

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 58 OF 104

The Unseen Hand

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Esther 1-10; Job 1-3
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 65-66
Gospels	Luke 7:11-50
General New Testament	Ephesians 2:11-3:21

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to teach a class how to trust God when He is not explaining Himself. Esther never names Him and never needs to; the reversals speak. Job is told nothing at all and worships anyway. Psalm 66 says out loud what Job could not see, that the fire was God's refining and the destination was abundance. And Luke shows a Savior who walks into a funeral no one invited Him to. Set these side by side and your class will leave with something sturdier than an explanation: a conviction that the hand they cannot see is not idle and is not unkind.

Doctrinally, two matters need plain handling. First, the opening of Job must be used to kill the assumption that suffering measures sin. God calls Job blameless before the first disaster, and the friends who will argue otherwise beginning next week are recorded without approval. Second, Ephesians 2:14-16 states that the law of commandments in ordinances was abolished in the flesh of Christ, which settles both the unity of Jew and Gentile in one body and the question of whether Old Covenant practice binds Christians. Along with that, note that the mystery has been revealed and recorded, so no one is receiving new revelation today.

Formationally, the thread is what we do with people who are in the dark. Job's friends were at their best during the seven days when they said nothing. Jesus spoke to a widow before He solved her problem. Simon the Pharisee got the theology right and the person wrong. Put this question to your class and ask for a name: who in your life is in the seven days of silence right now, and what day this week will you go and sit with them?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Esther 1-10 with Job 1-3. It is the longest reading and the most likely to raise questions. Spend the first half on the reversals in Esther, then turn to Job and settle, plainly and early, that suffering is not a measure of guilt.

Second session: Take up Ephesians 2:11-3:21. Read 2:11-13 aloud and let the class feel the five things they were without. Give real time to 2:14-16 and the abolished law, then close with the prayer in 3:14-21 so the hour ends in worship.

The other two readings: Assign Psalms 65 and 66 and Luke 7:11-50. Tell the class that Psalm 66:10-12 is the sentence Job was never given, and ask them to read it the same day they read Job 3. For Luke, point them to the contrast between Simon and the woman and let it do its own work.

When God Seems Absent

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Esther is a masterpiece of understatement. The writer never mentions God, never mentions prayer directly, never mentions the Law or the temple, and never records a miracle. What he does instead is stack up a series of events that no one could have arranged and that all point one direction. A queen refuses to appear. A Jewish girl wins a beauty contest she never asked to enter. A plot is overheard and written down and then forgotten for five years until the one night the king cannot sleep. Haman builds a gallows seventy five feet tall and hangs on it himself.

Job opens the opposite way. The curtain is pulled back and the reader is shown what no character in the book ever learns: a heavenly court, an accuser who claims Job serves God only for the benefits, and a God who permits testing within strict limits. Then the disasters land in one afternoon, four messengers arriving on each other's heels. Job tears his robe, shaves his head, falls down, and worships. When his body is covered with sores and his wife breaks, he still will not charge God foolishly.

Chapter 3 is where many readers get uncomfortable, and they should not. After seven days of silence Job opens his mouth and curses the day he was born. He asks why light is given to a man in misery. This is not apostasy; it is grief speaking with terrible honesty, and Scripture preserves it. Set the two books side by side and the lesson emerges: Esther shows a God who is working when you cannot see Him, and Job shows a man who keeps holding on when he cannot understand Him.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Esther is set in Susa during the reign of Ahasuerus, the Xerxes I of history, between about 486 and 465 B.C., which places the book chronologically between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7.
- These are Jews who did not return to Jerusalem when they could have. The book explains how the scattered remnant survived an attempted genocide, and it accounts for the feast of Purim (9:20–32).
- The writer of Esther deliberately keeps God offstage. The point is providence, not absence: God governs history even when He does not announce Himself.
- Job appears to belong to the patriarchal period. There is no mention of Israel, Moses, the Law, the tabernacle, or the priesthood; Job offers sacrifices himself as head of his household (1:5), and his wealth is measured in livestock.
- Job is wisdom literature. Chapters 1, 2, and 42 are prose narrative; almost everything between is Hebrew poetry, a long argument in speeches and replies.
- The adversary in Job 1 and 2 is a creature under God's authority who can do nothing except what he is permitted. He is never God's equal and never appears again after chapter 2.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *God is never named in the book of Esther, and no miracle occurs. Trace the so called coincidences: Vashti deposed, Esther chosen, Mordecai overhearing the plot, the king's sleepless night, the reading of the chronicles. What does the absence of God's name in this book teach you about the way He usually works?*

