

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 57 OF 104

Hearing and Building

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Nehemiah 8-13
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 63-64
Gospels	Luke 6:20-7:10
General New Testament	Ephesians 1:1-2:10

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to connect hearing with building. Nehemiah 8 shows a whole city standing for hours to hear God's word explained, and then doing something about it. Luke 6 ends with two builders who heard the same sermon and were distinguished only by obedience. Ephesians 1 says the Ephesians entered God's eternal purpose the day they heard the word of truth and believed it. And Psalm 63 shows a man in a desert whose only supply is what he already knows about God. Hearing that never reaches the hands leaves a house standing on sand.

Doctrinally, Ephesians 1 is the high ground of the week and it must be taught carefully. Keep the phrases "in Him," "in Christ," and "in the Beloved" in front of the class from the first minute. God's choice before the foundation of the world is a choice about a people and a purpose, and a person enters that people by hearing and obeying the gospel, exactly as 1:13 describes and exactly as Acts 19 records happening in Ephesus. Then hold Ephesians 2:8-9 together with 2:10 and with James 2:24, and you will have settled two of the most common errors your members will meet this year.

Formationally, the thread is what happens after the hearing. Nehemiah 13 shows reforms unraveling during one man's absence. Luke 6:46 asks why we call Him Lord and do not do what He says. Ask your class this question, and do not accept a general answer: what is the one thing you already know God has told you to do, that you have known for more than a month, and that you still have not done? Then ask what day this week it gets done.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Ephesians 1:1-2:10. It carries the doctrinal weight of the week and rewards slow reading. Read 1:3-14 aloud and count the "in Him" phrases with the class before you say anything else; the paragraph will teach itself once the location is visible.

Second session: Take up Nehemiah 8-13. Give most of the hour to chapter 8 and the reading at the Water Gate, then use chapter 13 as the sober ending. The contrast between a covenant signed and a covenant neglected preaches itself without much help.

The other two readings: Assign Psalms 63 and 64 and Luke 6:20-7:10 for the week. Urge the class to read Psalm 63 aloud in the morning and Luke 6:27-36 slowly with a pen. Mention that the extended questions on "judge not" will be useful the next time someone quotes it at them.

The Book Opened in the Square

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 8 is one of the great scenes in the Old Testament, and it is worth slowing down for. The people ask for the book; nobody has to summon them. Ezra stands on a purpose built platform with thirteen men beside him, opens the scroll, and the whole assembly stands. Levites circulate through the crowd giving the sense, probably explaining the Hebrew to a generation raised speaking Aramaic. The response is tears, because when the Law is finally understood the distance between what God said and how they had lived becomes visible.

What follows is the fruit of that hearing. They keep the Feast of Tabernacles, living in booths for a week, the first such observance recorded since the days of Joshua. They assemble again to confess, and chapter 9 preserves one of the longest prayers in Scripture, a retelling of Israel's history in which God gives and the people rebel, over and over, and God is called righteous in all of it. Then in chapter 10 they put their commitment in writing and seal it.

Chapter 13 is the honest ending. Nehemiah goes back to the king for a while, and in his absence the high priest gives Tobiah a room in the temple courts, the Levites lose their support and return to farming, merchants sell on the Sabbath, and children of mixed marriages cannot speak the language of Judah. Nehemiah cleans house with considerable heat. The book closes with a man asking God to remember him, which is both a prayer and a sober reminder that reform is never finished.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The events follow the completion of the wall in about 445 B.C. Ezra the scribe, who had arrived roughly thirteen years earlier, leads the public reading; Nehemiah the governor stands with him.
- The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated the wilderness wandering (Leviticus 23:33–43) and fell in the seventh month, the same month as this assembly.
- The people had returned from Babylon, where Aramaic was the common tongue. The Levites "giving the sense" likely involved translation as well as explanation.
- Nehemiah 9 is a covenant confession that rehearses Israel's history from creation through the exile, and it is the fullest Old Testament example of praying through the story of God's dealings.
- This is the close of Old Testament history. Malachi addresses many of the same failures found in Nehemiah 13, particularly neglected offerings and unfaithful marriages.
- Nehemiah writes as a governor under Persian authority, and his reforms are enforcements of the Law of Moses on a covenant nation, not a pattern for civil enforcement of religion today.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Nehemiah 8:8 says they read from the book distinctly, gave the sense, and helped the people understand. Walk through what actually happened in that square. Why is understanding, rather than mere exposure, the goal, and what does that require of a teacher and of a hearer?*

