

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 56 OF 104

Building and Freedom

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Nehemiah 1-7
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 60-62
Gospels	Luke 5:27-6:19
General New Testament	Galatians 4:21-6:18

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to put courage and freedom side by side and show the class that they belong to the same God. Nehemiah builds under mockery, David waits in silence when the ground has shifted, Levi walks away from a lucrative booth, and the Galatians are told to stand fast. None of that is generic inspiration. In every case a person is being asked to keep trusting God when quitting would be easier and cheaper, and in every case the ground of that trust is God's own character rather than the circumstance.

Doctrinally, two matters deserve plain treatment. First, the old covenant is fulfilled and taken away in Christ. Luke shows why the new wine could not be poured into the old skins, and Galatians shows what happens to people who try to reassemble the skins. Second, Galatians 5:4 says in so many words that a Christian can fall from grace, and Galatians 5:6 settles the faith and works question with a phrase rather than an argument. If your congregation has members who were taught either unconditional security or salvation by faith alone, this is the week to address it kindly, from the text, and without caricature.

Formationally, watch the Ono invitation. Sanballat did not tempt Nehemiah with sin; he tempted him with a meeting. Most Christians do not abandon the work of God in a dramatic moment. They come down off the wall for good, reasonable, harmless things, one at a time, until the gap in the wall becomes permanent. Ask your class this question directly: name the one good thing on your calendar that is quietly keeping you from the work God actually gave you, and tell us what you are going to do about it before Sunday.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Galatians 4:21-6:18 first. It carries the week's doctrinal weight, and Galatians 5:4 and 5:6 deserve unhurried treatment early while the class is fresh. Give the last fifteen minutes to the fruit of the Spirit so the hour ends in formation rather than debate.

Second session: Take up Nehemiah 1-7. It is vivid, it moves quickly, and the five tactics of opposition give the class an obvious structure. Spend real time in chapter 5, which is the part most lessons skip and the part most congregations need.

The other two readings: Psalms 60 through 62 and Luke 5:27-6:19 work well on their own. Point the class to Psalm 62 and suggest reading it aloud once a day this week. For Luke, flag the Sabbath question in advance and tell them the extended questions walk through it with the passages that settle it.

Rebuilding the Broken Wall

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Nehemiah is a memoir, written largely in the first person, and it reads like a man's private journal opened for our instruction. The opening scene sets everything: a Jewish official with a comfortable post in the Persian court hears that the city of his fathers lies open and defenseless, and the news breaks him. He does not organize first. He sits down and weeps, then fasts and prays for roughly four months before the door opens in chapter 2.

The building itself occupies chapters 3 through 6, and the striking thing is how ordinary the workers are. Goldsmiths and perfumers lay stone. Families repair the stretch in front of their own doors. Meanwhile the opposition never stops changing tactics, which is why Nehemiah keeps a weapon in one hand and a tool in the other, and why he posts the trumpeter beside him so scattered workers can rally.

Chapter 5 is the hinge for a teacher. The wall survives every external attack, but it nearly falls to greed within. Nehemiah confronts the nobles, makes them swear restitution, and then for twelve years refuses the governor's food allowance because the burden on the people was already heavy. Leadership in this book is not technique. It is prayer, courage, and a man who will not enrich himself off the work of God.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Nehemiah served as cupbearer to Artaxerxes I of Persia, a position of trust and access, and came to Jerusalem about 445 B.C., some thirteen years after Ezra's return.
- This is the latest historical narrative in the Old Testament. Malachi prophesies in roughly the same period, and after this the inspired record goes quiet until John the Baptist.
- The returned exiles are a small, poor province under Persian authority, not an independent nation. The wall is about survival, identity, and the safety of the temple already rebuilt in Ezra 6.
- Sanballat governed Samaria, Tobiah was an Ammonite official with marriage ties inside Judah (6:17–19), and Geshem led an Arab faction. The opposition was political and personal, not merely religious.
- In Nehemiah and Ezra the books were originally counted as one work. Ezra restores worship and the Law; Nehemiah restores the city and the community that keeps it.
- Read this as history that displays God's faithfulness to His covenant people, not as a coded promise about any modern political state.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Nehemiah hears the report in 1:3 and spends days mourning and praying before he ever acts. Walk through his prayer in 1:5–11 and notice where he puts himself in the confession. Why does he say “I and my father's house have sinned” rather than “they”?*