Make the class count the coincidences out loud; the effect is cumulative and it is the whole argument of the book. Any one of them could be chance. All of them together, arriving in the precise order required to save a people, cannot be. The writer is doing on purpose what God usually does in our lives: acting so consistently and so quietly that only the person looking backward can see the hand.

Draw the application carefully. Most Christians live in Esther rather than in Exodus. There is no pillar of fire, no voice, no parted sea. There is a job that fell through, a friend who called at the right hour, a delay that turned out to be mercy. God has not stopped working; He has stopped announcing. Ask each person to name one event in their past that looked random at the time and does not look random now.

Question 2. *In Job 1 and 2 the reader is given information Job is never given. He suffers without ever learning why, and he dies in chapter 42 without being told about the conversation in chapter 1. How should that shape the way you read his complaints, and the way you think about your own unexplained losses?*

The prologue is a gift to the reader and a burden withheld from Job. He never knows. That is the structural genius of the book, and it is exactly our position: we are told in Scripture that God is good, sovereign, and purposeful, and we are not told why this particular thing happened to us. Job's complaints, which run for chapters, are therefore the honest speech of a righteous man operating without the information we have.

Say plainly what this rules out. It rules out the assumption that suffering is a reliable measure of sin. Job is called blameless and upright by God Himself in 1:8, and everything that follows happens to him because of his integrity, not in spite of it. Jesus says the same thing about the man born blind (John 9:1-3) and about the tower of Siloam (Luke 13:1-5). A class that learns this now will be far kinder to hurting people for the rest of their lives.

Question 3. *Job's wife says to curse God and die; Job asks whether we shall accept good from God and not adversity. Both responses are human and understandable. What do the first forty eight hours after catastrophe usually reveal about what a person actually believes?*

Do not be too hard on Job's wife. She buried the same ten children, lost the same estate, and now watches her husband scrape himself with a shard of pottery. Her words are wrong, and Job names them as the words of a foolish woman, but her pain is real, and a teacher who mocks her will lose half the room. Job's answer is the great line of the book: shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?

The first days after a catastrophe expose the foundation. Not because a grieving person's words should be held against them, but because what comes out under pressure is what was stored up beforehand. Job could worship on the worst day of his life because he had worshiped on ordinary ones. Ask the class what they are storing now, in a normal week, that they will need later.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every reversal in the book of Esther: the gallows, the decree, the robe, the honor, the feast. Then read Esther 9:1 and write down the exact phrase the writer uses to describe what happened.*

Haman is hanged on the gallows built for Mordecai; Mordecai wears the robe Haman intended for himself; Haman leads the horse instead of riding it; the decree of destruction is answered by a decree of defense; mourning turns to feasting. Esther 9:1 says it was turned to the contrary, or overturned. The whole book is built on that single verb.

2. *Esther 4:13-14 has Mordecai say that if Esther stays silent, relief and deliverance will arise from another place. Compare Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:28. Trace what all three passages assume about God without proving it.*

All three assume that God is working through human decisions without cancelling them. Mordecai is certain deliverance will come from somewhere, and equally certain that Esther's silence would cost her. Joseph tells his brothers they meant it for evil but God meant it for good. Paul says all things work together for good to those who love God. None of the three explains how; all three refuse to give up either God's purpose or human responsibility.

3. *Read Job 1:20-22 and 2:9-10 carefully and write down exactly what Job did, exactly what he said, and exactly what the writer says he did not do. The precision matters.*

He arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshiped. He said the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong, and later, did not sin with his lips. Notice that he does not deny the loss, does not pretend to feel fine, and does not stop worshiping.

