

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 53 OF 104

Tested and Proved

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	2 Chronicles 21–29
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 53–55
Gospels	Luke 3
General New Testament	2 Corinthians 12–13

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to move the class from assuming to examining. Every reading puts someone to the test. Joash is tested by a funeral, Uzziah by success, Ahaz by the opportunity to shut a door, David by a friend's betrayal, the crowds at the Jordan by a preacher who will not accept their pedigree, and the Corinthians by an apostle who tells them to stop grading him and grade themselves. Nobody in these chapters is tested by an exam. They are tested by ordinary weeks.

Doctrinally, four things want care. First, Uzziah in the holy place teaches that we do not choose what pleases God in worship; He specifies it. Second, the instruments in 2 Chronicles 29 belong to the Old Covenant sacrificial order and do not carry over into the church (Ephesians 5:19). Third, Romans 3, quoting Psalm 53, proves universal personal sin, not inherited guilt or inability. Fourth, John's baptism and the baptism of Acts 2:38 are not the same thing, and Acts 19:1–5 settles it.

Formationally, the thread is proof. John asks for fruit and will not accept ancestry. Paul asks a church to test itself and offers scars and weakness rather than credentials. The Chronicler keeps writing sentences like, but not with a loyal heart. Ask your class this, and give them a full minute of silence before anyone answers: if someone followed you for one ordinary week, taking notes on your money, your speech, and your schedule, what would they conclude you actually believe?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Luke 3 first. It is the week's clearest call and the easiest to apply, and the three questions in 3:10–14 will carry a full hour. Reserve the last fifteen minutes for the baptism of Jesus and the difference between John's baptism and Acts 2:38.

Second session: Take up 2 Corinthians 12–13 second, built on the thorn in 12:7–10 and the self examination of 13:5. Expect personal stories about unanswered prayer and leave room for them. Handle 12:12 and miraculous gifts plainly, briefly, and kindly.

The other two readings: 2 Chronicles 21–29 and Psalms 53 through 55 fit the extended questions. Give the class the one sentence that ties the Chronicles reading together, that Joash was faithful all the days of Jehoiada, and ask them to read Psalm 55 slowly and notice how honest the Bible lets a hurt man be.

Kings Under Examination

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The Chronicler is telling the story of a promise under threat. God swore that David would not lack a man on the throne, and in these chapters the line nearly goes out twice: Jehoram kills his brothers, Arabian raiders kill all of Jehoram's sons but the youngest, and then Athaliah murders the royal seed. One baby survives because an aunt hides him in a bedroom and then in the house of God for six years. If you want to see God keeping a promise in the dark, it is here.

Three kings in this reading start well and end badly, and the Chronicler will not let you miss the pattern. Joash is faithful while Jehoiada lives. Amaziah obeys, but not with a loyal heart, and ends up bowing to the gods of the people he just defeated, which is as senseless as the prophet says. Uzziah is marvelously helped till he was strong, and then his strength becomes the thing that ruins him. These are not stories about wicked men. They are stories about good men who did not finish.

Then Ahaz, who is simply an apostate: altars on every corner, sacrifices to the gods of Damascus, the vessels of God's house cut in pieces, the doors shut. And then his son Hezekiah, who does not appoint a committee or wait for a better year. In the first month of his first year he opens the doors, calls the Levites, and says my sons, do not be negligent now. The reading ends with a cleansed house, restored worship, and a king who rejoiced that God had prepared the people, for the thing was done suddenly.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This section covers roughly 848 to 715 BC, from Jehoram to the accession of Hezekiah, all in the southern kingdom of Judah.
- Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, married into David's line by Jehoshaphat's alliance, which shows how long the consequences of that alliance ran.
- The Chronicler works with a consistent theology of retribution within the nation: seeking God brings help, forsaking Him brings trouble. This concerns God's covenant with Israel, not a formula for individual lives today.
- Only descendants of Aaron could burn incense (Exodus 30:7-8; Numbers 16). Uzziah's leprosy is a judgment on presumption in worship, not on an honest mistake.
- Ahaz is the king Isaiah confronts in Isaiah 7, the same crisis that produces the sign of Immanuel.
- Hezekiah's reforms in chapters 29 through 31 are the Chronicler's high point after the reign of Solomon, and they take up more space here than in 2 Kings.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest, and then turned as soon as Jehoiada was buried (24:2, 17-22). Whose faith are you currently leaning on, and what would be left of yours if that person were gone next year?*

The text is careful about the timing. Joash did right all the days of Jehoiada, and when Jehoiada died the leaders of Judah came and bowed to the king, and he listened to them. His faith had been real enough to repair the temple and shallow enough to evaporate at the first funeral. And what he did next was monstrous: he had Jehoiada's own son stoned in the court of the house of God, and 24:22 says he did not remember the kindness Jehoiada had shown him.