Three things happened together: the text was read plainly, its meaning was explained, and the hearers were helped to understand. Any one of the three alone falls short. Reading without explanation leaves people with sounds. Explanation without the text leaves people with a man's opinions. And both without the labor of helping people understand leaves a teacher satisfied with a lesson nobody followed. Note that thirteen Levites are named as doing this work; it took a crowd of teachers to serve one crowd of hearers.

Press the responsibility both directions. A teacher owes his class clarity, preparation, and plain speech rather than performance. A hearer owes the text his attention, his Bible open, and his willingness to be changed. Ask your

class how many of them could say what last Sunday's lesson was about. Then ask what would have to change, on both sides of the room, for the answer to be different next month.

Question 2. *The people weep when they hear the Law, and their leaders tell them to stop mourning, to eat and drink and share, because the joy of the Lord is their strength. Given that Scripture elsewhere commends godly sorrow, why was joy the right response on that particular day?*

The tears were right; they simply were not the whole story. The people wept because they finally understood, and the leaders did not scold them for it. But this was a holy day, and the covenant God who had exposed their sin was the same God who had brought them home, rebuilt their wall, and given them His word again. Godly sorrow works repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10), and repentance ends in restored joy, not in permanent grief.

The verse is widely quoted and rarely read in context, so put it back. Notice that the joy issues in a shared meal and in portions sent to those who had nothing prepared. Biblical joy is not a mood they were told to produce; it is a response to what God is, and it immediately turns outward. Ask the class where a genuine grasp of God's mercy has actually made them more generous.

Question 3. *Chapter 13 shows Nehemiah returning after an absence to find Tobiah living in the temple storerooms, the Levites unpaid and back in their fields, and the Sabbath turned into market day. What in your own life reliably slides backward the moment you stop watching it?*

Nehemiah 13 is a study in entropy. Nothing dramatic happened; Nehemiah simply was not there. The covenant of chapter 10 had been signed by these same people, and within a few years the storerooms held Tobiah's furniture instead of the tithes. That is how reform usually dies: not by reversal but by quiet neglect while attention is elsewhere.

Bring this to the specific. For most adults the honest answers are prayer, Scripture reading, money, marriage, and health. Something in every life drifts the moment it stops being watched. Ask each person to name theirs out loud if the class is close enough for that, and to name the one safeguard that has actually worked for them before.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read the long prayer of Nehemiah 9 and mark two repeated movements: what God did, and what the people did in response. Write out the pattern in your own words, and note where the prayer finally lands in verses 32 through 38.*

The pattern repeats: God chose, brought out, led, gave water and bread, gave laws, gave a land; and they dealt proudly, hardened their necks, refused to obey, cast the Law behind their backs, killed the prophets. Yet the prayer keeps saying that God is merciful, slow to anger, and did not forsake them. It lands in verses 32 through 38 with a confession that God has been just in everything that has come on them, and a written covenant in response. Confession in Scripture regularly begins with God's character, not with our feelings.

2. *Nehemiah 8:10 tells the people to send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared. Compare that instruction with Acts 2:44–46. What do gladness and generosity keep doing together in Scripture?*

In both places joy produces sharing almost immediately. In Nehemiah the command to rejoice comes with the command to send portions; in Acts the disciples eat with gladness and simplicity of heart while selling possessions to supply whoever had need. Joy that never reaches a neighbor's table has probably not understood what it received.

3. *List the specific commitments the people wrote and sealed in Nehemiah 10:28–39. Which single commitment in that list has an obvious equivalent in your own life, and are you keeping it?*

They committed to keep the Law, not to intermarry with the peoples of the land, not to buy on the Sabbath, to let the land rest, to bring a wood offering, firstfruits, firstborn, tithes, and a yearly temple contribution, and they concluded with the sentence that sums it up: we will not neglect the house of our God. Answers on the personal question will vary; the most common honest equivalent is regular, sacrificial support of the Lord's work.

