

# Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 51 OF 104

*Gold and a Manger*

| THIS WEEK'S READINGS  |                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| General Old Testament | 2 Chronicles 1-9  |
| Wisdom Literature     | Psalms 49-50      |
| Gospels               | Luke 1:67-2:21    |
| General New Testament | 2 Corinthians 8-9 |

## TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to unsettle the quiet assumption that what we give God is ours to begin with. Solomon builds the most costly house in Israel's history and God still says, in Psalm 50, that He owns the cattle on every hill and does not need a bull from anyone's stall. Luke sets the King of glory in a feeding trough. Paul says the poorest churches in his experience were the most generous. By the end of the week the class should be asking a different question: not how much does God require, but what am I still holding back.

Doctrinally, three matters deserve care. First, 2 Chronicles 7:14 is a covenant word to Israel about their land, not a promise to any modern nation; teach the abiding principles and refuse the political application. Second, giving under the new covenant is free will, purposed, proportionate, and weekly (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7), and the tithe is not bound on Christians (Hebrews 7:12). Third, guard 2 Corinthians 9 from prosperity teaching; the increase promised is a greater capacity to give and a harvest of thanksgiving.

Formationally, the thread is what a person does with what he owns. Solomon poured out gold and later poured out his loyalty in the wrong directions. The rich man of Psalm 49 carried nothing away. The Macedonians had almost nothing and begged to give. Mary and Joseph had no room and were given the Son of God. Ask the class this, plainly: if someone examined your bank statement for the last ninety days and knew nothing else about you, what would they conclude you worship?

## SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

**First session:** Take up 2 Corinthians 8-9 first. It is the week's most practical reading and the one most likely to be misunderstood. Build the hour on the Macedonians in 8:1-5, the example of Christ in 8:9, and the pattern of 9:7 with 1 Corinthians 16:2. Settle the tithe question kindly and finally.

**Second session:** Take up 2 Chronicles 1-9 second. Use three anchors: Solomon's request in chapter 1, the glory filling the house in 5:13-14, and the dedication prayer with God's answer in chapter 7. Give 7:14 the careful handling it needs, and do not skip 1 Kings 11.

**The other two readings:** Psalm 49 and 50 and Luke 1:67-2:21 carry the extended questions well. Encourage the class to read Luke 2:1-20 aloud at home, slowly, resisting every familiar picture, and to notice how little Luke actually describes and how much we have added.

## Solomon Builds the House

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The Chronicler gives nine chapters to Solomon and spends six of them on the temple. That proportion is the point. His post exile readers worshiped in a rebuilt house that old men had wept over because it was so plainly inferior, and he wants them to remember what this place was and Whose idea it had been. Notice that the site is named in 3:1, Mount Moriah, the place where Abraham was stopped and where David bought a threshing floor. God had been preparing that hill for a long time.

The center of the reading is chapters 5 through 7. The ark comes in, the singers and trumpeters make one sound, and the cloud fills the house so completely that the priests cannot continue ministering. Solomon then kneels on a bronze platform in front of the whole assembly and prays a prayer that is mostly about sin and forgiveness, not about architecture. Seven times he says, in effect, when they sin and turn back, hear from heaven and forgive. Then fire falls and the glory fills the house again.

The last chapters can read like a travel brochure: gold shields, a throne with lions, a fleet, a queen who came to test him with hard questions and left overwhelmed. The Chronicler wants his readers to see how far God kept His word to David. But read with 1 Kings 11 in your peripheral vision and with Deuteronomy 17 in mind, and you will notice the horses, the ships, and the foreign alliances quietly stacking up. Wisdom received is not the same as wisdom kept.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The temple was begun in the fourth year of Solomon's reign, about 966 BC, and took seven years to build (3:1-2; 1 Kings 6:38).
- Chronicles was written for the returned exiles and consistently presents Solomon's reign at its best; 1 Kings 11, which records his idolatry, is omitted here, so supply it for the class.
- Genre is selective historical narrative written with a worship agenda, not a neutral chronicle.
- Mount Moriah links this site to Genesis 22 and to 1 Chronicles 21, tying together provision, judgment, mercy, and worship at one place.
- The temple, its priesthood, and its sacrifices belonged to the Old Covenant and were fulfilled and removed in Christ (Hebrews 8:13; 9:11-12; 10:1-10). The dwelling place of God now is His people (Ephesians 2:19-22).
- The queen of Sheba most likely came from southwestern Arabia, a considerable distance, which is exactly the point Jesus makes about her in Matthew 12:42.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *God tells Solomon to ask for whatever he wants (1:7), and Solomon asks for wisdom and knowledge to lead God's people. If God made that offer to you tonight, what would you actually ask for, and what does your honest answer reveal about you?*