4. *In Job 3 he curses the day of his birth and asks why he did not die at birth, yet he never curses God. Compare Jeremiah 20:14–18. Is lament a sin, and where is the line?*

Lament is not sin. Job curses his birthday, not his God, and Scripture records his speech without rebuke at this point. Jeremiah says almost identical words. The line falls where honest sorrow turns into accusation that God is unjust, or into abandoning Him altogether. Job comes close in later chapters and is corrected in chapter 38, but even then God says Job spoke of Him what was right compared with his friends (42:7).

5. *Job 2:13 says the friends sat with him seven days and nights and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw his grief was very great. Someone you know is in that week right now. Go sit with them before Sunday, and do not explain anything.*

Answers will vary. The instruction not to explain is the hard part, and it is the most useful thing in this reading. The friends were at their best during the silence. Follow up the next week and ask what happened, and expect students to report that saying less was harder and better than they expected.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- This reading is the moment to settle a lifelong error: suffering is not a reliable index of sin. Job is righteous, and God says so before the first disaster. The friends will argue otherwise beginning next week, and their speeches are recorded accurately without being approved (Job 42:7).
- Esther contains conduct the book does not commend: a pagan king's harem, Esther concealing her identity, the violence of chapter 9. The writer reports history. Draw the providence of God from it, not a pattern for personal ethics.
- The absence of God's name in Esther is a literary strategy, not evidence that God was absent or that the book is less inspired. Say so plainly, since some in the class will have heard otherwise.
- Satan in Job is a creature who must ask permission and who operates within limits God sets. Do not let the class drift toward treating him as an equal and opposite power.
- Purim was a Jewish national observance, not a binding religious feast for Christians. Explain it historically and move on.

Through Fire and Water

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 65 is a harvest psalm, and it moves in three movements. It opens in Zion with praise and with vows, and immediately raises the problem of sin: iniquities prevail against me, but You will provide atonement. Then it widens to God as the confidence of all the ends of the earth, the one who set the mountains and stills both the roaring of the seas and the tumult of the peoples. Then it narrows again to a plowed field, and the poetry becomes almost extravagant: You visit the earth and water it, You crown the year with Your goodness, the valleys shout for joy and sing.

Psalm 66 is a psalm of thanksgiving that turns from the community to the individual halfway through. The first half calls all the earth to come and see God's works, and it remembers the exodus: He turned the sea into dry land. Then verses 10 through 12 do something rare. They attribute the hard season directly to God. You tested us, You refined us, You brought us into the net, You laid affliction on our backs, You caused men to ride over our heads. And then, in the same sentence, You brought us out to rich fulfillment.

The last third is personal. I will go into Your house with burnt offerings, I will pay my vows, come and hear what He has done for my soul. Verse 18 is the sober note: if I had regarded iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have heard. The psalm ends by blessing God who has not turned away His mercy. Taken together these two psalms give a class the whole range of an honest faith: gratitude for the rain, honesty about the fire, and a mouth willing to say what God has done.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Both psalms are attributed to David in the Hebrew titles and are addressed to the chief musician; Psalm 66 is labeled a song as well as a psalm.
- Psalm 65 is a psalm of praise with a strong harvest and creation emphasis, suited to a festival setting in Israel's worship.
- Psalm 66 is a thanksgiving psalm that moves from national remembrance of the exodus to personal testimony, a common Hebrew pattern.
- The atonement language of 65:3 belongs to the Old Covenant sacrificial system, which pointed forward to the one sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 10:1–14).
- Israel's agricultural year and its worship calendar were bound together, so a harvest psalm is also a theology of providence.
- Vows in verses like 66:13–15 were voluntary promises made in distress and paid publicly afterward. Compare Ecclesiastes 5:4–5 on the seriousness of keeping them.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 66:10–12 says God tested His people, refined them like silver, laid affliction on their backs, and then brought them out to a place of abundance. How do you hold together the claim that God allowed the affliction and the claim that God is good?*

The psalm does not soften it. God tested, God refined, God brought them into the net, God laid the burden on their backs. Scripture is consistently willing to say that hard providences come from God's hand, and consistently unwilling to conclude that God is therefore unkind. The image is a silversmith, who applies heat with purpose and watches constantly, and the paragraph ends not in the fire but in a wide place of abundance.