4. *Nehemiah 13:15–22 shows him shutting the gates to stop Sabbath trading. Read Colossians 2:16–17 and Hebrews 8:13 alongside it. What was binding on Israel that is not binding on us, and what does that leave unchanged about honoring God with our time?*

Sabbath observance was bound on Israel under the Old Covenant and is not bound on Christians. Colossians 2:16–17 lists sabbaths among the shadows fulfilled in Christ, and Hebrews 8:13 declares the first covenant obsolete. What remains unchanged is the principle underneath: our calendars reveal what we actually treasure, and the Lord's people gather on the first day of the week to worship (Acts 20:7).

5. *The reading in chapter 8 was public and out loud, and it lasted hours. Put a specific block on your calendar this week to read Scripture aloud with your family or a friend, and keep it even if the week goes badly.*

Answers will vary. The point is public, audible reading, which most families have never tried. Listen the following week for how it went, especially from parents of young children, and be ready with realistic encouragement rather than idealized advice.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The joy of the Lord as strength (8:10) is regularly quoted with no context at all. Anchor it to the day, the book, and the shared meal, or the class will take it as a slogan about staying positive.
- Nehemiah 13:23–27 addresses marriages that were pulling Israel away from covenant faithfulness, not race. Apply it carefully. The New Testament instructs Christians to marry in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39) and warns against being unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14), but it also forbids a Christian to divorce an unbelieving spouse who is willing to stay (1 Corinthians 7:12–13). Do not let Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 13 be used to counsel a divorce today.
- Nehemiah's treatment of the offenders in 13:25 is recorded, not commended. Scripture reports what its characters did without approving all of it.
- Do not bind Old Covenant observances, including the Sabbath, the feasts, or the tithe as law, on Christians. Draw the enduring principles of reverence, generosity, and obedience instead.

Thirsty in a Dry Land

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 63 carries a title placing it in the wilderness of Judah, most likely during Absalom's rebellion when David was driven from Jerusalem. That setting explains the whole psalm. He is exiled from the sanctuary, so he says he has seen God in the sanctuary and now seeks Him here in the dust. He is thirsty in the ordinary physical sense, and he uses that to name a deeper thirst. This is not a man enjoying a spiritual mood; it is a man in trouble reaching for the only thing that has ever held him.

The turning point is verse 3. God's lovingkindness, His covenant loyalty, is better than life. Everything a person normally holds onto is life, and David says the love of God outweighs it. What follows is worship language: blessing, lifting hands, a soul satisfied as with rich food, joyful lips, remembering in the night. The psalm ends with confidence that those hunting him will not have the last word.

Psalm 64 is shorter and darker. The threat here is not an army but a conspiracy of speech: men who whet their tongues, aim bitter words like arrows, encourage themselves in evil, and say "Who will see them?" The psalm answers that question. God sees, God acts, and the very tongue they sharpened turns back on them. It closes with the righteous glad in the Lord, which is where laments in the Psalter keep landing.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Both psalms are attributed to David. Psalm 63 is set in the wilderness of Judah; Psalm 64 is addressed to the chief musician with no historical note.
- Psalm 63 is a psalm of trust and longing; Psalm 64 is an individual lament with imprecatory elements.
- The word rendered lovingkindness or steadfast love is the covenant word for God's loyal, committed love toward His people. It is the anchor of verse 3.
- The night watches divided the night into segments for sentries. David is describing lying awake and using the hours to think about God rather than about his enemies.
- Lifting the hands and blessing the name were ordinary postures of Israelite prayer and praise, not prescriptions for Christian assemblies.
- Imprecatory language appeals to God to act as judge. It is not a model for personal retaliation (Romans 12:19; 1 Peter 2:23).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *David is in an actual desert, and he says his soul is thirsty the way his body is. Think about the dry seasons you have been through. Did the dryness make you thirstier for God, or did it make you numb, and what made the difference?*

Dryness does not automatically produce thirst; sometimes it produces numbness, and every adult in the room knows the difference. What separates them is usually memory. David says in verse 2 that he has seen God's power and glory in the sanctuary, and that memory is what drives him to seek God in the wilderness. A person with no stored experience of God has nothing to reach for when the well runs dry.

