

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 70 OF 104

Comfort My People

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Isaiah 39–43
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 86–88
Gospels	Luke 17
General New Testament	1 Timothy 1–2

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to let the class feel how God treats the weak. Isaiah 40 gives the picture: the God who measures the oceans in His hand gathers lambs in His arms. Every reading fills that picture in. A psalmist asks Him to bow down and listen. Another prays out of total darkness and is not rebuked for it. A leper comes back and is made whole. And a man who hunted Christians is held up as the pattern of what mercy will do.

Doctrinally, three things need care. First, the kingdom in Luke 17:20–21 is Christ's present reign, established at Pentecost, not a political display still awaited, and verses 34 through 36 describe judgment rather than a secret removal of the church. Second, 1 Timothy 2:4–6 says God desires all men to be saved and that Christ gave Himself a ransom for all, which rules out unconditional election and a limited atonement. Third, 1 Timothy 2:8–15 must be taught as Paul teaches it, grounded in creation, stated plainly, and surrounded by the full picture of how women serve in the Lord's church.

The formational thread is gratitude and dependence. Nine men walked away healed, and one turned around. Ten lepers received the same mercy; one received the Giver. Ask your class this before they leave the room: name one specific mercy you have received in the last year and never gone back to thank God for by name, and then do it out loud before you sleep tonight.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Isaiah 39–43 first, and give most of the hour to chapter 40. Read 40:1–11 and 40:27–31 aloud; they carry more weight heard than explained. Use chapter 39 as the five-minute setup, and finish with the bruised reed in 42:3.

Second session: Take up Luke 17 second. It divides naturally into three parts: forgiveness and faith, the ten lepers, and the day of the Son of Man. If time is short, drop the last section rather than rushing the first two, and settle the kingdom question from 17:20–21 clearly.

The other two readings: Psalm 86–88 and 1 Timothy 1–2 carry the extended questions. Say a word about Psalm 88 before the class scatters, because someone in the room needs to know that prayer is still prayer in the dark. Offer to study 1 Timothy 2:8–15 at greater length with anyone who asks.

Comfort for a Weary People

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 39 is the pivot on which the whole book turns. Envoys arrive from Babylon, at that time a rising second-rate power, and Hezekiah shows them everything: the silver, the gold, the spices, the armory, all of it. Isaiah asks two quiet questions and then announces that everything the king displayed will be carried to Babylon, along with his own sons. Hezekiah's reply in verse 8 is one of the saddest lines in the Old Testament. He hears "not in your days" and calls the word good.

Then chapter 40 opens, and it is as if a window has been thrown open in a closed room. Comfort, comfort My people. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem. Her warfare is ended. The rest of the book is written to people who will be in exile, generations away, and it is meant to be read by them when everything Isaiah predicted has come true. That is why the great questions of chapters 40 through 43 are all about God's ability: Who has measured the waters? To whom will you liken God? Have you not known?

Two notes to bring to the class. First, the greatness of God in chapter 40 is not abstract; it lands in verse 11, where the One who measures the oceans in the hollow of His hand carries lambs in His arms. Second, the Servant appears in 42:1-9, and Matthew applies it directly to Jesus. Isaiah is telling exiles that the God who is vast enough to name every star is also gentle enough to notice a smoking wick, and that He is sending Someone.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Isaiah 39 links the Assyrian crisis of Hezekiah's day to the Babylonian exile that would come more than a century later, in 586 before Christ.
- Chapters 40 through 66 are written with the exile in view, addressing a people who would need to know that their God had not been defeated by Babylon's gods.
- The New Testament treats the whole book as the work of one prophet, Isaiah, quoting from both halves in the same breath (John 12:38-41, citing Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10).
- The literary form is Hebrew poetry with sustained courtroom imagery: God summons the idols to present evidence and predict the future, and they cannot.
- "Servant" language in these chapters sometimes refers to the nation Israel (41:8; 43:10) and sometimes to an individual Servant who does for Israel what Israel could not do (42:1-9; 52:13-53:12). Watch the shift.
- Isaiah 40:3 is applied by all four Gospels to John the Baptist, making chapter 40 the doorway into the New Testament.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Isaiah 40:1-11 changes the tone of the whole book. What is the messenger told to say, and why is "comfort" the right word for a people who still have judgment ahead of them?*

