

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 66 OF 104

One More Year

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Isaiah 11-17
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 78
Gospels	Luke 13
General New Testament	1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:16

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

The aim this week is urgency without panic. God is patient, and the readings all show it: a gardener buys a barren tree another year, a psalm records God forgiving Israel again and again because He remembered they were flesh, Isaiah grieves over Moab instead of gloating, and Paul thanks God for a church only weeks old. But every one of those readings also has an ending in it. The tree can still be cut down, the wilderness still filled with graves, the door still gets shut, and the king who said "I will ascend" still goes to the pit. Your students should leave able to say what they have been postponing.

Doctrinally, the sharpest point is Isaiah 14. The passage is introduced in verse 4 as a proverb against the king of Babylon and describes a man through verse 22. Teach it that way, kindly, and show the class the verses that do speak of the devil. Two other matters need care: Isaiah 11:6-9 is figurative language for the peace of Christ's reign in His church, not a coming earthly age; and Luke 13:34, "you were not willing," together with Psalm 78 and Hebrews 3:12-19, closes the door on both irresistible grace and the notion that a person once saved cannot fall away.

Formationally, the thread is what a person does with extra time. Israel had forty years of visible miracles and forgot them at every campsite. Jerusalem had prophets, then the Son Himself, and would not be gathered. The Thessalonians had a few weeks of preaching and turned their whole city upside down with it. Put this to your class: if this year were the extra year the gardener asked for, what would have to be different by next spring, and what one thing will you start before Sunday?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Luke 13. It carries the week's thread and it will hold a class for an hour without help. Spend the first fifteen minutes on 13:1-5, because your students have almost certainly drawn the conclusion Jesus forbids, then give the rest to the fig tree and the narrow door.

Second session: Take up Isaiah 11-17. Begin in chapter 11 with the shoot from the stump so the class sees hope before judgment, then go straight to 14:4 and read the taunt song as the text presents it. Handle the Lucifer question calmly and early rather than letting it surface at the end.

The other two readings: Psalm 78 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:16 are excellent private reading. Ask the class to read Psalm 78 with a pencil and mark every time the word "forgot" or "remembered" appears, and to read 1 Thessalonians 1 asking whether anyone could write those sentences about them. Both will feed the discussion in either session.

A Shoot from a Dead Stump

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 11 opens on a stump. The house of David, that magnificent tree, has been cut to a trunk, and out of it comes a shoot, a green thing nobody expected. The Spirit of the Lord rests on Him: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He does not judge by what His eyes see; He judges the poor with righteousness. Then the famous picture: wolf with lamb, leopard with young goat, a child playing over a cobra's hole, and the earth full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Verse 10 names Him: the Root of Jesse, standing as a banner, and the Gentiles will seek Him. Chapter 12 is the congregation's response, two short stanzas of a song rescued people sing: O Lord, I will praise You; though You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. Then, remarkably, chapters 15 and 16 will stop to weep over Moab. God's judgment on the nations is never delivered with satisfaction.

Chapters 13 through 17 begin the burdens against the nations, and they are not detours. They show that the God of Judah governs Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, and Damascus alike. The centerpiece is the taunt song of chapter 14, a funeral parody sung over the king of Babylon: the trees of Lebanon rejoice that nobody is cutting them anymore, and the dead kings in Sheol stand up to greet the new arrival with a sneer. How you are fallen, O day star, son of the dawn. You said in your heart, I will ascend, I will be like the Most High. And here you are, with maggots for a bed.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Isaiah 11 is one of the clearest Messianic passages in the Old Testament, and the New Testament quotes it directly of Christ (Romans 15:12; compare Matthew 12:18–21).
- The “burdens” of chapters 13 through 23 are oracles against foreign nations, a standard prophetic form (compare Jeremiah 46–51; Amos 1–2; Ezekiel 25–32).
- Isaiah 14:4 explicitly labels the passage “this proverb against the king of Babylon.” The taunt song was a recognized literary form, a mock funeral lament sung over a fallen tyrant.
- Babylon was not yet the dominant power when Isaiah wrote; Assyria was. The prophecy names a conqueror roughly a century and a half before he arrives, and the Medes are named in 13:17.
- Prophetic “day of the Lord” language about darkened suns and shaken heavens describes God intervening in history to bring down a kingdom. It is used of Babylon here, Egypt in Ezekiel 32, and Edom in Isaiah 34.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Isaiah 11:1 shows a shoot growing out of a cut-down stump. Why does God give that picture to people who are about to be felled themselves, and what does hope look like when the tree is already down?*

God gives it to them precisely because they are about to be felled. Isaiah has just described a forest cut down with iron (10:33–34), and now the first word of chapter 11 is a shoot out of a stump. The imagery is deliberate: what looks like the end of the house of David is not the end of God's promise. Seven hundred years later, a carpenter's family in a village nobody respected turns out to be the root system nobody could kill.