Ask for real stories, and give the class permission to say that a hard season pushed them away rather than toward God. That admission is often the beginning of recovery. Then ask what habits, formed in the good years, would give them something to hold in the next bad one. This is a strong argument for daily Scripture and for showing up on the first day of the week when you do not feel like it.

Question 2. *Psalm 63:3 says God's lovingkindness is better than life. That is an enormous claim to make out loud. What would have to be true of a person before he could say it and mean it?*

To say God's love is better than life is to say that if you took everything else away, what remains would still be enough. That claim can only be made by someone who has begun to lose things. David is saying it while camped in a wasteland, away from his throne and his city, with his own son hunting him. It is easy to sing and costly to mean.

Turn it toward the class gently. Most of us prove what we value not in a crisis but in a schedule. Ask what would still be left if the thing they are most afraid of losing were gone, and whether they would call that remainder enough. Paul makes the same calculation in Philippians 1:21 and 3:7-8, which is worth reading aloud beside this psalm.

Question 3. *Psalm 64 describes words sharpened like swords, aimed from ambush, and spoken in secret. Where does that kind of speech happen among people who would never consider themselves violent, and what is the remedy?*

Psalm 64 is about respectable violence. The weapons are words: a sharpened tongue, bitter speech aimed from concealment, plotting that assumes no one is watching. Congregations do this. It happens in a phone call that begins with concern, in an email copied to the wrong people, in a sentence dropped in a hallway and left to do its work.

The remedy runs in two directions. Toward the offender, the psalm insists that God sees and that words return on the head that sharpened them (compare Matthew 12:36-37). Toward ourselves, the discipline is simple and hard: say nothing about a brother that you have not been willing to say to him. Ask the class to commit to one specific speech rule this week, and to name it out loud.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Go through Psalm 63 and note every physical word: soul, flesh, lips, mouth, hands, bed, night watches, the shadow of His wings. What picture of worship emerges when you put them all together?*

The psalm engages the whole person: soul and flesh both long for God, hands are lifted, lips praise, mouth is satisfied, the body lies on a bed at night, and the whole person shelters under His wings. Worship in the Psalms is never merely internal or merely external. It is a person, entire, turned toward God, which is exactly what Romans 12:1 asks for.

2. *Psalm 63:6 says David meditated on God during the night watches. Compare Psalm 1:2 and Joshua 1:8. Trace what all three passages say meditation is and what it is for.*

Psalm 1:2 has the blessed man meditating day and night in the Law; Joshua 1:8 ties meditation to obedience and success in the task God gave; Psalm 63:6 shows meditation filling the sleepless hours. In each case meditation means turning God's words and works over in the mind repeatedly, and in each case it is aimed at action, not at emptiness.

3. *Psalm 64:7-8 says God will shoot at the wicked with an arrow and their own tongue will turn against them. Read Romans 12:19 before you answer. How should a Christian pray about someone who is actively harming him?*

A Christian may and should ask God to defend him, to stop the harm, and to bring justice, leaving vengeance in God's hands rather than his own. What he may not do is ask God for permission to retaliate, and what he is commanded to do is pray for his enemy and bless him (Luke 6:27-28; Romans 12:20-21). The psalm is honest about the desire for justice; the New Testament tells us where to put it.

4. *Psalm 63:8 says the soul follows hard after God and God's right hand upholds him. Set that verse beside Philippians 2:12-13. How do pursuing and being upheld fit together in one sentence without contradicting each other?*

The two halves belong together. David pursues, and God sustains the pursuit. Paul says work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do. Neither passage teaches that God does it all while we wait, and neither teaches that we do it alone. Effort and dependence are not rivals in Scripture.

5. *David sought God early, before the day took him. Identify the one habit that currently occupies the first twenty minutes of your morning, and trade it this week for Scripture and prayer. Write down on Saturday whether you did it.*

Answers will vary. The most common answers are a phone, the news, and email. Do not moralize about the device; make the trade concrete and ask for a report. People who have never once started a day with Scripture often find the first week harder than they expected and the second week easier.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 63 is not a technique for producing feelings. It is the language of a man in trouble. Guard the class from measuring their spiritual health by how much emotion they can generate in a quiet time.
- The imprecatory notes in Psalm 64 are appeals to God as judge. Handle them honestly and set them beside Romans 12:19 and the example of Christ in 1 Peter 2:23.
- “Better than life” is not a promise that the faithful will be spared hardship. David wrote it while hunted. Do not let it slide toward a message that trusting God improves your circumstances.