The messenger is told to speak comfort, to speak to Jerusalem's heart, to announce that her warfare is ended and her iniquity pardoned, to prepare a road in the wilderness, to acknowledge that all flesh is grass while the word of our God stands forever, and to say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" The comfort is not a mood; it is news. God is coming, He is bringing His reward with Him, and He will feed His flock like a shepherd.

Comfort is exactly right for a people facing judgment because the judgment was never the last word. God's discipline of Judah had a terminus, and the exile would end. Point the class to the shape of it: grass withers, flowers fade, empires rise and are carried off, and the word of our God stands forever. That sentence is what makes comfort possible in a world where everything else is temporary. Ask what they are currently leaning on that is grass.

Question 2. *Isaiah 40:28–31 promises renewed strength to those who wait on the Lord. Talk together about what waiting on God actually involves when you are the one who is exhausted, and what it is not.*

Waiting on the Lord is not passivity, and it is not a technique for producing energy. The Hebrew idea carries hoping, looking expectantly, binding yourself to God's timing. Note how the promise is phrased: even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. Human strength is not the variable. The variable is whether a tired person keeps looking to God or starts looking for a shortcut.

Be honest with a class about what verse 31 does not promise. It does not promise that the exhaustion ends this week, that the diagnosis reverses, or that the difficult season shortens. It promises renewed strength for the road that remains, sometimes as soaring, sometimes as running, and sometimes as the plain grace of walking and not fainting. Ask which of the three they need right now, and notice that the list descends. Walking without fainting is the deepest miracle of the three.

Question 3. *Isaiah 42:3 says the Servant will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoking flax. Who in your life is a bruised reed right now, and how should that verse change the way you handle him this month?*

A bruised reed is already damaged and nearly useless; a smoking flax is a wick that has gone out, giving smoke and no light. The natural response to both is to snap the reed and pinch out the wick, because neither is producing anything. The Servant does neither. He is strong enough to bring justice to the Gentiles and gentle enough not to finish off the barely functioning.

Move the class from admiration to imitation. The bruised reed in most congregations is the member who has failed publicly, the one whose marriage did not survive, the one in recovery again, the teenager who has stopped talking. Our instinct is efficiency: write him off and spend our time where it produces. Ask for a name and a specific act, and warn them that handling a bruised reed takes longer than they will want it to.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Isaiah 39 is a short chapter with a long shadow. Trace what Hezekiah did, what Isaiah told him, and how he answered in verse 8, then consider what that answer reveals about him.*

Hezekiah welcomed the Babylonian envoys and showed them the whole of his treasure, armory, and storehouses with nothing held back. Isaiah announced that all of it, and some of Hezekiah's own descendants, would be carried to Babylon. Hezekiah's reply, "The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good," is explained by his next thought: "At least there will be peace and truth in my days." It is the answer of a man relieved that the bill will come due after he is gone. It is worth asking whether we make decisions the same way.

2. *List every "fear not," "do not be dismayed," or similar reassurance in Isaiah 41 through 43, and write down the reason God attaches to each one.*

Among them: "Fear not, for I am with you" (41:10), "I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you" (41:10), "I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand" (41:13), "Fear not, you worm Jacob, I will help you" (41:14), "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine" (43:1), and "Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east" (43:5). In every case the reason is not the circumstance but the person of God: who He is, what He has done, and whose they are.

3. *Compare Isaiah 40:3–5 with Matthew 3:1–3 and Luke 3:4–6. Who is the voice, whose way is prepared, and what does that tell you about the identity of the One who came?*

The voice is John the Baptist, who identifies himself by this very verse in John 1:23. The way being prepared in Isaiah is the way of the Lord, the highway for our God. The New Testament applies it to the coming of Jesus. That identification is one of the plainest claims of Jesus' deity in Scripture: the road prepared for Jehovah was the road down which Jesus walked.

