

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 67 OF 104

Death Swallowed Up

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Isaiah 18-26
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 79-80
Gospels	Luke 14
General New Testament	1 Thessalonians 2:17-4:18

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

The aim this week is to set a table and an open grave side by side, and to let your class see which one God has the last word about. Isaiah watches empire after empire come down and then describes a feast on a mountain where God swallows up death forever and wipes the tears off every face. Asaph stands in a city full of unburied dead and asks God to restore what only God can restore. Jesus tells about a banquet with empty chairs because the invited guests had errands. And Paul tells a frightened young church exactly what will happen when the Lord comes, and then tells them to go use it on each other.

Doctrinally, the weight is on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and it needs to be taught with care and confidence. Scripture describes one coming, loud and public; one resurrection, of the just and the unjust; and one judgment. There is no secret removal of the church, no seven-year interval, no earthly reign to follow. Note also Luke 14:14, where "the resurrection of the just" does not establish a separate earlier resurrection, and Isaiah 26:19, which points forward to the bodily resurrection the New Testament makes plain. Handle Isaiah 24 through 26 within its own setting rather than as a timetable.

Formationally, the thread is what we do with an invitation. The excuses in Luke 14 were all reasonable, which is exactly why they worked. The guests who finally filled the house were people who had nothing to offer and no competing plans. And the payment for the whole thing comes at the resurrection of the just, which means a disciple is someone willing to be repaid late. Put this to your class: name the one thing in your life that is most likely to keep you from the table, and tell us what you will do about it before next Sunday.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up 1 Thessalonians 2:17-4:18. Give the first part of the hour to Paul's affection and to the instructions on purity and honest work, and save at least twenty minutes for 4:13-18. Read it aloud the way you would at a graveside, then settle the questions your class has been taught elsewhere.

Second session: Take up Luke 14. It teaches easily and it presses hard. Work through the seats, the guest list, and the excuses, then finish with the tower and the king, and ask the class what we usually leave out when we invite someone to Christ.

The other two readings: Isaiah 18-26 is long, so give the class one instruction: read for the burdens, but slow down at 25:6-9 and 26:1-4 and read those twice. Ask them to read Psalm 79 and Psalm 80 as prayers for a church rather than a nation, and to notice how often the psalmist appeals to God's name rather than to his own worthiness.

The Feast on the Mountain**PASSAGE OVERVIEW**

Chapters 18 through 23 finish the burdens against the nations, and they are more varied than a first reading suggests. Egypt is judged and then, astonishingly, healed: in that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of Egypt, and a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Israel will be one of three, and the Lord of hosts will say, blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance. Ancient enemies worshipping together is not a footnote; it is the gospel in outline seven centuries early.

Chapter 22 turns the fire on Jerusalem itself, and the sting is in the detail. When God called for weeping and sackcloth, they threw a party: let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Then a palace steward named Shebna, busy carving himself an impressive tomb, is removed, and the key of the house of David is laid on the shoulder of Eliakim, who will open so that no one shuts and shut so that no one opens. Revelation 3:7 puts that key in the hand of Christ.

Chapters 24 through 26 pull back to the widest view. The earth is emptied and turned upside down, the city of confusion is broken down, and the Lord of hosts reigns on Mount Zion. And in the middle of that shaking, chapter 25 sets a table: a feast of choice pieces and well-refined wine, the covering over all peoples destroyed, death swallowed up forever, and the Lord God wiping tears from all faces. Chapter 26 answers with a song: a strong city, perfect peace for the mind stayed on God, and the line that Israel could hardly have grasped, “Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise.”