Most of us start with borrowed faith, and that is not a criticism; it is how a Christian home works. The question is whether it ever becomes our own. Ask the class to name the person whose conviction they have been standing on, whether a parent, a spouse, an elder, or a preacher. Then ask what they personally have settled, from the

Scriptures, that would hold if that voice went silent. 2 Timothy 1:5 traces Timothy's faith through his grandmother and mother and then says it dwells in him too. That last step is the one that matters.

Question 2. *Second Chronicles 26:16 says that when Uzziah was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction. How does success actually endanger a person spiritually, and what safeguards can you put in place before you need them?*

Uzziah's ruin is stated in one of the most quotable sentences in Chronicles: when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction. Note what he had: military victory, engineering, agriculture, a name that spread abroad, and 26:15 says he was marvelously helped till he was strong. The help came from God, and the strength made him forget it. Deuteronomy 8:11–18 warned Israel about exactly this, that full barns and good houses make a man say my power and the might of my hand.

Push for safeguards, because success is not usually resisted in the moment; it is survived by habits set earlier. Regular confession to someone who can tell you no. Giving that scales with income. Remaining accountable to elders rather than drifting above correction. Keeping a job or a ministry where you are not the most important person in the room. Ask the class which of those they have, and which they have quietly outgrown.

Question 3. *Ahaz shut the doors of the house of the Lord, and Hezekiah opened them in the first month of his first year (28:24; 29:3). What has been shut in your life that needs opening again, and what is your equivalent of the first month of the first year?*

Ahaz did not merely neglect the temple; 28:24 says he shut up the doors of the house of the Lord and made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem. Worship did not stop. It just went everywhere except where God had put His name. When Hezekiah takes the throne, the very first thing recorded of him is that he opened the doors and repaired them, and then he called the Levites and told them not to be negligent. Everything else in his reign flows out of that one act.

Bring it home with specifics rather than sentiment. A shut door might be a Bible not opened in years, a prayer life that ended during a hard season, a relationship in the church that was never repaired, a besetting sin nobody knows about, a child not spoken to. The second half of the question is the real point: Hezekiah did it in the first month of the first year. Ask what this week could be the first month of.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read the letter from Elijah in 21:12–15 and note what Jehoram had done and what was announced against him. Why is it significant that even a king in the line of David could be told, in writing, that he had walked in the ways of the kings of Israel?*

Jehoram had killed his six brothers with the sword, walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and made Judah commit spiritual harlotry. The letter announced a plague on his people and a lingering intestinal disease on him. That a written prophetic rebuke came to a son of David underscores the Chronicler's whole point: the covenant did not exempt the royal line from judgment. Position in God's plan has never been a substitute for obedience, which is exactly what John the Baptist will say to the descendants of Abraham in this week's Luke reading.

2. *Trace the phrase used of Amaziah in 25:2, that he did what was right in the sight of the Lord but not with a loyal heart, through his story in chapter 25. Where do you see the half heartedness show up in what he actually did?*

Amaziah obeys the law of Moses in not killing the children of his father's murderers (25:4), which is genuine. But he hires mercenaries from Israel and only sends them home when a prophet warns him about the money, and even then he grumbles about the cost. After defeating the men of Seir he brings home their gods and bows to them, and when a prophet asks why he sought gods that could not deliver their own people, he threatens to kill him. Then he picks a needless fight with Israel out of pride. Every step shows obedience that goes only as far as it is convenient.

3. *Zechariah the son of Jehoiada is stoned in the court of the temple (24:20–22). Read Luke 11:50–51 and note how Jesus uses that murder. What does it say about how God keeps accounts?*

Jesus speaks of the blood of all the prophets from Abel to Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple, and says it will be required of that generation. He treats a murder from the ninth century BC as still on the books.

God does not forget what men do to His messengers, and the accumulation of rejected warnings is itself a form of judgment. Note also Zechariah's dying words in 24:22, the Lord look on it and repay, and how differently Stephen dies in Acts 7:60.