4. *Isaiah 42:1–9 is the first of the Servant Songs. Read Matthew 12:15–21 and note how much of the song Matthew quotes and what event in Jesus' ministry he attaches it to.*

Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1–4 and applies it to Jesus healing all who followed Him while charging them not to make Him known. The point Matthew draws is the Servant's quietness: He will not quarrel or cry out, no one will hear His

voice in the streets, and He will not break a bruised reed until He sends forth justice to victory. The One with all authority did not use it to make noise.

5. *Isaiah 43:1–2 promises God’s presence in the water and the fire, not exemption from them. Name the water you are walking through right now, and write verse 2 somewhere you will see it every morning this week.*

Answers will vary. Note the exact wording of the promise: when you pass through the waters, not if; and I will be with you, not you will stay dry. Listen for people who are honest about the water they are in, and be ready afterward to follow up privately with anyone who names something heavy.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Isaiah 39 predicts the Babylonian exile more than a century before it happened. Some deny that a single prophet could have written both halves of the book. The New Testament answers that question for us (John 12:38–41), and the God who names Cyrus in advance (Isaiah 45:1) is not limited by time.
- Isaiah 40:31 is not a promise of physical vitality, and it must not be preached as one. Teach it as strength for endurance.
- The “Servant” shifts between the nation and the coming Messiah in these chapters. Point out which is which rather than flattening them together.
- Isaiah 43:5–6 speaks of a gathering from the nations that is fulfilled in Christ and His church (Galatians 3:26–29; Ephesians 2:11–22). Do not read it as a modern political restoration.

When Prayer Meets Darkness

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 86 is the only psalm in Book III attributed to David, and it is largely stitched together from lines found elsewhere in Scripture, which is itself instructive: a praying man reaches for words God has already given. The requests are modest and repeated, “Bow down Your ear, O Lord, hear me,” “Preserve my life,” “Be merciful to me,” and then at verse 11 comes the request that outruns the rest: “Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth; unite my heart to fear Your name.”

Psalm 87 is short and startling. It praises Zion, which is expected, and then lists the nations by name in a registry of citizens: Rahab, a poetic name for Egypt, and Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia. Of each it says, “This one was born there.” These are Israel’s historic enemies, enrolled as natives of the city of God. Paul says the same thing in prose when he writes that the middle wall of separation has been broken down and that Gentiles are now fellow citizens with the saints.

Psalm 88 is unlike anything else in the Psalter. Almost every lament turns somewhere, usually with “but I will trust,” and this one does not. Heman describes himself as counted with those who go down to the pit, a man shut up who cannot get out, with God’s wrath lying heavy on him and his companions gone. The last word of the psalm in Hebrew is darkness. Teach it without trying to fix it. Its presence in the inspired book is God’s way of saying that a believer can pray like that and still be praying.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 86 is a prayer of David, placed among the Asaph and Korah collections of Book III.
- Psalm 87 is by the sons of Korah, one of the songs of Zion, celebrating the city where God had put His name.
- Psalm 88 is attributed to Heman the Ezrahite, a Levitical singer named in 1 Kings 4:31 and 1 Chronicles 15:17–19.
- Lament is the most common genre in the Psalter. Psalm 88 is the extreme case, a lament with no turn toward praise.
- “Rahab” in 87:4 is a poetic name for Egypt, not the woman of Jericho.
- The New Testament identifies the Zion of these psalms with the church and the heavenly city (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22–23), not with a political nation.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 86:11 asks God to unite his heart to fear His name. Describe what a divided heart looks like from the inside, and name where you feel the division most in your own week.*

A divided heart is not unbelief. It is belief with a second allegiance running quietly alongside it. It looks like being genuinely glad in worship on Sunday and genuinely absorbed in something incompatible on Thursday, without ever feeling like a hypocrite, because the two never meet. James calls such a man double-minded and unstable in all his ways (James 1:8). David is asking God to fuse the pieces.