Connect this directly to Job, which the class is also reading this week. Job never learns the purpose. This psalmist, looking back, can name it. Most of us will live somewhere between the two: in the middle of it we will be Job, and

years later we may be Psalm 66. Ask whether anyone in the room can look back on a fire and name, specifically, what came out of it that could not have come any other way.

Question 2. *Psalm 65:9–13 spends five verses on rain, rivers, furrows, grain, pastures, and hills. Most of us have not thought about the weather as an act of God in years. What would change in your week if you noticed ordinary provision the way this psalm does?*

The psalm treats rain as personal attention. You visit the earth, You water it, You bless its growth. Modern people know the mechanism and have therefore stopped seeing the Giver, as though explaining how a gift arrived meant nobody sent it. Jesus said the Father makes His sun rise and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45), and Paul told a pagan crowd that God had not left Himself without witness, giving rain and fruitful seasons (Acts 14:17).

The practical suggestion is simple and it works: thank God out loud for one specific ordinary thing each day this week. Groceries. A functioning body. Water that arrives when you turn a handle. Gratitude is a discipline before it is a feeling, and a class that practices it for a week will notice their complaining change before their circumstances do.

Question 3. *Psalm 66:18 says that if the psalmist had cherished iniquity in his heart, the Lord would not have heard him. What is the difference between a Christian who still struggles with sin and a Christian who is regarding iniquity in his heart, and why does that difference show up in his prayer life?*

The verse is not saying God refuses to hear imperfect people, or no one would ever be heard. The word regard carries the sense of cherishing, approving, holding on to. It describes a person who has made peace with a sin, who intends to keep it, and who is praying around it rather than about it. Isaiah 59:1–2 says the same thing: God's hand is not short, but iniquities have separated.

The contrast is the Christian who hates his sin, confesses it, fights it, and falls, whom 1 John 1:7–9 promises cleansing. Prayer life is the symptom because a man cannot be both intimate with God and quietly holding something back from Him. Ask the class, gently and without requiring an answer out loud, whether there is something they have stopped bringing to God because they have decided to keep it.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Go through Psalm 65 and list every verb with God as the subject: He hears, chooses, satisfies, answers, establishes, stills, waters, crowns. Which of those have you personally watched Him do?*

The psalm credits God with hearing prayer, choosing and bringing near, satisfying with the goodness of His house, answering by awesome deeds, being the confidence of all the earth, establishing the mountains, stilling the seas and the tumult of the peoples, visiting and watering the earth, enriching it, providing grain, blessing the growth, and crowning the year. Answers on the personal question will vary; press for specifics rather than categories.

2. *Psalm 65:3 says iniquities prevail against us, but as for our transgressions, You will provide atonement. Read Hebrews 10:1–4 and 10:10–14. What could the Old Covenant sacrifices do, and what could they never do?*

The Old Covenant sacrifices could provide a ritual covering, could remind the worshiper of sin year after year, and could point forward. Hebrews says plainly that it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. What they could never do, Christ did once for all, by one offering perfecting forever those who are being sanctified.

3. *Set Psalm 66:10–12 beside 1 Peter 1:6–7 and Romans 5:3–5. Trace what each passage says testing produces. Then write down what your last hard season actually produced in you.*

Psalm 66 says testing refines like silver and ends in abundance. First Peter says the trial of faith, more precious than gold that perishes, results in praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Romans says tribulation produces perseverance, perseverance character, character hope. The personal question will vary, and some students will honestly answer that their last hard season produced bitterness. That answer is worth taking seriously rather than correcting quickly.

4. Psalm 66:16 says, *Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will declare what He has done for my soul. Write out your own four sentence version of that declaration, in plain words, with no religious vocabulary.*

Answers will vary. The requirement to avoid religious vocabulary is deliberate. Most Christians can recite doctrine and cannot say in ordinary words what God has actually done for them, which is precisely why they never speak to their neighbors about Him.