Solomon's request is remarkable for what it leaves out. No long life, no riches, no victory over enemies. He asks for wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before a people too numerous to count, which is to say he asks for what he needs in order to do the job God gave him. God's reply in 1:11-12 makes the reasoning explicit: because this was in your heart, and you did not ask for wealth or honor or the life of your enemies, therefore wisdom is granted, and the rest besides.

Take the question personally and give the class a moment of silence before anyone speaks. Most of our prayers cluster around comfort, health, and relief. That is not wicked, and Scripture invites us to ask (Philippians 4:6), but James 4:3 warns about asking to spend on our pleasures. A useful follow up: what would you ask for if you knew the request would be granted and then made public to the whole congregation?

**Question 2.** *Read 2 Chronicles 7:12–22 all the way through, not just verse 14. Who is being addressed, what covenant is in view, and what does that passage rightly teach a Christian today about humility, prayer, and repentance?*

This is the most misused verse in Chronicles, so handle it carefully and kindly. The context is God's answer about the house Solomon has just dedicated. The if is addressed to My people who are called by My name, meaning covenant Israel, and the promise concerns their land, given to them by covenant. The surrounding verses say so plainly: verse 13 speaks of shutting up heaven and sending locusts, verse 20 warns that God will pluck them up out of His land and make this house a byword. Verse 14 cannot be lifted out of that paragraph and stapled onto a modern nation.

Then teach what it does say to us, because the principles are permanent and precious. God still resists the proud and gives grace to the humble (James 4:6–10). He still hears the prayers of His people (1 Peter 3:12). He still calls for repentance and a turning from wicked ways, and He still forgives. Christians ought to pray for their nation and its leaders (1 Timothy 2:1–2). Just do not promise a nation what God promised Israel, and do not let patriotism do the work of exegesis.

**Question 3.** *In his prayer Solomon makes room for the foreigner who comes from a far country because he has heard of God's name (6:32–33). What does that tell you about God's intentions from the beginning, and how welcoming is your congregation to the person who walks in knowing nobody?*

Solomon's prayer is for Israel, and then in the middle of it he pauses for the outsider: the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel but comes from a far country for Your great name's sake. He asks God to hear that man too, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You. Isaiah later says the same thing, that God's house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations (Isaiah 56:7), and Jesus quotes that verse when He cleanses the temple.

Turn it toward the building your class is sitting in. The stranger who walks in on a Sunday morning is doing something socially expensive. He does not know where anything is, whom to sit by, or what the unwritten rules are. Ask the class to name what actually happened the last time a visitor came, not what they hope happens. Then ask for one specific change, such as who walks to the back after the closing prayer instead of toward the front.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *Work through Solomon's prayer in 6:22–39 and list the situations he anticipates: sin against a neighbor, defeat, drought, famine, the foreigner, war, and captivity. What does each petition assume about how God deals with His people?*

Solomon anticipates an oath taken before the altar, defeat in battle because of sin, drought, famine and plague, the prayer of the foreigner, an army sent out by God's direction, and captivity in a far land. Every petition assumes the same things: that sin brings consequences, that God hears from heaven, that repentance and turning are the way back, and that forgiveness is God's to give. Notice how much of the prayer is about failure. Solomon knew his people.

**2.** *Compare 2 Chronicles 5:13–14 with Exodus 40:34–35. Then read 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 2 Corinthians 6:16. Where does God's glory dwell now, and how should that change the way you treat your own body and the church?*

In both Exodus 40 and 2 Chronicles 5 the cloud so fills the place that the ministers cannot stand to serve; the glory of God overwhelms the room. Under the new covenant, God does not dwell in a building. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says the church is the temple of God and the Spirit dwells in it; 2 Corinthians 6:16 says we are the temple of the living God; and 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 says the same of the individual body, bought with a price. The practical result is that holiness is no longer about a place but about a people.