Bring it to the class where they actually live. Hope in Scripture is not optimism about the trend line; it is confidence about the Person. Ask who in the room is looking at a stump: a marriage, a wayward child, a congregation that has shrunk, a body that is failing, a reputation that is gone. Then ask what it would mean to believe that God specializes in green shoots, and what they should keep doing in the meantime while nothing is visible above the ground.

Question 2. *Isaiah 11:6–9 pictures the wolf with the lamb and a child playing over a viper’s hole. How is that picture being fulfilled, and what changes if we say it describes the reign of Christ right now rather than a future age?*

Teach this as the figurative picture it is, and say so plainly. Prophecy regularly paints the peace of the Messiah’s reign with pictures from creation. The point of verse 9 interprets the whole scene: they shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord. It is a picture of hostility ended among those who come under His reign. The New Testament shows it happening: Jews and Gentiles, slaves and masters, Pharisees and tax collectors sitting at one table, natural enemies made one body (Ephesians 2:13–16).

Then say what the alternative costs. If this describes a future earthly age, then the kingdom is still coming, Christ is not yet reigning, and everything the New Testament says about the church being the fulfillment has to be reworked. If it describes His present reign, then every reconciled relationship in your congregation is Isaiah 11 happening. Ask the class where they have seen a wolf and a lamb in the same pew, and thank God for it out loud.

Question 3. *Isaiah 14:4 introduces the famous passage in 14:12–15 as a proverb against the king of Babylon. Read it as the taunt song it is, and talk about what happens to anyone whose life sentence begins with “I will ascend.”*

Start with verse 4, because it settles the question: “you will take up this proverb against the king of Babylon.” Everything from there to verse 22 addresses a man. He made the earth tremble and shook kingdoms (v. 16), he did not open the house of his prisoners (v. 17), other kings lie in their own tombs while he is cast out like an abhorred branch (vv. 18–19), and his sons are to be slaughtered (v. 21). That is not a description of an angelic being; that is the death of a tyrant, sung about by people he ground into the dust.

Now take the spiritual point, which is enormous and does not require misreading the text. The song is built around five sentences beginning “I will”: I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars, I will sit on the mount of the congregation, I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High. That is the anatomy of pride in any life. Ask the class to say out loud the sentences their own hearts start with “I will,” and then read verse 15: yet you shall be brought down. God resists the proud (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List what Isaiah 11:2–5 says about the Spirit resting on the Branch and about how He judges. Compare Matthew 3:16–17 and John 3:34.*

The Spirit of the Lord rests on Him: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He delights in the fear of the Lord, does not judge by sight or by hearsay, judges the poor with righteousness, decides with equity for the meek, strikes the earth with the rod of His mouth, and wears righteousness and faithfulness as a belt. Matthew 3:16–17 records the Spirit descending on Jesus at His baptism, and John 3:34 says God does not give Him the Spirit by measure. Isaiah described the equipment; the Gospels record the day it was publicly conferred.

2. *Isaiah 11:10 says the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples and that the Gentiles will seek Him. Read Romans 15:8–12 and write down how Paul uses that verse and what he concludes from it.*

Romans 15:8–12 gathers four Old Testament quotations to prove that the Gentiles were always in God’s plan, and Isaiah 11:10 is the climax: “There shall be a root of Jesse; and He who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope.” Paul’s conclusion is that Christ became a servant to the circumcision to confirm the promises made to the fathers and so that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy. The banner has already been raised, and the nations have already begun coming.