Press the class toward the specific. The division usually has an address: money, an appetite, ambition, a relationship, an old resentment carefully maintained. Ask them to name the area where they would not want God to have the final word, and then notice that David asks for this as a gift rather than resolving to try harder. Teaching, walking, and a united heart come in that order in verse 11.

Question 2. *Psalm 87 lists Israel's old enemies as citizens born in Zion. How does that anticipate what God does in Christ (Ephesians 2:11–22), and what should it do to the way our congregation looks at the people we consider outsiders?*

Psalm 87 does something no one in Israel expected. It does not say the nations will visit Zion; it says they were born there. God keeps a registry, and when He writes up the peoples He counts Egyptians and Babylonians as natives of His city. Ephesians 2:11–22 is the fulfillment: those who were once far off are made near by the blood of Christ, no longer strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

The application is uncomfortable and necessary. Every congregation has a mental list of people it does not really expect to see baptized: the neighbor of another religion, the family with the reputation, the coworker who mocks. Psalm 87 says God is writing names in a registry we did not compile. Ask the class to name one person they have privately written off, and to start praying that God will enroll him.

Question 3. *Psalm 88 ends with no relief and no resolution. Why would God include a prayer like that in Scripture, and what does it offer to a person sitting in the dark tonight that a cheerful psalm could not?*

A psalm like this exists because God is not afraid of honest speech, and because His people needed permission to pray in the dark. Every believer eventually meets a season where the usual answers do not arrive, and a Bible with only happy prayers in it would push such a person out of the room. Psalm 88 keeps the door open. Its very presence says that a man in total darkness who is still talking to God is not a failure.

Point out the structure so the class does not miss the faith buried in it. Verse 1 begins “O Lord, God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before You,” and every complaint that follows is addressed to God. He never stops praying. He never goes to anyone else. Then connect it forward: the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross prayed in that darkness, and Hebrews 5:7 says He was heard. Do not tie a bow on the psalm. Let it stand, and let the people who need it find it.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Go through Psalm 86 and list the reasons David gives God for answering him. How many are about David, and how many are about God's own character?*

David's own reasons include that he is poor and needy, that he is holy or devoted to God, that he trusts God, that he cries out all day long, and that he lifts up his soul to God. But the weight falls on God: You are good and ready to forgive, abundant in mercy to all who call, there is none like You, You alone are God, You are great and do wondrous things, You are full of compassion, gracious, longsuffering, abundant in mercy and truth. David's confidence rests far more on who God is than on who David is.

2. *Psalm 86:15 quotes a sentence God spoke about Himself. Find it in Exodus 34:6–7, then note the echoes in Numbers 14:18, Psalm 103:8, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2. Why do you think that one self-description is repeated so often?*

The sentence comes from Exodus 34:6–7, God's own self-revelation to Moses on the mountain after the golden calf: merciful and gracious, longsuffering, abundant in goodness and truth. It is repeated across the Old Testament because it is God's chosen self-description, and because a people who keep failing need to hear the same thing again. Notice where God says it first: immediately after Israel's worst act of idolatry.

3. *Read Psalm 88 aloud, slowly. Mark every complaint and every question. Now identify the one thing the psalmist never stops doing, even at his lowest point.*

He never stops praying. Verse 1 begins with a cry to the God of his salvation, verse 9 says he has called daily, verse 13 says in the morning his prayer comes before God. Every accusation and question in the psalm is addressed to God rather than about Him. That is the thin, strong thread the whole psalm hangs on, and it is worth saying out loud to anyone in the dark.

4. Compare Psalm 88 with 2 Corinthians 1:8–10. How does Paul describe his own despair, and what does he say God intended it to accomplish in him?