4. *In 26:16–21 Uzziah takes a censer into the holy place. Read Numbers 16:39–40 and Hebrews 7:13–14, and explain why the priesthood was not his to take and why that principle still matters for worship today.*

Numbers 16 and its aftermath established that only the sons of Aaron could burn incense, and the censers of Korah's company were hammered into a covering for the altar as a permanent reminder. Uzziah was a good king doing a religious act that God had not assigned to him, and he was struck with leprosy in the middle of it. Hebrews 7:13–14 notes that our Lord came from Judah, a tribe from which no man ever served at the altar, which is why He is priest after the order of Melchizedek and not of Aaron. The permanent principle is that we do not get to decide what pleases God in worship; He tells us (Leviticus 10:1–3; Colossians 3:17).

5. *Hezekiah did not wait. In the first month of his first year he opened the doors and told the Levites to sanctify themselves and get to work (29:3–5). Name the one thing you have been meaning to put right for more than a year, and take the first concrete step on it this week.*

Answers will vary. Hezekiah's speed is the lesson: he did not announce a plan for later in the year. Listen for procrastination dressed up as prudence, and press for a first step that can be completed within seven days, even if the whole repair takes longer.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Instrumental music surfaces again in 29:25–28, where instruments are set in place by the commandment of David and of the prophets, and played while the burnt offering is made. Note the connection: the instruments belong to the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant, which was fulfilled and removed in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 10:1–10). The New Testament assigns the church singing and making melody in the heart (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).
- Do not turn Jehoram's disease or Uzziah's leprosy into a rule that sickness reveals sin. Jesus rejects that reasoning in John 9:1–3, and Job stands against it.
- The Chronicler's pattern of immediate national reward and punishment belonged to God's covenant with Israel as a nation. Do not promise individual Christians that faithfulness will produce prosperity or that hardship proves unfaithfulness.
- Joash's story can be used to frighten young people about losing faith. Aim instead at the positive: help each person own what he believes now, while the people who taught him are still available to ask.

When the Friend Turns

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 53 is a near twin of Psalm 14 with a few changes, most noticeably the use of God rather than Lord throughout and a different ending. Its subject is not philosophical atheism, which was rare in the ancient world, but the practical kind: the man who lives as if no one is watching and therefore eats up God's people as he eats bread. The psalm answers him with the picture of God leaning over the balcony of heaven to look for one person who understands.

Psalm 54 is a brief, tight prayer from a real crisis. The Ziphites, men of David's own tribe, twice told Saul where he was hiding. The psalm has the whole shape of faith in seven verses: a cry for help, a statement of the trouble, a declaration that God is my helper, a vow to sacrifice freely, and thanks offered before the deliverance has arrived.

Psalm 55 is the emotional center of the three, and it is remarkably raw. David is fearful and horrified, and he says out loud that he wishes he had wings like a dove so he could fly away and be at rest. Then comes the knife: it was not an enemy, it was you, my equal, my guide, my acquaintance, with whom I took sweet counsel and walked to the house of God in company. The psalm does not tidy this up. It ends by handing the whole thing to God with a promise that He will never permit the righteous to be moved.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- All three are attributed to David; Psalm 54 carries a specific occasion, the Ziphites' betrayal of 1 Samuel 23 and 26.
- Genre: Psalm 53 is a wisdom psalm about human corruption; Psalms 54 and 55 are individual laments, the most common type in the Psalter.
- Psalm 53 and Psalm 14 are almost identical, an example of the same song circulating in more than one collection with slight liturgical adaptation.
- Many readers connect Psalm 55:12–14 with Ahithophel, David's counselor who joined Absalom's rebellion (2 Samuel 15:31; 16:23; 17:23).
- The New Testament does not apply Psalm 55 to Judas; the passage Jesus quotes about His betrayer is Psalm 41:9 (John 13:18). Note the parallel without overstating it.
- Maschil in the headings of 54 and 55 indicates a psalm of instruction, meant to teach as well as to be sung.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 53:1 says the fool has said in his heart, there is no God, and then immediately describes corrupt behavior. What does that connection suggest about where practical atheism actually starts, and how can a believer live as though there were no God without ever saying so?*

The Hebrew fool is not a man with a low IQ but a man with a settled moral posture, and the psalm links his denial directly to his behavior: they are corrupt, they have done abominable iniquity, there is none who does good. Notice the location of the denial. He has said it in his heart, not in a lecture hall. Few people announce that God does not exist; many people arrange their lives as though He does not see.