3. *Trace who is being addressed in Isaiah 14 from verse 4 through verse 22. Write down every detail the passage gives about him, including verses 16 through 20, and say whom the text is describing.*

The subject throughout is the king of Babylon, named as such in verse 4. He is the oppressor whose golden city has ceased (v. 4), who struck peoples in wrath (v. 6), whose fall makes the cedars glad (v. 8), who is greeted in Sheol by other dead kings (vv. 9–11), whose pomp and music went down to the grave (v. 11), who said “I will” five times (vv. 13–14), whom onlookers stare at saying “is this the man?” (v. 16), who is cast out of his own burial (vv. 19–20), and

whose sons must be prepared for slaughter (v. 21). Scripture teaches the fall of Satan elsewhere (Luke 10:18; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Revelation 12:9); it is not the subject here.

4. *Isaiah 13:9–13 speaks of the sun darkened, the stars withholding light, and the heavens shaken. Compare Isaiah 34:4 and Ezekiel 32:7–8 and describe how the prophets use this kind of language.*

The prophets use this cosmic language for God's judgments inside history. Isaiah 13 applies it to the fall of Babylon to the Medes, Isaiah 34 to the destruction of Edom, and Ezekiel 32 to the fall of Egypt, where God says He will cover the heavens and make the stars dark over Pharaoh. The language says that when God topples a kingdom it feels to those inside it like the sky coming apart. Reading such passages as newspaper predictions of the end of the world misses what the prophets are doing.

5. *Isaiah 12 is a short song for people God has rescued. Write four lines of your own in that style, naming what God has actually done for you, and say them out loud this week.*

Answers will vary. Watch for two things: that the lines name something God actually did rather than a general sentiment, and that the student really says them out loud. Isaiah 12 is short enough to memorize, and a congregation that learns to speak its own salvation out loud loses much of its fear of talking about Christ to somebody else.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Isaiah 14:12–15 is a taunt song against a human king, identified in 14:4 and described in human terms through verse 22. Do not teach it as a biography of Satan's fall. Acknowledge kindly that many have been taught otherwise, show them verse 4 and verses 16 through 20, and point to the passages that do address the devil (Luke 10:18; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Revelation 12:9).
- Isaiah 11:6–9 is figurative language for the peace of Christ's reign, fulfilled in the church where former enemies are made one (Ephesians 2:13–16). Do not allow it to become a literal future earthly millennium.
- The cosmic imagery of Isaiah 13 belongs to the fall of Babylon in history. Avoid newspaper eschatology and date-setting; compare Isaiah 34:4 and Ezekiel 32:7–8 to show the pattern.
- Isaiah 11:11–16 speaks of God recovering a remnant a second time. It was fulfilled in the return from captivity and finally in the gospel gathering of Jew and Gentile into Christ, not in modern political events.

Tell the Next Generation

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 78 is the longest history lesson in the Psalter and one of the most pointed. It begins like a teacher gathering children: give ear, O my people, I will open my mouth in a parable, I will utter dark sayings of old, which our fathers have told us. Then the purpose statement in verses 5 through 8: God established a testimony and a law and commanded our fathers to make them known to their children, that the generation to come might know them, that they may set their hope in God and not forget His works, and not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation.

What follows is the story told with unflinching honesty. The sons of Ephraim, armed and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle. God divided the sea, led them with a cloud by day and fire by night, split rocks and gave water like rivers, and they sinned still more. They tested God by demanding food, and He rained down manna and sent meat like the sand of the sea, and while the food was still in their mouths the wrath of God came up against them. They flattered Him with their mouths and lied to Him with their tongues, for their heart was not steadfast.

And then the verse that saves the psalm from despair: but He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them; yes, many a time He turned His anger away, for He remembered that they were but flesh, a breath that passes and does not come again. The psalm ends in an unexpected place. God rejects the tent of Joseph and the tribe of Ephraim, chooses Judah and Mount Zion, and chooses David His servant, taking him from the sheepfolds to shepherd Jacob His people. The history of failure ends with a shepherd, which is the only way that history could end well.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 78 is a maskil of Asaph, a teaching psalm. Its closest relatives are Psalm 105, Psalm 106, and Psalm 136, all of which retell Israel's history for instruction.
- The events rehearsed run from the plagues in Egypt through the wilderness, the conquest, the loss of the ark at Shiloh (1 Samuel 4), and the rise of David.
- The psalm was written after David's accession and probably reflects the tension between the northern tribes, led by Ephraim, and Judah.
- Verse 2 is applied to the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13:35, which shows the New Testament reading of the psalm's teaching purpose.
- Paul says the same events were written for our admonition (1 Corinthians 10:6–11), and Hebrews 3 and 4 use the wilderness generation as the standing warning to Christians.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The psalm exists for a stated reason: so that the generation to come would know, and would not be like their fathers (78:5–8). What is a congregation actually supposed to do with that, and how are we doing at it right now?*