Paul says he and his companions were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that they despaired even of life, and had the sentence of death in themselves. He says the purpose was “that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.” Note what Paul does not say: he does not say the despair was a failure of faith, nor that it was pleasant, nor that it lifted quickly. He says it relocated his trust.

5. Think of someone you know who is in a Psalm 88 season. Instead of sending a verse, plan one specific act of presence this week, put it on your calendar, and do it.

Answers will vary. Watch for the reflex to fix rather than to sit with. The most useful acts are small, physical, and repeated: a standing weekly visit, a meal without advice attached, a ride to an appointment, a text that expects no answer. Encourage the class to commit to a date rather than a good intention.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not rush Psalm 88 to a happy ending. Teaching that faithful people always feel God’s nearness does real harm to suffering members. Let lament be lament, and let the rest of Scripture supply the hope.
- Psalm 87 speaks of Zion, which the New Testament applies to the church and the heavenly city. Do not read it as a promise about a modern political state.
- Psalm 86:2, “preserve my life, for I am holy,” is covenant loyalty language, not sinless perfection. David knew better (Psalm 51).
- Be ready for someone in the room who is living in Psalm 88 right now. Have a plan to follow up privately, and do not let a class discussion become the only care that person receives.

Faith, Duty, and Gratitude

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The chapter opens with a hard word about causing others to stumble, and then an even harder one about forgiveness. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; if he repents, forgive him; and if he does it seven times in a day and comes back seven times saying “I repent,” forgive him. Jesus is not describing a doormat. Rebuke is commanded. But the door is never bolted, and that is what the apostles found impossible.

Their cry, “Increase our faith,” gets an answer they did not expect. Jesus does not offer them a larger quantity of faith; He points out that faith the size of a mustard seed would uproot a tree and plant it in the sea. The issue is not volume. Then the parable of the servant lands the point. A man who has plowed all day and then serves supper does not expect a medal, and neither should we. “We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.”

The account of the ten lepers sits in the middle of the chapter like an illustration: ten men obey and are healed, one turns around, and he is the Samaritan. Jesus asks where the nine are, and tells the one, “Your faith has made you well.” The chapter then closes with the days of the Son of Man, sudden and ordinary at once, with people eating, drinking, marrying, buying, and selling right up to the day, and with a three-word sermon: remember Lot’s wife.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke 17 continues the long section of Jesus’ teaching on the way to Jerusalem (9:51–19:27), with the cross drawing closer.
- Leprosy required separation from the community (Leviticus 13:45–46), so the ten men stood at a distance; the command to show themselves to the priest follows Leviticus 14.
- That one of the ten was a Samaritan matters to Luke, whose Gospel repeatedly features the outsider who responds (Luke 10:33; 7:9).
- The phrase in 17:21 is better rendered “in your midst” or “among you”; Jesus is telling Pharisees that the kingdom is not arriving with the political display they expect.
- Jesus’ reference to Noah and Lot assumes both accounts as history (Genesis 7 and 19), as does Peter (2 Peter 2:5–8).
- “One taken, the other left” in 17:34–36 belongs with the judgment imagery of the passage. Compare the parallel in Matthew 24:37–41; nothing here describes a secret removal of the church.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus says to forgive a brother seven times in one day if he repents, and the apostles immediately answer, “Increase our faith.” Why would that particular command make them feel they were running low?*

Because the command removes every escape hatch. Seven times in one day means the repentance is barely plausible, and the offender is either very weak or very manipulative. Human wisdom says that after the third time you protect yourself. Jesus says forgive. Notice that He does not say pretend, and He does not cancel the rebuke of verse 3. He simply refuses to let the injured party become the one who closes the door.

This is the place to distinguish two things that often get confused. A forgiving spirit is unconditional; we are to hold no grudge and to be ready always (Mark 11:25; Ephesians 4:32). Restored fellowship in a particular offense follows repentance, which is why verse 3 says “if he repents.” Ask the class where they are keeping a door bolted that Jesus would have open, and be ready for the class member who is in a genuinely dangerous relationship. Forgiveness and wisdom about safety are not opposites.