Nehemiah's prayer follows a shape worth naming out loud: he adores God as great and awesome and keeping covenant, he confesses, he rehearses God's promise, and only at the very end does he make his request, and even then it is one sentence. Notice that the confession is in the first person plural and then narrows further: “both my father's house and I have sinned.” He does not stand outside the problem and diagnose it. He stands inside it.

Press the class on that move. It is far easier to grieve over the condition of the church, the country, or the family as an observer than to say, “I helped make it this way, and I am asking God to begin with me.” Ask what a first person confession would sound like about the thing they are most frustrated with right now.

Question 2. Trace the opposition through chapters 2, 4, and 6. Sanballat and Tobiah try ridicule, then threat, then conspiracy, then a friendly invitation, then slander. How does Nehemiah answer each one, and which of those five is hardest to resist in your own life?

Lay the five tactics side by side. Ridicule in 2:19 and 4:1–3 aims at morale. Threatened violence in 4:7–8 aims at fear. Discouragement in 4:10–12 comes from the workers themselves, exhausted and hearing rumors. The invitation to Ono in 6:2 is the most dangerous because it looks reasonable and even friendly. Slander in 6:5–7 attacks his motives publicly, and the fabricated prophecy in 6:10–13 tries to frighten him into sin.

Nehemiah's answers are consistent: he prays, he sets a guard, he reorganizes the work so families defend their own, he refuses to come down, and he answers slander with a plain denial and another prayer. Ask which tactic actually works on the people in the room. For most adults it is not the threat. It is the reasonable invitation that quietly ends the work.

Question 3. Chapter 5 interrupts the building with a problem the enemy did not cause. Brothers were charging brothers interest and taking their children as collateral. Why is an injustice inside the family of God more dangerous to the work than the men shouting from the hill?

The famine in 5:1–5 was real, and the crisis was that fellow Israelites were profiting from it: mortgages on fields, interest charged, sons and daughters going into servitude. The Law forbade taking interest from a brother (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35–37), so this was not merely unkind, it was disobedient. Nehemiah is angry, he confronts them publicly, and he makes them swear before the priests.

The danger is that the enemies outside were watching. A community that builds a wall while devouring one another has already lost what the wall was meant to protect. Bring it home: a congregation can have sound doctrine and a full building and still be hollowed out by gossip, by members quietly taking advantage of one another in business, by families overlooked while nobody wants to ask. Ask what the watching neighbors would report about us.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Find every prayer of Nehemiah in these seven chapters (1:5–11; 2:4; 4:4–5; 4:9; 5:19; 6:9; 6:14). Write out what each one asks for. What pattern shows up in a man who prays that often and that briefly?

Nehemiah prays a long, ordered prayer once and then prays in short bursts constantly: while standing before the king, when mocked, when threatened, when he acts with integrity, when he is afraid, when he is slandered. The pattern is a man in unbroken conversation with God, so that prayer is not an interruption of the work but the atmosphere of it. Compare 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

2. Compare Nehemiah 1:8–9 with Deuteronomy 30:1–5. Nehemiah is praying God's own words back to Him. How would your praying change if you did the same thing this week?

Nehemiah takes hold of God's promise in Deuteronomy 30 that if the scattered people return and obey, God will gather them from the farthest place under heaven. He is not informing God; he is standing on what God already said. Answers will vary on application, but look for students who begin carrying a specific promise into prayer rather than only carrying requests.

3. Read chapter 3 slowly and list the kinds of people who built: priests, goldsmiths, perfumers, rulers, daughters, and men who repaired the section in front of their own houses. Then notice 3:5. What does Nehemiah quietly record about the nobles of Tekoa?