**3.** *Trace the sources of Solomon's wealth in chapters 8 and 9, and then read Deuteronomy 17:16–17. What warning signs are already visible in this glowing account?*

Chapter 8 records forced labor, fortified store cities, and a fleet sailing to Ophir; chapter 9 records gold by the ton, silver made as common as stones, chariots and horsemen, horses imported from Egypt, and a growing trade with foreign kings. Deuteronomy 17:16–17 forbade the king to multiply horses, return the people to Egypt, multiply wives,

or greatly multiply silver and gold. The Chronicler reports it all admiringly, but the reader with Deuteronomy open can see the ledger tilting.

4. *The queen of Sheba says the half was not told her (9:6). Read Matthew 12:42 and explain what Jesus claims about Himself using her as a witness.*

Jesus says the queen of the South came from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon's wisdom, and that a greater than Solomon is here. The claim is enormous and is made almost in passing: the wisdom that emptied a queen of her breath was a small thing next to the One standing in front of them, and the people who had Him in person were less responsive than a pagan queen who traveled a thousand miles on a rumor.

5. *Solomon gave his best craftsmen, his best materials, and seven years to this house. Name one area where you have been giving God your second best, and decide on one concrete change you will make this week.*

Answers will vary. Listen for the difference between an admission and a decision. Solomon's best craftsman, Hiram, was sent for on purpose; the cedar came a long way; the work took seven years. Press for one thing that will look different this week: preparation for a class taught, attention given at home, honesty in a work practice, or the quality of the hour on Sunday morning.

### **HANDLE WITH CARE**

- 2 Chronicles 7:14 is regularly applied to modern nations as though God had made a covenant with them. He has not. The promise is to covenant Israel about their land. Teach the abiding principles of humility, prayer, and repentance, and refuse the political application gently but clearly.
- The splendor of the temple does not authorize adding whatever seems impressive to worship today. God prescribed every detail of that house. The New Testament prescribes what the church does when it assembles (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11 and 14; Ephesians 5:19).
- Do not use the temple to argue for or against church building projects. The house of God today is people (1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 2:5).
- Chronicles omits Solomon's idolatry. If you leave the class with an unqualified hero, they will be confused later. Mention 1 Kings 11:1–11 and let Solomon stand as a warning about the slow cost of compromise.

## What Money Cannot Buy

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 49 belongs to the wisdom psalms and sounds more like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes than like a hymn. The psalmist calls all inhabitants of the world, low and high, rich and poor, to listen to a riddle, and the riddle is this: why should I fear when evil days come and wealthy men crowd me, when the one certainty is that none of them can buy his way past the grave. Verse 12 and verse 20 make the refrain: a man in honor who does not understand is like the beasts that perish.

But the psalm is not despairing, because of verse 15. God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me. The psalmist does not know how, and he does not say when. He simply knows that what no brother can purchase, God can. That line is a hand reaching forward in the dark toward the empty tomb, and the class should feel it.

Psalm 50 changes the scene entirely. God Himself takes the stand. The striking thing is what He does not say. He does not accuse Israel of neglecting sacrifice; He says their offerings are continually before Him. His complaint is that they have begun to treat worship as a transaction that feeds Him, and that some of them recite His covenant while stealing, committing adultery, and slandering their brothers. What He wants is thanksgiving, kept vows, a call for help in trouble, and a life that matches the mouth.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 49 is ascribed to the sons of Korah; Psalm 50 is the first of twelve psalms of Asaph, a chief musician appointed by David (1 Chronicles 16:5).
- Genre matters here: Psalm 49 is wisdom instruction addressed to people, and Psalm 50 is a covenant lawsuit in which God addresses His people. Neither is a personal lament.
- The imagery of Psalm 50:1–6, fire and tempest and summoned heavens, echoes Sinai and pictures God coming to hold court over His own congregation.
- Old Testament hope beyond death is real but less developed than ours; Psalm 49:15 is a genuine confidence, not a full doctrine of resurrection. The fuller light comes in Christ (2 Timothy 1:10).
- The sacrifices Psalm 50 discusses were divinely commanded. God is not rejecting the system He gave; He is rejecting the assumption that ritual substitutes for a heart (compare 1 Samuel 15:22; Isaiah 1:11–17; Micah 6:6–8).