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Chapters 13 through 23 are a collection of oracles against the nations. Chapters 24 through 27 are sometimes called Isaiah’s apocalypse because they widen from particular nations to the whole earth.
- Isaiah’s three years of walking barefoot (chapter 20) was a sign against trusting Egypt and Ethiopia for protection from Assyria. Prophets frequently acted out their messages.
- Shebna and Eliakim are real historical figures who also appear in 2 Kings 18:18 and Isaiah 36:3. The steward held the key of the royal household and controlled access to the king.
- Isaiah 25:8 is quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:54 of the resurrection, and its language reappears in Revelation 7:17 and 21:4.
- The feast on the mountain is a standard biblical picture of salvation and fellowship with God, and Jesus uses it repeatedly (Matthew 8:11; Luke 14:15–24; Revelation 19:9).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Isaiah 19:23–25 ends an oracle against Egypt with God calling Egypt “My people” and Assyria “the work of My hands.” How does that change the way we read God’s judgments on the nations, and where do you see it fulfilled?*

Start by noticing the pattern in these chapters. God judges Egypt, and then God heals Egypt. He strikes and heals, and they return to the Lord, and He is entreated by them. The nations are not simply targets of wrath; they are objects of a mercy that Israel did not expect to be shared. Chapter 19 ends with Egypt, Assyria, and Israel worshipping together, which would have been about as welcome in Jerusalem as it sounds.

The fulfillment is the church. Ephesians 2:13–16 says Christ broke down the middle wall of division and made the two into one new man. Acts 8 has an Ethiopian official reading this very prophet and going home rejoicing. Ask your class where the modern version of that offense lives: which people would we be uncomfortable seeing at the Lord’s table, and what does Isaiah 19:25 say about that discomfort?

Question 2. *Isaiah 25:6–8 sets a feast on a mountain, destroys the covering over the nations, swallows up death, and wipes the tears off every face. Talk about what it means that God’s answer to death is a meal.*

God could have answered death with an announcement or a decree. Instead He sets a table, and the table is for all peoples. A feast means abundance, celebration, company, and time; you do not eat a banquet alone or in a hurry. And it is on a mountain, in public, where the shroud that has covered every nation gets torn off.

Then take verse 8 apart, because each phrase matters. He will swallow up death forever, which means death is not managed or delayed but consumed. The Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, which is a startlingly personal act; God does not send someone to do it. And He will remove the rebuke of His people from all the earth. Ask the class who at this table has buried someone this year, and read the verse again slowly for them. Then note that Paul says this happens at the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:54) and John says it again at the end (Revelation 21:4).

Question 3. *Isaiah 26:3 promises perfect peace to the mind that is stayed on God. Discuss what “stayed” actually means, and what it would look like on a day when nothing is under your control.*

The Hebrew behind “stayed” means supported, propped, leaning the full weight on something. It is the word for a hand pressed down on a sacrificial animal. A mind stayed on God is not a mind that thinks pleasant thoughts about Him; it is a mind resting its weight on Him because it has nothing else to stand on. And the peace promised is literally “peace, peace,” the Hebrew way of saying complete and settled.

Make it practical, because this verse gets embroidered on pillows and rarely used. On a day you cannot control, a mind stayed on God looks like specific things: saying Scripture out loud rather than rehearsing the worst case, praying about the thing while it is still unresolved, refusing to make decisions out of panic, doing the next duty in front of you. Note that verse 3 is followed immediately by verse 4: trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord is everlasting strength. Ask each person what they leaned their weight on the last time they were afraid.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the nations addressed in chapters 18 through 23, and beside each one write down what that nation was trusting in.*

Ethiopia or Cush (18), trusting in its rivers and its ambassadors; Egypt (19–20), trusting in its wise men, idols, and the Nile; Babylon, called the Desert of the Sea (21:1–10), trusting in its feasts and its gods; Edom or Dumah (21:11–12); Arabia (21:13–17); Jerusalem, the Valley of Vision (22), trusting in its walls, its water supply, and its weapons while never looking to the One who made it; and Tyre (23), trusting in its trade and wealth. The list is a catalog of everything people substitute for God.

2. *Isaiah 22:22 lays the key of the house of David on Eliakim’s shoulder. Read Revelation 3:7 and describe how John applies that image and to whom.*

In Revelation 3:7 the risen Christ introduces Himself to the church at Philadelphia as “He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.” The authority Hezekiah gave a steward over one palace, Christ holds over the house of God itself. He controls access, and no one can close a door He has opened.