Question 2. *The mustard seed and the parable of the unworthy servant belong together (17:5–10). What is Jesus correcting about how we measure faith, and about how we picture our own service to God?*

Jesus corrects the assumption that faith works like fuel, that we simply need a larger tank. A mustard seed of real faith uproots a mulberry tree, because the power is in the God it trusts, not in the strength of the trusting. Asking for more faith can be a way of postponing obedience until we feel ready, and Jesus will not allow that.

The parable then dismantles the other error, which is the sense that our service puts God in our debt. The servant plows, tends sheep, comes in, cooks, serves, and only then eats, and no one thanks him for doing his job. “Unprofitable” does not mean worthless; it means we add nothing to God that He did not first give us. Hold this together with Luke 12:37, where the Master astonishingly girds Himself and serves His servants. Duty is ours; reward is grace.

Question 3. *Nine men were healed and one came back. Why is gratitude so easy to skip, and what does twenty years of unexpressed thankfulness do to a person's soul?*

Gratitude gets skipped because receiving feels like an event and thanking feels like an errand. The nine were not villains. They were doing exactly what Jesus told them, going to the priests, and no doubt they were glad. They simply never turned around. Thanklessness is rarely a decision; it is an omission repeated until it becomes a character.

Twenty years of that produces a particular kind of person: one who notices what is missing rather than what was given, whose prayers are requests with no thanksgiving in them, who assumes the good things are ordinary and the hard things are an injustice. Romans 1:21 traces a whole descent that begins right there, with people who knew God but were not thankful. Ask the class to name one person who has done something for them that they never adequately acknowledged, and to fix it this week.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace exactly what the one leper did in 17:15–16, and note what Jesus said to him in verse 19 that He did not say to the other nine. What might that mean?*

He saw that he was healed, turned back, glorified God with a loud voice, fell on his face at Jesus' feet, and gave Him thanks. To him alone Jesus said, “Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.” All ten were cleansed of leprosy, but the word used to the one carries the sense of being made whole or saved. The nine got their skin back. The one got Jesus.

2. *Jesus says in 17:10 that when we have done everything commanded we are unprofitable servants. Read Romans 4:4–5 and Ephesians 2:8–10, and explain how duty and grace fit together without either one canceling the other.*

Duty and grace are not rivals because they answer different questions. Duty answers what a servant owes; grace answers what a servant receives. Romans 4:4–5 says that to the one who works, wages are counted as debt, but to the one who believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, faith is counted for righteousness. Ephesians 2:8–10 says we are saved by grace through faith, not of works, and in the same breath says we were created in Christ Jesus for good works God prepared for us to walk in. So we obey fully and claim nothing, and God rewards us anyway out of grace.

3. *In 17:20–21 Jesus says the kingdom of God does not come with observation. Compare Mark 9:1, Acts 2:1–4 and 2:36–47, and Colossians 1:13. When did the kingdom come, and where is it now?*

The kingdom came within the lifetime of those standing with Jesus. Mark 9:1 says some standing there would not taste death until they saw it come with power; Acts 2 records that power at Pentecost and three thousand entering by repentance and baptism; Colossians 1:13 says Christians have already been delivered into the kingdom of God's dear Son. The kingdom is Christ's present reign, and His church is the sphere of that reign. It came without political spectacle, exactly as Jesus said.

4. *List the details Jesus gives about the days of Noah and the days of Lot in 17:26–30. What were those people doing, and what exactly was wrong with it?*

They were eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting, and building. Nothing on that list is sinful. That is the point: life looked entirely normal right up to the day the flood came and the day fire fell. The problem was not the

activity but the total absence of readiness, a whole society absorbed in ordinary things with no thought of God. Jesus is warning against a life so full of the routine that the eternal never gets a hearing.