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Psalm 49:7–9 says no one can pay a ransom sufficient to redeem another person's life. Read Mark 10:45 and 1 Peter 1:18–19 alongside it, and talk about what it took to do what money could never do.*

The psalm states a hard fact: the redemption of a soul is costly, and it ceases forever. Whatever a man has, it is not enough. He cannot buy back his brother, and he cannot buy back himself. Verse 8 says the price is beyond anyone's reach, and the psalm leaves the problem unsolved until verse 15, where God says, in effect, I will pay it.

Let the New Testament finish the sentence. Mark 10:45 says the Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many. 1 Peter 1:18–19 says we were not redeemed with corruptible things like silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. 1 Timothy 2:6 calls Him a ransom for all. The very word the psalm uses is the word the gospel answers. Ask the class what it changes about their view of their own life to know its purchase price.

**Question 2.** *In Psalm 50:8–13 God says He will not take a bull from your house because every beast of the forest already belongs to Him. If God needs nothing from us, why does He ask anything of us at all?*

God's argument in verses 9 through 12 is almost humorous: if I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world is Mine and all its fullness. Every animal on a thousand hills already belongs to Him. Israel had drifted into the surrounding pagan idea that the gods must be fed and that worship is a way to keep heaven supplied and therefore obligated. God demolishes that.

So why does He ask anything? Verses 14, 15, and 23 answer. He asks for thanksgiving, for kept vows, for a call in the day of trouble, and for a life ordered aright, because worship is not for His supply but for our formation and His glory. Acts 17:24–25 makes the identical argument to the Athenians: God is not worshiped with men's hands as though He needed anything. Ask the class how their view of Sunday morning changes if God does not need anything they bring but delights in their bringing it.

**Question 3.** *Psalm 50:16–21 describes people who can quote God's statutes while running with thieves and slandering their own brothers, and God says they thought He was just like them. Where does that gap between what we say on Sunday and how we live on Thursday show up most easily in our own lives?*

Verses 16 through 21 are painfully specific. These people recite the statutes and take the covenant in their mouth while hating instruction, consenting with a thief, keeping company with adulterers, and sitting down to speak against their own brother. God's summary is chilling: these things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you. Silence from God had been read as approval.

The place this bites hardest today is the tongue, exactly as in verses 19 and 20. A person can be doctrinally careful, present every service, and still spend Thursday dismantling a brother's reputation. James 3:9–10 says this ought not to be. Ask the class not to confess the sins of the absent, but to name the gap they know is real in themselves, and give them a specific assignment: one week of saying nothing about a brother that you would not say to his face.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *List the things Psalm 49 says wealth cannot do. Then read Luke 12:16–21 and note how Jesus makes the same argument with a story.*

Wealth cannot redeem a brother, cannot give God a ransom, cannot buy endless life, cannot prevent the grave, cannot go with a man when he dies, and cannot purchase understanding. Luke 12:16–21 dramatizes it: a man with a bumper crop builds bigger barns, says soul, take your ease, and hears God call him a fool because that night his soul is required of him. Both texts end at the same place, that a man can be rich and not be rich toward God.

**2.** *Psalm 49:15 says God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me. Compare Job 19:25–27 and 1 Corinthians 15:54–57, and describe how much clearer the hope becomes on this side of the resurrection.*

The psalmist is confident that God will take him out of the grave's power, but he does not explain how. Job says he knows his Redeemer lives and that in his flesh he will see God. Both are real faith reaching toward something not yet revealed. 1 Corinthians 15:54–57 gives us what they longed for: death swallowed up in victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Timothy 1:10 says Christ brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. We sing what they hoped.

**3.** *Psalm 50 is arranged like a trial. Trace it: who convenes the court, who is summoned, what the charge against the worshiper is in verses 7 through 15, and what the charge against the wicked is in verses 16 through 21.*

The Mighty One, God the Lord, convenes the court and summons the heavens and the earth as witnesses (50:1–6). His own godly ones, those who made a covenant by sacrifice, are gathered. In verses 7 through 15 the charge is not neglect of offerings but a misunderstanding of them, as though God were fed by them; He asks instead for thanksgiving and trust in the day of trouble. In verses 16 through 21 the charge against the wicked is hypocrisy: reciting the covenant while practicing theft, adultery, and slander.