3. *Isaiah 25:8 says God will swallow up death forever. Read 1 Corinthians 15:54–57 and note how Paul quotes it, what he adds to it, and when he says it happens.*

Paul quotes it in the great resurrection chapter: “Death is swallowed up in victory,” joined with Hosea 13:14, “O Death, where is your sting?” He adds that the sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law, and thanks God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. He places it at the last trumpet, when this corruptible puts on incorruption, that is, at the resurrection when Christ returns.

4. *Read Isaiah 26:19 and compare Daniel 12:2, John 5:28–29, and Acts 24:15. How much could Isaiah’s hearers have understood, and how much more do we now know?*

Isaiah 26:19 says, “Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust.” In its setting it speaks of God reviving a crushed people, but the language reaches past national restoration,

and Daniel 12:2 makes it explicit: many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame. Jesus settles it in John 5:28–29, and Paul tells Felix in Acts 24:15 that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. Isaiah’s hearers had a glimpse; we have the full account, because Christ was raised.

5. Isaiah 22:12–13 describes people who responded to a call for repentance by eating and drinking, since tomorrow they die. Identify one place where you are numbing yourself instead of facing something, and do the harder thing this week.

Answers will vary. The passage describes people who heard a call to repent and went to a party instead, and that is still the most common response to conviction. Listen for honest naming: the screen, the schedule, the drink, the constant noise. Then ask what facing it would actually require this week.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Isaiah 24 through 27 uses sweeping language about the whole earth. Interpret it within the book’s own setting and symbolism; do not turn it into a timetable of modern events or a program for the end of the world.
- Isaiah 26:19 and the resurrection language of these chapters point forward to the bodily resurrection that the New Testament makes plain. Do not build on them a separate earlier resurrection for the righteous; Scripture teaches one resurrection of the just and the unjust at one coming (John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15).
- Isaiah 19’s promises about Egypt and Assyria are fulfilled in the gospel bringing the nations into one body in Christ (Ephesians 2:13–16), not in modern political arrangements.
- “Babylon is fallen, is fallen” (21:9) is echoed in Revelation 14:8 and 18:2. Note the connection briefly and keep both passages in their own settings rather than merging them into a prediction.

Restore Us, O God

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 79 is what prayer sounds like after a catastrophe. The temple is defiled, Jerusalem is rubble, corpses lie unburied, and the surrounding nations are laughing. The psalmist does not begin with theology; he begins with a description, because naming what happened is part of bringing it to God. Then come the questions: how long, Lord, will You be angry forever, will Your jealousy burn like fire?

What turns the psalm is verse 9, and it is worth pausing over: “Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; and deliver us, and provide atonement for our sins, for Your name’s sake.” He asks for help, and he asks for atonement, and both requests rest on God’s own reputation rather than on Israel’s merit. Verse 10 makes it plainer still: why should the nations say, where is their God? These people know they deserve what happened, and they appeal instead to who God is.

Psalm 80 works the same ground with a different image. The Shepherd of Israel is asked to shine forth, and then the picture changes to a vine God Himself brought out of Egypt, planted after driving out the nations, tended until it filled the land and sent its branches to the sea. Now its hedges are broken down and everyone who passes by picks at it. Three times the refrain returns: restore us, O God; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved. That is the prayer of a people who know they cannot fix this themselves.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Both psalms are attributed to Asaph, and Psalm 79 almost certainly reflects the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:8–10; Lamentations).
- Psalm 80 mentions Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, which suggests concern for the northern tribes and may reflect the Assyrian crisis.
- These are community laments, spoken in the first person plural and intended for use by the assembled people, not private devotions.
- The vine is a standing image for Israel (Isaiah 5; Jeremiah 2:21; Hosea 10:1) and Jesus takes it up in John 15, where He identifies Himself as the true vine.
- “Cause Your face to shine” echoes the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24–26, so the people are asking God to keep His own promised blessing.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 79:9 asks God to help “for the glory of Your name.” Why does the psalmist make God’s reputation his argument instead of his own need, and what would change if we prayed that way?*

The psalmist has no leverage. He cannot argue that Israel deserves rescue; the destruction happened precisely because it did not. So he reaches for the one argument that never depends on the one praying: Your name is involved in this. If Your people are wiped out and the nations say where is their God, Your reputation suffers. Moses prayed this way in Exodus 32:11–13, Joshua in Joshua 7:9, and Daniel in Daniel 9:17–19.