The list includes the high priest and his fellow priests, men from Jericho and Tekoa, Uzziel a goldsmith, Hananiah a perfumer, rulers of districts, Shallum and his daughters, and several who repaired directly opposite their own houses. Nehemiah 3:5 notes that the nobles of Tekoa "did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord." The inspired record preserves both the servants and the shirkers.

4. *In 6:2–4 Nehemiah refuses four invitations to meet on the plain of Ono with the same answer: “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down.” Name the Ono invitations in your calendar right now, the good and harmless things that would pull you off the wall.*

Answers will vary. The point is discernment about good things, not sinful ones. Ono was a day’s travel away, and the meeting would have cost him days plus his life. Listen for students naming commitments that are genuinely fine in themselves but that would end the work God has actually given them.

5. *Somewhere in your life there is a gap in the wall you have learned to live with: a relationship left broken, a habit left unaddressed, a duty quietly dropped. Name it, and name the first stone you will set back in place before next Sunday.*

Answers will vary. Push for one gap and one stone, not a list of five. Formation happens where the resolution is small enough to actually be done on a Tuesday.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Resist turning Nehemiah into a leadership seminar with the Bible as decoration. The book is about God keeping covenant with a returned remnant; the leadership lessons are real, but they are downstream of that.
- Do not allegorize the wall into whatever your class wants it to mean. Draw application from the character of the people and the faithfulness of God, and say plainly when you are applying rather than interpreting.
- Nehemiah’s prayers against his enemies (4:4–5; 6:14) belong with the imprecatory psalms. They are appeals to God’s justice by a man under covenant, not a model for personal vengeance. Compare Romans 12:19.
- The restoration of Jerusalem here is historical and covenantal. Do not press it into a prediction about a modern political nation; the promises to Abraham and David are fulfilled in Christ and His church (Galatians 3:16; Acts 2:29–36).

He Only Is My Rock

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 60 carries a long historical title tying it to David's wars with Aram and Edom, and it is a community lament: the nation has been defeated, and the psalmist assumes without flinching that God was involved. He asks God to repair the breaches and then quotes an oracle in which God claims Shechem, Gilead, Moab, and Edom as His own possessions. The psalm ends where laments in Scripture usually end, not with resolution of the circumstance but with renewed confidence in God.

Psalm 61 is more personal. Whether David wrote it in exile or in battle, the phrase "from the end of the earth" names the feeling of being far outside anything safe. His request is memorable: lead me to the rock that is higher than I. He is asking for a refuge he cannot climb to on his own, which is exactly the honest prayer of a person who has run out of resources.

Psalm 62 is the settled one, built on a Hebrew word often rendered "only" or "surely" that recurs six times. Twice the psalmist repeats a refrain about God as rock and salvation and defense. In between he looks straight at the people scheming against him and at the money everyone else is chasing, weighs both on a scale, and finds them lighter than breath. The last two verses give the reason: power belongs to God, and mercy belongs to God.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- All three psalms are attributed to David in their titles, with Psalm 60 explicitly tied to campaigns recorded in 2 Samuel 8 and 1 Chronicles 18.
- Psalm 60 is a community lament; Psalm 61 is an individual lament with royal elements; Psalm 62 is a psalm of confidence or trust.
- Hebrew laments regularly move from complaint, to petition, to a vow of praise. Teach the class the shape once and they will see it for the rest of the Psalms.
- The "Selah" markers are musical or reflective notations; do not build doctrine on them.
- Royal language about the king's endless years reaches its true fulfillment in Christ, who now reigns at God's right hand (Acts 2:33–36).
- Psalm 60:6–8 is repeated almost word for word in Psalm 108, a reminder that psalms were reused in Israel's worship as we reuse hymns.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 60 begins by telling God that He has cast off His people and made them drink wine of confusion. How does it change your own praying to know that Scripture preserves a prayer this blunt, and where is the line between honest lament and accusing God?*

God is not fragile, and He is not flattered by pretending. Psalm 60 is inspired Scripture, which means God Himself chose to preserve a prayer that says, in effect, You have shaken the land and split it open. The honesty is not rebellion; it is the honesty of a man who still believes God is the only one who can fix what God has allowed. Notice that the psalm never turns to another god and never stops asking.