That is where the second half of the question does its work. Practical atheism looks like a Christian who prays about nothing, budgets as though tithes and offerings were the only spiritual part of his money, talks about people differently when they are absent, and makes his big decisions without ever once asking what God would have him do. Psalm 10:11 puts it plainly: he has said in his heart, God has forgotten. Ask where each person's functional atheism shows up, and expect a quiet room.

Question 2. *In Psalm 55:12–14 David says he could have borne it if an enemy had done this, but it was his companion and friend. Why does betrayal inside the family of God wound so much more deeply, and how should a Christian respond when it happens?*

David names three things that made the wound deep: equality, intimacy, and shared worship. This was a peer, a counselor, a man he confided in, and someone he walked to God's house beside. The injury is not just the act but the memory attached to it. Every good thing they had together becomes evidence against the friendship, which is why betrayal takes so much longer to heal than simple hostility.

Say plainly that many people in the room have been hurt inside the church, and some are still carrying it. Then give them somewhere to go. David prays instead of retaliating. Romans 12:17–21 forbids repaying evil for evil. Matthew 18:15 tells us to go to the brother, which is harder than either gossip or avoidance. Ephesians 4:31–32 says put away bitterness and forgive as God forgave you. And note that forgiving does not require pretending nothing happened; the psalm is bluntly honest about what happened. Ask whether anyone needs to make a visit this week rather than nurse a grievance for another year.

Question 3. *Psalm 55:22 says to cast your burden on the Lord and He shall sustain you. In practical terms, what is the difference between casting a burden on God and simply worrying about it in religious language?*

Casting is a decisive verb. The Hebrew pictures throwing something down so it is no longer on your shoulders, and 1 Peter 5:7 uses the same image: casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Worry, by contrast, keeps picking the burden back up. Philippians 4:6–7 gives the mechanics: anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known, and the peace of God guards your heart.

Give the class a practical test. A burden has been cast when you have told God the specific thing, asked for a specific outcome, thanked Him in advance, and then gone and done your work. It has not been cast when you have prayed about it seven times today with rising panic. Ask who needs to name one burden aloud this week to God and, if it would help, to one trusted brother or sister.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Compare Psalm 53 with Psalm 14 and list the differences. Then read Romans 3:10–12, where Paul quotes this psalm. What is Paul proving in Romans 3, and what is he not proving?*

The psalms are nearly identical; Psalm 53 uses God where Psalm 14 uses Lord, and verse 5 differs, replacing Psalm 14:5–6 with a description of enemies scattered and put to shame. Paul quotes the opening lines in Romans 3:10–12 to prove that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin, since both the Law and the Psalms indict Israel too. What he is proving is that every accountable person has sinned and needs justification through Christ (Romans 3:23). What he is not proving is that human beings are born guilty or are incapable of responding to God; the same letter commands obedience from the heart (Romans 6:17) and says God will render to each according to his deeds (Romans 2:6).

2. *Read 1 Samuel 23:19–29 for the setting of Psalm 54. Note what David asks for, what he promises, and where his confidence comes from in verses 4 and 7.*

David asks God to save him by His name and to vindicate him by His strength, because strangers have risen against him and oppressors seek his life. He promises to sacrifice freely and to praise God's name because it is good. His confidence appears in verse 4, behold, God is my helper, the Lord is with those who uphold my life, and in verse 7, He has delivered me out of all trouble and my eye has seen its desire upon my enemies. The thanksgiving is spoken while he is still hiding in the wilderness.

3. *Trace David's emotions through Psalm 55: what he feels in verses 4 through 8, what he asks for in verses 9 and 15, and where he lands in verses 16 through 23. How honest is the Bible about fear?*

In verses 4 through 8 he describes his heart in anguish, the terrors of death fallen on him, fearfulness and trembling, horror overwhelming him, and a longing to fly away like a dove and be at rest in the wilderness. In verses 9 and 15 he asks God to divide their tongues and to let death seize them. In verses 16 through 23 he says as for me, I will call upon God, and the Lord shall save me, evening and morning and at noon I will pray, He has redeemed my soul in

peace, cast your burden on the Lord. Scripture is completely honest about fear, and it does not treat the fear itself as a failure.

4. *Psalm 55:15 asks that death come suddenly on his enemies. Read Romans 12:19 and Luke 23:34, and explain how a Christian should handle a prayer like that.*

It is an appeal to God to execute justice, not permission to take revenge. Romans 12:19 says vengeance belongs to God and tells Christians to give place to wrath. The Christian standard is higher because we have seen the cross: Jesus prayed for His executioners, and Stephen did the same. Read the imprecatory lines as a real cry for God to do right, notice that even here David is handing the matter over rather than picking up a sword, and then let the New Testament set our practice.