The command is not that the children should be enrolled in a program; it is that fathers should tell. God established a testimony and commanded our fathers to make it known to their children, that they should arise and declare them to their children. Three generations appear in one verse. Notice also that the story being handed down includes the failures. This is not a sanitized family history; it is a candid account of people who saw God act and then behaved badly, told so the next batch will not repeat it.

Be concrete about the congregation, and be fair. Classes and camps and youth programs are good, and they are not the command. The command lands on parents and grandparents at the kitchen table and in the truck. Ask the adults in the room when they last told a child something God did in their own life, not a Bible story, their own story. And ask whether they have ever told a young person about a sin that cost them something, because verse 8 assumes the warnings get passed down too.

Question 2. *The refrain of this psalm is that they forgot His works. How does a person who has personally watched God act manage to forget it, and what safeguards have you built into your own life?*

The psalm says how it happens, and it is not mysterious. They did not keep His covenant (v. 10), they forgot His works and the wonders He had shown them (v. 11), their heart was not steadfast (v. 37), and they turned back and tested God (v. 41). Forgetting in Scripture is not amnesia; it is a failure to keep something in front of you until it governs your behavior. A man can remember the facts perfectly and forget them completely.

So ask about safeguards, and expect the class to have few. The biblical ones are all practical: telling the story out loud, the Supper every first day of the week, written records, singing, regular reading, and the company of people who will remind you. The Israelites had memorial stones; we have a table. Ask what each person will actually do to keep God's past acts in front of them, and be suspicious of any answer that requires no particular time on a particular day.

Question 3. *Psalm 78:38–39 says God, full of compassion, forgave them again and again and remembered that they were only flesh. Talk about how this psalm holds together that patience and the fact that a whole generation still died in the wilderness.*

Both are in the psalm and neither cancels the other. Verse 38 is one of the great sentences about God in the Old Testament: full of compassion, He forgave, He did not destroy, many a time He turned His anger away, and He remembered that they were but flesh. That is not a God looking for a reason to condemn. But verses 31 through 34 are equally plain: He slew the stoutest of them, and only then did they seek Him and return and inquire early after God. Patience is real, and it is not infinite in any particular case.

The New Testament draws the conclusion for us. Hebrews 3:12–19 says that generation could not enter because of unbelief, and applies it directly to Christians: take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief. That passage, honestly taught, closes the door on the idea that a saved person cannot fall. Ask the class where they have been treating God's patience as permission. That is precisely the mistake Romans 2:4 names: the goodness of God leads you to repentance.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the cycle running through the psalm: what God did, what the people did in response, and what God did next. Identify at least four complete rounds of it.*

One pattern: God brings them out of Egypt and splits the sea (vv. 12–13); they sin yet more and test Him by demanding food (vv. 17–20); He gives manna and quail (vv. 23–29); His wrath rises while the food is in their mouths (vv. 30–31). Another: He kills the strongest (v. 31); they seek Him and return (v. 34); they flatter Him with their mouths (vv. 36–37); He forgives, being full of compassion (v. 38). More rounds run through verses 40 through 55 and 56 through 64. The repetition is the sermon.

2. *List the miracles named in 78:12–16 and 78:23–29. Mark the ones that should have been impossible for an eyewitness to forget.*

He divided the sea and made the waters stand up like a heap, led them with a cloud by day and a light of fire by night, split rocks in the wilderness and gave water in abundance, brought streams out of a rock and made waters run down like rivers, commanded the clouds and opened the doors of heaven, rained down manna and gave the bread of heaven, and rained meat on them like dust and feathered fowl like the sand of the sea. Every one of these was witnessed firsthand by the people who forgot it, which is the whole point.

3. *Psalm 78:2 is quoted in Matthew 13:34–35. Read both passages and explain what Matthew is claiming by applying this line to the teaching of Jesus.*

Matthew quotes it to say that Jesus' practice of teaching in parables fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world." The psalmist was uncovering the hidden meaning of Israel's history; Jesus uncovers the hidden meaning of the kingdom. Matthew is claiming that the Teacher of Psalm 78 has arrived in person.

