with a sentence that is the key to the whole episode: no one may carry the ark of God but the Levites, for the Lord has chosen them, because we did not consult Him about the proper order. Then singers, and joy, and a psalm.

Chapter 17 is the theological center of the reading. David, settled in a house of cedar, tells Nathan it is not right that the ark should live under curtains. Nathan says do it, and that night God says otherwise. You will not build Me a house; I will build you a house. I will raise up your seed after you, and I will establish his throne forever. Second Samuel 7 records the same promise, and the New Testament tells us where it landed. Gabriel says it to Mary in Luke 1:32–33, and Peter preaches it on Pentecost in Acts 2:29–36: David is dead and buried, but God had sworn to seat one of his descendants on his throne, and He has raised up Jesus and exalted Him to His right hand.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Chronicles was compiled after the exile, and its account of David centers on the ark, the worship of God, and the promise of an enduring throne, which were exactly the questions troubling the restored community.
- The law specified that the ark be carried on poles by Kohathite Levites and never touched (Exodus 25:12–15; Numbers 4:5–15; 7:9). The new cart was a Philistine method (1 Samuel 6:7–8), not a Hebrew one.
- Obed-Edom the Gittite, at whose house the ark rested for three months, is later listed among the gatekeepers and singers (1 Chronicles 15:18, 24; 16:38).
- The psalm of chapter 16 is assembled from material also found in Psalms 105, 96, and 106, which shows how Israel's songs were composed, arranged, and reused for particular occasions.
- The promise of 17:11–14 is the Davidic covenant, repeated in 2 Samuel 7:12–16 and Psalm 89, and declared fulfilled in Christ in Acts 2:29–36, Acts 13:32–34, and Hebrews 1:5.
- Chapters 18 and 19 record David's wars, including the humiliation of his ambassadors by the Ammonites, which is the background to the events of 2 Samuel 11 that Chronicles does not repeat.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The ark is moved twice, once on a new cart with disastrous results and once by Levites on their shoulders with joy, and in 15:13 David says plainly what went wrong the first time. Read both accounts and discuss what he learned, and where the same principle applies to how we approach God today.*

Lay the two accounts beside each other and let the class find the differences, because they are stark. The first time, David consults the captains of thousands and hundreds and every leader, and the whole assembly agrees, and the thing seemed right to all the people. The one party not consulted was God. They put the ark on a new cart, which was sincere, expensive, and modeled on what the Philistines had done. The second time, David says only the Levites may carry the ark, the Levites sanctify themselves, and they bear it on their shoulders with poles, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the Lord.

David states the principle himself in 15:13: the Lord our God broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order. That is the sentence to write on the board. The question was never whether the ark should be brought up; it was whether God had said anything about how. Then apply it carefully and without a scolding tone. In worship and in the work of the church, the test is not sincerity, enthusiasm, consensus, or effectiveness, but authority: has God spoken about this? Colossians 3:17 says do all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Ask the class where a congregation is most tempted to move the ark on a new cart because everybody agrees and it works.

Question 2. *In 17:11–14 God tells David that He will raise up his descendant, establish his kingdom, and settle him in His house and kingdom forever. Read Luke 1:32–33 and Acts 2:29–36 beside it, and talk about where that promise landed and why it matters how we answer that question.*

God tells David that when his days are fulfilled, He will raise up his seed, that this descendant will build a house for God, and that God will establish his throne forever; I will settle him in My house and in My kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever. Solomon partially answers it, building the temple, but Solomon died and his throne did not last. The New Testament tells us who the promise was finally about. Gabriel says it to Mary in words drawn straight from this passage: the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.

Then Acts 2:29–36, which is where a class should settle the question once and for all. Peter says David is dead and buried and his tomb is with us to this day; being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he spoke concerning the resurrection. Therefore, exalted to the right hand of God, this Jesus is both Lord and Christ. The throne of David is occupied now, in heaven, by a living King. Colossians 1:13 says Christians have been conveyed into His kingdom. It matters how we answer this because the alternative answer, a political throne in Jerusalem still awaiting a future occupant, denies that God has already kept the promise He made in this chapter.

Question 3. *First Chronicles 12:32 describes two hundred men of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. What would that kind of understanding look like in a congregation now, and how is it different from simply having opinions about what is going on?*

Take the phrase apart. Understanding of the times means reading the situation accurately: what is actually happening, what is at stake, where events are heading. To know what Israel ought to do means translating that reading into action. The combination is rare. Plenty of people have one half. Some can analyze the culture brilliantly and have no idea what a church should do about it. Others are full of activity with no grasp of the moment they are acting in.