The line between lament and accusation is roughly the line between "I do not understand what You are doing" and "You are wrong to do it." Job crosses back and forth and is finally corrected, yet God says Job spoke rightly of Him compared to his friends. Give your class permission to bring God their actual condition. Many of them have been praying edited prayers for years and are exhausted from it.

Question 2. Read Psalm 62 aloud and mark every time the psalmist says God alone, or God only. Then list the rivals he names in verses 9 and 10. Which of those competitors quietly has your confidence right now?

The repetitions are the sermon. Verses 1, 2, 5, and 6 keep circling back: my soul waits only for God, He only is my rock, He only is my defense, I shall not be greatly moved. Then verse 9 weighs humanity on a scale, common men and men of rank together, and they are lighter than breath. Verse 10 names the specific rivals: extortion, robbery, and riches that increase.

The discussion turns practical when you ask what a person actually reaches for at two in the morning. For some it is the account balance. For some it is a plan to get even. For some it is the reassurance of an important friend. Do not let the class answer in generalities; ask for the specific thing they check when they are afraid.

Question 3. Psalm 62:8 says to trust in Him at all times and pour out your heart before Him. Most of us pour our hearts out somewhere. Where do we actually take our fear and disappointment first, and what does that habit cost us?

Verse 8 is an invitation to the whole congregation: trust at all times, pour out your heart, God is a refuge for us. The Hebrew picture is emptying a container, holding nothing back. That is worship, and it is also the reason the psalms are in the Bible: God gave His people words for the days when they cannot find their own.

Most of us pour out our hearts, but sideways. We vent to a coworker, we scroll, we rehearse the argument in the car, we tell the story to the third and fourth person. None of that is prayer, and none of it is refuge. Ask the class to name where their emotional energy actually goes first, then ask what it would take this week to make God the first hearer rather than the last.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Write down every image these three psalms use for God: refuge, strong tower, rock, shelter, defense, salvation, glory. Which image do you most need this month, and why that one?

Psalm 61 alone gives shelter, strong tower, tabernacle, and the shadow of His wings, and adds the rock higher than I. Psalm 62 gives rock, salvation, defense, and refuge. The images cluster around two ideas: height, meaning a place the enemy cannot reach, and covering, meaning a place where you are hidden. Answers on the personal question will vary; listen for what the student is actually afraid of.

2. Psalm 60:11–12 says the help of man is useless and that through God we will do valiantly. Compare Psalm 20:7 and Isaiah 31:1. What is the one temptation all three passages are fighting?

All three fight the temptation to trust visible strength: armies, chariots, horses, Egypt, the help of man. The issue is never whether means are used but where confidence rests. Psalm 60:12 does not say God will do it without us; it says through God we will do valiantly, and He will tread down our enemies.

3. In Psalm 61:6–7 David prays that the king's years be prolonged through many generations. Read 2 Samuel 7:16 and Luke 1:32–33 together. Whose throne actually turned out to be the everlasting one, and where does He reign now?

David's line did not continue on an earthly throne, and the monarchy ended in exile. The everlasting throne promised in 2 Samuel 7:16 belongs to Jesus, announced by Gabriel in Luke 1:32–33 and declared fulfilled by Peter in Acts 2:29–36. Christ reigns now, at the right hand of God, over His kingdom the church (Colossians 1:13), not at some future date over a restored political Israel.

4. Psalm 62:9–10 warns about trusting oppression, robbery, and increasing riches. Set it beside 1 Timothy 6:17–19. Trace exactly what Paul tells the rich to do instead, and count how many of those things you did last month.

Paul tells the rich not to be haughty, not to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, to do good, to be rich in good works, to be ready to give and willing to share, storing up a good foundation for the time to come. The counting exercise is deliberately uncomfortable. Riches are not condemned; setting the heart on them is.