Ask what would change in our praying. Most of our prayers argue from need and, without saying so, from a sense that we have earned consideration. Praying for God’s name to be honored reorders the request and often changes what we ask for. It also exposes prayers we would be embarrassed to attach His glory to. Ask the class to take one current request and rephrase it beginning with “for the glory of Your name,” and see whether it survives.

Question 2. *Psalm 79:6–12 asks God to pour out wrath and repay the nations sevenfold. How should Christians read and use a prayer like that, given Romans 12:19 and Revelation 6:9–10?*

Handle this honestly rather than apologetically. These lines are the appeal of victims to a Judge, not a program for personal revenge. The people praying have no army and no court; the only justice available to them is God's. Revelation 6:9–10 records martyrs under the altar asking the same question, how long until You judge and avenge our blood, and they are not rebuked for it.

Then draw the New Testament line clearly. Romans 12:19 tells Christians never to avenge themselves but to give place to wrath, precisely because vengeance belongs to God. That is the same theology, applied to people who now know Christ. So a Christian may hand his rage over to God and ask Him to judge rightly, and must not take the sword himself. Jesus, who prayed for His executioners, also committed Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:23). Both are true, and the psalms teach us to say the hard part out loud to God rather than acting on it.

Question 3. *Psalm 80 repeats one request three times: restore us, cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved. What is actually being asked for, and what would restoration look like in this congregation rather than mere improvement?*

The word means to turn us back, to bring us again. They are not asking for better circumstances; they are asking God to reverse what has happened to them, and to do it Himself. The second half of the refrain explains it: cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved. Their problem is not mainly political; it is that God has hidden His face, and the only cure for that is God.

Now aim it at the congregation, gently. Improvement is what we usually want: more attendance, more energy, better programs. Restoration is a different category. It means repentance, reconciliation of members who do not speak, renewed love for the word, and people returning who left. Ask the class to name one thing here that needs restoring rather than improving, and then actually pray the refrain together before the hour ends.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List what Psalm 79:1–4 says has been lost or defiled. Then identify what troubles the psalmist beyond the physical damage.*

The nations have entered God's inheritance, defiled His holy temple, laid Jerusalem in heaps, given the bodies of His servants to the birds and the flesh of His saints to the beasts, shed blood like water all around Jerusalem, and left no one to bury the dead. Beyond the physical loss, two things trouble him more: that God's own name is being mocked by neighbors who ask where their God is, and that the dead of God's people were denied even burial, which in that culture was the final indignity.

2. *Trace the vine imagery in Psalm 80:8–16 from planting to burning. Compare Isaiah 5:1–7 and John 15:1–8, and note what each passage does with the same picture.*

God brought a vine out of Egypt, cast out the nations, prepared room, took deep root, filled the land, covered hills with its shadow, sent boughs to the sea and branches to the river; then its hedges were broken down, passersby pluck it, the boar ravages it, and it is burned with fire. Isaiah 5 uses the same picture for a vineyard that produced wild grapes and asks what more could have been done. John 15 transforms it: Jesus says He is the true vine, and fruitfulness now comes from abiding in Him rather than from national identity.

3. *The refrain of Psalm 80 appears in verses 3, 7, and 19. Write out all three and note how the name used for God changes each time.*

Verse 3: "Restore us, O God; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved." Verse 7: "Restore us, O God of hosts." Verse 19: "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts." The name grows longer and fuller each time, as though the prayer gains confidence as it goes. It is a small detail with a large lesson: praying the same request repeatedly is not faithlessness, and a persistent pray-er often ends up with a bigger view of God than he started with.

