

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 55 OF 104

Who Belongs to God

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Ezra 1-10
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 58-59
Gospels	Luke 4:31-5:26
General New Testament	Galatians 3:1-4:20

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to answer one question from four directions: who belongs to God, and how? Ezra's answer was a covenant people kept distinct so the promise could survive. Paul's answer is that the promise has arrived and the family is now defined by being in Christ. Luke shows the Son of God taking in a demoniac's town, a fisherman who wanted Him to leave, a leper nobody would touch, and a man whose friends destroyed a roof. By the end of the week your class should be able to say, from Scripture, exactly how a person becomes a child of God.

Doctrinally, four things want care. First, Galatians 3:26-27 is one sentence, and it teaches that faith brings a person into Christ in baptism. Second, the Law of Moses was temporary and has been taken out of the way, so we bind none of it, and we do not go looking there for authority in worship. Third, Galatians 3:28 concerns standing before God, not the removal of God given roles. Fourth, note Galatians 5:4 in advance: a person can fall from grace, which settles the once saved, always saved question from Paul's own pen.

Formationally, the thread is what people will go through to get to God and to get others to Him. Exiles walked home to a ruin and built an altar first. David sang at a window with men waiting outside. Four men opened a roof. Paul says he is in labor a second time until Christ is formed in a church that has wandered. Ask your class this, and ask for a name rather than a principle: who is the one person you would tear a roof off for, and what is the very next thing you are going to do about them?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Galatians 3:1-4:20 first, and build the hour on 3:26-27 and the purpose of the Law in 3:19-25. This is the clearest passage in the New Testament on how a person enters Christ, and it also settles why we do not bind the Old Law. Read 3:26 and 3:27 together as one sentence.

Second session: Take up Luke 4:31-5:26 second. Use the paralytic in 5:17-26 as the anchor, since the forgiveness claim and the miracle that proves it tie directly to the Galatians lesson. Let the four friends carry the application.

The other two readings: Ezra 1-10 and Psalms 58 and 59 fit the extended questions. Warn the class ahead of time about Ezra 9 and 10 and state plainly that 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 governs a Christian married to an unbeliever today. Encourage them to read Ezra 3:10-13 aloud at home and to ask which sound their own congregation is making.

The Long Way Home

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ended, and the first act of the returned exiles tells you what kind of book this is. They come back to rubble, and in the seventh month they set the altar on its base and offer burnt offerings morning and evening, though fear was upon them because of the peoples of those countries. Worship first, while still afraid, before there is a wall or a roof. Then the foundation is laid, and the sound of that day is one of the most human moments in Scripture: young men shouting with joy and old men weeping because they had seen what it replaced.

The middle chapters are a study in how good work gets stopped. First an offer of partnership from people whose religion was a mixture, which Zerubbabel wisely refuses. Then discouragement, hired counselors, and letters to the throne that get the work halted by decree. For roughly sixteen years nothing happens. What restarts it is not a change in policy but two preachers, Haggai and Zechariah, who tell the people plainly that they have paneled their own houses while God's house lies waste. The temple is finished in the sixth year of Darius, and they keep the Passover with joy.

Then the book jumps about sixty years and introduces Ezra, a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses, whose great sentence is 7:10: he prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach. He brings a second group home, refuses a military escort because he has already told the king that God takes care of those who seek Him, and then walks into a crisis. The leaders themselves have married into the surrounding peoples, and the covenant community is dissolving. Ezra tears his clothes, pulls out his hair, and prays a confession that says we, not they, from beginning to end.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The first return under Zerubbabel came about 538 BC after Cyrus' decree; the temple was finished about 516 BC; Ezra arrived about 458 BC, roughly sixty years later.
- The book is compiled from official documents, letters, genealogies, and memoirs, some of it written in Aramaic, the diplomatic language of the empire (4:8–6:18).
- The people who offered to help in 4:1–3 were descendants of populations Assyria had resettled in the north, whose worship mixed the Lord with other gods (2 Kings 17:24–41).
- The prohibition on intermarriage in Deuteronomy 7:3–4 was religious, not racial. Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabitess were welcomed, and both stand in the line of Christ (Matthew 1:5).
- The covenant line mattered because the promised Seed would come through it (Genesis 22:18; Galatians 3:16). Preserving a distinct people was preserving the promise.
- The Old Covenant and its separations were fulfilled and taken away in Christ, who made Jew and Gentile one and broke down the middle wall of division (Ephesians 2:13–16).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The returned exiles set up the altar and began the daily offerings before the foundation of the temple was laid (3:1–6), and they did it while they were afraid of the people around them. What does that order of priorities say to a congregation or a family deciding what to build first?*

Ezra 3:3 is the line to read aloud: they set the altar on its bases, for fear was upon them because of the peoples of those countries, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord. The fear did not delay the worship; it seems to have driven it. And note what they built. Not a wall, not houses, not a defensive position. An altar, which produced nothing, defended nothing, and mattered more than everything else.