Two Houses, One Flood

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke's sermon on the level place covers much of the same ground as Matthew's sermon on the mount, and whether it is the same occasion reported differently or a similar sermon preached again, the substance is the teaching of Jesus about the character of kingdom citizens. Luke's form is blunt. Where Matthew says blessed are the poor in spirit, Luke says blessed are you poor, and then adds woes: woe to you who are rich, full, laughing, and well spoken of. Luke is writing to a Roman world that measured people exactly that way.

The heart of the sermon is 6:27–36, and it is the hardest paragraph in the gospel for ordinary people. Love enemies, do good to haters, bless cursers, pray for abusers, offer the other cheek, give to whoever asks, lend without expecting return. The reason given is not that it works but that it resembles God: He is kind to the unthankful and evil, and we are to be merciful as our Father is merciful. This is family likeness, not strategy.

The sermon ends with a test that is not about knowledge. Why call Me Lord, Lord, and not do what I say? Two men build, one digs deep and lays a foundation on rock, and the flood exposes the difference. Then Luke immediately illustrates the point with a Gentile soldier who never studied under a rabbi but understood the word of Jesus better than the religious professionals did. He sends a message: I am a man under authority; say the word, and my servant will be healed. Jesus marvels, which Scripture records Him doing only rarely.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke 6:17 places this teaching on a level place after a night of prayer and the choosing of the Twelve, with a great crowd from Judea, Jerusalem, and the coastal cities present.
- Luke consistently highlights the poor, the outsider, and the Gentile. The centurion account is placed immediately after the sermon for a reason.
- A centurion commanded roughly eighty to a hundred men. This one had built the local synagogue, which marks him as a God fearing Gentile respected by the Jewish elders.
- The sermon is spoken under the Old Covenant to disciples who will live under the New. Its ethics are permanently binding on Christians; its setting is before the cross.
- Building on rock in that region meant digging through loose soil in a dry wadi to reach bedrock, hard work with nothing to show for it until the rains came.
- Jesus marveling at faith occurs here and at the unbelief of Nazareth (Mark 6:6). In both cases it is a Gentile's faith or Israel's failure that draws the comment.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Luke pairs four blessings with four woes. Read 6:20–26 aloud and set each pair side by side. Which list would an outsider place most of us on, and what does the pairing say about how God measures a life?*

Set them in pairs: poor and rich, hungry and full, weeping and laughing, hated for the Son of Man's sake and well spoken of by all. The woes are not curses hurled at wealthy people; the word means alas, and the sentence attached to each is that they have already received their consolation. The problem with the full life is that it feels like the finished life. There is nothing left to want, so there is nothing left to seek.

Most American Christians are on the second list by any global measure, and saying so plainly is not scolding, it is honesty. The question to press is not whether we are comfortable but whether our comfort has quietly become our consolation. Ask what a person who is rich, full, and well spoken of would have to do to keep hungering after God.

Question 2. Take 6:27–36 line by line: love, do good, bless, pray, give, lend, be merciful. Pick one enemy or difficult person in your life, do not name them out loud, and describe what obeying one of those verbs would look like for you before next Sunday.

Notice the grammar: nearly every command is active. Love, do good, bless, pray, give, lend, be merciful. Jesus does not tell us to stop hating our enemies; He tells us to act toward them. That is deliberate, because feelings follow actions far more reliably than actions follow feelings. He also grounds it in God's own conduct toward the unthankful, so refusing is not merely disobedience; it is failing to resemble the Father.

Keep the class specific and keep the names private. The point of not naming is that the exercise stops being about the other person's guilt and starts being about the student's obedience. Ask for a verb and a day. Many will discover that the hardest verb on the list is the simplest: pray for them, by name, daily, for a week.

Question 3. Both men in 6:46–49 built houses, and from the outside the houses looked alike until the river hit them. The centurion in 7:1–10 understood something about authority that the religious crowd did not. What does it actually mean to call Jesus Lord?