5. *Psalm 62:1 begins with the soul silently waiting. Take five minutes each morning this week and ask God for nothing at all; simply wait before Him. Write down on Saturday what changed and what did not.*

Answers will vary. Expect honest reports of distraction and restlessness, and treat that as data rather than failure. The value of the exercise is that it exposes how little practice most of us have at simply being with God rather than transacting with Him.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 60 speaks of national defeat and national restoration under the Old Covenant. Draw out the character of God and the honesty of lament; do not transfer Israel's national promises directly to a country today.
- Guard the royal language in Psalm 61 from premillennial use. The throne that endures is Christ's, and He occupies it now.
- Trusting God rather than riches is not a promise of prosperity in reverse. Psalm 62 does not say the faithful will be wealthy or that the wealthy are faithless; it says confidence belongs in God alone.

New Wine, Old Wineskins

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke has been building a case. Jesus forgives a paralyzed man in the previous paragraph, which raises the question of authority, and now He calls a tax collector, which raises the question of company. Levi, also called Matthew, was a contractor for Rome in a border town, despised by his own people as a collaborator and a thief. Jesus says “Follow Me,” and Luke notes that he left all, rose up, and followed. Then he throws a great feast, and the guest list is the problem.

The reply of Jesus in 5:31–39 is four pictures in a row. A physician goes where the sick are. Wedding guests do not fast while the bridegroom is present. You do not tear a piece from a new garment to patch an old one. You do not pour new wine into brittle skins. Something has arrived that the old structures cannot hold, and the last line is almost wistful: people who have been drinking the old wine say the old is better.

The two Sabbath scenes press the same point. The disciples pluck grain, which the Law permitted (Deuteronomy 23:25) but the rabbinic additions forbade as harvesting. Then Jesus heals a withered hand with the scribes watching to see if He will. He asks whether the Sabbath is for doing good or evil, saving life or destroying it, and the answer is so obvious that their rage in 6:11 exposes them. Immediately afterward He spends a night in prayer and appoints the Twelve, the men who will carry all of this after He is gone.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke is a careful historian writing an orderly account to Theophilus (Luke 1:1–4), and he shows a consistent interest in outsiders: tax collectors, Samaritans, women, the poor.
- Levi is the Matthew of the First Gospel (compare Matthew 9:9 with Mark 2:14). Tax collectors bid for collection rights and profited on the margin, which is why they were grouped with sinners.
- Wineskins were animal hides. New skins stretched as fermentation produced gas; used skins had already stretched and would split. The picture would have been immediately obvious to a first century listener.
- The Sabbath disputes are with the oral traditions built around the Law, not with the Law itself. Jesus never breaks a command of God; He breaks the fence men built around it.
- The Old Law is still in force during Jesus’ earthly ministry. It is fulfilled and taken out of the way at the cross (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 9:15–17), which is why Christians today worship on the first day of the week.
- The appointing of the Twelve in 6:13–16 gives them the name apostles, meaning sent ones, and sets the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Levi left a profitable booth and then immediately used his house and his money to get his old crowd in front of Jesus. What did following cost him, and what did his banquet accomplish that a sermon could not?*

Levi’s cost was permanent. A fisherman could go back to his boat, and after the crucifixion several of them did. Nobody goes back to a tax booth; the franchise would be gone the same week. Luke’s phrase “he left all” is not decorative. And then, remarkably, the first thing he does with what he has left is spend it: a great feast, in his own house, for a large company of tax collectors and others.

The banquet accomplished proximity. Levi could not preach, but he could set a table and put his friends in the same room as Jesus. Ask the class who is in their circle that the preacher will never meet. Most Christians badly underestimate the evangelistic weight of a meal and badly overestimate how eloquent they would need to be.

Question 2. *Jesus says no one puts new wine into old wineskins. In context He is talking about the arrival of something the old system could not contain. Which parts of the old order was He refusing to patch, and why does that matter for how we read the Old Testament today?*

The old garment and the old skins stand for the whole structure of the Mosaic system with its rituals, its calendar, its priesthood, and by extension the rabbinic additions layered on top. Jesus is not renovating it. Hebrews says the same thing at length: a change of priesthood requires a change of law, and the first covenant is becoming obsolete (Hebrews 7:12; 8:13). The new covenant is not Judaism improved.