Turn it toward decisions people actually make. A young couple deciding what the first year of marriage will be organized around. A family deciding whether Sunday is negotiable when the calendar gets full. A congregation deciding whether the first line of the budget is the building or the preaching of the gospel. Matthew 6:33 states the principle; Ezra 3 shows it in rubble. Ask each person to name the altar he has been postponing until conditions improve.

Question 2. *When the foundation was laid, the young men shouted and the old men who had seen the first house wept aloud, so that no one could tell the noise apart (3:11–13). How should a church handle the people who remember better days, and how should those people handle themselves?*

Both reactions were right, and that is what makes the scene so useful. The young men had never seen Solomon's temple and were rightly overjoyed at what God was doing now. The old men had seen the glory and knew exactly how much smaller this was, and their grief was honest. The trouble comes only when memory turns into contempt for what God is doing at present. Haggai 2:3 addresses those same old men directly, asks who is left that saw this house in its former glory, and then says, yet now be strong, for I am with you.

Give both sides a word. To the ones who remember: your memory is a gift when it is used to encourage and a poison when it is used to compare. To the younger: a man weeping at a foundation is not your enemy, and you would do well to ask him what he saw. Ask the class whether their congregation currently sounds more like shouting, more like weeping, or like both at once, and whether the two groups are talking to each other.

Question 3. *Ezra 9 and 10 record men putting away foreign wives, and it is one of the hardest passages in the Old Testament. What was God protecting, and what does the New Testament actually bind on a Christian who is married to an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:12–14; 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14)?*

Handle this slowly and honestly. What God was protecting is stated in 9:2, the holy seed, and in Deuteronomy 7:4, the reason for the original command: they will turn your sons away from following Me. This was never about ethnicity; Rahab and Ruth married into Israel and are in the genealogy of Christ. It was about whether the covenant people would survive as a people through whom the Messiah could come. Israel had just spent seventy years in exile learning what idolatry costs, and within two generations the leaders were marrying it back in.

Now say plainly what the New Testament binds, because someone in the room is in a mixed marriage and is listening carefully. 1 Corinthians 7:12–14 is explicit: if a brother has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her, and the unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believer. A Christian married to a non Christian is not to put that spouse away; he is to live so faithfully that the spouse may be won (1 Peter 3:1–2). What Scripture does teach is forward looking: marry only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39), and do not be unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14). Ezra is a warning against forming the yoke, not a command to break an existing marriage. Say that clearly, and then say it again.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace every tactic the opposition uses in chapters 4 and 5: an offer to help, discouragement, hired counselors, letters to the king, and force. Which of those would be hardest for you to recognize if it came at your congregation today?*

First an offer to build with them, which would have merged true worship with a mixture; then weakening the hands of the people and troubling them in building; then hiring counselors to frustrate their purpose over many years; then written accusations to successive kings alleging rebellion and lost revenue; and finally force and power to make them cease. The subtlest is the first, because it comes as friendship and looks like cooperation. Answers will vary on the second half, but the partnership that quietly redefines the work is usually harder to spot than open opposition.

2. *Ezra 6:14 says they built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. Read Haggai 1:2–8 and describe what the people had been saying and what the prophet said back.*

The people were saying the time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built. Haggai answers, is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses and this temple to lie in ruins? He tells them to consider their ways, points out that they have sown much and brought in little, and says to go up to the mountain, bring

wood, and build, that God may take pleasure in it and be glorified. The diagnosis is not that they were busy but that they had put their own comfort first and then called it timing.

3. *Ezra 7:10 says Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach it in Israel. List those three verbs in order, and explain why the order cannot be rearranged.*

Seek, do, teach. He sought it before he practiced it, because you cannot obey what you have not learned, and he practiced it before he taught it, because teaching what you do not live produces exactly the hypocrisy Jesus condemned in Matthew 23:3. Rearranged, the order fails every time: teaching before doing makes a hypocrite, and doing before seeking makes a zealot who is sincere and wrong (Romans 10:2). Ezra's reform worked because the man had worked on himself first.