In a congregation, this looks like the older member who can tell when a family is about to drift and who goes to see them. The elder who knows which battle is worth fighting this year. The teacher who can tell what the young people are actually facing rather than what they faced twenty years ago. Ask the class who in their congregation has this gift, and then ask the harder question: is anyone listening to them? Note also that the men of Issachar are

listed among the troops. They were not commentators. They came to Hebron with everyone else and put their bodies where their understanding was.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Set chapter 13 and chapter 15 side by side and list every difference you can find: who carried the ark, how, who was consulted, what preparation was made, and what the outcome was.

Chapter 13: David consults the captains and the whole assembly, everyone agrees, the ark is set on a new cart driven by Uzza and Ahio, the oxen stumble, Uzza puts out his hand and dies, David is angry and afraid, and the ark is diverted for three months. Chapter 15: David prepares a place and pitches a tent, says no one but the Levites may carry it, gathers the priests and Levites and tells them to sanctify themselves, states the reason for the earlier failure, and the Levites bear the ark on their shoulders by its poles as Moses had commanded, with singers and great joy. The difference between the two accounts is not sincerity or effort. It is whether anyone asked God.

2. Read the song in 16:8–36, then compare it with Psalm 105:1–15, Psalm 96, and Psalm 106:1, 47–48. Describe what David assembled and what he wanted the assembly singing that day.

Verses 8 through 22 correspond closely to Psalm 105:1–15, verses 23 through 33 to Psalm 96, and verses 34 through 36 to Psalm 106:1 and 47–48. David assembled an anthology for the occasion, joining a call to remember the covenant with Abraham, a summons for the nations to declare God's glory, and a closing plea for gathering and deliverance. What he wanted the assembly singing that day was not primarily about the ark or about himself. It was about God's covenant faithfulness and the nations coming to know Him.

3. Trace the reversal in 17:1–15. Write down what David proposed, what Nathan said first, what God said that night, and how the word "house" changes meaning between verse 1 and verse 10.

David proposes building a house of cedar for the ark. Nathan says do all that is in your heart, for God is with you, and is corrected that same night. God says David will not build Him a house, recounts that He has moved from tent to tent and never asked anyone for a cedar house, and then turns it around: the Lord will build you a house. From verse 1 to verse 10 the word moves from a building to a dynasty. The reversal is the heart of the passage, and it is the pattern of grace throughout Scripture: we propose to do something for God, and He tells us what He intends to do for us.

4. Note the two times David inquires of God before battle in 14:10 and 14:14, and what he does when the answer is different the second time. Then read 13:1–4 and see whether anyone asked God about the cart.

In 14:10 David asks whether he should go up against the Philistines and is told to go, and God delivers them. In 14:14 he inquires again, and this time the answer is different: do not go up after them, circle around, and come upon them in front of the mulberry trees. He obeys the new instruction and wins. Chapter 13 records consultation with captains, leaders, and the whole assembly, and nothing whatever about asking God. The contrast is deliberate on the Chronicler's part. David was capable of inquiring; in the matter of the ark he simply did not.

5. Name one good thing you are currently doing in a way you never checked against Scripture, because it works and everyone does it that way. Look up what God has actually said about it this week, and change what needs changing.

Answers will vary, and the assignment is research rather than resolve. Look for specifics: how a congregation makes decisions, how benevolence is handled, what happens in the assembly, how a family teaches its children, how a person handles money or conflict. The pattern to watch for is exactly David's: a good goal pursued by a method nobody ever checked. Follow up the next week and ask what they found when they actually looked it up.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Uzza's death will trouble the class, and it should. Note that the law was explicit and known (Numbers 4:15), that the cart was a Philistine method, and that David himself names the failure in 15:13. Teach God's holiness and His right to be approached on His own terms without turning it into a portrait of a God looking for an excuse.
- The promise of 17:11–14 is fulfilled in Christ, who reigns now at God's right hand (Acts 2:29–36; Colossians 1:13; 1 Corinthians 15:24–26). Leave no room for a future political throne in Jerusalem or an earthly millennial reign.

- Do not use the singers and instruments of the ark and tabernacle service to authorize instrumental music in the worship of the church. That service belonged to the Old Covenant sanctuary, which has been fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13). The New Testament pattern for the church is singing and making melody in the heart (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).
- David's wars in chapters 18 and 19 are reported as national history under a covenant God had made with that nation. Do not carry them over as a model for Christian conduct; our warfare is not carnal (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Romans 12:19).