5. *Now use it. Before next Sunday, tell one specific person, by name, what God has done for your soul. Not a lecture and not an argument; just the four sentences you wrote.*

Answers will vary. Ask for a report. The most common discovery is that the conversation was far less awkward than anticipated, and that the person listened longer than expected.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The harvest language of Psalm 65 is about God's ordinary providence over creation. Do not let it slide into a promise of material prosperity for the faithful.
- Psalm 66:18 should not be used to make struggling Christians doubt that God hears them. Distinguish cherished, unrepented sin from the ongoing fight against sin (1 John 1:7-9).
- Saying that God tested and afflicted His people is biblical language, and it should not be softened. At the same time, James 1:13 says God tempts no one to evil. Keep testing and tempting distinct.

He Stopped the Funeral

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Nain sat a few miles from Shunem, where Elisha had raised a boy centuries earlier, and Luke's readers would feel the echo. A widow whose only son has died has lost her husband, her child, her income, and her standing in one stroke. Two crowds meet at the gate: the crowd following life and the crowd carrying death. Luke says the Lord saw her and had compassion. He tells her not to weep, which no one should ever say unless he can do what comes next. Then He touches the open bier, which made a Jew ceremonially unclean, and speaks to the dead.

The John the Baptist paragraph is one of the most pastoral in the Gospels. John is in Herod's prison, and prison does what prison does. He sends two disciples with a question that would be embarrassing coming from anyone else. Jesus does not scold him. He works for an hour in front of the messengers and then sends them back with evidence, quoting Isaiah so that John, who knew his Scriptures, would hear the answer inside the answer. Then He turns to the crowd and gives John the highest praise He ever gave a man.

The dinner at Simon's house is the third scene, and it works by contrast. A woman known in the city as a sinner comes in, stands behind Jesus weeping, wets His feet with tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them, and pours out ointment. Simon says nothing out loud and everything inwardly. Jesus answers the thought with a parable about two debts, then itemizes the courtesies Simon omitted and the woman supplied. The scene ends with two sentences that belong together: your sins are forgiven, and your faith has saved you, go in peace.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke alone records the raising at Nain. It is the second of three occasions in the Gospels where Jesus raises the dead, along with Jairus' daughter and Lazarus.
- A widow without a son in that culture had no legal protector and usually no income. The severity of her situation is the point of the story.
- John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod Antipas for condemning his marriage to Herodias (Luke 3:19–20) and was later executed.
- The kingdom of God is still future in 7:28 ("he who is least in the kingdom"). It was established on Pentecost (Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). John belonged to the era of preparation.
- Meals in that world were often semi public. Guests reclined on low couches with their feet extended away from the table, which is how the woman could stand behind Jesus at His feet.
- Anointing a guest's head, offering water for the feet, and greeting with a kiss were ordinary courtesies. Simon supplied none of them, which is the quiet insult Jesus finally names.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Nobody asked Jesus to raise the widow's son. Walk slowly through 7:13–15 and note what He saw, what He felt, what He said, and what He touched. What does that sequence tell you about a compassion that moves before it is requested?*

Luke gives four movements in three verses. He saw her, which means He was looking at the mourner rather than at the spectacle. He had compassion, a word Luke uses of the good Samaritan and the father of the prodigal. He spoke to her first, before He did anything, which means her grief was addressed before her problem was solved. Then He touched the bier and spoke to a corpse as though it could hear Him, which in His presence it could.

Compassion that waits to be asked is usually compassion that will not be asked. Widows, the newly divorced, the chronically ill, and the family whose child has gone off the rails almost never request help, because asking is

humiliating and because they assume everyone is busy. Ask your class to name a person they have been waiting on to reach out, and then to reverse the direction this week.

Question 2. *John the Baptist, who had announced Jesus and baptized Him, sends from prison to ask whether He is the Coming One. How does Jesus answer the question, and how does He then speak about John to the crowd? What does that model for handling a faithful person's honest doubt?*

Jesus answers with evidence rather than reassurance. Luke notes that in that very hour He cured many, and then He tells the messengers to report what they had seen and heard, in language taken straight from Isaiah 35 and 61. He does not say "tell John to have more faith." He gives him something to think about, and He adds a beatitude for the one not offended in Him, which is the gentlest possible acknowledgment that John was struggling.