4. *Twice in Psalm 50 God asks for the sacrifice of thanksgiving (50:14, 23). Read Hebrews 13:15–16 and name what the corresponding offering looks like for a Christian.*

Hebrews 13:15–16 calls it the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name, and adds do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. The Christian's offering is gratitude spoken out loud and generosity practiced, along with the presenting of the whole self as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). Note how completely this matches Psalm 50:14 and 23.

5. *Psalm 49:16–17 says not to be overawed when a man grows rich, because he will carry nothing away. Name one financial worry or one financial envy you have been carrying, and write out what you will do differently about it this week.*

Answers will vary. Both errors in the psalm are worth watching for: fear of not having enough, and envy of those who have more. Look for a concrete step, such as a budget conversation with a spouse, a specific gift given, a subscription or comparison habit dropped, or a decision to stop tracking somebody else's prosperity.

#### **HANDLE WITH CARE**

- Psalm 49 is not a condemnation of having money. It is a warning about trusting it. Abraham, Job, and Barnabas were people of means. The psalm targets confidence, not currency.
- Do not overstate Psalm 49:15. It is genuine hope, but the clear doctrine of the resurrection belongs to the gospel. Let the Old Testament speak in its own voice and then let Christ answer it.
- Psalm 50 is sometimes used to argue that God does not care about the form of worship, only the heart. That is not what it says. God gave those sacrifices in detail and never withdrew the requirement; He is condemning heartless performance, not divine order (compare 1 Corinthians 11:27–29).
- Keep the discussion of hypocrisy pointed at the people in the room. A class that spends the hour on hypocrites elsewhere has proved the psalm's point.

## Good Tidings of Great Joy

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The song of Zacharias is a priest's song, full of covenant vocabulary: visited, redeemed, horn of salvation, the house of David, the holy covenant, the oath to Abraham. For nine months he had nothing to do but think about what the angel said, and when his mouth opens the result is not personal relief but a sweeping statement about God keeping His word. Then, at verse 76, the great themes narrow to a baby in his arms: and you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest.

Luke 2 opens at the other end of the world's power structure. Caesar Augustus signs a decree, and the machinery of an empire moves a poor couple to the town the prophet named. Luke gives the birth itself one sentence. No description of the night, no adjectives, no sentiment. She brought forth her firstborn Son, wrapped Him, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. The restraint is more powerful than any embellishment we add.

Then the announcement, and notice who receives it. Shepherds, men whose work kept them out at night and often out of polite religious society, are the first to hear that a Savior has been born, who is Christ the Lord. The sign given is deliberately unimpressive: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, lying in a feeding trough. The glory of God shone around them, and then they went and found exactly what they had been told, and told everyone they met.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke alone records the songs of this chapter, and he alone dates the birth by reference to Roman rule, a habit that runs through his gospel and Acts (Luke 3:1–2; Acts 18:12).
- Bethlehem is about eighty miles from Nazareth by the usual route, several days of travel for a woman late in pregnancy.
- The inn is likely a crowded guest room rather than a commercial hotel; the manger indicates a place where animals were kept or fed, which may have been part of a house.
- Shepherds had a poor reputation in the culture of the day and were sometimes regarded as unreliable witnesses, which makes God's choice of them pointed.
- Jesus was born under the Law (Galatians 4:4) and so was circumcised the eighth day and named Jesus, exactly as the angel said before He was conceived (2:21; 1:31).
- The census under Quirinius (2:2) has raised historical questions; there is good evidence for an earlier administration or enrollment, and the teacher should answer briefly, confidently, and then move on.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Zacharias speaks of being saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us (1:71, 74).*

*Read 1:77 and then Luke 24:46–47, and talk about what kind of salvation this child actually brings and how easy it is to want the wrong kind.*

Zacharias uses the language of national deliverance, and he means it, but Luke immediately shows what it amounts to in 1:77: to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins. The enemy that most needed defeating was never Rome. It was sin and death, and the dayspring from on high came to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Luke 24:46–47 says the same thing at the other end of the book: repentance and remission of sins preached in His name to all nations.

The wrong kind of salvation is easy to want because it is easier to see. We want God to remove the difficult person, fix the finances, and end the trouble. Those are not wicked desires, but a class that only prays that way has quietly redefined what a Savior is for. Ask the group to name what they have most wanted God to save them from lately, and then ask whether they have prayed with equal heat about a sin.