Your Throne Is Forever

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 45 is unusual in the Psalter: a wedding song for a royal marriage, and the writer knows he is writing something fine. My heart is overflowing with a good theme; I recite my composition concerning the King; my tongue is the pen of a ready writer. He praises the king for beauty and for grace on his lips, then for riding out in majesty for the cause of truth, humility, and righteousness. Then verses 6 and 7, which the writer of Hebrews takes up and applies directly to Christ: Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom.

The second half turns to the bride. Listen, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your own people also, and your father's house; so the King will greatly desire your beauty. She comes in embroidered robes with her companions, and she is brought to the king with gladness and rejoicing. Teach it first as what it is, an inspired song for a royal wedding, and then follow the New Testament where it leads, since Hebrews 1 has already made the application to Christ. Be careful not to press every ornament of the psalm into an allegory the Bible never makes.

Psalm 46 is a different kind of song, and it was written for people whose world was coming apart. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea, though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. Against that noise the psalm sets a quiet image: there is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God. Jerusalem had no river, only a spring, which makes the picture a promise rather than a description. Then the psalm ends with God speaking for Himself. Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 45 is addressed to the chief musician, set to “The Lilies,” and titled a song of love, a contemplation of the sons of Korah. It is the only royal wedding song in the Psalter.
- Hebrews 1:8–9 quotes Psalm 45:6–7 and applies it to the Son, which is the New Testament's own interpretation and settles the question of whether the psalm reaches beyond an earthly king.
- Psalm 46 is also a psalm of the sons of Korah, set “to Alamoth,” likely a musical direction. It belongs with Psalms 47 and 48 as songs celebrating God's protection of Zion.
- “Be still” in 46:10 translates a verb meaning to let go, drop the hands, or cease striving. In context it is addressed to raging nations as much as to anxious individuals.
- The refrain of 46:7 and 46:11, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge,” frames the psalm and gives it its argument.
- Many congregations know Psalm 46 through Luther's hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which is a paraphrase of it.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. Psalm 45:6–7 says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,” and Hebrews 1:8–9 quotes those very words as spoken by the Father to the Son. Discuss what the writer of Hebrews is proving with them, and what it means to have an Old Testament wedding song used that way.

The writer of Hebrews is proving the superiority of the Son to the angels, and he does it by stringing together Old Testament passages and asking which of them was ever said to an angel. To which of the angels did He ever say, You are My Son, today I have begotten You? And of the angels He says, who makes His angels spirits. But to the

Son He says, Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The argument turns on the fact that the Father addresses the Son as God and assigns Him an eternal throne, which no angel ever received.

That an Old Testament wedding song carries such freight should shape how your class reads the Psalms. The Holy Spirit who inspired the psalm knew where it was going. The human poet was writing for a king's wedding; the Spirit was writing about the King. Note also verse 7 as Hebrews quotes it: You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions. The eternal throne and the anointing sit in the same sentence, which is exactly the New Testament's picture of Christ: divine, and yet the One God exalted and gave the name above every name (Philippians 2:9).

Question 2. *In 45:10–11 the bride is told to listen, consider, incline her ear, forget her own people and her father's house, and let the king desire her beauty. Talk about what leaving behind actually costs, and about where following Christ has required you to leave something that was genuinely yours.*

Take the instruction to the bride seriously before you apply it. In a royal marriage of that world, a bride frequently came from another nation, and the counsel is realistic rather than harsh: her future belongs with her husband, and clinging to what she has left will cost her the life she is entering. Listen, consider, incline your ear, forget your own people and your father's house. It is the language of a genuine transfer of loyalty, and it is not asking her to stop loving her family. It is asking her to stop belonging to it first.

Then move to the class, carefully and without exaggeration. Following Christ has a leaving in it, and Jesus said so more bluntly than most of us are comfortable repeating (Luke 14:26, 33; Matthew 10:37). For some people that means a set of friendships that cannot survive the change. For others it means a family expectation, a career path, a way of handling money, or an inherited grudge. Ask each person to name what has actually been left, and then ask, gently, what has not been. Most of us are carrying something from our father's house that we have never agreed to put down.

Question 3. *Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God," and it is spoken in a psalm full of collapsing mountains, raging nations, and broken weapons. Read the whole psalm first and then discuss what that command actually means in its own setting, and how it differs from the way the verse is usually used.*

Read the whole psalm first, because verse 10 has been badly served by being printed alone on wall art. The setting is catastrophe and war: the earth removed, mountains carried into the sea, waters roaring, nations raging, kingdoms moved. God utters His voice and the earth melts. Come, behold the works of the Lord, who has made desolations in the earth, who makes wars cease to the end of the earth, breaks the bow, cuts the spear, and burns the chariot. Only then, be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations.