5. *Psalm 55:17 says evening, morning, and at noon I will pray and cry aloud. Choose three fixed times this week, write them down, and actually stop and pray at each one, even if only for two minutes.*

Answers will vary, but this one should be reported on next week if your class will allow it. Fixed times are how a life of prayer actually forms; Daniel 6:10 shows the same pattern of three times a day. Watch for the person who insists he prays continually and therefore needs no set time; continual prayer grows out of appointed prayer, not instead of it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 53:3, as quoted in Romans 3, is regularly used to teach total depravity and inherited guilt. It teaches neither. It describes the universal practice of sin among accountable people, which Scripture everywhere affirms, and it stops there (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 3:23).
- Psalm 55:15 is imprecatory. Handle it as an appeal to divine justice and contrast it openly with Luke 23:34 and Acts 7:60. Do not let a member walk out thinking Scripture licenses personal vengeance.
- Be careful not to assert that Psalm 55 predicts Judas. The New Testament applies Psalm 41:9 to him. The parallel is real, but keep the claim honest.
- Betrayal is a live wound in most congregations. Be ready for the conversation this lesson may start after class, and do not let the discussion turn into a forum for airing specific grievances about people in the building.

Fruit Worthy of Repentance

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke dates the ministry of John with six political and religious markers, and it is not decoration. He is writing to a man named Theophilus in the real world, and he wants it understood that these events happened at a particular time under named officials, verifiable by anyone who cared to check. Then he lets the contrast land: with Tiberius on the throne and Caiaphas in the temple, the word of God came to a man in the desert.

John's preaching has a hard edge that we soften at our peril. He calls the crowds coming to be baptized a brood of vipers, demands fruits worthy of repentance, and cuts off the one argument they were counting on, that Abraham was their father. God, he says, can raise up children to Abraham from the stones. Then the practical questions come, and his answers are so plain they are almost disappointing: share what you have, stop cheating people, be content with your pay. Repentance, it turns out, shows up in coats, invoices, and paychecks.

The chapter ends with two scenes that establish who Jesus is. At His baptism the heavens open, the Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove, and the Father speaks: You are My beloved Son, in You I am well pleased. Then Luke traces the line backward, not forward, past David and Abraham and Noah, to Adam, the son of God. Matthew shows the King of the Jews. Luke shows the Son of Man, related to every person who has ever lived.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The fifteenth year of Tiberius places John's ministry around AD 26 to 29.
- Annas and Caiaphas are both named as high priest because Annas retained the influence and title even after Rome deposed him in favor of his son in law.
- John is the promised forerunner of Malachi 3:1 and 4:5–6, and the last prophet of the old order (Luke 16:16).
- John's baptism was from heaven (Luke 20:4), was a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, and pointed forward to the One coming after him. It ceased when the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ was preached (Acts 19:1–5).
- Tax collectors bought the right to collect and profited from whatever they could extract above the assessment; the soldiers in view were likely locally employed rather than Roman legionaries.
- Luke's genealogy runs from Jesus back to Adam, through David's son Nathan rather than Solomon, and includes seventy seven names.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Three groups ask John what they should do, and he tells them to share a coat, collect no more than they are appointed, and be content with their wages (3:10–14). Why are his answers so ordinary, and what would he say to you about your work this week?*

Notice that nobody is told to leave his profession, join a monastic community, or take up an unusual religious practice. The tax collector stays a tax collector and stops overcharging. The soldier stays a soldier and stops intimidating people and complaining about his pay. The man with two coats gives one away. Repentance in John's preaching is not an emotional experience; it is a change in the way a person handles money, power, and possessions.

The second half is where the class earns its hour. Ask what John would say to a contractor, a nurse, a teacher, a salesman, a retiree, a student. He would probably say something uncomfortably specific about honest hours, honest invoices, how you talk about the people you supervise, and what you do with the surplus in your closet. Ask for one sentence each, in the first person, beginning with this week I will stop or this week I will start.

Question 2. *John tells the crowd not to begin saying that they have Abraham as their father (3:8). What is the modern version of that sentence in a congregation like ours, and how do we know when we are leaning on it?*

The sentence assumes that heritage settles the question. We have the right ancestor, so we are safe. John says God can make children of Abraham out of rocks, which means descent from a godly man guarantees nothing. This is the same error Paul dismantles in Romans 2:28–29 and the same one Jesus confronts in John 8:39.