**Question 2.** *God announced the birth of His Son to shepherds working a night shift rather than to the temple leadership or to Herod's court. What is God saying by that choice, and who are the people in your town most likely to be overlooked in the same way?*

The choice is deliberate and it fits Luke's whole gospel. This is the writer who will record the good Samaritan, the prodigal, the tax collector in the temple, the woman with the alabaster jar, and the thief on the cross. God bypassed the people who would have considered themselves the natural recipients of the news and sent an angel to men who smelled like sheep. 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 states the principle: God chooses the foolish, the weak, and the despised, so that no flesh should glory in His presence.

Make the second half local and specific. Every town has people the church has quietly decided are unlikely: the night shift worker, the family in the trailer at the edge of the property, the man with a record, the immigrant whose English is halting, the widow nobody visits. Ask for names, not categories, and ask what one household in the class could do this month.

**Question 3.** *Twice Luke says Mary kept these things and pondered them in her heart (2:19; see also 2:51). What would it take for you to build that kind of reflection into a week that is already full, and what usually crowds it out?*

Mary had more to think about than anyone in the account, and Luke twice describes her doing exactly that. The word he uses suggests gathering things up and holding them together, turning them over. She could not have understood it all in 2:19; she was assembling pieces that would not fit until a resurrection morning thirty odd years later. Faithfulness sometimes looks like holding onto what God said while you wait for the rest.

Most of the class wants this and cannot find the room. Do not moralize; solve it practically. Ask each person to name the specific thing that crowds out reflection, whether it is a phone, a television, an over scheduled evening, or exhaustion, and then to name a real slot, ten minutes, a particular time and place, before Sunday. Psalm 1:2 and Psalm 119:15 describe the same habit, and it is learned the way any habit is learned.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *Write out everything Zacharias says God has done or will do in 1:68–79. How much of it is about rescue from enemies, and how much is about forgiveness and light?*

He says God has visited and redeemed His people, raised up a horn of salvation in David's house, spoken by the prophets, performed the mercy promised to the fathers, remembered His holy covenant and the oath to Abraham, granted deliverance from enemies so that we may serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days, and sent the Dayspring from on high to give light to those in darkness and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Deliverance from enemies occupies two verses; forgiveness, light, and service occupy the rest.

**2.** *Read Malachi 3:1 and Malachi 4:5–6 beside Luke 1:76–77. What office is John being given, and how does Luke 1:17 describe the work?*

John is the promised messenger who prepares the way, the Elijah figure of Malachi 4:5–6 who turns the hearts of the fathers to the children. Luke 1:17 says he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, and to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Jesus confirms this identification in Matthew 11:13–14 and 17:12–13. John is a prophet, and more than a prophet, and the last one of the old order.

**3.** *Micah 5:2 said the ruler would come from Bethlehem, and Luke 2:1–7 shows a Roman tax decree moving the right family to the right town at the right time. Trace how many ordinary events had to line up, and describe what that says about God's providence in your own ordinary week.*

A Roman emperor issues a tax decree; a governor administers it; a carpenter's ancestry requires him to register in a particular town; a pregnant woman travels; a guest room is full. Not one of those people was trying to fulfill Micah 5:2, and every one of them did. Answers will vary on the application. Point toward Romans 8:28 and Proverbs 16:9

without promising that every inconvenience has a visible purpose; providence usually looks like traffic and paperwork while it is happening.

4. *The angels announce peace on earth among men with whom God is pleased (2:14). Compare Romans 5:1 and Ephesians 2:13–17. What kind of peace is being promised, and what kind is not?*

It is peace with God first. Romans 5:1 says that being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:13–17 adds peace between Jew and Gentile, two made one, the middle wall of division broken down. What is not promised is the absence of conflict in the world; Jesus Himself says in Luke 12:51 that He did not come to give peace on earth in that sense. Nations did not stop fighting in the year of His birth.

5. *The shepherds did three things: they went with haste, they saw, and they made widely known what they had been told (2:15–18). Name the one person you will tell something true about Christ this week, and set the day.*

Answers will vary. The shepherds are a compact model of evangelism: they heard, they moved quickly, they verified for themselves, and they told. Notice that nobody commissioned them, and notice that what they reported was simply what they had been told concerning this Child. Press for a name and a day rather than a general willingness.