The verb means to let go, to drop your hands, to stop striving. It is God speaking to a world in uproar and to people frantically trying to manage it: stop, and recognize who is actually God here. That is a far stronger word than the peaceful-moment reading, and it is also more useful. Ask the class where they are currently striving to hold together something that only God can hold, and what dropping their hands would mean this week. Note that the psalm does not promise the mountains will stay put. It promises that the Lord of hosts is with us and the God of Jacob is our refuge.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Map Psalm 46 into its three sections, marking where the refrain of verses 7 and 11 falls. Write down what threat each section addresses and what the refrain says in response to all of them.*

Verses 1 through 3 face the collapse of the natural order, earth removed, mountains in the sea, roaring waters, and answer with God as refuge, strength, and a very present help in trouble. Verses 4 through 7 face the threat to the city, and answer with the river, God in her midst, and the refrain: the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. Verses 8 through 11 face the raging of the nations and the wars of the earth, and answer with God ending war and being exalted, closing with the same refrain. Three different catastrophes, one answer given twice. The refrain does not explain the trouble; it names who is present in it.

2. Read Psalm 45:6–7 and then Hebrews 1:1–9. List the Old Testament passages the writer of Hebrews strings together and state the single point he is making about the Son.

Hebrews 1 quotes Psalm 2:7, 2 Samuel 7:14, Deuteronomy 32:43 or Psalm 97:7, Psalm 104:4, Psalm 45:6–7, and Psalm 102:25–27, and then in verse 13 Psalm 110:1. The single point is that the Son is superior to the angels: He is called Son and God, given an eternal throne and a scepter of righteousness, credited with creating the heavens and the earth, unchanging when they perish, and seated at God's right hand, none of which was ever said to any angel. The chapter is a sustained argument for who Jesus is.

3. Psalm 46:4 speaks of a river whose streams make glad the city of God, though Jerusalem had no river. Compare John 7:37–39 and Revelation 22:1–2, and describe what the image is saying.

Jerusalem sat on a ridge with no river, supplied by the spring of Gihon and later by Hezekiah's tunnel, which is why the image is striking rather than descriptive. It is a promise of abundant, steady, God-given life in a place that has no natural source of it. John 7:37–39 has Jesus saying that whoever believes in Him will have rivers of living water flowing from within, which John explains as the Spirit. Revelation 22:1–2 shows a pure river of water of life proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. The picture runs from the psalm to Christ to the final city: God Himself is the supply.

4. List everything God is said to do in 46:8–10: what He makes, what He causes, what He breaks, what He burns, and what He will be. Note how many of those verbs concern war.

He makes desolations in the earth, He makes wars cease to the end of the earth, He breaks the bow, He cuts the spear in two, He burns the chariot in the fire, He is exalted among the nations, and He is exalted in the earth. Five of the seven concern war, which is why "be still" in the next breath is not a gentle suggestion. The psalm is about God putting an end to human violence by His own authority, and the stillness commanded is the stillness of people who stop fighting because the real King has spoken.

5. Set aside twenty minutes of actual silence this week, with no screen, no music, and no task, and spend it reading Psalm 46 slowly and praying it back to God. Put it on the calendar now, because it will not happen otherwise.

Answers will vary, and the discipline is the assignment. Most adults have not been alone with no input for twenty minutes in years, and the first ten are usually uncomfortable. Encourage people to bring the psalm and a pen rather than trying to empty their minds, since biblical stillness is filled with God's word rather than with nothing. Ask the following week who actually did it and what happened.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 45 is a royal wedding song that the New Testament applies to Christ (Hebrews 1:8–9). Follow that application and stop there; do not allegorize the ivory palaces, the daughters of kings, or the garments into hidden doctrines.
- "Be still, and know that I am God" is not an invitation to mysticism or emptying the mind. It is a command to cease striving and recognize God's sovereignty, spoken in a context of war. Teach it in context.
- Psalm 46 does not promise exemption from catastrophe. It promises God's presence in it. Read carefully, the psalm assumes the mountains really do fall.
- Psalm 45:6 addresses the King as God. Use it to affirm the deity of Christ as Hebrews 1:8 does, and be prepared to show a class member why that translation is sound if the question arises.

An Orderly Account

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke begins where no other Gospel begins, with a statement of method. Many have undertaken to compile a narrative; he has had perfect understanding of all things from the very first; he is writing an orderly account for a man named Theophilus, and he states his purpose plainly: that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. Luke is a careful man, a physician, a traveling companion of Paul, and he wants his reader to know this is not folklore. The faith he is commending rests on things that happened, to people whose names he can supply.