4. *In 8:21–23 Ezra proclaims a fast because he was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers after telling him God protects those who seek Him. When has your own testimony put you in a position where you had to depend on God in front of people who were watching?*

Answers will vary. Ezra's situation was self inflicted in the best sense; he had testified to a pagan king about God's care, and now asking for an armed escort would have made his words hollow. So he fasted with the whole company, and 8:31 says the hand of God was upon them and He delivered them. Listen for people who have made a stand at work or in a family and then had to live with it, and encourage them; that pressure is a sign of a testimony worth having.

5. *The people in Ezra 10 made a hard decision publicly, in the rain, with a list of names written down. Name one thing in your life that you have kept private because deciding it out loud would cost you something, and take the first public step this week.*

Answers will vary, and this question needs care. Ezra 10 involved public accountability, a written list, and a decision made in a downpour. The parallel today is not public humiliation but the step from private intention to something someone else knows about: telling a spouse, calling an elder, confessing to the person wronged, asking a brother to check on you. James 5:16 assumes this kind of openness among Christians.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Ezra 9 and 10 must not be used to counsel a Christian to divorce an unbelieving spouse. 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 forbids exactly that. Ezra records what Israel did under the Law of Moses to preserve the covenant line; the abiding principle for us is not to enter such a yoke (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14).
- The separation commanded in Deuteronomy 7 was religious, not racial. Say so explicitly, and use Rahab and Ruth as proof. Never let this text be enlisted for any form of racial thinking.
- Do not read the return from exile as a prophecy about modern political events in the Middle East. The promises to Abraham and David are fulfilled in Christ and His church (Galatians 3:16, 29; Acts 2:29–36).
- The temple, its altar, and its sacrifices belong to the Old Covenant. Draw the principle of putting God first, not a pattern for church construction or ceremony (Hebrews 10:1–10).

When the Powerful Are Wrong

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 58 is the most difficult of the two, and there is no use softening it. It opens by questioning whether the so called mighty ones speak righteousness at all, says they go astray speaking lies, compares their venom to a serpent that will not be charmed, and then asks God to break their teeth in their mouths. These are not private enemies. They are officials, people with the power to ruin others legally, and the psalm is an appeal to the highest court that the lower court has failed.

Read that way, Psalm 58 is not a tantrum but an act of faith. The psalmist does not pick up a sword or organize a revolt. He states the injustice plainly, refuses to pretend it is acceptable, and hands the whole matter to the only Judge who cannot be bribed. The closing verse is the point of the psalm: so that men will say, surely there is a reward for the righteous, surely He is God who judges in the earth.

Psalm 59 is more personal and, in the end, almost cheerful. The heading places it on the night Saul's men watched David's house, which 1 Samuel 19 tells us ended with Michal lowering him through a window and putting an idol in the bed. David describes the watchers as dogs circling the city at evening, and he twice repeats the image. But the second refrain is different from the first. What begins as I will wait for You becomes I will sing aloud of Your mercy in the morning. The night is not over, and he has already scheduled the song.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Both psalms are attributed to David and carry the heading Do Not Destroy, likely the name of a tune, along with the term Michtam.
- Psalm 59's heading ties it to 1 Samuel 19:11, when Saul sent men to watch David's house and kill him in the morning.
- Genre: Psalm 58 is a communal complaint about corrupt rulers with strong imprecatory language; Psalm 59 is an individual lament that ends in confident praise.
- Imprecatory psalms appeal to God to enforce His own covenant justice. They were written under a covenant in which God dealt with the nation in visible, immediate terms.
- The Christian standard for personal enemies is set by Christ and His apostles: bless and do not curse, leave vengeance to God, overcome evil with good (Luke 23:34; Romans 12:14–21; 1 Peter 2:23).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 58 is aimed at judges who speak righteousness with their mouths and weigh out violence with their hands. When the people who are supposed to enforce justice are themselves the problem, what does the Bible tell a believer to do with that anger?*

Begin by validating the anger, because Scripture does. Injustice from those charged with justice is a specific evil, and God has always had strong words for it (Isaiah 10:1–2; Amos 5:11–12; Micah 3:1–3). A Christian who feels nothing at the sight of a rigged courtroom, a defrauded widow, or an abused child has a defect, not a virtue.

Then give the anger somewhere to go. Scripture directs it into prayer to the God who judges, into honest speech that refuses to call evil good, into whatever lawful action a person's position allows, and into a settled refusal to take vengeance personally (Romans 12:19). 1 Timothy 2:1–2 tells us to pray for kings and all in authority. Ask the class what they have done with their anger about injustice lately, and how much of it has actually reached God in prayer as opposed to being spent on conversation.