4. *Psalm 79:8 asks God not to remember former iniquities against them. Compare Psalm 103:10–14 and Hebrews 8:12, and describe how God deals with the sins of His people.*

Psalm 103 says God has not dealt with us according to our sins, that as far as the east is from the west so far has He removed our transgressions, and that He knows our frame and remembers we are dust. Hebrews 8:12 quotes the new covenant promise: I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. God's not remembering is not forgetfulness but a decision not to hold it against us, and under the new covenant it rests on the blood of Christ rather than on a yearly sacrifice.

5. *Name one thing in your life that needs restoring rather than improving, and ask God for it specifically, in those words, every day this week.*

Answers will vary. The distinction is the assignment: improvement is something we manage, restoration is something God does and we ask for. Listen for marriages, prodigal children, a conscience, a prayer life that died years ago.

Encourage people to use the psalm's own words rather than inventing better ones.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 79:6–12 contains imprecatory elements. Teach them as appeals to God as Judge, honest and inspired, and not as models for personal vengeance (Romans 12:19; 1 Peter 2:23).
- These are national laments under the old covenant. Draw the timeless truths about God's name, His discipline of His people, and honest prayer, without transferring Israel's national promises to any modern nation.
- Psalm 80:17, "the man of Your right hand, the son of man whom You made strong," refers in context to Israel or its king. Note how the language reaches toward Christ without claiming more for the verse than the text supports.

Seats, Excuses, and Cost

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The whole chapter happens around a table, which is where Luke's Jesus does much of His best work. He is invited to a sabbath dinner at the house of a leading Pharisee, and the atmosphere is stated in verse 1: they watched Him closely. A man with dropsy is there, almost certainly placed. Jesus asks the lawyers whether it is lawful to heal on the sabbath, and they refuse to answer, so He heals the man, sends him away, and asks which of them would leave a son or an ox in a well until Monday.

Then He turns the dinner into a lesson, twice. To the guests: stop taking the best seats, because a man who seats himself high may be moved down in front of everybody. Take the lowest place, and let the host move you up. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled. To the host: stop inviting people who will invite you back. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

A guest, sensing the mood, says something safely religious about the kingdom, and Jesus tells about a great supper. Everything is ready, and the guests begin, with one accord, to make excuses: a field, some oxen, a wife. The master fills his house instead with the poor and crippled from the streets and the highways, and none of the men first invited will taste his supper. Then, with great crowds going along, Jesus stops and talks about a builder who runs out of money halfway up and a king counting his soldiers before he marches. Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Meals in this culture were ranked. Seats were assigned by honor, and moving a guest down in front of others was a public humiliation.
- Hospitality functioned as a system of obligation: you invited people who could invite you back, which made the guest list a calculation of social return.
- Dropsy, an accumulation of fluid caused by underlying disease, was visible and miserable. The man's presence at a lawyer's sabbath dinner was almost certainly arranged as a test.
- The excuses in the parable would have sounded reasonable to the hearers: property, livelihood, and family. Deuteronomy 24:5 even exempted a newly married man from military service.
- "Bearing the cross" was not a metaphor for inconvenience. Everyone listening had seen condemned men carrying the crossbeam to their own execution.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *In 14:7–11 Jesus watches dinner guests pick out the good seats. Where does that same instinct show up in a congregation, and what exactly is the alternative He gives?*

The instinct is universal and it survives conversion. In a congregation it shows up as wanting to be asked rather than volunteering, being wounded when someone else is recognized, keeping score of who was consulted, choosing visible service over invisible service, and the peculiar competition over who is busiest. None of that requires a head table; it only requires people.

Jesus' alternative is not false modesty, which is just self-promotion in a quieter voice. It is actually taking the low place: doing the job nobody sees, letting somebody else have the credit, and leaving your standing in the hands of the host. Verse 11 states the principle that runs through Scripture (Proverbs 25:6–7; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6). Ask each person to name one place this week where they can choose the lower seat on purpose.