Then, the moment the messengers leave, He defends John publicly. Not a reed shaken by the wind. Not a man in soft clothing. More than a prophet. No one greater born of women. He protects the reputation of a doubting man in front of the very crowd that might have written him off. That is the pattern for handling a brother's doubt: take the question seriously, answer it with Scripture and evidence, and never let him be despised for asking.

Question 3. *In 7:44–46 Jesus lists what Simon did not do and what the woman did. Read both lists aloud. Which of the two do our own habits of worship most resemble, and what would it look like this week to be the other one?*

Simon gave no water for the feet, no kiss, no oil for the head. The woman washed His feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, did not stop kissing them, and anointed them with ointment. One man calculated, one woman poured. The difference is not temperament; it is the size of the debt each believed he owed. Simon thought he owed fifty denarii at most, and paid accordingly.

The uncomfortable truth is that most long time church members drift toward Simon. Present, correct, orthodox, and unmoved. Ask what a Simon would have to remember in order to become the woman, and then be specific about worship: singing that engages the mind and heart (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), the Lord's Supper approached deliberately rather than automatically, and giving that actually costs something.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Jesus answers John by pointing to what is happening: the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. Look up Isaiah 35:5–6 and 61:1. What is Jesus claiming about Himself without ever stating it directly?*

Isaiah 35:5–6 promises that in the day of God's coming the eyes of the blind will be opened, the deaf unstopped, the lame leap, and the tongue of the dumb sing. Isaiah 61:1 speaks of preaching good tidings to the poor. By listing exactly those items, Jesus is telling John that the prophesied day has arrived and that He is the one bringing it. He claims to be the Messiah by describing His own work in the prophet's own words.

2. *Luke 7:28 says no one born of women is greater than John, yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. Read Mark 9:1, Acts 2, and Colossians 1:13. When did the kingdom begin, and why does that make John's position what it is?*

The kingdom began on Pentecost, as Mark 9:1 predicted and Acts 2 records, and Colossians 1:13 says Christians have already been conveyed into it. John died before the cross, so he stood at the doorway of the kingdom rather than inside it. He was the greatest of the prophetic era, and the humblest Christian enjoys privileges John never had: the completed gospel, forgiveness in the blood of Christ, and membership in the body.

3. *Trace the parable of the two debtors in 7:41–43 and then read 7:47 twice. Does the woman love because she has been forgiven, or is she forgiven because she loved? Notice what Jesus actually says to her in 7:50.*

The parable settles it. Jesus asks Simon which debtor will love more, and Simon answers correctly: the one forgiven more. So love follows forgiveness, not the reverse. Verse 47 is best read as evidence rather than cause: her many sins are forgiven, which is shown by the fact that she loved much. And Jesus removes all doubt in verse 50 by saying her faith, not her love, has saved her.

4. Compare the raising at Nain with 1 Kings 17:17–24 and 2 Kings 4:32–37. List what Elijah and Elisha each did, and then list what Jesus did. What is different about the manner, and what does that difference say about who He is?

Elijah stretched himself on the child three times and cried out to the Lord; Elisha prayed, lay on the child, and repeated it. Both appealed to God for power they did not possess. Jesus simply said, Young man, I say to you, arise. The manner is the message. The prophets asked; the Lord commanded. Luke calls Him the Lord in verse 13, and the crowd concludes that God has visited His people.

5. Grief in your congregation this week has a name and an address. Do what Jesus did at Nain: go to the person, say something true, and do something concrete. Then write down what it cost you in time.

Answers will vary. Insist on all three elements: go, say something true, do something concrete. The writing down of the cost is not busywork; it keeps the assignment from becoming a sentiment.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The raising at Nain is a sign of who Jesus is, not a promise that God will reverse every loss now. Say this kindly, especially if someone in the class has buried a child.
- Handle John's question without embarrassment. Doubt in a faithful man under pressure is not apostasy, and the way Jesus treats him is the pattern for the class.
- Luke 7:28 raises the kingdom question. Be plain that the kingdom was established on Pentecost and that Christ reigns now. Do not leave room for a future earthly kingdom still awaited.
- Luke 7:47–50 is often used to teach salvation by emotion or by love, and just as often to teach faith only. Neither is right. Jesus, on earth and before the cross, forgave by His own authority (Luke 5:24), and the terms of pardon He gave the church after His resurrection are believing and being baptized (Mark 16:15–16; Acts 2:38).