Calling Him Lord means submitting to His authority in practice. That is the force of 6:46, and the two houses illustrate it: both men heard, only one did. The flood does not create the difference; it reveals it. Note that the house on rock is not spared the storm, it is only unshaken by it, which is a different and better promise than the one most people want.

The centurion understood authority because he lived inside it. He gives an order and it is carried out; he receives an order and he carries it out. So he reasons that the word of Jesus needs no physical presence to accomplish anything. Contrast the elders in 7:4–5, who argue that Jesus should help because the man deserves it, having built their synagogue. The centurion says he is not worthy. Jesus commends the man who claimed nothing and trusted the word.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. List every command Jesus gives in 6:27–38 and count them. Then mark the ones that require you to do something rather than merely refrain from something.

The commands include love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who spitefully use you, offer the other cheek, do not withhold your tunic, give to everyone who asks, do not demand your goods back, do to others as you would have them do to you, love and do good and lend hoping for nothing, be merciful, judge not, condemn not, forgive, give. Nearly all of them are active rather than passive, which is the point worth writing on the board.

2. Compare Luke 6:20–26 with Matthew 5:3–12. Note what Luke includes that Matthew does not and how Matthew phrases the first and fourth blessings. Why might Luke, who writes so often about the poor, record the woes?

Matthew has poor in spirit and hunger and thirst for righteousness; Luke has simply poor and hungry, and adds four woes that Matthew does not record. Luke writes to a Gentile world and returns repeatedly to wealth and poverty (Luke 12:13–21; 16:19–31; 18:18–30). The woes are not a different gospel; they are the same gospel aimed at readers who were in danger of hearing only the comfortable half.

3. Jesus says judge not, yet John 7:24 tells us to judge with righteous judgment and 1 Corinthians 5:12 has Paul judging those inside the church. Distinguish the kind of judging forbidden from the kind commanded, using all three passages.

What is forbidden is self righteous, hypocritical, condemning judgment, the kind that inspects a speck while ignoring a plank, and judgment that presumes to settle a person's eternal standing. What is commanded is discernment about conduct and doctrine according to God's standard, and, within the congregation, the discipline of a member in open sin. The difference lies in the standard used, the humility of the one judging, and the aim, which must be restoration rather than superiority.

4. *Trace exactly what the centurion says in 7:6–8 about his own authority and about Jesus. Note what he never asks for and never claims. Then compare his words with the elders' argument in 7:4–5. Whose reasoning does Jesus commend?*

The centurion says he is not worthy to have Jesus come under his roof, that he did not consider himself worthy even to come in person, that he understands authority because he is a man under authority, and that Jesus need only say the word. He never claims merit and never requires a visible sign or a physical touch. The elders, by contrast, argue that he deserves it because he loves the nation and built the synagogue. Jesus commends the centurion's reasoning and calls it faith greater than any He had found in Israel.

5. *Luke 6:35 says to do good and lend, hoping for nothing in return. This week do one concrete, costly good for someone who cannot repay you and who will probably never know it was you.*

Answers will vary. The anonymity matters, because it removes the return Jesus tells us not to expect. Watch for students who substitute a generous feeling for a concrete act, and ask the following week what it actually cost.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Luke's blessing on the poor is not a claim that poverty makes a person righteous, and the woe to the rich is not a claim that wealth damns. Read them as warnings about where consolation is found (compare 1 Timothy 6:17–19).
- "Judge not" is probably the most misused sentence in the Bible. Deal with it directly and give the class the balancing passages, or they will be disarmed the next time someone quotes it at them.
- "Give, and it will be given to you" is not a formula for financial return. It describes the generous measure of God toward generous people, not an investment scheme.
- The centurion is commended for faith during Jesus' earthly ministry, before the death of Christ and before the terms of pardon were preached at Pentecost. Do not use this account to set aside what the risen Lord commanded in Mark 16:16 and what Peter preached in Acts 2:38.

Every Blessing in Him

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Ephesians 1:3–14 is one sentence in the Greek, a sustained burst of praise that keeps circling back to the same location. Every blessing is in Christ, in Him, in the Beloved, and that repetition is the key to the entire paragraph. Paul is not cataloging what God did to isolated individuals in eternity past; he is describing what God purposed for a people, and then naming the place where a person receives it. The doxology is arranged around the Father who chose, the Son in whom the blessings are given, and the Spirit who seals.