Question 2. *Psalm 58:6–9 asks God to break their teeth and let them melt away like a snail. How should a Christian read prayers like that, and what makes them different from a desire for personal revenge?*

The first thing to say is that these prayers are in the Bible on purpose, and they teach us that God can handle honest speech. The psalmist is not plotting; he is praying, which means he has already handed the matter over. Notice also what he asks for: that God would act, and that the outcome would make people say that righteousness is rewarded and God judges. The goal is public vindication of God's justice, not the satisfaction of a grudge.

The difference from personal revenge is who holds the weapon. Romans 12:19 says give place to wrath, for vengeance is Mine, I will repay. Nothing in these psalms authorizes a Christian to strike back. And the standard has been raised since: Jesus prayed for the men driving the nails, and Stephen prayed for the men throwing the stones. Teach the class to pray honestly about evil, to ask God to stop it and to do right, and to leave the settling to Him.

Question 3. *Psalm 59:16 says, I will sing of Your power, yes, I will sing aloud of Your mercy in the morning. David wrote that with armed men outside his door. What would it take for singing to be your first response to a frightening night rather than your last?*

David's song is a decision, not a mood. He has not been delivered yet; the men are still outside. What he has is a conviction about who God is, stated in the same breath as the danger: You, O God, are my defense, my God of mercy. Acts 16:25 shows Paul and Silas doing the identical thing at midnight with their feet in stocks, and the other prisoners were listening.

The practical answer to the question is usually preparation. People sing in a crisis what they have been singing all along. A person who has spent years with the Psalms and with the songs of the church has something to reach for at two in the morning; a person who has not will reach for his phone. Ask the class what they actually do in the first ten minutes of a frightening night, and suggest that each of them pick a psalm and a hymn now, before they need it.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read 1 Samuel 19:11–17 for the setting of Psalm 59. Who warned David, how did he escape, and what does the psalm add that the narrative does not tell you?*

Michal, David's wife and Saul's daughter, warned him and let him down through a window, then put an image in the bed with goats' hair at its head to buy time. The narrative gives the escape; the psalm gives the inside of the night. It tells us what David heard, dogs prowling and returning at evening, what he felt, and what he decided, which is that he would watch for God because God was his defense. The history says what happened; the psalm says what it was like and where he put his confidence.

2. *List the images Psalm 58 uses for the wicked: poison, a deaf serpent, a lion's teeth, water, a snail, a stillborn child. What does the accumulation of images accomplish that a plain statement would not?*

The images pile up deliberately: venom like the poison of a serpent, a deaf cobra that will not hear the charmer, teeth that must be broken, water that flows away, a bow bent whose arrows are cut off, a snail that melts as it goes, and a stillborn child who never sees the sun. A plain statement would say the wicked are dangerous and will perish. The images make you feel both halves at once, the real menace and the real fragility, which is exactly what a person crushed by powerful people needs to hear.

3. *Psalm 58:11 ends with the conclusion that surely there is a God who judges in the earth. Compare Romans 12:19 and 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8. How does confidence in God's judgment actually free a believer from having to settle the score?*

Romans 12:19 says do not avenge yourselves, but give place to wrath, for it is written, vengeance is Mine, I will repay. 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8 says it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and that the Lord will be revealed in flaming fire. The freedom is practical: if God has guaranteed that accounts will be settled justly, then I am released from the exhausting job of settling them myself, and I am free to do good to the person instead (Romans 12:20–21).

4. *Psalm 59 has two pairs of repeated lines, in verses 6 and 14 and in verses 9 and 17. Write out both pairs and note what changes in the second version of each. What has shifted in David between them?*

Verses 6 and 14 are nearly identical, describing the enemies returning at evening, growling like dogs, and prowling about the city. But verse 15 adds that they wander for food and howl if they are not satisfied, while verse 16 turns to but I will sing. Verses 9 and 17 shift from I will wait for You, for God is my defense, to I will sing praises to You, for God is my defense. The shift is from waiting to singing. Nothing outside David has changed; what has changed is that he has stopped bracing and started worshiping.