The Wall Torn Down

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Paul tells the Gentiles to remember, and the list he gives them is brutal: called the uncircumcision, without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. He is not shaming them. He is establishing the size of the gift. Verse 13 is the hinge of the whole letter: but now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Then comes the architecture. There was in the temple a literal barrier beyond which no Gentile could pass on pain of death, and Paul uses it as the picture. Christ is our peace, He made both one, He broke down the middle wall of separation, and He did it by abolishing in His flesh the law of commandments contained in ordinances. The Old Law was not evil; it was the covenant that marked Israel off from the nations, and it had to be fulfilled and removed before one new man could exist. The result is a household, a temple, joined together and growing, with Christ as chief cornerstone.

Chapter 3 is Paul's explanation of his own place in this. The mystery, now revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit, is that Gentiles are fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ through the gospel. Then he says something that should stop a class cold: God's intent is that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God be made known to principalities and powers in heavenly places. The chapter closes on his knees, praying for inner strength and rooted love, and then bursting into a doxology: to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- In the Jerusalem temple a stone barrier separated the court of the Gentiles from the inner courts, with inscriptions warning that any foreigner crossing it was responsible for his own death. Paul had been accused of bringing a Gentile past it (Acts 21:28–29).
- The word mystery in the New Testament does not mean something unknowable; it means something once hidden and now revealed.
- The apostles and prophets of 2:20 and 3:5 are foundational. A foundation is laid once, which is why the New Testament does not anticipate apostles and prophets in later generations.
- Paul writes as a prisoner (3:1, 13) and treats his imprisonment as service on their behalf rather than as misfortune.
- The letter's structure places this whole section under the heading of what God has done, before any command is given. The imperatives begin in chapter 4.
- "Principalities and powers in heavenly places" refers to spiritual beings; Ephesians returns to them in 6:12. The church is the demonstration of God's wisdom before an audience larger than the human one.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Ephesians 2:12 lists five things the Gentiles were without. Find all five and read them aloud, then read verse 13. What did the blood of Christ change about each item on that list?*

The five are: without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. It is a picture of complete exclusion: no Messiah, no citizenship, no covenant, no hope, no God. Then verse 13 reverses every item at once. Those far off are made near, and the currency is the blood of Christ, not ancestry, not law keeping, not merit.

Push the class to feel the word remember. Christians forget what they were, and forgetting makes us proud and makes us stingy with the gospel. Ask each person to name, privately, what their own verse 12 looked like: what they were without Christ, and what they had no hope of. Then ask how a person who genuinely remembers that talks to a neighbor who is still there.

Question 2. *Paul says in 2:14–16 that Christ abolished in His flesh the law of commandments contained in ordinances, in order to make one new man and one body. Why did the Old Law itself have to be taken out of the way before Jew and Gentile could be one, and what does that settle about binding Old Covenant practice on Christians today?*

The Law of Moses was the covenant that constituted Israel as a separate people, with circumcision, diet, calendar, and temple all marking the boundary. As long as it stood, a Gentile could only be included as a second class outsider or by becoming a Jew. Paul says Christ abolished it in His flesh, which is what Colossians 2:14 describes as nailing the handwriting of requirements to the cross and what Hebrews 8:13 calls making the first covenant obsolete. The wall came down because the law that constituted it was fulfilled and removed.

The application is direct and it matters. Christians are not under the Law of Moses. We do not keep the Sabbath, the feasts, the dietary rules, or the tithe as legal requirements, and we do not reach back into the Old Covenant to authorize practices in worship that the New Testament does not authorize. The Old Testament remains inspired and profitable and was written for our learning (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16–17), but it is not our covenant. Make that distinction carefully; half the confusion in most congregations lives right there.