For the class, this settles how we read the Old Testament. It was written for our instruction (Romans 15:4) and it is inspired and profitable (2 Timothy 3:16–17), but its regulations are not binding on Christians (Colossians 2:14–17; Galatians 3:24–25). Be specific: this is why we do not keep Sabbath, offer animals, burn incense, or bring a tithe under law, and why we do not reach back into the Old Covenant to authorize practices in worship.

Question 3. *In the grainfield and in the synagogue, Jesus collides with men who had built extra rules around God's commands. Where do we do the same thing, and how do you tell the difference between a conviction God gave and a tradition we inherited?*

The oral tradition had turned Sabbath rest into thirty nine categories of forbidden work, and plucking heads of grain to eat counted as reaping. Jesus answers not by dismissing Scripture but by appealing to it: David ate the showbread, and the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. In the synagogue He puts the question in its starkest form and heals a man in front of men who cared more about their rule than about the hand.

The test for the class is a fair one and it cuts both ways. A conviction God gave can be shown in a text, chapter and verse, applied honestly in context. A tradition we inherited may still be wise, useful, and worth keeping, but it cannot be bound on another person's conscience as though God said it. Ask each person to name one practice they hold that they have never actually traced to a passage.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Set Luke 5:27–32 beside Luke 19:1–10. Both men collected taxes for Rome and both met Jesus. List everything the two accounts have in common and the one thing Luke tells us about Zacchaeus that he does not tell us about Levi.*

Both men were tax collectors, both were called by Jesus personally, both responded immediately, both hosted Him in their homes, and both drew criticism from the religious crowd for the company Jesus kept. The difference is that Luke records Zacchaeus announcing restitution: half his goods to the poor and fourfold repayment to anyone he defrauded. Repentance in Zacchaeus has a dollar figure attached.

2. *Jesus says He came to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance. Read Luke 18:9–14 and then Romans 3:23. Who exactly are the righteous He is not calling, and why is that the most dangerous group to belong to?*

The righteous He is not calling are those who believe themselves righteous, like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11 who thanks God he is not like other men. Romans 3:23 says all have sinned, so the category of the genuinely righteous is empty. That is what makes self assurance the most dangerous position in the room: a sick man who insists he is well will never send for the physician.

3. *Trace Luke's references to Jesus praying: 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28; 11:1; 22:41. What happens right after the all night prayer in 6:12, and what does the timing suggest about how He made decisions?*

Jesus prays at His baptism, withdraws regularly to pray, prays all night before choosing the Twelve, prays before Peter's confession and at the transfiguration, prays in a way that makes the disciples ask to be taught, and prays in Gethsemane. The all night prayer in 6:12 comes immediately before the most consequential personnel decision of His ministry. He never treated prayer as preparation for the real work; it was the real work.

4. *Jesus calls Himself Lord of the Sabbath in 6:5. Read Colossians 2:16–17 and Hebrews 8:13, then Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:1–2. Is the Sabbath binding on Christians, and on which day does the New Testament show the church assembling?*

The Sabbath is not binding on Christians. Colossians 2:16–17 places sabbaths among the shadows fulfilled in Christ, and Hebrews 8:13 says the first covenant is obsolete. The New Testament shows the church gathering to break bread

on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7) and laying by in store on the first day (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). The Lord's Day is a day of worship and gladness, not a Christian Sabbath with Sabbath regulations attached.

5. *Name the person you have quietly decided is too far gone for the gospel. Levi's answer was a table. Invite that person to a meal this week, and go with no agenda except friendship and honesty.*

Answers will vary. Watch for two failure modes: the student who picks someone easy and safe, and the student who turns a meal into an ambush. The assignment is a table, not a trap. Ask the following week how it went.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- New wine and new wineskins refer to the new covenant replacing the old, not to a general principle that novelty is good. Do not let the figure be used to justify innovations in worship that the New Testament does not authorize.
- Be clear that Jesus never violated the Law of Moses. His conflict was with human additions to it. Saying otherwise makes Him a sinner and undermines the atonement.
- The Sabbath question will come up. Teach it plainly and kindly: the Old Law is fulfilled and removed, and the apostolic pattern is worship on the first day of the week.
- Jesus eating with sinners is not approval of sin. He came calling them to repentance (5:32). Keep both halves together, or the class will hear either harshness or license.