5. *Jesus says, "Remember Lot's wife" (17:32). Name what you keep turning around to look at, and take one step this week that makes going back to it harder.*

Answers will vary. Lot's wife was not destroyed for a glance but for a heart still in Sodom; she left the city and the city never left her. Listen for specifics: a phone contact, a route home, a friendship, an app, an old grievance replayed. The follow-up question worth asking is what practical barrier could be put in place this week, since resolve alone rarely survives a Friday night.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Luke 17:21 must not be taught as a merely inward, mystical kingdom. Jesus is telling Pharisees that the kingdom would not arrive with political display. The kingdom was established on Pentecost, and Christ reigns now (Daniel 2:44; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13).
- Verses 34 through 36 describe judgment, not a secret rapture followed by a second chance. Compare Matthew 24:37–41 and 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10.
- "Unprofitable servants" does not deny that God rewards faithfulness (Luke 12:37; Hebrews 6:10). It denies that He owes us anything.
- On forgiveness, keep the distinction clear between a forgiving heart, which is always required, and restored fellowship after an offense, which verse 3 ties to repentance. Be pastorally careful with anyone in an abusive situation.

Mercy, Prayer, and Order

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

First Timothy is a working letter from an old apostle to a young preacher holding a difficult post. The assignment in 1:3 is blunt: stay in Ephesus and charge certain men not to teach a different doctrine, nor to give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which produce questions rather than godly edifying. That sentence has kept preachers on task for two thousand years. The cure for speculation is not more speculation; it is sound teaching that produces love out of a pure heart.

Then Paul does something unexpected. Halfway through instructions about the law, he stops and tells his own story. He was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent man. He obtained mercy because he did it ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant. The verse to underline is 1:16: he was shown mercy so that in him first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering as a pattern to those who would afterward believe. Paul is God's demonstration model.

Chapter 2 turns to the assembly. First, prayer, and the scope of it is enormous: supplications for all men, for kings and all in authority, because God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Second, one God and one Mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all. Third, order: men leading in prayer without wrath and doubting, women adorned with good works, learning quietly, with Paul grounding his instruction in the creation account rather than in local custom. Teach all of it plainly, in Paul's own tone, which is pastoral rather than combative.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Paul wrote 1 Timothy after his first Roman imprisonment, probably in the early sixties, to Timothy, whom he had left at Ephesus.
- Ephesus was a wealthy city dominated by the temple of Artemis, with a religious culture centered on a goddess and her priestesses, which makes Paul's appeal to Genesis rather than to local practice significant.
- The letter belongs with 2 Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles, written to men charged with ordering congregations.
- The false teaching in view involved the law misused, fables, and endless genealogies (1:4-7), producing disputes rather than godliness.
- "One Mediator" in 2:5 was written in a world full of intermediaries, priesthoods, and patron deities; the claim was as pointed then as it is now.
- Paul's instruction about men and women in 2:8-15 concerns the assembly and authoritative teaching; elsewhere women teach women and children (Titus 2:3-5) and help teach privately (Acts 18:26).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul calls himself the chief of sinners and says he obtained mercy as a pattern for those who would believe afterward (1:15-16). How should that change the way we speak to someone who is convinced he has gone too far?*

Paul's point in 1:16 is that his case was chosen for its extremity. He held the coats at Stephen's stoning, he hauled believers out of their homes, he tried to make them blaspheme. If mercy reached that man, the argument from the greater to the lesser is unavoidable: no one listening has a stronger case for being beyond it. God did not save Paul quietly; He saved him as an exhibit.

So the way we talk to the person who thinks he has gone too far is not by minimizing what he did. Paul never minimized it; he called himself chief of sinners in the present tense. We tell him the truth about his sin and the

truth about the mercy in the same breath, and then we tell him what Ananias told Paul: arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16). Ask the class who in their life needs to hear that this month.