The modern versions are easy to list once you start: my grandfather helped build this building, I was raised in the church, I have been a member here for forty years, my father was an elder, I was baptized at twelve. Every one of those can be true and good and still be a place to hide. The diagnostic is what a person points to when asked why he is confident before God. If the answer is family, history, or membership rather than Christ and a life presently obedient to Him, the warning is for him. Say this gently. Some of the most faithful people in the room will hear it hardest, and some who most need it will not.

Question 3. *Jesus had no sin to repent of, yet He was baptized (3:21–22). Why would He do that, and how does His baptism differ from John's baptism and from the baptism commanded in Acts 2:38?*

Matthew 3:15 gives the reason in Jesus' own words: thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. He was identifying Himself with the people He came to save and submitting to everything God required of a righteous Israelite. John 1:31–34 adds another purpose: the baptism was the moment John was given the sign, the Spirit descending and remaining, by which he could identify and announce the Messiah. It also inaugurated His public ministry, and it is the one scene where Father, Son, and Spirit are all distinctly present.

Then draw the distinctions clearly. John's baptism was for repentance and pointed forward to One who had not yet died and risen. Baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, commanded in Acts 2:38, is for the remission of sins on the basis of a death and resurrection that have now happened, and it puts a person into Christ and into His body (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Acts 19:1–5 settles the matter historically: men who had received John's baptism were baptized again in the name of the Lord Jesus. Teach it plainly, and let the class see that the difference is not a technicality but the difference between anticipation and fulfillment.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every specific instruction John gives in 3:10–14, and note what each one costs the person who obeys it. What pattern do you see in the kind of repentance he is asking for?*

He tells the man with two tunics to give to the one who has none and to share food; he tells the tax collectors to collect no more than what is appointed; he tells the soldiers not to intimidate anyone, not to accuse falsely, and to be content with their wages. Each one costs money, leverage, or comfort. The pattern is that repentance surfaces first where a person has an advantage over someone weaker. John does not ask for religious performance; he asks people to stop using their position and start using their surplus.

2. *Read Isaiah 40:3–5 and note how Luke quotes it in 3:4–6. Luke carries the quotation further than Matthew and Mark do. What phrase does he include, and why would that matter to his readers?*

Matthew and Mark stop at prepare the way of the Lord. Luke continues through Isaiah 40:5 to include and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Luke writes with the Gentile world in view, and his gospel repeatedly widens the frame: Simeon's light to the Gentiles, the genealogy traced to Adam, the good Samaritan, the grateful leper, and finally Acts, where the gospel reaches Rome. That one added phrase is Luke's whole project in miniature.

3. *Compare the genealogy in Luke 3:23–38 with Matthew 1:1–17. Note where each begins and ends, which son of David each traces, and how many names differ. Then read John 1:45 and Galatians 3:16 and describe what both genealogies are establishing.*

Matthew begins with Abraham and moves forward to Joseph, tracing the royal line through Solomon; Luke begins with Jesus and moves backward to Adam and to God, tracing the line through David's son Nathan. The names between David and Joseph differ almost entirely. The two most common explanations are that Luke gives Mary's line, with Joseph listed as the legal son in law of Heli, or that Matthew gives the legal royal succession while Luke gives the natural descent. Scripture does not tell us which, and honesty is better than a confident guess. What both

establish is the same thing: Jesus is the son of David and the seed of Abraham (John 1:45; Galatians 3:16), the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote.

4. *Read Acts 19:1–7, where Paul meets men who had received John’s baptism. What does Paul do, and what does that tell you about the difference between John’s baptism and baptism into Christ?*

Paul baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus. These men had received a baptism that had been valid before the cross but was now obsolete, because the death, burial, and resurrection it pointed toward had occurred and the terms of pardon had been published at Pentecost. Their sincerity was not in question, and it was not enough. The episode shows that the form and the authority of baptism matter, and that receiving the right baptism, not merely a baptism, is what Scripture requires (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4).