Stand Fast in Liberty

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Paul has spent three chapters proving that the Galatians were justified by faith in Christ and not by keeping the Law of Moses, and that the Judaizing teachers who followed him into Galatia were preaching another gospel. Now he presses it home with an inspired use of the Abraham narrative: Hagar the bondwoman and her son born of the flesh, Sarah the freewoman and the son born through promise. Two covenants, two kinds of children. His conclusion in 4:30 is blunt: cast out the bondwoman.

Chapter 5 turns pastoral. Stand fast, do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage, and here is what is at stake: if you receive circumcision as a requirement of justification, Christ profits you nothing, you are a debtor to the whole Law, you are estranged from Christ, you have fallen from grace. That is as strong as apostolic language gets, and it should be read slowly in class rather than summarized.

Then Paul does something the legalists could never do. Having removed the Law as a system of justification, he does not leave the Galatians without a standard. He gives them the Spirit. Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh. He lists what the flesh produces and what the Spirit produces, and the second list is not a set of rules at all but a description of a character being formed. Chapter 6 shows that character at work on a real congregation: restoring the fallen, carrying each other, supporting teachers, doing good to all.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Galatians is written to churches Paul established, probably in south Galatia on the first preaching trip (Acts 13–14), and it is among the earliest of his letters.
- The opponents are Judaizers who taught that Gentile converts had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1).
- The allegory of 4:21–31 is Paul writing by inspiration. He is not modeling a method for us to apply to any narrative we choose.
- “Fallen from grace” (5:4) is written to Christians, about Christians, and describes a real and present danger, not a hypothetical one.
- The works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit are not two options for Christians; they are two directions, and Paul says those who practice the first will not inherit the kingdom of God.
- Paul takes the pen himself at 6:11, and his closing boast is in the cross and in the new creation, not in circumcision.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Galatians 5:4 says those seeking to be justified by law have become estranged from Christ and have fallen from grace. Read 5:1–6 carefully. What were these people doing, and what does Paul’s warning mean for the idea that a saved person can never be lost?*

Note precisely what the Galatians were doing. They were not denying Jesus, abandoning the assembly, or falling into open immorality. They were adding a requirement, seeking to be justified by law, and Paul says that choice severs them from Christ. The Greek behind “estranged” carries the sense of being rendered inoperative, cut loose from. Grace is not a status you cannot lose; it is a relationship you can walk out of.

This is the plainest verse in the New Testament on the possibility of apostasy, and it does not stand alone. Hebrews 3:12–14 warns of departing from the living God, Hebrews 6:4–6 and 10:26–31 describe those who were enlightened and then fell, and 2 Peter 2:20–22 describes people entangled again after escaping. Teach it without

heat. Many good people have been assured that this cannot happen to them, and the text, not the teacher, should do the correcting.

Question 2. *In 5:6 Paul says what counts is faith working through love. Set that phrase beside Ephesians 2:8–9 and James 2:17–24. How do those three passages together answer the claim that a person is saved by faith alone?*

Put the three passages on the board. Ephesians 2:8–9 rules out earning: salvation is by grace through faith, not of works, lest anyone boast. James 2:24 rules out a bare mental assent: a man is justified by works and not by faith only, and 2:17 says faith without works is dead. Galatians 5:6 holds them together in four words: faith working through love. The faith that saves is not inactive, and the works that accompany it are not wages earned.

Then make it concrete. The works Paul excludes in Galatians are works of the Law of Moses performed to establish a claim on God. The works James requires are the obedience of trust, which includes obeying the gospel itself. Faith led the Philippian jailer to be baptized that same hour (Acts 16:33), and Paul says all who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:26–27). That is faith working, and it is not earning.