4. *Compare 78:9–11 about the sons of Ephraim with 78:67–72 about Judah and David. Why does a psalm about the wilderness end with a shepherd boy?*

Ephraim, the leading northern tribe, is remembered for turning back in the day of battle though they were armed; the psalm ties it to not keeping God's covenant and refusing to walk in His law. At the end God rejects the tent of Joseph and the tribe of Ephraim, chooses Judah, Mount Zion, and David. The psalm ends with a shepherd because Israel's repeated failure is a failure of leadership and of heart, and God's answer is to give His people a shepherd after His own heart, which finally points to the Shepherd of John 10:11 and Hebrews 13:20.

5. *Name the specific person in the next generation you are responsible for telling, and this week tell them one story about something God has actually done.*

Answers will vary, and the assignment is deliberately small: one person, one story, this week. Listen next time for whether it happened. Many adults have never once told a child what God did for them, and a single telling often starts a habit.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Israel's history is written for our instruction and admonition (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6–11). Draw timeless lessons about God's patience, human forgetfulness, and accountability; do not read New Testament specifics back into the wilderness.
- God's choice of Judah over Ephraim is covenant purpose working toward Christ, not unconditional individual election. Guard against Calvinistic readings.
- The psalm is honest about sin without teaching inherited guilt. Each generation is condemned for its own rebellion (Ezekiel 18:20), which is exactly why the fathers are told to warn the children.
- Handle verses 31 through 34 soberly. God's severity and His compassion are both in this psalm, and a class that hears only one of them has not heard the psalm.

Unless You Repent

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke 13 opens with people doing what people still do: using a horrifying news story to sort the world into the deserving and the undeserving. Pilate had killed Galileans in the temple courts; did that prove they were wicked? Jesus says no, and then does something the crowd did not expect. He takes the question away from the dead and hands it to the living: unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. He says it twice, adding a story about eighteen people killed when a tower collapsed. The lesson of a disaster is never that others had it coming; it is that your own time is shorter than you think.

Then the fig tree. Three years of nothing, an owner ready to cut it down, and a gardener who asks for one more year and volunteers to dig around it and fertilize it. Notice that the parable does not end. We are not told what happened next spring, because the hearer is standing inside the story. Mercy is real, mercy is being actively argued for, and mercy has a calendar.

The rest of the chapter fills it out. A woman bent double for eighteen years is set free on a sabbath, and the synagogue ruler is indignant about the day. The kingdom starts like a mustard seed and works like leaven, small and unstoppable. A narrow door stands open now and will be shut, and people who ate and drank with Him will find that acquaintance is not obedience. And the chapter ends with the Lord looking at Jerusalem, saying He wanted to gather her children as a hen gathers her brood, and you were not willing. That last phrase is the whole tragedy of the Bible in four words.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke alone records both the massacre of the Galileans and the collapse of the tower in Siloam. Neither is known from other sources, which fits Luke's habit of preserving local detail.
- The assumption that suffering is proportional to personal sin was widespread, and Jesus rejects it here as He does in John 9:1–3 and as the book of Job rejects it at length.
- The fig tree was a common image for Israel (Hosea 9:10; Micah 7:1), and three years of fruitlessness roughly matches the span of Jesus' public ministry.
- The synagogue ruler's objection rested on rabbinic tradition about what constituted work on the sabbath, not on any word of the Law itself.
- "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" in 13:34–35 anticipates both the rejection of Christ and the destruction of the city in A.D. 70 (compare Luke 19:41–44; 21:20–24).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus is handed a piece of terrible news and turns it into a call to repent (13:1–5). Why does He refuse to answer the question they were really asking, and what assumption is He dismantling?*

The question behind the report was, what did those men do to deserve that? It is a comfortable question, because as long as suffering is a verdict, a healthy person can feel safe. Jesus dismantles it in one sentence: they were not worse sinners, and neither were the eighteen crushed by the tower. Job's friends made this mistake, the disciples made it in John 9, and every generation makes it when disaster strikes somewhere else.