Then the first scene, and it is set in the temple. Zacharias, a priest of the division of Abijah, married to Elizabeth, also of priestly descent, both righteous before God and blameless, and both old and childless. His lot falls to burn incense, the opportunity of a lifetime, and while the whole multitude prays outside, Gabriel appears at the right side of the altar. Your prayer is heard. Your wife will bear a son. You shall call his name John. And then a description of the boy's work borrowed from Malachi: he will turn many to the Lord, and go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Zacharias asks for proof, and receives a sign he did not want, nine months of silence.

Six months later, in a village of no importance, the same angel comes to a young woman engaged to a carpenter. The announcement is greater by an order of magnitude. He will be great, He will be called the Son of the Highest, the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end. Mary asks how, since she is a virgin, and Gabriel tells her: the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. And he adds Elizabeth as evidence, with the sentence that carries the whole chapter: for with God nothing will be impossible. Then Mary's answer, which is the finest sentence anyone speaks in the reading.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke, a physician and a companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; the "we" passages of Acts), wrote both this Gospel and Acts to Theophilus, whose title in 1:3 suggests a man of some standing.
- Priests were organized into twenty-four divisions (1 Chronicles 24), each serving twice a year. Burning incense was assigned by lot and would normally come to a priest only once in a lifetime.
- Gabriel appears elsewhere only in Daniel 8:16 and 9:21, always bringing an explanation or an announcement about God's purposes.
- Malachi 4:5–6, the last paragraph of the Old Testament, promised a forerunner in the spirit of Elijah. Gabriel's words in 1:17 quote it, and Jesus identifies John as its fulfillment (Matthew 11:13–14; 17:12–13).
- Betrothal in that culture was legally binding and could be ended only by divorce (Matthew 1:18–19), which is why Mary's consent carried real risk.
- Luke 1:32–33 draws directly on the promise of 2 Samuel 7:12–13 and 1 Chronicles 17:11–14, the covenant with David that Peter declares fulfilled in the resurrection and enthronement of Christ (Acts 2:29–36).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Luke says he investigated everything carefully from the first and wrote an orderly account so that Theophilus might know the certainty of the things he had been taught (1:1–4). Discuss what that says about the kind of faith the New Testament expects, and why careful investigation and inspiration are not in competition.*

Luke tells us his sources were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, that he traced everything accurately from the beginning, and that his purpose was certainty. The New Testament nowhere commends a faith that is indifferent to evidence. John says his Gospel was written that you may believe (John 20:30–31). Peter says we did not follow cunningly devised fables but were eyewitnesses of His majesty (2 Peter 1:16). Paul lists more than five hundred witnesses and notes that most were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6). Faith in Scripture is trust grounded in testimony, not a leap taken in the dark.

Careful investigation and inspiration are not rivals because inspiration is not dictation to an unconscious man. God used Luke's research, Luke's vocabulary, Luke's ordering, and Luke's medical eye, and the result is exactly what God intended (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21). Say that plainly to a class, because some of them have been told that honest inquiry is the enemy of faith. Then ask a practical question: when someone asks them why they believe, do they have anything to say beyond how it makes them feel? Luke 1:1–4 is a rebuke to lazy faith on both sides.

Question 2. *Zacharias asks, "How shall I know this?" and is struck mute, while Mary asks, "How can this be?" and is answered kindly (1:18, 1:34). Compare the two questions word for word, and talk about the difference between a question that seeks understanding and a question that demands proof.*

The questions look similar and are not. Zacharias says, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years. He is asking for verification; he wants evidence before he will accept what an angel standing by the altar of incense has just told him. Mary says, How can this be, since I do not know a man? She is not asking whether it will happen; she is asking by what means, because the ordinary means is not available to her. One question resists the announcement. The other accepts it and asks for understanding.

Gabriel's responses tell you he read them the same way. To Zacharias: I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings; behold, you will be mute because you did not believe my words. To Mary: a full explanation, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and then a kindness she had not asked for, the news about Elizabeth, and the assurance that with God nothing will be impossible. Be fair to Zacharias in class. He was an old, righteous man whose life had disappointed him, and Scripture records his failure and then puts a magnificent song in his mouth in the same chapter. God is not finished with people who ask the wrong question.

Question 3. *Gabriel tells Mary that her son will receive the throne of His father David, will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and that of His kingdom there will be no end (1:32–33). Read Acts 2:29–36 and Colossians 1:13, and discuss where and when that reign began.*

Read Gabriel's words slowly, because they are drawn straight from the promise your class studied in 1 Chronicles 17 this same week. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end. The promise made in a tent to a shepherd king is here handed to a young woman in a village, and the reign it describes has no end point at all.