Question 2. *The three excuses in 14:18–20 are a field, five yoke of oxen, and a new wife, all of them legitimate. Why do good things make the best excuses, and which of the three is yours?*

Good things make the best excuses because they are defensible. Nobody in the parable says he prefers not to come; each has a reason that sounds responsible. A field must be seen, oxen must be tested, a wife must be attended to. That is precisely the danger. Sin we can recognize; a full calendar of legitimate obligations quietly crowds out the one invitation that mattered, and we never make a decision at all, we just never get around to it.

Press the third question. For most adults in your class, the answer is work, property, or family, in some combination, and each of those is a gift from God. Ask what it would look like for the invitation of Christ to actually outrank one of them this month: a promotion turned down, a Sunday protected, a project delayed, an evening given. Notice also that the master gets angry (14:21). Politely declining Christ is still declining Him.

Question 3. *Jesus deliberately slows people down and tells them to count the cost (14:28–33). Why would He do that with an eager crowd, and what do we tend to leave out when we invite someone to Christ?*

Because He wants disciples, not a crowd, and because a person who has not counted the cost quits. The two illustrations both involve public failure: a man with a half-built tower everyone can see, and a king whose army is destroyed because he never did the arithmetic. Jesus would rather a man walk away now than collapse later. This is the opposite of high-pressure recruiting, and it is the Lord Himself doing it.

Then turn the question on how we invite people. We are often tempted to advertise the benefits and mention the cost after they are committed: the peace, the fellowship, the good people. All of that is true. But Jesus says plainly that following Him may cost family relationships, personal ambition, possessions, and even life, and that a disciple carries a cross. Ask the class whether anyone ever told them the cost before they were baptized, and what difference it would have made. Then ask what a more honest invitation would sound like.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List what Jesus tells the host about his guest list in 14:12–14, and write down the reason He gives at the end of verse 14.*

Do not invite friends, brothers, relatives, or rich neighbors, lest they invite you back and you be repaid. Instead invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. The reason given is that “you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” The whole instruction turns on where a person expects his payment to come from and when.

2. *Jesus says a disciple must hate father and mother and even his own life (14:26). Compare Matthew 10:37 and Genesis 29:30–31, then explain the idiom in your own words.*

It is a Hebrew way of stating comparison in absolute terms. Matthew 10:37 gives the plain sense: he who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. Genesis 29:30–31 shows the idiom in action, saying Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah and then that Leah was “hated.” Jesus is not commanding hostility toward family; He is saying that when loyalties collide, He must win, and that a disciple settles this in advance.

3. *Trace the three responses in 14:18–20 and the two commands given to the servant in 14:21–23. Write down who ends up at the table and who does not.*

The first bought a field and must go see it; the second bought five yoke of oxen and must test them; the third married a wife and therefore cannot come. The master tells the servant first to go quickly into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor, maimed, lame, and blind; then, when there is still room, to go out to the highways and hedges and compel them to come in, that the house may be filled. The ones who end up at the table are the people nobody expected; the ones who were invited first do not taste it.

4. *Read 14:34–35 about salt that has lost its flavor. Compare Matthew 5:13, and describe what makes a disciple useless and whether anything can be done about it.*

Salt was valued for what it did, and salt that had lost its savor could not be restored by adding anything; it was fit neither for the land nor the dunghill. Matthew 5:13 says the same and adds that it is thrown out and trampled. A disciple becomes useless by becoming indistinguishable, by losing the very qualities that made him preserve and

season anything. The warning stands right after the call to count the cost, which is not an accident: a half-committed disciple is the salt Jesus is describing.

5. *Jesus says to invite people who cannot repay you. Plan one specific act of hospitality this month for someone who can do nothing for you, and put it on the calendar today.*

Answers will vary. Insist on someone who genuinely cannot reciprocate: a widow, a single mother, a person with a disability, an international student, a family in a hard season, a member nobody invites. Put a date on it. Verse 14 supplies the motive, and it is worth saying out loud that the payment is deferred on purpose.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Luke 14:26 must be explained as the Hebrew idiom of comparison, with Matthew 10:37 alongside it. Jesus commands supreme loyalty, not hatred of family; He also commands honoring father and mother (Mark 7:9–13).
- “Compel them to come in” (14:23) means urge them strongly, and it describes the persistence of the invitation. It has been abused historically to justify force in religion; say plainly that faith cannot be coerced (2 Corinthians 5:11; Revelation 22:17).
- Luke 14:33 teaches the total claim of Christ on everything a disciple owns, not a call to monastic poverty. The question is ownership, not inventory.
- “The resurrection of the just” (14:14) does not imply a separate earlier resurrection for the righteous. Scripture teaches one resurrection of the just and the unjust at Christ’s return (John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15).