Then feel the force of what He puts in its place. He does not say, therefore do not worry. He says, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. The right response to somebody else's sudden death is not analysis; it is an inventory of your own life, because the one thing the story proves is that people die without warning. Ask the class what they did the last time a tragedy filled the news, and whether repentance was anywhere in it.

Question 2. *The fig tree gets one more year because the gardener asks for it (13:6–9). Talk about what that parable says about the patience of God, and about the fact that the extension had a number attached to it.*

Hold both halves of the parable. The owner is not unreasonable; three years is a fair trial, and a fruitless tree is using up ground. The gardener does not deny the diagnosis. He asks for time and commits himself to work: let me dig around it and fertilize it. That is God's patience with a real advocate in it, and it is why anyone in your class is still breathing rather than settled.

Then note the number. One more year, and if not, then cut it down. Scripture never presents God's patience as indefinite. It is deliberately long (2 Peter 3:9), it is meant to lead to repentance (Romans 2:4), and it is not unlimited (Genesis 6:3; Acts 17:30–31). Ask the class what they would do differently if they knew this was the extra year. Then point out gently that none of us knows that it is not.

Question 3. *Someone asks whether only a few will be saved, and Jesus answers, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate" (13:23–24). Discuss the difference between curiosity about other people's salvation and the urgency He places on the man asking.*

The man asks a theoretical question about statistics: are there few who are saved? Jesus does not give him a number. He gives him a command with his own name on it: strive to enter, because many will seek to enter and will not be able. The word for strive is the one behind our word agonize; it is the effort of an athlete in a contest. Notice the redirection, which is the same move He made in verses 1 through 5.

Press the difference with your class, because religious people love the theoretical version. Speculating about who will be saved, whether the sincere pagan has a chance, what happens to the person who never heard, all of that can run an hour and cost nothing. Jesus keeps turning the question back on the asker. Ask each person what striving would look like in the specific area where their own obedience is thin, and be ready for a long pause.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Jesus does and says in the synagogue in 13:10–17. State the ruler's objection precisely, and then state Jesus' answer precisely.*

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, sees a woman bent over for eighteen years and unable to straighten, calls her to Him, says she is loosed from her infirmity, lays hands on her, and she is immediately made straight and glorifies God. The ruler is indignant and tells the crowd there are six days for work, so come and be healed then, not on the sabbath. Jesus answers that every one of them unties an ox or a donkey and leads it to water on the sabbath, so should not this daughter of Abraham, bound by Satan eighteen years, be loosed on the sabbath? His opponents were ashamed and the crowd rejoiced.

2. *Compare the mustard seed and the leaven (13:18–21) with Daniel 2:44 and Acts 2:41–47. Write down what the two parables are claiming about how the kingdom grows.*

Both parables say the kingdom begins almost invisibly and ends up enormous. A mustard seed becomes a tree that birds nest in; a little leaven works quietly through three measures of meal until the whole is leavened. Daniel 2:44 says God would set up a kingdom in the days of those kings that would never be destroyed, and a stone cut without hands that filled the whole earth. Acts 2 shows it starting with a hundred and twenty and adding three thousand in a day. The kingdom is not built by spectacle; it spreads by the word, person to person.

3. *Read 13:24–30 carefully. Write down what the people outside the shut door say and what the master says back to them. What kind of relationship with Him were they claiming?*

They say, Lord, Lord, open to us; and then, we ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets. The master says twice, I do not know you, where you are from; depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity. What they claim is acquaintance: proximity, shared meals, attendance at His teaching. What they cannot claim is obedience. Compare Matthew 7:21–23. It is possible to be near Christ all your life and be unknown to Him, and the door that is open now is not open forever.

4. Trace Jesus' words about Jerusalem in 13:31–35. Note what He says He wanted to do, what He says prevented it, and who is held responsible.

He says He wanted to gather Jerusalem's children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. What prevented it is stated in four words: and you were not willing. The responsibility is laid squarely on the people who refused, not on any decree of God. The city that killed the prophets and stoned those sent to her has a house left desolate. This verse alone answers any teaching that says human beings cannot resist God's will for their salvation.

5. If the gardener were pleading for one more year over your life, what would need to be growing by next spring? Name one thing you will change this week so that it is.