### HANDLE WITH CARE

- Traditions have grown around this account that the text does not support: no innkeeper is mentioned, no stable is described, no animals are named, and the number of angels who spoke is one, with a multitude praising. Teach what Luke wrote.
- Peace on earth is not a promise of world peace or a political program. It is peace with God through Christ (Romans 5:1; Colossians 1:20).
- The circumcision of Jesus on the eighth day is sometimes used to justify infant baptism. It does not. Jesus was born under the Law and kept it. Baptism in the New Testament follows teaching, belief, and repentance, which infants cannot do (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36–37), and infants have no sin to be forgiven (Ezekiel 18:20; Matthew 18:3).
- If someone raises the Quirinius dating, answer briefly and honestly. Luke is a careful historian whose accuracy has been repeatedly vindicated, and an unresolved detail is not an error. Do not let the hour disappear into it.

## The Grace of Giving

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These two chapters are the longest sustained treatment of giving in the New Testament, and the remarkable thing is how rarely Paul talks about money directly. He calls the offering a grace, a fellowship, a ministry, a blessing, and a proof of love. He never names an amount, never sets a percentage, and never applies pressure by guilt, though he is not above a little holy competition, telling Corinth about Macedonia and telling Macedonia about Corinth.

The Macedonian example in 8:1–5 sets the standard, and it is not a standard of size. In a great trial of affliction, the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. They gave beyond their ability, on their own initiative, begging for the favor of participating. The key is verse 5: they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God. Everything else followed from that transaction.

Chapter 9 gives the principles. Sowing sparingly and reaping sparingly, giving as one purposes in his heart, God loving a cheerful giver, God being able to make all grace abound so that having sufficiency in all things we may abound to every good work. Read carefully, none of this promises financial return; the increase Paul describes is an increased capacity to be generous and a harvest of thanksgiving to God. Keep that distinction sharp, because the prosperity preachers live in this chapter.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The collection was for poor saints in Jerusalem, and Paul had been gathering it across several provinces for years (Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4; Acts 24:17).
- Corinth had begun the collection a year before and had stalled, probably because of the conflict that occupies the rest of this letter (8:10–11).
- Macedonia included Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, congregations that were poor and persecuted (Acts 16–17; Philippians 4:15–16).
- Titus and two unnamed brothers, one chosen by the churches, were sent to handle the funds so that no one could accuse Paul of mishandling them (8:18–21).
- The tithe belonged to the Law of Moses, which was fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 7:12; 8:13). The New Testament pattern is free will giving, purposed, proportionate, and laid by on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2).

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Second Corinthians 8:5 says the Macedonians first gave themselves to the Lord. Why does that order matter so much, and what happens in a congregation when the order gets reversed?*

The Macedonians did not decide how much to give and then get around to consecrating themselves. They handed over the person first, and the wallet came along afterward because it belonged to the person. That is why Paul calls their giving a grace of God rather than an achievement. Romans 12:1 works the same way: present your bodies a living sacrifice, and everything else is a detail of that one transaction.

When a congregation reverses the order, giving becomes fundraising. The budget drives the appeal, guilt becomes the tool, and members start calculating a defensible minimum. Ask the class what a congregation looks like from the inside when people have given themselves first, and what it looks like when they have not. Most of them have seen both. Then ask each person which transaction he has actually made.

**Question 2.** *Second Corinthians 9:7 says each one should give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity. Compare 1 Corinthians 16:1–2. How does the New Testament pattern of giving differ from a required percentage, and is it easier or harder on us?*

The New Testament nowhere binds the tithe on Christians. The tithe belonged to the Law of Moses, along with a priesthood and a sacrificial system, and Hebrews 7:12 says that when the priesthood changed, the law changed. What replaces it is not a lower standard but a larger one. 1 Corinthians 16:2 says on the first day of the week let each one lay something aside, storing up as he has prospered. That is regular, personal, proportionate, and planned. 2 Corinthians 9:7 adds purposed, cheerful, and free.

Now press the second half of the question, because most classes assume free will giving is the easier arrangement. A percentage lets a man discharge an obligation and stop thinking. Purposing in the heart means the question is never closed; it means he must ask, in the presence of Christ who became poor, what he ought to do with what he has. Ask the class honestly: has free will giving made them more generous than a tithe would have, or less? The answer is usually humbling.