5. *David calls God his defense and his refuge in the day of trouble (59:16). Identify the situation where you have been trying to be your own defense, and this week take one specific step to stop defending yourself and let God handle it.*

Answers will vary. Self defense in the ordinary sense, explaining yourself, correcting every misstatement, managing what people think, consumes enormous energy and rarely works. 1 Peter 2:23 says Christ committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. Look for one concrete restraint: an email not sent, a conversation not relitigated, a reputation left in God's hands for thirty days.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 58:3, the wicked are estranged from the womb, is sometimes offered as proof of inherited sin. It is poetic hyperbole describing lifelong, habitual wickedness, in the same register as saying a man has been trouble since the day he was born. Scripture is plain that guilt is personal (Ezekiel 18:20) and that children belong to the kingdom (Matthew 19:14).
- These are the strongest imprecatory psalms your class has met. Teach them as appeals to God's justice within the Old Covenant and set the Christian standard beside them plainly (Luke 6:27–28; Romans 12:14–21).
- Do not let a discussion of corrupt judges become a political argument about current officials or parties. Keep it on what Scripture says about injustice and about what a Christian does with anger.
- Psalm 59:16 is not a promise that deliverance always arrives by morning. David sang before he knew the outcome, and that is the point.

Authority No One Could Deny

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke has established who Jesus is; now he shows what that means in practice. The word authority runs through the whole section. They were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority. With authority and power He commands the unclean spirits. He rebukes a fever and it leaves. He tells a fisherman where to put a net in water the man had worked all night. He touches a leper, which no one touched, and the leprosy is gone. And then He says something no rabbi would say, and the room goes quiet.

Notice the pace and the restraint. The whole city is at the door at sunset, everyone wants more, and the next morning He leaves, saying He must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for this purpose I have been sent. He silences demons who are telling the truth about His identity because He will not have that testimony from that source. He withdraws into the wilderness to pray while the crowds grow. A man with genuine power who is not driven by the crowd's appetite is a rare sight, and Luke wants you to see it.

The healing of the paralytic is the hinge. The friends are resourceful and shameless, and Jesus responds first to something nobody asked about: man, your sins are forgiven you. The scribes immediately see the size of the claim, and their theology is sound, since only God can forgive sins. So Jesus asks which is easier to say, forgives the man, and then heals him in front of everyone, offering the visible miracle as proof of the invisible pardon. Everyone goes home glorifying God and saying they have seen strange things today.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Capernaum, a fishing town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, became the base of Jesus' Galilean ministry.
- Synagogue services included Scripture reading and comment by qualified men, which is how Jesus regularly gained a hearing in a new town.
- The scribes and Pharisees in 5:17 had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem, which means the leadership was already investigating Him.
- Roofs were flat, reached by an outside stair, and often made of beams covered with branches and packed clay, which is why four men could open one and let a mat down.
- Leprosy under the Law made a person ceremonially unclean and socially isolated, and Leviticus 13 and 14 gave the priest the role of examining and certifying cleansing.
- The Old Law was still in force until the cross (Matthew 5:17–18; Colossians 2:14), which is why Jesus sends the healed man to the priest.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *When Jesus told the paralyzed man his sins were forgiven, the scribes reasoned that only God can forgive sins, and they were right about that (5:20–21). What is Jesus claiming, and how does He answer their objection?*

The scribes are not being obtuse. Their premise is exactly right: who can forgive sins but God alone? That is sound doctrine, and it means the only options are blasphemy or deity. Jesus does not soften the claim or explain it away. He asks which is easier to say, and the answer is obvious, since anyone can say your sins are forgiven and no one can check. So He does the thing that can be checked, in order to prove the thing that cannot.

Make sure the class sees the argument as an argument. The miracle is evidence, offered deliberately, that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. John 20:30–31 says the signs were written that you may believe.

Then add the pastoral point: the man came for his legs, and Jesus dealt first with what was actually killing him. Ask the class what they have been asking God for and whether they have ever asked Him for the deeper thing.

Question 2. *Peter's reaction to the miraculous catch was to fall down and say, depart from me, for I am a sinful man (5:8). Why does a close encounter with holiness make a person aware of his own sin rather than pleased with himself?*

Peter had just watched a carpenter out fish him in his own trade, in his own boat, after his own wasted night. What he perceived was not merely power but holiness, and holiness makes a man conscious of what he is. Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up and said, woe is me, for I am undone, a man of unclean lips. Job, after God speaks out of the whirlwind, abhors himself and repents in dust and ashes. Nobody in Scripture sees God clearly and feels good about himself.