Then answer the question of when and where, from Scripture rather than from a chart. Acts 2:29–36: David is dead and buried, he spoke as a prophet of the resurrection of the Christ to sit on his throne, and God has raised up this Jesus and exalted Him to His right hand, making Him both Lord and Christ. Colossians 1:13 says Christians have been delivered from the power of darkness and conveyed into the kingdom of the Son of His love. First Corinthians 15:24–25 says He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet, and then delivers the kingdom to the Father. So the reign began at the resurrection and ascension, it continues now, and it ends by being handed over

rather than by being transferred to an earthly capital. Teach it warmly; many good people have never heard it put together this way.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. List everything Gabriel says about John in 1:13–17. Then read Malachi 4:5–6 and note which phrases Gabriel is quoting and what that told Zacharias about the moment he was standing in.

Gabriel says John will bring joy and gladness, that many will rejoice at his birth, that he will be great in the sight of the Lord, that he will drink neither wine nor strong drink, that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, that he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, that he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, that he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, and that he will make ready a people prepared for the Lord. The phrases about Elijah and about turning the hearts of the fathers to the children come straight from Malachi 4:5–6. Zacharias, a priest who knew his scrolls, was being told that the last promise of the Old Testament was being fulfilled in his own house.

2. Write out Zacharias's question in 1:18 and Mary's in 1:34 side by side, along with what each says about their circumstances. Then note how Gabriel answers each one, and what he gives Mary that he did not give Zacharias.

Zacharias: How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years. Mary: How can this be, since I do not know a man? Both face a physical impossibility, and both mention it. The difference is in the first clause. Zacharias asks for a means of knowing, which is a request for proof; Mary asks for the mechanism, having already accepted the announcement. Gabriel silences Zacharias for nine months and tells him plainly that it is because he did not believe. To Mary he explains the how, and then volunteers Elizabeth's pregnancy as encouragement she did not request, closing with the assurance that with God nothing will be impossible.

3. Luke 1:6 says Zacharias and Elizabeth were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless, and the very next verse says they had no child. Describe what that pairing rules out about the relationship between godliness and circumstances.

It rules out the idea that godliness produces a trouble-free life, and it rules out the reverse assumption that hardship indicates hidden sin. Luke goes out of his way to say they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances blameless, and then tells us the one thing that had defined and pained their whole married life. Childlessness in that culture also carried a social stigma, so this was a public as well as a private grief. Job, Jeremiah, Paul, and John 9:1–3 teach the same lesson, and a congregation needs to hear it regularly, because someone in the room is quietly wondering what he did to deserve his situation.

4. Compare Luke 1:32–33 with 2 Samuel 7:12–13 and Acts 2:29–36. Write down what was promised, who fulfilled it, and when Peter says the enthronement took place.

Second Samuel 7:12–13 promises David that God will set up his seed after him, establish the kingdom, and establish the throne of his kingdom forever. Luke 1:32–33 tells Mary that the Lord God will give her son the throne of His father David, that He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and that of His kingdom there will be no end. Acts 2:29–36 says David died and was buried, that as a prophet he knew God had sworn to seat one of his descendants on his throne, that he therefore spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, and that God has raised up this Jesus and exalted Him to His right hand, making Him both Lord and Christ. Peter locates the enthronement at the resurrection and ascension, and dates it to the day he was speaking.

5. Mary answered, "Let it be to me according to your word," knowing what it would cost her reputation and possibly her engagement. Name the word of God you have been negotiating with, and this week stop negotiating and obey it.

Answers will vary and this one should be handled gently, because it will surface real things. Point out what Mary's answer actually cost: an engagement that could have ended in disgrace, a village that would count months, and a reputation she would never fully recover in Nazareth. She calls herself the maidservant of the Lord and says, let it be to me according to your word. Listen for the specific command being negotiated: forgiveness withheld, a relationship that should end, giving that has never been decided, a confession not made, an assembly attended when convenient. Ask for the obedience this week rather than the intention.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Luke 1:32–33 is a favorite premillennial proof text. Teach it with Acts 2:29–36, Colossians 1:13, and 1 Corinthians 15:24–26: Christ received David’s throne at His resurrection and ascension, He reigns now, and the kingdom is delivered up at His coming rather than established then. There is no future earthly throne in Jerusalem awaiting Him.
- The virgin conception is presented as a historical event accomplished by the power of God (1:34–35). Do not allow it to be treated as symbolic, and answer honest questions from the text rather than from biology.
- Mary is highly favored and blessed, and she is a servant of God like any other. Scripture nowhere teaches her sinlessness, her perpetual virginity (Matthew 1:25; 13:55–56), or prayer directed to her. There is one Mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5), and Jesus Himself redirected a woman who blessed His mother (Luke 11:27–28). Say this kindly and briefly if it comes up.
- John came in the spirit and power of Elijah, not as Elijah returned (John 1:21; Matthew 11:13–14). Keep that distinction clear.