The Dead in Christ

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The first part of this reading is one of the warmest passages Paul ever wrote, and it is mostly about how much he missed people. He says he was orphaned from them, that he tried again and again to come, that Satan hindered him, and that he finally could endure it no longer and sent Timothy. When Timothy came back with good news about their faith and love, Paul says, now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. This is an apostle whose emotional well-being is tied to whether a congregation is holding up.

Then chapter 4 turns to instruction, and Paul is direct. This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God, and that no one take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter. Sexual sin is never treated in the New Testament as a private matter; it always has a victim. He follows it with brotherly love, a quiet life, and working with your hands so that you may walk properly toward outsiders and lack nothing.

And then the passage this church needed most. Some members had died, and the rest feared they would miss the Lord's coming. Paul answers with the plainest description of the second coming in Scripture: the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive shall be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Notice verse 18: therefore comfort one another with these words. This passage was given for funerals, not for charts.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Paul had been driven out of Thessalonica quickly (Acts 17:5–10) and had been unable to return, which is why he sent Timothy from Athens (3:1–2).
- The congregation was young, largely Gentile, and living in a culture where sexual license was ordinary and religiously sanctioned. Paul's instructions in 4:3–8 were counter-cultural in the extreme.
- Some members had died since Paul left, and the church feared they would be at a disadvantage when the Lord came. That specific worry is the reason 4:13–18 exists.
- "Fallen asleep" is the New Testament's common figure for the death of a Christian (John 11:11–14; 1 Corinthians 15:18). It says nothing about the soul being unconscious; it describes the body's appearance and its certain waking.
- "Caught up" translates a word meaning to seize or snatch away, from which the Latin gives us the term rapture. The event Paul describes is public, loud, and visible, not secret.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul calls these Christians his hope, his joy, and his crown of rejoicing at the coming of the Lord (2:19–20). What would have to be true of our relationships for any of us to say that about other people?*

Paul's language is extravagant and he means it: what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy. He is saying that when he stands before Christ, the thing he will be proudest of is these people. Not his letters, not his travels, not his suffering. Them.

For that to be true of us, our relationships in the church would have to be deeper than pleasant. It would require investing in specific people over years, the way Paul did in a few weeks, and caring enough about their faithfulness that our own peace of mind rises and falls with it. Ask the class who they are personally carrying, and who is

carrying them. Then ask how many people in this building could name someone who is watching out for their soul. The honest answer usually starts a good conversation.

Question 2. *In 4:3–8 Paul is blunt about sexual purity, calls it the will of God and our sanctification, and adds that immorality defrauds a brother. How does he ground the command, and why does he make it a matter of how we treat other people?*

He grounds it in three things. First, God's will: this is the will of God, your sanctification. Not the culture's opinion, not the couple's feelings, not what is common. Second, the character of those who do not know God; Paul says the Gentiles behave this way because they do not know Him, which means the Christian's behavior is a matter of knowing who God is. Third, judgment: the Lord is the avenger of all such, and the one who rejects this does not reject man but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

The reason it becomes a matter of how we treat people is verse 6: no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter. Sexual sin always involves a person, and usually several. There is the other party, whose purity is spent; there is a future or present spouse, defrauded of what belongs to them; there are children and a congregation. Teach this with dignity and without detail, and remember that people in the room are carrying real wounds and real struggles. Then point to the way out, which Paul names: sanctification and honor, learning to control one's own body, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in a Christian.