Answers will vary. The question is designed to make the general resolve specific, so push for fruit that someone else could notice: a restored relationship, a habit ended, a ministry begun, a confession made. And note that in the parable the gardener supplies the digging and the fertilizer; nobody grows fruit alone.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Luke 13:1–5 flatly denies that suffering is proportional to personal sin. Say it plainly; someone in your class is carrying guilt for a tragedy they did not cause (compare Job; John 9:1–3).
- Repentance here is not regret or an emotional moment. It is a change of mind that produces changed conduct (2 Corinthians 7:10; Acts 26:20; Matthew 21:28–29).
- The narrow door is not a Calvinistic limitation on who may be saved. The invitation stands open now, and the urgency is that it will not always; note that people come from east and west to sit down in the kingdom (13:29). Luke 13:34, “you were not willing,” affirms that a person can resist God's gracious invitation. Use both gently against irresistible grace.
- The sabbath healing shows Christ's authority over the day and exposes man-made tradition. It does not make the sabbath binding on Christians (Colossians 2:16–17).

Turned from Idols

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Paul had been in Thessalonica a matter of weeks. Acts 17 records three sabbaths of reasoning in the synagogue, a riot, and a night escape to Berea. He left behind a congregation of new Christians in a hostile city and worried about them constantly. This letter, probably the earliest of his that we have, is what relief sounds like. He thanks God without ceasing, remembering their work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1 is a portrait of a healthy young church. The gospel came in power and much assurance; they received the word in much affliction with joy of the Holy Spirit; they became imitators of Paul and of the Lord, and examples to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia; and the word rang out from them so that Paul found his preaching preceded by their reputation. Then verses 9 and 10 compress the whole thing: you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Chapter 2 defends his ministry against opponents calling him another traveling talker who took their money and ran. His answer catalogs what he did not do: not in deceit, not as pleasing men but God who tests the heart, not with flattering words, not with a cloak for covetousness, not seeking glory from men. What he did is more striking: he was gentle as a nursing mother with her own children, willing to impart not only the gospel but his own life; he worked night and day rather than burden anyone; and he charged each one as a father does his children. It is a job description for every teacher and elder.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia, a free city on the Egnatian Way with a busy port and a Jewish synagogue. Paul came there from Philippi, where he had been beaten and jailed (2:2).
- Acts 17:1–10 records the founding of the church: three sabbaths of reasoning, many converts including devout Greeks and leading women, and a mob that dragged Jason before the rulers.
- The letter was written from Corinth around A.D. 51, after Timothy returned with a report (3:6), making it one of the earliest New Testament documents.
- Turning “from idols” shows the church included many Gentile converts, not only synagogue attenders.
- Paul worked with his hands to support himself here, as he did in Corinth (2:9; Acts 18:3; 1 Corinthians 9:12–18), so that no one could say he preached for money.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul pairs faith with work, love with labor, and hope with patience (1:3). Talk about what each of those pairings means in practice, and which of the three is thinnest in you right now.*

Take them one at a time. A work of faith means faith that did something; the Thessalonians did not merely believe the gospel, they smashed their idols, which in that city carried a social and economic cost. A labor of love uses a word for exhausting toil; love that costs nothing is a sentiment, and this is the kind that leaves you tired. Patience of hope is endurance produced by expecting Christ; hope in Scripture is not a wish but a confident expectation that changes what you can put up with.

Then ask which is thinnest, and give the class a way to tell. Thin faith shows up as belief that never issues in a decision. Thin love shows up as warm feelings toward people we never actually serve. Thin hope shows up as a short fuse, because a person who is not expecting anything cannot endure much. Each of those has a specific remedy, and all three of them require doing something this week rather than resolving something.

Question 2. *1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 describes a conversion in one sentence: they turned, to serve, to wait. Walk through those three parts and ask what is missing from a Christian life when any one of them drops out.*

Turned: a decisive break with what they had been serving. In their case that meant idols, which were woven into family life, trade guilds, and civic festivals. To serve: the Christian life is active employment under a living God, not a status. To wait: they lived leaning forward, expecting the Son from heaven. All three appear in one sentence because all three belong to one conversion.

Now ask what happens when one drops out. Turning without serving produces a person who quit some sins and does nothing. Serving without turning produces busy religion with the old idols still in the house, and covetousness is the one Paul names as idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Turning and serving without waiting produces a Christian who works hard and has no horizon, who is easily discouraged because this world is all he is measuring by. Ask each person which of the three is weakest and what that has cost them.