The prayer in 1:15–23 asks for something specific: not more blessings but open eyes to see the ones already given. Paul wants them to know the hope of the calling, the riches of the inheritance, and the greatness of the power that worked in Christ when God raised Him from the dead and seated Him far above every name. Then comes the sentence a teacher should not rush past. God gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body. The exaltation of Christ is stated for the sake of the church.

Chapter 2 turns the telescope around. You were dead in trespasses and sins, walking with the crowd, living in the desires of the flesh. But God, being rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ, raised us up, and seated us with Him. Verses 8 through 10 tie it off: by grace through faith, the gift of God, not of works so that no one boasts, and yet created in Christ Jesus for good works God prepared in advance. Grace excludes boasting. It does not exclude obedience.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Paul writes from prison, probably in Rome around A.D. 62, and Ephesians shares much of its material with Colossians, written at the same time.
- Ephesus was a major port city dominated by the temple of Artemis and a culture of magic (Acts 19:11–20). Language about principalities, powers, and Christ being far above them would have landed hard there.
- The church at Ephesus was founded on Paul's third preaching trip, and Acts 19:1–7 records a dozen men there being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus after learning they had known only John's baptism.
- The controlling phrase of the letter is "in Christ." Paul uses it and its equivalents more than thirty times, and it governs how the election language in chapter 1 must be read.
- Chapters 1 through 3 are doctrine, chapters 4 through 6 are conduct, and the hinge is the word "therefore" in 4:1.
- The sealing of the Spirit as an earnest or down payment (1:13–14) is a commercial term: a deposit guaranteeing that the rest will be paid.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. Go through 1:3–14 and count the phrases "in Christ," "in Him," and "in the Beloved." Every blessing in the paragraph is located somewhere. What does that tell you about what God chose, and about how a person comes to be included?

Count them with the class; it takes two minutes and it settles the chapter. Chosen in Him, adopted through Jesus Christ, accepted in the Beloved, redemption in Him, gathered together in Christ, an inheritance in Him, trusted in Him, sealed in Him. The sphere never changes. God did not choose certain individuals and then arrange for them to end up in Christ; He chose that those in Christ would be holy, blameless, adopted, and His. The choice is eternal and certain, and the terms of entry are the gospel.

This is where a teacher must be plain and unhurried. Unconditional individual election would make the invitations of Scripture meaningless and the warnings dishonest. Paul tells these same readers in 1:13 exactly how they got

in: they heard the word of truth, they believed, they were sealed. Second Thessalonians 2:13–14 says God chose them for salvation and then adds, “to which He called you by our gospel.” The call comes through preaching, and it can be obeyed or refused (Acts 7:51; Matthew 23:37).

Question 2. *Ephesians 1:22–23 says God gave Christ to be head over all things to the church, which is His body. If that is true, what should change about how a Christian speaks about the church, thinks about missing an assembly, and treats other members?*

If the church is the body of Christ and He is its head, then the church is not an organization a Christian supports, a building he attends, or a preference he holds. It is the body of the One who owns him. Paul says God gave Christ to be head over all things to the church, which means the government of the universe is arranged for the sake of this body. That should end forever the habit of speaking about the church as an optional add on to personal faith.

Make it concrete in three directions. Speech: we do not run down the body of Christ in front of our children or our neighbors, and we take grievances to people rather than about them. Assembly: absence is not a scheduling matter but a body part missing (1 Corinthians 12:14–27; Hebrews 10:24–25). Membership: there is one body (Ephesians 4:4), so the New Testament knows nothing of choosing among competing churches by taste.

Question 3. *Read 2:8–10 as one unit, not as two verses and a leftover. Paul says saved by grace through faith, not of works, and then says we are His workmanship created for good works. Which works does he exclude, which does he require, and why is the difference worth fighting over?*

Paul excludes works that would create a claim: meritorious works, works of the Law of Moses undertaken to establish righteousness, anything that lets a man boast that he earned it. He does not exclude the obedience of faith, and he cannot, because the same breath says we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, and because verse 10 is part of the same sentence structure. James settles it from the other side: a man is justified by works and not by faith only (James 2:24).