5. *John said the axe is already laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down (3:9). Name one specific fruit that has been missing from your life, and do one concrete thing about it before next Sunday.*

Answers will vary. Notice that John’s image is agricultural and unsentimental: a tree is judged by what it produces, not by what species it claims to be. Galatians 5:22–23 provides a checklist if the class needs one. Press for one fruit and one concrete action, and be alert for the person who names a feeling rather than a deed.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not blur John’s baptism with the baptism the church administers. Acts 19:1–5 draws the line for us. John’s was from heaven and was right for its time; it is not what the Great Commission commands.
- Luke 3:16, baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire, should be read with verse 17. The fire is most naturally the judgment that burns the chaff, not a personal spiritual experience to be sought. The Spirit baptism promised was fulfilled at Pentecost and at Cornelius’ house (Acts 1:5; 2:1–4; 11:15–17).
- The genealogy differences will come up. Present the main explanations honestly, note that Scripture does not resolve it for us, and refuse to build a doctrine on a guess. An unexplained detail is not an error.
- 3:22 is a good place to affirm the distinct persons of Father, Son, and Spirit, but resist speculative discussion about the nature of the Godhead. Teach what the text shows.

Strength Made Perfect in Weakness

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Paul has been forced into boasting, and he ends it by boasting about the two things his opponents would never mention: a revelation he is not allowed to describe and a weakness he could not get rid of. He tells the vision in the third person, fourteen years after the fact, and gives no details at all. A man who had been to the third heaven and heard unspeakable words spent fourteen years not telling anyone. Compare that with how quickly we publicize far smaller things.

The thorn is the heart of the passage. We are not told what it was, and the silence is providential; every sufferer can stand in that space. What we are told is why: lest I be exalted above measure, a phrase repeated twice in one verse. God did not send a messenger of Satan to hurt Paul for its own sake but to keep a man who had seen paradise from becoming unusable through pride. Three prayers, three refusals, and then a promise that is better than the removal: My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.

Chapter 13 turns to the coming visit. Paul warns that he will not spare, quotes the rule about two or three witnesses, and then flips the whole trial around. They have been examining him; now he says examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. The letter that began in affliction and comfort ends with a benediction naming the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The third heaven is the presence of God; Jewish usage distinguished the sky, the starry heavens, and the dwelling place of God. Paul equates it with paradise (12:2–4).
- The vision occurred about fourteen years before the writing, which places it in the largely unrecorded years between Paul's conversion and his first missionary tour.
- The thorn, literally a stake or splinter, is never identified. Proposals include an eye ailment (Galatians 4:15; 6:11), malaria, or persistent persecution by opponents; the text says only that it was a messenger of Satan to buffet him.
- Signs, wonders, and mighty deeds authenticated an apostle (12:12; Acts 2:43; Romans 15:18–19), and they confirmed the word before the New Testament was complete (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4).
- Two or three witnesses (13:1) is drawn from Deuteronomy 19:15 and governs church discipline (Matthew 18:16; 1 Timothy 5:19).
- The closing benediction in 13:14 is the fullest of Paul's blessings and names all three persons of the Godhead.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul prayed three times for the thorn to be removed, and God said no and gave him something else instead (12:7–9). Describe a prayer of yours that God has answered that way, and what you did with the answer.*

Set the scene carefully first. This is not a man with a casual prayer life or a weak faith. He had raised the dead, healed the sick, and been carried to paradise. He pleaded three times, which echoes Gethsemane, and the answer was no. What he received instead was a word in the perfect tense: My grace is sufficient, and it keeps on being sufficient. God did not change the circumstance; He changed what the circumstance was doing to Paul.

Expect real stories here, and expect some of them to still hurt. A chronic illness. A child who has not come back. A marriage that ended. A prayer prayed for twenty years. Do not rush to resolve them. Ask what each person did with the answer, because that is the honest question. Some grew bitter, some grew tender, and most did both at different times. Hebrews 12:11 and Romans 5:3–5 describe the intended outcome, and both take time.

Question 2. *Second Corinthians 12:10 says that when I am weak, then I am strong. How does that actually work, and how is it different from simply telling yourself you are stronger than you feel?*

The logic is not psychological but theological. Paul does not say weakness feels like strength; he says that when he is weak, the power of Christ rests on him, and therefore the strength at work is not his. Weakness removes the illusion of self sufficiency, which is the only thing that ever stood between him and the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:27–29 says God chose the weak things so that no flesh should glory in His presence.

The counterfeit is positive thinking, the pep talk that tells a person he is stronger than he knows. Paul says the opposite: you are weaker than you think, and that is fine, because the strength was never supposed to be yours. Ask the class where they have been trying to be adequate, and what would change if they admitted they are not and asked for help, from God and from the brethren.