Question 3. *In 2:1–12 Paul describes exactly how he conducted himself among them. Which single detail of that description would most change this congregation if we actually took it seriously?*

Let the class choose, but be ready to name the candidates. He suffered at Philippi and came anyway. He did not flatter. He did not use ministry as a cover for greed. He refused to seek glory from men. He was gentle as a nursing mother. He gave not only the gospel but his own life, which means the people knew him, not just his lessons. He worked night and day rather than be a burden. He dealt with them one at a time, exhorting, comforting, and charging each one as a father does his own children.

The detail that usually convicts a congregation is the last one: every one of you. Paul did not treat the church as an audience. He handled individuals by name, which is slow, personal, and impossible to do from a distance. Ask your class who in this congregation is currently being exhorted, comforted, and charged by someone who knows their name and their situation, and who is falling through the gap. Then ask each person to take one of those names for the next month.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Paul says the Thessalonians did and became in chapter 1. Then read Acts 17:1–10 and estimate how long they had been Christians when he wrote it.*

They had a work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope; they received the word in much affliction with joy of the Holy Spirit; they became imitators of Paul and of the Lord; they became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia; the word of the Lord sounded out from them everywhere; they turned to God from idols; they serve the living and true God; and they wait for His Son from heaven. Acts 17 indicates Paul was there only a few weeks, which means all of this was true of Christians who were, at most, a matter of months old.

2. *1 Thessalonians 1:5 says the gospel came in word, in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance. Compare Mark 16:20 and Hebrews 2:3–4, and describe how the word was confirmed when it was first preached.*

Mark 16:20 says the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through the accompanying signs, and Hebrews 2:3–4 says the salvation first spoken by the Lord was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness with signs, wonders, various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The miracles were credentials for the message in a time when the New Testament was not yet written. Once revelation was complete, the confirming signs had done their work (1 Corinthians 13:8–10). We now have the confirmed word itself.

3. *Trace the denials in 2:3–6: not from error, not from uncleanness, not in deceit, not pleasing men, not flattering words, not a cloak for covetousness, not seeking glory from men. What was Paul evidently being accused of, and how does he answer it?*

He was evidently accused of being a deceiver, a flatterer, a man in it for money, or one who fled when trouble came. His answer is not to protest his sincerity but to point at things they watched him do: they knew his manner of life, they saw him work with his hands, they saw him leave Philippi bruised and preach anyway, they know he never took their money. A preacher's best defense has always been a life the congregation has seen up close.

4. Paul uses two family pictures in 2:7 and 2:11, a nursing mother and a father exhorting his children. Compare the two, and name a person who has been each of those to you.

The nursing mother is tenderness, patience, and the willingness to give herself away; Paul says he was willing to impart his own life. The father exhorting is direction, correction, and challenge, handled one child at a time. A congregation needs both, and both must be present in the same people. Answers on who has filled those roles will vary; encourage each person to go tell that individual this week.

5. 1 Thessalonians 1:8 says the word of the Lord sounded out from them. Name one person who would hear the gospel if it sounded out from you, and take the first step this month.

Answers will vary. The phrase means the gospel rang out from them like a trumpet, and it was not an organized campaign; it was new Christians who could not stop talking. Ask for one name and one first step: an invitation, a question, an offer to study. The Thessalonians had been Christians for weeks and were already doing this.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- 1 Thessalonians 1:10 speaks of Jesus delivering us from the wrath to come. This refers to the judgment, not to a secret rapture that removes Christians before a tribulation. Keep it in line with 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10 and 2 Peter 3:10–13.
- The “election” of 1:4 is God’s choice of a people in Christ, evidenced in verse 5 by the gospel coming to them and in verse 6 by their response. It is not unconditional individual election; they were chosen as they obeyed the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14).
- 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 describes those who opposed and killed the Lord and drove out the apostles, and the historical judgment that came upon them. Teach it as Paul wrote it and give no room to prejudice against Jewish people; Paul was himself a Jew who wished himself accursed for their sake (Romans 9:1–3).
- The power and the Holy Spirit of 1:5 refer to the confirming work that attended apostolic preaching. Distinguish it from any claim to present-day miraculous gifts, and do so graciously.

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Isaiah 18–26 · Psalm 79–80 · Luke 14 · 1 Thessalonians 2:17–4:18

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