The reason this is worth fighting over is pastoral, not merely academic. Faith only leaves a person with no clear answer to the question the crowd asked at Pentecost, “What shall we do?” Peter had an answer: repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Baptism is not a work of merit; it is the appointed moment when a believer is buried with Christ and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). Grace supplies everything. Faith receives it God’s way.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every blessing named in 1:3–14 and write beside each one the phrase that tells you where it is located. Count how many times the location is the same.*

The list runs: every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ; chosen in Him; adopted through Jesus Christ; accepted in the Beloved; redemption through His blood in Him; forgiveness; the mystery of His will made known, to gather all things together in Christ; an inheritance obtained in Him; sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise. The location is the same every time, which is precisely Paul’s point. Outside of Christ there are no spiritual blessings at all.

2. *Ephesians 1:4–5 says God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world and predestined us to adoption. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14 and Romans 8:28–30 alongside it, and pay attention to the words “called you by our gospel.” What did God determine beforehand, and how does a person enter it?*

God determined before the world began that He would have a people, holy and blameless, adopted as sons, conformed to the image of His Son, and that this people would be in Christ. That is the predestination Paul teaches: the certainty of the plan, not the arbitrary selection of individuals. A person enters it when he responds to the gospel call, which is why 2 Thessalonians 2:14 adds “by our gospel” and why Romans 8:29 speaks of conformity to Christ’s image as the thing predetermined.

3. Trace the sequence in 1:13: you heard the word of truth, you believed, you were sealed. Then read Acts 19:1-5, where Paul meets these very Ephesians, and Galatians 3:26-27. Write out the steps the New Testament shows between hearing and belonging.

The order in 1:13 is hearing, believing, and being sealed. Acts 19:1-5 shows what stood between believing and belonging for these very readers: they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Galatians 3:26-27 says they are sons of God through faith, for as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Hearing, faith, repentance, confession, and baptism are not five competing plans; they are one response to one gospel (Romans 10:9-10, 17; Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16).

4. Ephesians 2:1-3 says they were dead in trespasses and sins in which they once walked. Compare Ezekiel 18:20 and Isaiah 59:1-2. What made them dead, and what does that rule out about the condition of a newborn child?

They were dead because of their own trespasses and sins, the ones in which they themselves once walked, and Isaiah 59:1-2 says it is our iniquities that separate us from God. Ezekiel 18:20 says the son does not bear the guilt of the father. That rules out inherited guilt. A newborn has committed no trespasses and walked in nothing; Jesus held up children as the pattern of those who belong to the kingdom (Matthew 18:3; 19:14).

5. Ephesians 2:10 says we are created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Name the good work already sitting in front of you that you have been walking around, and do it this week.

Answers will vary. The phrase “prepared beforehand” means the opportunities are already laid out in front of us, not that we must invent a ministry. Listen for the ordinary and the near: a neighbor, a widow in the congregation, a grandchild, a coworker. The work most people are walking around is usually the one they have already thought of more than once.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Predestination in Ephesians 1 is God’s eternal purpose that those in Christ should be His holy, adopted people. Teach it with the phrases “in Him” and “in Christ” in front of the class the whole time. It is not unconditional individual election, and treating it that way contradicts the invitations and warnings of the same New Testament.
- Ephesians 2:1-3 describes people dead through their own sins and their own walking. Do not let it be read as total depravity or inherited guilt. Each person becomes guilty when he himself sins (Ezekiel 18:20).
- Ephesians 2:8-9 must never be taught apart from 2:10 and James 2:14-26. Grace excludes merit and boasting; it does not exclude the obedience by which a believer receives what grace offers.
- The sealing and the earnest of the Spirit (1:13-14) guarantee God’s faithfulness to His promise, not a Christian’s automatic perseverance. The same letter warns its readers to stand and to take up armor precisely because they can fall (Ephesians 6:11-13; compare Hebrews 3:12-14).
- The church in 1:22-23 is one body under one head. Avoid party language and speak of the church as the New Testament does (Romans 16:16).

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Esther 1-10; Job 1-3 · Psalm 65-66 · Luke 7:11-50 · Ephesians 2:11-3:21

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