Question 3. *Second Corinthians 13:5 tells the Corinthians to examine themselves as to whether they are in the faith, and to test themselves. What standard would you use for that examination, and how do you keep it from becoming either self flattery or despair?*

Give them the standard from Scripture rather than from feelings. Am I in Christ, having believed, repented, confessed, and been baptized into Him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27)? Am I walking in the light and confessing sin as it comes (1 John 1:7–9)? Do I love the brethren (1 John 3:14)? Do I keep His commandments (1 John 2:3–5)? Is there fruit (Galatians 5:22–23)? 1 John was written so that believers might know (1 John 5:13), which means assurance is available and is tied to obedience, not to a feeling.

Guard both ditches. Self flattery examines itself against other people, which Paul already called unwise in chapter 10. Despair examines itself against perfection and never finds relief. The corrective is that the question is not whether you have arrived but whether you are in the faith and moving. Ask each person to name one specific area where honest examination would change something this month, and offer to talk privately with anyone unsure of where he stands.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Paul states the purpose of the thorn twice in a single verse (12:7). Write out both statements. What does the repetition tell you about the danger he was in and about who sent the affliction?*

Both statements are identical: lest I be exalted above measure, and again lest I be exalted above measure. The repetition frames the sentence like bookends and makes the purpose unmistakable. It also tells us how real the danger was; a man who had been to paradise was in genuine peril of pride. As for who sent it, Paul says it was given, a passive that points to God, and also calls it a messenger of Satan, which shows that God can use even the adversary's work to accomplish His own purpose, exactly as in Job 1 and 2.

2. *Trace the argument from 12:9 to 12:10. List what Paul says he takes pleasure in, and explain how he moves from a denied request to genuine contentment.*

After hearing that grace is sufficient and strength is perfected in weakness, Paul says most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Then he lists what he takes pleasure in: infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions, and distresses, for Christ's sake. The move from denied request to contentment happens through a change of goal. Once the aim is the power of Christ resting on him rather than comfort, the very thing he wanted removed becomes the means to what he wants most.

3. *Second Corinthians 12:12 speaks of the signs of an apostle. Read Hebrews 2:3–4, Mark 16:20, and 1 Corinthians 13:8–10. What purpose did those signs serve, and what does Scripture say about their continuance?*

The signs authenticated the messenger and confirmed the message. Hebrews 2:3–4 says the salvation spoken by the Lord was confirmed by those who heard Him, God bearing witness with signs and wonders and gifts of the Holy Spirit; Mark 16:20 says the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs. 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 says prophecies, tongues, and knowledge would cease when that which is perfect, the completed revelation, had come. The purpose was confirmation, not permanent display, and when the confirming work was finished, the signs served their purpose and ceased.

4. List the sins Paul fears he will find at Corinth in 12:20–21. How many are sins of the tongue or of relationship rather than of appetite? What does that emphasis say about what damages a church?

He fears contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, and tumults, and then in verse 21 uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness. Eight of the eleven are sins of the tongue, temper, or ambition, and only three concern appetite. Churches rarely split over immorality; they split over whispering, wounded pride, and factions. James 3:14–16 and Galatians 5:19–21 list the same things and treat them with the same seriousness as the sins we find easier to condemn.

5. Paul says he would gladly spend and be spent for their souls, even if the more he loved them the less he was loved (12:15). Name one person you will keep loving this week with no expectation of return, and one specific way you will do it.

Answers will vary. The phrase to press is even though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. Paul is describing love that does not run on reciprocity, which is exactly the love described in 1 Corinthians 13 and modeled in Romans 5:8. Look for a name and an action, and be ready for someone to admit he has been keeping score.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not speculate about the identity of the thorn as though Scripture had told us; the silence lets every sufferer find himself in the passage. For the same reason, 12:2–4 is not an invitation to pursue visions or heavenly experiences: Paul kept silent about his for fourteen years and would not describe it when he finally spoke.
- Guard against teaching that God always heals or that a prayer unanswered means insufficient faith. Paul's faith was not in question, and the answer was still no.
- 12:12 belongs in an honest discussion of miraculous gifts. Teach that the signs confirmed the word and that revelation is now complete (Jude 3; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10). Do it graciously; many sincere people have been taught otherwise.
- 13:5 can be turned into morbid introspection. Pair it with 1 John 5:13 so the class understands that God intends His people to know where they stand.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: 2 Chronicles 30–36 • Psalm 56–57 • Luke 4:1–30 • Galatians 1–2

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