Question 3. *1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 was written to people standing at gravesides. Walk through what Paul says will actually happen, and then talk about what Christian grief looks like that is genuinely different from grief without hope.*

Take the sequence as Paul gives it. The Lord Himself descends from heaven, not an emissary. There is a shout, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God, so this is the noisiest event in history, not a silent disappearance. The dead in Christ rise first, which is the very point the Thessalonians were worried about: the dead are not at a disadvantage, they go first. Then the living are caught up together with them, and all of them meet the Lord in the air, and from then on we are always with the Lord.

Now define the difference in grief. Paul does not say do not sorrow; he says do not sorrow as others who have no hope. Christians weep at funerals, and Jesus wept at one. What is different is that we grieve a separation rather than an ending, we can say the word "until," and we bury a body that is going to be raised. Ask what has actually comforted people in the class at a graveside, and note that verse 18 makes this passage an assignment: comfort one another with these words. Most Christians have never used it on anyone.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace Paul's prayer in 3:11–13. List each request, and note specifically what he asks for their love and for their hearts.*

He asks that God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ would direct his way to them; that the Lord would make them increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as Paul does toward them; and that He would establish their hearts blameless in holiness before God at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. Notice that love is asked for in abounding quantities and that holiness is what he wants established, and that both are aimed at the day Christ comes.

2. *1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 tells Christians to aspire to lead a quiet life, mind their own business, and work with their hands. Compare 2 Thessalonians 3:10–12 and Ephesians 4:28, and write down why Paul keeps returning to this.*

Ephesians 4:28 tells the former thief to work with his hands so that he may have something to give to him who has need. Second Thessalonians 3:10–12 is stronger: if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat, and some among them were busybodies rather than busy. Paul keeps returning to it because idleness damages the worker, burdens the church, and ruins the congregation's reputation with outsiders. The gospel produces people who pay their own way and have something left over to give.

3. List the events of 4:16–17 in the order Paul gives them. Then read John 5:28–29, 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, and 2 Peter 3:10–13, and write down how many comings and how many resurrections the New Testament describes.

The Lord Himself descends with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, with the trumpet of God; the dead in Christ rise first; then the living are caught up together with them in the clouds; they meet the Lord in the air; and they are always with the Lord. John 5:28–29 says all who are in the graves, both those who did good and those who did evil, come out in one hour. First Corinthians 15:51–52 places the change of the living at the last trumpet. Second Peter 3:10–13 says the heavens and earth pass away on that same day. One coming, one resurrection of the just and the unjust, one judgment, one end.

4. Paul says not to sorrow as others who have no hope (4:13). Read 1 Corinthians 15:19–20 and describe what hope adds to a funeral without pretending that it removes the tears.

Paul says that if our hope in Christ is for this life only, we are of all men the most pitiable, but now Christ is risen and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Firstfruits means the first sheaf of a harvest that is certainly coming. Hope does not make the loss smaller; it makes it temporary. A Christian funeral still has a coffin and still has tears, but it also has an “until,” and that changes everything about how the tears are carried.

5. Name a grieving person you know. Go to them this week and say to them what verse 18 tells us to say to one another.

Answers will vary, and this is the most important assignment of the week. Verse 18 is a command, and it names the material: these words. Encourage people to read the passage to the grieving person rather than manufacture something of their own, and to go in person.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 describes one loud, public, visible coming of Christ, not a secret rapture followed by a tribulation period and an earthly reign. Keep it alongside 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10 and 2 Peter 3:10–13, and note that the passage was given for comfort, not for prediction.
- “The dead in Christ will rise first” means before the living Christians are changed, answering the Thessalonians’ actual worry. It does not establish two separate resurrections separated by years (John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15).
- The instruction on sexual purity in 4:3–8 must be taught plainly and with dignity in a mixed class. Be clear about God’s design for marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman, be honest that the culture teaches otherwise, and be pastorally aware that people in the room are wounded and struggling.
- “Fallen asleep” is a figure for the death of the body and does not teach that the soul is unconscious (Luke 16:22–23; 23:43; Philippians 1:23).

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Isaiah 27–32 · Psalm 81–83 · Luke 15 · 1 Thessalonians 5

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