**Question 3.** *Paul grounds the whole appeal in 8:9, that though Christ was rich, for our sakes He became poor. How should that one sentence shape what a Christian does with a raise, an inheritance, or an unexpected windfall?*

Paul's theology of giving is not built on need, though the need was real. It is built on the incarnation. He was rich, and for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. The riches He left were not a bank account; Philippians 2:6–8 describes what He actually surrendered. And the riches we gain are not money either. The whole verse is an exchange of far greater things, and it sits in the middle of a chapter about a collection, which tells you how Paul thought about a collection.

Bring it down to cases. A raise arrives. An inheritance clears probate. A house sells for more than expected. The default assumption in our culture is that increased income raises the standard of living. Paul's logic suggests it should first raise the level of generosity. Ask the class to name the last time their income went up and to say honestly what changed as a result. Then ask what they will do the next time.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *List the safeguards Paul builds around this money in 8:16–24. Why is it not enough to be honest; why does he insist on providing honorable things in the sight of men as well as of the Lord?*

Paul sends Titus, who went of his own accord, along with a brother whose praise in the gospel is throughout the churches and who was chosen by the churches to travel with them, and a third brother who had been proved diligent. He states the reason in 8:20–21: avoiding blame in this lavish gift, providing honorable things not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of men. Personal integrity is not enough when other people's money is involved, because the reputation of the gospel is attached to it. Congregations should build the same kind of visible accountability around their treasures.

**2.** *Read 1 Corinthians 16:1–2 and note four things it specifies about the collection: when, who, how much, and how it is handled. Compare that with what you actually practice.*

When: upon the first day of the week. Who: let each one of you, which includes everyone, not only those of means. How much: as he has prospered, which is proportionate and personal rather than a flat figure. How handled: laid by in store so that there be no collections when Paul comes, meaning planned in advance rather than impulsive. Answers will vary on the comparison. Listen for the person who realizes his giving is a leftover decision made in the pew rather than a purposed one made at home.

**3.** *Second Corinthians 8:12 says a gift is accepted according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. How does that protect the poorest member of a congregation from shame, and the wealthiest from self congratulation?*

Because the measure is what a man has. The widow in Mark 12:41–44 gave two mites and was commended above the wealthy, which means the amount that pleases God is not a number but a proportion of a real life. The poorest member can give acceptably and fully, and the wealthiest cannot congratulate himself on a figure that cost him

nothing. 2 Corinthians 8:13–15 adds that the goal is not that others be eased and you burdened, but equality, with the abundance of one supplying the lack of another.

4. *Trace what Paul says the Corinthians' gift will accomplish in 9:11–14, beyond simply meeting a need. How many separate results can you find?*

Paul lists a striking chain: they are enriched in everything for all liberality, the gift causes thanksgiving to God, it supplies the needs of the saints, it abounds through many thanksgivings to God, the recipients glorify God for the Corinthians' professed subjection to the gospel, the recipients pray for the Corinthians and long for them, and God is thanked for His indescribable gift. The money meets a need almost incidentally; its larger work is worship, unity, and prayer between churches that had never met.

5. *Before next Sunday, decide on a specific amount you will purpose in your heart to give each week, write it down, and begin. If you already have one, raise it deliberately rather than accidentally.*

Answers will vary, and this one should be done privately rather than reported aloud. The two words to press are purpose and write. A purposed amount survives a tight month; an unpurposed one does not. For the member who already gives regularly, the deliberate raise is the point, since giving that never changes in twenty years of rising income is not really proportionate.

### **HANDLE WITH CARE**

- Do not bind the tithe. It belonged to the Law (Leviticus 27:30; Hebrews 7:5, 12). Teach 1 Corinthians 16:2 and 2 Corinthians 9:7 as the pattern: first day of the week, each one, as he has prospered, as he purposes, cheerfully.
- Guard 9:6–11 against prosperity teaching. Paul says God supplies seed to the sower and multiplies the seed sown so that we may abound to every good work. The promised increase is capacity for generosity and a harvest of thanksgiving, not a financial return on investment.
- Avoid turning cheerful giving into optional giving. Paul spends two chapters urging, arranging, and organizing this offering. Free will does not mean casual.
- The equality of 8:13–15 is voluntary sharing among brethren, not a program imposed by force. Keep the discussion on what Christians choose to do with their own, and away from politics.

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**NEXT WEEK'S READING:** 2 Chronicles 10–20 · Psalm 51–52 · Luke 2:22–52 · 2 Corinthians 10–11

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