Question 3. *Ephesians 3:10 says the manifold wisdom of God is now made known through the church to principalities and powers. The church is the exhibit. If that is true, how should it change what we expect from Sunday morning and what we expect from each other on Tuesday?*

The claim is staggering: God is displaying His wisdom to angelic beings by means of a congregation. Not by means of the created order, not by means of prophecy, but by means of a body made of people who would never have chosen each other, living together in peace because of the cross. Jew and Gentile in one body was the proof. In our setting it is the wealthy and the struggling, the educated and the unschooled, the old family and the newcomer, sitting at the same table because of the same blood.

That should raise our expectations of Sunday and of Tuesday alike. On Sunday it means the assembly is not a performance we evaluate but a body we belong to. On Tuesday it means the real demonstration happens in a hospital room, a phone call, a meal delivered, a grudge dropped. Ask the class what an outsider would learn about God's wisdom by watching this congregation for a month, and be prepared for an honest answer.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the three pictures of the church in 2:19–22: citizens, family, and building. Trace the cornerstone idea through Isaiah 28:16 and 1 Peter 2:4–8. What does a cornerstone determine about everything built after it?*

They are fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God, and a building joined together into a holy temple in which God dwells by the Spirit. Isaiah 28:16 promises a precious cornerstone in Zion, and 1 Peter 2:4–8 applies it to Christ, chosen and precious to believers and a stone of stumbling to the disobedient. The cornerstone sets the line and the angle for every stone laid afterward; nothing in the building is square except by reference to it.

2. *Ephesians 3:3–5 says the mystery was made known to Paul by revelation and has now been revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. Read 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 and Jude 3 alongside it. Is God still giving new revelation today, and how do you know?*

God is not giving new revelation today. The mystery was revealed to the apostles and prophets, and that revelation is now written. First Corinthians 13:8–10 says prophecy, tongues, and knowledge would cease when that which is perfect, the complete revelation, had come. Jude 3 speaks of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Ephesians 2:20 puts apostles and prophets in the foundation, and a foundation is not relaid in every generation. Teach this plainly and without scorn toward people who have been taught otherwise.

3. *Ephesians 3:11 speaks of the eternal purpose which God accomplished in Christ Jesus. Compare 1:9–10. In your own words, what was God planning all along, and at what point did it stop being a secret?*

God planned from eternity to gather together in one all things in Christ, to have a people made of Jew and Gentile alike in one body, reconciled to Him through the cross. It stopped being a secret when Christ came and the gospel was preached, and specifically when God revealed it to the apostles and sent them to the nations (Acts 10; Acts 11:18; Ephesians 3:5–6).

4. *Write out every request in Paul's prayer in 3:14–19. There are at least five. Which one would you most want someone to pray over you this month, and why that one?*

He asks that they be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ dwell in their hearts through faith, that they be rooted and grounded in love, that they be able to comprehend with all the saints the dimensions of Christ's love, that they know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, and that they be filled with all the fullness of God. Answers on the personal question will vary; listen for whether students ask for inner strength or merely for changed circumstances.

5. *Paul says Christ Himself is our peace and that He tore down a wall. Name the divide you have quietly allowed to stand in your own heart toward a brother or sister in Christ, whether it is money, politics, background, or an old offense. Take one concrete step toward that person this week.*

Answers will vary. The step must be concrete: a call, a visit, a meal, a specific apology. A general resolution to feel differently about the person is not a step and should not be accepted as one.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Ephesians 2:14–16 teaches plainly that the Old Law was abolished in Christ. Handle this with care and thoroughness; it is one of the clearest passages in the New Testament on the subject and it will settle many later questions.
- There is one body (2:16; 4:4), the church built on the one foundation with Christ as cornerstone. Speak of it as the New Testament does, without party labels (Romans 16:16).
- The apostles and prophets are foundational, and the mystery has been revealed and recorded. Do not leave room for modern apostles, modern prophets, or continuing revelation (Jude 3; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10).
- The eternal purpose of 3:11 is God's plan for a people in Christ, not the unconditional selection of individuals. Keep it consistent with what you taught from chapter 1.
- Being brought near by the blood (2:13) is received, according to the same New Testament, when a believer is baptized into the one body (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26–27). Do not let the passage be read as though nearness came apart from obedient faith.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Job 4–11 · Psalm 67–68 · Luke 8:1–39 · Ephesians 4

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com