The encouraging half is what Jesus does with it. He does not depart. He says, do not be afraid, from now on you will catch men, and Peter leaves everything and follows. Conviction that drives a person toward Christ is the Spirit's work through the word; conviction that drives a person away from Him is the devil's counterfeit. Ask the class when they last felt genuinely undone before God, and what they did next.

Question 3. *Four men tore a hole in another man's roof to get their friend to Jesus, and the text says Jesus saw their faith (5:18-20). Who is the one person you would be willing to go to that much trouble for, and what would the roof look like in your case?*

The details are wonderful. They could not find a way in because of the crowd, so they went up on the housetop and let him down through the tiles with his bed into the midst before Jesus. That is destruction of property, social embarrassment, physical labor, and a complete disregard for how it looked. And Luke says, when He saw their faith, plural, meaning the faith of the men on the roof was part of what Jesus responded to.

Bring it to names. Most of us have one person we say we would do anything for and then do very little for. The roof in our case might be a standing weekly invitation, a long drive, an awkward conversation with an adult child, a willingness to look foolish in front of neighbors, or simply refusing to quit after the fourth no. Ask each person to name the friend and the roof, and then ask when this week the digging starts.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every kind of authority Jesus displays in this reading: over teaching, over demons, over disease, over nature, over sin. Which one did the scribes find intolerable, and why?*

He teaches with authority rather than by citing other teachers; He commands unclean spirits and they obey; He rebukes a fever and heals every kind of sickness; He directs a catch of fish that overwhelms two boats; He touches and cleanses a leper; and He forgives sins. The scribes had no objection to healing. It was the forgiveness that provoked them, because forgiveness is God's prerogative alone, and the claim to exercise it is a claim to deity (Isaiah 43:25; Mark 2:7).

2. *The demons say they know who He is, the Holy One of God (4:34, 41). Read James 2:19 and explain the difference between knowing who Jesus is and belonging to Him.*

James 2:19 says you believe that there is one God, you do well, the demons also believe and tremble. The demons in Luke 4 had accurate information and even confessed it out loud, and they were not saved by it. Belief that is not accompanied by submission, repentance, and obedience is not the faith the New Testament calls saving (John 3:36; Hebrews 5:9; James 2:24). It is possible to be entirely orthodox and entirely lost.

3. *Luke 5:16 says He often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed. Find every mention of Jesus praying in Luke's gospel that you can, starting with 3:21, 5:16, 6:12, and 9:28. What pattern emerges, and what does it say about His practice before major moments?*

Luke shows Jesus praying at His baptism, withdrawing regularly to pray in the wilderness while the crowds pressed in, praying all night before choosing the twelve, praying at the transfiguration, praying before Peter's confession (9:18), teaching the disciples to pray (11:1), praying for Peter (22:32), and praying in Gethsemane (22:41-44). The

pattern is that prayer precedes every major decision and every major pressure, and that He deliberately withdrew from useful work in order to pray. Luke, more than any other gospel writer, wants his readers to see this.

4. *Jesus told the cleansed leper to show himself to the priest and make the offering Moses commanded (5:14). Read Leviticus 14:1–7 and Matthew 5:17. Why was that instruction appropriate before the cross, and what changed afterward (Colossians 2:14)?*

Leviticus 14 required a cleansed leper to be examined by the priest and to bring specified offerings, after which he could be readmitted to the community. Jesus was born under the Law and lived under it perfectly, and Matthew 5:17 says He came not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. Sending the man to the priest also put the evidence directly in front of the religious establishment. After the cross, that system was fulfilled and taken out of the way, nailed to His cross (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:13; 10:9), so Christians do not keep its ceremonies today.

5. *The four friends solved the problem instead of accepting it. Name one person you have been praying for without acting for, and this week do one concrete thing: the invitation, the visit, the ride, the conversation you have been putting off.*

Answers will vary. The distinction between praying for and acting for is the point of the question, and most classes will feel it immediately. James 2:15–16 makes the same point about good wishes without action. Press for one name and one action this week, and consider asking the class to report next time.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Only God forgives sins, and Christ exercises that authority as deity. No man, priest, or church officer has the power to forgive sins; the gospel tells a sinner how to receive forgiveness from God (Acts 2:38; 8:22; 1 John 1:9).
- The miracles authenticated His identity and His message (John 20:30–31; Hebrews 2:3–4). Do not teach them as a promise that God will heal every illness today, and do not let the class conclude that sickness indicates weak faith.
- The demons' accurate confession is a caution against equating knowledge with salvation (James 2:19). Handle discussion of demons soberly and without speculation.
- Note that Jesus keeps the Law of Moses here because it was still in force. Be clear that the cross changed that (Colossians 2:14), so the class does not conclude that Old Covenant ceremonies bind Christians.