Treasure in Earthen Vessels

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The passage runs on a repeated refrain: we do not lose heart. Paul says it in 4:1 and again in 4:16, and everything between explains how a man in his circumstances could say it. He has renounced the hidden things of shame, refuses to walk in craftiness or handle the word of God deceitfully, and commends himself to every man's conscience by the open statement of the truth. If the gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded. And what we preach is not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, with ourselves as servants for His sake.

Then the image that names the whole passage. We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. A clay pot was cheap, ordinary, and breakable, the sort of thing found in every kitchen in the empire. Then the four pairs, which belong together like blows and recoveries: hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. The pattern is not denial. Each pair admits the first half completely.

From there Paul lifts his eyes. The outward man is perishing, the inward man is renewed day by day, and our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. We do not look at the things which are seen, for they are temporary, but at the things which are not seen, for they are eternal. Then the tent: we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. We groan, we are confident, we walk by faith and not by sight, and we make it our aim to be well pleasing to Him, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Second Corinthians was written around A.D. 56, in the middle of sustained opposition to Paul's ministry in Corinth. This passage is his answer to critics who found him unimpressive.
- "Earthen vessels" were common unglazed pottery, inexpensive and fragile; the contrast with treasure would have been immediate to any first-century reader.
- The "judgment seat" of 5:10 translates a word for the raised platform where a Roman magistrate rendered decisions, the same kind of seat Paul stood before in Acts 18:12.
- The tent imagery of 5:1–4 fits Paul's own trade (Acts 18:3) and echoes Peter's use of the same picture in 2 Peter 1:13–14.
- "Guarantee" or earnest in 5:5 is the same commercial term used in 1:22: a down payment that pledges the rest, not an unconditional assurance (compare Ephesians 1:13–14; Hebrews 3:12–14).
- Second Corinthians 11:23–28 supplies the concrete content of the afflictions Paul calls light in 4:17: beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, hunger, cold, and the daily care of all the churches.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul says we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us (4:7). Discuss why God would deliberately choose fragile, ordinary carriers, and what that means for the person in this room who feels least qualified to be one.*

Paul gives the reason himself, and it is the whole answer: that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. If God had entrusted the gospel to the impressive, the eloquent, and the unbreakable, every observer would credit the container. He deliberately did the opposite. He put the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in clay

pots, and then He let the pots be hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, so that when the light kept shining, nobody could mistake where it came from.

That is the sentence for the person in your class who has decided he is unqualified. He is right about the pot and wrong about the conclusion. First Corinthians 1:26–29 says the same thing at greater length: not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble, but God has chosen the foolish and the weak and the despised, that no flesh should glory in His presence. Ask the class who taught them the gospel, and whether that person was impressive. Almost always the answer is a grandmother, a neighbor, a coworker, or a preacher nobody outside the county has heard of. God has been running this arrangement on purpose for two thousand years.

Question 2. *In 4:17 Paul calls his affliction light and momentary. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23–28 to see what he was actually carrying when he wrote that. How does a person get to the place where such a list can be called light without pretending it does not hurt?*

Read 11:23–28 aloud first and let the class hear the inventory: stripes above measure, prisons, near death often, thirty-nine lashes five times, beaten with rods three times, stoned once, shipwrecked three times, a night and a day in the deep, perils of every kind, weariness, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, and besides all that, the daily pressure of concern for all the churches. Then read 4:17 again. Our light affliction, which is but for a moment. Paul was not a man with an easy life describing other people's troubles.

How does a person get there? The verse gives two measurements and both are comparisons. Light, compared to a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. For a moment, compared to eternal. He is not saying it does not hurt; he groans in the very next paragraph. He is saying he has weighed it. And verse 18 names the practice that makes the weighing possible: we do not look at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen. That is a discipline, not a temperament. Ask the class what they are currently looking at, in the hours when nobody assigns them anything, and whether the eternal ever gets a real share of their attention.

Question 3. *Second Corinthians 5:10 says we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body. Talk about who "all" includes, what is being examined, and how that verse should shape an ordinary Thursday.*

Take the verse in pieces. We must all appear, which includes Christians; Paul writes "we," and Romans 14:10–12 says each of us shall give account of himself to God. Before the judgment seat of Christ, which is a magistrate's bench, not an inquiry into whether we are loved. That each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. It is personal, it concerns this present life, and it concerns what was actually done rather than what was intended or claimed.