Question 3. *Paul calls the nine qualities in 5:22–23 fruit, singular, not fruits. Which one of them is thinnest in you right now, and what would it actually take for that one to grow, given that fruit grows from a root and not from effort alone?*

The singular noun matters. Paul is not offering a menu from which a Christian selects the two or three that suit his temperament. He is describing one crop with nine features, produced by one Spirit in a life surrendered to Him. Which is why growth is never mere willpower. You do not manufacture patience by gritting your teeth; you cultivate a root, through the word, prayer, obedience, and the company of God's people, and the fruit follows.

Expect the class to name self control or patience or gentleness. Push past the naming to mechanism: what specific input feeds that thinness, and what specific practice would starve it? Someone who is chronically impatient and chronically overscheduled is not facing a character mystery. Ask each person to name one thing they will remove this week and one thing they will add.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Make two columns and copy out the works of the flesh (5:19–21) and the fruit of the Spirit (5:22–23). Circle the sins in the first list that our culture no longer regards as sins. Then read the last line of verse 21 aloud.*

The lists are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries; and love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. The circling exercise usually lands on sexual sin, drunkenness, and revelry, and it should also land on contention, envy, and outbursts of wrath, which congregations tolerate far more easily. Verse 21 says those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

2. *In 4:21–31 Paul reads the story of Hagar and Sarah as a picture of two covenants. Which covenant does each woman represent, and how does his reading line up with Hebrews 8:6–13?*

Hagar, the bondwoman, corresponds to Mount Sinai and the Jerusalem of that day, producing children in bondage; Sarah, the freewoman, corresponds to the covenant of promise and the Jerusalem above, the mother of the free. Hebrews 8:6–13 says the same thing in different language: a better covenant established on better promises, and the first made obsolete. Both passages insist that the two cannot be combined.

3. *Galatians 6:2 says to bear one another's burdens, and 6:5 says each will bear his own load. Look at both verses in context. What kind of weight is shared, and what kind is never transferable?*

Galatians 6:2 uses a word for a crushing weight too heavy for one person, the kind of burden a brother is sinking under; that is shared, and carrying it fulfills the law of Christ. Galatians 6:5 uses a different word, closer to a soldier's pack or a man's own assignment. Responsibility before God for your own conduct and your own account is never transferable (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:12).

4. Read 6:7–9 with 2 Corinthians 9:6 and Hosea 8:7. Trace the law of sowing and reaping through all three. Where in the last five years have you seen a harvest you can trace back to a specific seed?

All three teach that the outcome corresponds to the seed and that the harvest comes later than the sowing. Paul adds two applications: sowing to the flesh reaps corruption, sowing to the Spirit reaps everlasting life, and therefore do not grow weary while doing good. Answers on the five year question will vary; the point is to make the principle personal rather than proverbial.

5. Galatians 6:1 tells the spiritual to restore one overtaken in a trespass, in a spirit of gentleness, watching themselves. Think of someone who has drifted from the Lord. Write down what you will say, and go this week.

Answers will vary. Two things to listen for: gentleness, since the same verse warns the restorer to consider himself lest he also be tempted, and follow through, since most people who intend this conversation never have it. Ask for a name and a day.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Falling from grace: teach 5:4 exactly as it stands. Christians can be lost. Handle members who were raised on “once saved, always saved” with patience, and let the text carry the weight.
- Faith and works: guard both ditches. Salvation is not earned, and faith alone does not save (James 2:24). Keep Galatians 5:6, Ephesians 2:8–10, and James 2 in front of the class together.
- The Israel of God in 6:16 is the church, made up of Jew and Gentile in Christ (Galatians 3:28–29; Romans 2:28–29). Do not let it become a reference to a future national Israel.
- Liberty is not license. Paul says it himself in 5:13: do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. Some classes need the first warning and some need the second; most need both.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Nehemiah 8–13 · Psalm 63–64 · Luke 6:20–7:10 · Ephesians 1:1–2:10

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