Sons, Not Slaves

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Paul's argument begins with their own experience. You received the Spirit, you saw miracles among you, and none of it came through keeping the Law of Moses. Then he goes back four centuries before Sinai to Abraham, who believed God and had it accounted to him for righteousness, and who received the promise that in him all nations would be blessed. If God justified Abraham by faith before there was a Law, and if the promise of blessing for all nations was made then, the Judaizers are arguing against the very covenant they claim to defend.

The heart of the section is what the Law was for. It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come. It could not give life, because if a law had been given that could give life, righteousness would have come by it. It shut everything up under sin. It functioned as a tutor, the household servant who walked a child to school, and its job ended when the child came of age. That is not an insult to the Law; it is a description of a good thing that had a purpose and an expiration.

Then comes the announcement the whole argument has been driving toward: you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Not sons by descent from Abraham, not sons by circumcision, but sons by faith that brings a person into Christ through baptism. And in Him the old dividing lines do not determine standing before God. Chapter 4 turns tender. Paul reminds them of how gladly they received him when he first came sick to them, and then asks whether he has become their enemy because he told them the truth.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The Judaizers taught that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses in order to be justified; every argument here is aimed at that claim.
- The four hundred and thirty years of 3:17 spans from the patriarchal promise to the giving of the Law at Sinai, showing the promise had priority.
- The tutor of 3:24 was a household slave who supervised a child, escorted him to his teacher, and disciplined him, and whose authority ended when the child reached maturity.
- Adoption in the Roman world conferred full legal sonship and inheritance rights, which is the force of 4:5–7.
- The days, months, seasons, and years of 4:10 are the Jewish sabbaths, new moons, and feasts, part of the Law that Christ took out of the way (Colossians 2:14–17).
- This is the passage to have ready whenever someone asks why Christians do not keep the Sabbath, the tithe, the feast days, or the temple order of worship.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Galatians 3:26–27 says you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Trace the connection Paul makes between those two verses. How does a person become a son of God, and what does putting on Christ mean?*

Read the two verses as one sentence, because in the Greek they are joined by a conjunction that means for or because. Verse 26 states the fact: you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Verse 27 explains how that faith brought them into Him: for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Paul is not adding a second, separate step; he is telling them when their faith put them into Christ. Romans 6:3–4 says the same, baptized into Christ Jesus, baptized into His death, buried with Him, raised to walk in newness of life.

Putting on Christ is the language of clothing, of taking on an identity that everyone can see. In Him there is redemption, forgiveness, every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3, 7), and none of those are located outside of Him.

So the practical question for anyone in the class is simple and kind: are you in Christ, and how did you get there? Teach it warmly. Many sincere people have been told that faith alone, apart from this verse, is the whole account, and they have never seen 3:26 and 3:27 read as one breath.

Question 2. *Paul says the Law was added because of transgressions, until the Seed should come, and served as a tutor to bring us to Christ (3:19–25). What was the Law for, what was it never able to do, and what follows about binding its practices on Christians today?*

Paul gives a series of answers. The Law was added because of transgressions, meaning it defined and exposed sin. It was temporary, until the Seed should come. It could not give life or produce righteousness. It confined everyone under sin so that the promise by faith might be given to those who believe. It served as a tutor to bring us to Christ, and after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. Romans 7:7 adds that he would not have known covetousness except the Law had said do not covet.

What follows is not that the Law was bad but that it is finished. Colossians 2:14 says it was wiped out and nailed to the cross; Hebrews 8:13 says the first covenant is obsolete and vanishing; Ephesians 2:14–16 says He abolished in His flesh the enmity, the law of commandments contained in ordinances. So we do not bind the Sabbath, the tithe, the feast days, the priesthood, the animal sacrifices, or the temple instruments on Christians, and we do not go back to a system God has closed. Romans 15:4 tells us those Scriptures were written for our learning, and they are enormously profitable; they simply are not our covenant.

Question 3. *Galatians 3:28 says there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. What is Paul saying is the same for everyone, and how do we keep that verse from being made to say things the same writer denies elsewhere?*

Paul is talking about standing before God and access to the promise. A Gentile does not need to become a Jew, a slave does not need to be freed, and a woman does not need to be a man in order to be a child of God, to be baptized into Christ, to be an heir of Abraham. In a world where a Jewish man might thank God he was not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman, this verse is revolutionary, and it should be taught as the enormous statement it is.