Then draw the line Paul draws. He does not put 5:10 there to frighten people; he puts it there as the reason for 5:9, therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. The judgment is what gives an ordinary Thursday its weight. How a man speaks to his wife when he is tired, what he does with two free hours, whether he tells the truth on a form, whether he goes to see somebody: all of it is done in the body, and all of it will be there. Say clearly what this rules out, which is any notion of a second chance after death or a place of further purging (Hebrews 9:27; Luke 16:26). Then ask the question in the study, and give people a minute to write the answer down rather than say it aloud.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out the four pairs in 4:8–9: hard-pressed but not crushed, and the three that follow. For each pair, name a real situation in which the first half is true and the second half is hard to believe.*

Hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. The first half of each pair is fully conceded, which is what makes the passage honest. Answers about real situations will vary, and the second half is the hard one: the man who is genuinely perplexed and cannot see how this is not despair; the person struck down by a diagnosis or a betrayal and unable to feel the difference between struck down and destroyed. Note for the class that Paul does not say we do not feel the first half.

He says the second half is nevertheless true, and he grounds it in verses 10 through 14, the life of Jesus manifested in our body and the certainty that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also.

2. *Paul says in 4:4 that the god of this age has blinded the minds of those who do not believe. Compare John 12:37–40 and 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12, and describe what those passages say about where the responsibility for such blindness lies.*

Second Corinthians 4:4 says the god of this age has blinded the minds of those who do not believe. John 12:37–40 says that although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe, and then quotes Isaiah about blinded eyes and hardened hearts. Second Thessalonians 2:10–12 is the clearest: they perish because they did not receive the love of the truth, and for this reason God sends them strong delusion. In every case the blindness follows a refusal. Satan blinds people who have already declined the light, and God's hardening is judicial, confirming a choice already made. Nothing in these passages teaches that God arbitrarily withholds the ability to believe; 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9 say He desires all to be saved.

3. *In 5:1–4 Paul calls the body a tent that will be dissolved and speaks of a building from God. Compare 2 Peter 1:13–14 and 1 Corinthians 15:53, and list what the three passages say about the body we have now and the one we are promised.*

The present body is a tent, an earthly house, something we groan in, which will be destroyed or taken down. Second Peter 1:13–14 calls it a tent that Peter knows he must shortly put off. First Corinthians 15:53 says this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality. The promised body is a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, incorruptible and immortal. All three passages assume the same thing: the present body is temporary and real, the future body is permanent and real, and what happens between is a change God performs, not an escape from embodiment.

4. *Second Corinthians 5:7 says we walk by faith, not by sight. Read Hebrews 11:1 and then trace 4:16–18, and explain in your own words what it means to look at things that are not seen.*

Hebrews 11:1 says faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Second Corinthians 4:16–18 says that although the outward man is perishing, the inward man is renewed day by day, and that we do not look at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen, because the seen is temporary and the unseen eternal. To look at what is not seen means to treat God's promises as the more solid set of facts and to make decisions accordingly. It is not pretending the visible is unreal; the visible is real and temporary. Walking by faith means letting the durable things set the direction.

5. *Paul says in 5:9 that we make it our aim to be well pleasing to Him, and gives the judgment seat as the reason. Name the one thing you would most want changed before you stand there, and take the first concrete step to change it this week.*

Answers will vary and should stay private unless someone volunteers. Listen afterward for the first step rather than the whole change, since almost nobody rebuilds a habit in a week. Note the structure of Paul's thought for the class: the judgment seat produces aim, not terror. A Christian who is aiming at pleasing Christ has already answered most of the questions an ordinary week will ask him.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Second Corinthians 5:10 applies to Christians as well as to everyone else (Romans 14:10–12). Teach it soberly and without dread; it is given as motivation for aiming to please Christ, not as grounds for insecurity. It also rules out any second chance or purging after death (Hebrews 9:27; Luke 16:26).
- Verses 6 through 8 describe being absent from the body and present with the Lord. Teach what the text says and resist building a detailed system about the intermediate state; Luke 16:19–31 and Philippians 1:21–23 are the other windows, and they are windows rather than blueprints.
- Second Corinthians 4:4 teaches that Satan blinds unbelieving minds; it does not teach that God unconditionally withholds the ability to believe from anyone. Compare John 12:37–40, 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12, 1 Timothy 2:4, and 2 Peter 3:9.

- The “guarantee of the Spirit” in 5:5 is a pledge of what is coming, not an unconditional assurance that a Christian cannot fall away (Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4).

NEXT WEEK'S READING: 1 Chronicles 20–29 · Psalm 47–48 · Luke 1:39–66 · 2 Corinthians 5:11–7:16

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