What it does not do is erase every distinction of role, any more than it abolishes the difference between a servant and a master in the household codes Paul writes elsewhere. The same apostle who wrote Galatians 3:28 gave instructions about who teaches and leads in the assembly (1 Timothy 2:11–12; 1 Corinthians 14:34–35) and about husbands and wives (Ephesians 5:22–33). Scripture does not contradict itself, so we hold both: identical standing before God, with different assignments in the home and the church. Teach this without apology and without harshness, and give honest weight to the dignity Galatians 3:28 confers.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Paul says about the purpose and limits of the Law in 3:19–25. How many separate statements can you find, and what picture of the Law do they build together?*

It was added because of transgressions; it was temporary, till the Seed should come; it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator; it is not against the promises of God; it could not give life; if righteousness could have come by law, then Christ died in vain; it confined all under sin; it was a tutor to bring us to Christ that we might be justified by faith; and after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. Together they picture a good, God given, temporary instrument that diagnosed a disease it could not cure and delivered its students to the One who could.

2. *Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, Habakkuk 2:4, Deuteronomy 27:26, and Deuteronomy 21:23 in 3:6–13. Look up each one in its own setting, and explain how Paul uses it.*

Genesis 15:6 says Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness, and Paul uses it to show justification by faith preceded the Law. Habakkuk 2:4, the just shall live by faith, shows that even under the Law the principle of faith stood. Deuteronomy 27:26 pronounces a curse on everyone who does not continue in all things written in the book of the law, which is Paul's proof that law keeping condemns rather than saves, since no one keeps all of it. Deuteronomy 21:23, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree, is applied to the cross, where Christ became a curse for us and redeemed us from the curse of the law.

3. In 3:16 Paul makes an argument from a single word, noting that the promise was made to Abraham's Seed, singular, not seeds. Read Genesis 22:18 and Galatians 3:29. Who is the Seed, and how do Gentiles come to be Abraham's offspring?

The Seed is Christ. Genesis 22:18 promised that in Abraham's Seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed, and Paul insists the singular matters. Gentiles become Abraham's offspring not by descent or circumcision but by being in the Seed: Galatians 3:29 says if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. That is the answer to every scheme that makes God's promises depend on national or ethnic Israel; they are fulfilled in Christ and in all who are in Him.

4. Galatians 4:9–11 rebukes them for observing days and months and seasons and years. Read Colossians 2:16–17 and Romans 14:5–6, and explain the difference between binding an Old Covenant observance and a personal matter of conscience.

The days, months, seasons, and years of Galatians 4:10 are the observances of the Law of Moses, and the Galatians were taking them up as a requirement for being right with God. Colossians 2:16–17 says let no one judge you regarding a festival, a new moon, or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, the substance being Christ. Romans 14:5–6 concerns a personal matter of conscience in which one man esteems a day above another and both are told not to judge each other. The difference is binding versus allowing: nobody may bind an Old Covenant observance as necessary to salvation, and nobody may condemn a brother for a private scruple God has not legislated.

5. Paul says he is again in labor until Christ is formed in them (4:19). Name one specific way Christ is not yet formed in you, tell one trusted person about it this week, and ask them to ask you about it next month.

Answers will vary, and this is the most useful question in the set. Christ formed in us is the goal of the whole letter and of Romans 8:29. Watch for answers that name a trait rather than a vague wish: a temper, a tongue, stinginess, an unforgiving memory, a prayerlessness. The accountability step is the part most people skip, and it is the part that works.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Galatians 3:26–27 is frequently taught with a full stop between the verses, as though baptism were unrelated to becoming a son of God. The connecting word joins them. Teach them together, plainly and warmly, alongside Romans 6:3–4 and Acts 2:38.
- Paul's conclusion to this argument is in Galatians 5:4: you have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. Note it now. A person who has been in grace can fall from it, which is fatal to once saved, always saved (Hebrews 3:12–14; 2 Peter 2:20–22).
- Galatians 3:28 is regularly used to set aside the New Testament's instructions about roles in the home and the assembly. Teach its actual subject, equal standing and equal access in Christ, and show that the same writer gives those instructions elsewhere without contradiction.
- Do not let the argument against the Law of Moses slide into the idea that obedience does not matter. The same letter ends with commands, warnings, and the fruit of the Spirit, and 5:6 defines the whole thing as faith working through love.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Nehemiah 1–7 • Psalm 60–62 • Luke 5:27–6:19 • Galatians 4:21–6:18

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