Question 2. *First Timothy 2:1–4 tells Christians to pray for kings and all in authority, written under an emperor who would eventually have Paul executed. What does praying regularly for rulers we did not choose and do not admire do inside of us?*

Notice the scope and the reason. All men, kings, and all who are in authority, and the reason given is a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence, followed by the larger reason, that God desires all men to be saved. Paul wrote this while Nero was on the throne. He did not make the prayer conditional on the ruler deserving it.

What it does inside us is the discussion worth having. It is very difficult to pray daily by name for a man and go on despising him. Prayer for rulers pulls a Christian out of the contempt that saturates public life and puts him back in the posture of a citizen of another kingdom. Ask the class to be honest about how much of their political conversation would survive being said out loud in a prayer. Then ask whether anyone has ever prayed for the salvation of the officials they criticize most.

Question 3. *Paul grounds his instruction in 2:11–14 in creation rather than in the customs of Ephesus. How should that shape the way a congregation orders its assemblies now, and how do we teach it in a way that honors the women who serve so faithfully among us?*

Paul's argument in verses 13 and 14 reaches back to Genesis: Adam was formed first, and the woman was deceived. He does not appeal to the culture of Ephesus, to women's education, or to a temporary local problem, which is precisely why the instruction is not temporary. In the assembly, the leading of the congregation in prayer, preaching, and authoritative teaching belongs to men, and the qualifications later given for elders and deacons assume the same (1 Timothy 3:1–13).

Teach it plainly and then teach the rest of the picture just as plainly, or the class will hear only a restriction. Women prayed and served throughout the New Testament church: Priscilla helped teach Apollos privately, Phoebe was commended to Rome, the older women are commanded to teach the younger, Timothy's faith came through his mother and grandmother. A congregation where women do not teach children, do not open their homes, do not visit the sick, and do not train younger women has not obeyed this chapter; it has only obeyed half a verse. Say that out loud, and say it warmly.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the kinds of people named in 1 Timothy 1:9–10 for whom the law is intended. What is Paul's point about using the law lawfully?*

The list includes the lawless and insubordinate, the ungodly and sinners, the unholy and profane, murderers of fathers and mothers, manslayers, fornicators, sodomites, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and anything else contrary to sound doctrine. Paul's point is that the law was not given to torment the righteous but to expose and restrain real wickedness. The false teachers were using it as a playground for speculation. The law is good when it is used for what God gave it to do.

2. *Trace Paul's account of himself in 1:12–17: what he was, what happened to him, the reason he gives, and the conclusion he draws. Compare it with Acts 9:1–19 and Acts 26:9–18.*

He was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man. He obtained mercy because he acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant with faith and love. He concludes that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom he is chief, and that he was shown mercy as a pattern for those who would afterward believe. Acts 9 and 26 fill in the road to Damascus, the blindness, Ananias, and the commission to the Gentiles. Note that Paul's conversion did not end with a feeling but with baptism (Acts 22:16).

3. *First Timothy 2:5 says there is one God and one Mediator between God and men. Read Hebrews 7:25 and 1 John 2:1, and explain what that rules out about how a person approaches God.*

It rules out every other mediator. No priest, no saint, no angel, no departed relative, and no human intercessor stands between a person and God. Christ alone is our access, and Hebrews 7:25 says He ever lives to make intercession for those who come to God through Him. First John 2:1 calls Him our Advocate with the Father. That is not a doctrinal technicality; it means the newest Christian may go straight to God tonight in Jesus' name.

4. *Paul tells women to adorn themselves in modest apparel, with good works (2:9–10). Read 1 Peter 3:3–4 beside it. What principle stands behind the instruction, and how is it applied without either ignoring it or turning it into a contest?*

The principle is that a Christian woman's attractiveness should come from her character and her good works rather than from display, and Peter says the same, contrasting outward braiding, gold, and clothing with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. Applied, it asks a simple question about clothing and expense: is this dressed to serve, or dressed to be looked at, or dressed to be envied? It is not applied by publishing a list of hemlines, and it is not applied by pretending the instruction is not there. Note also that Paul addresses the men in the same breath about anger and quarreling, so no one may treat this as a women's problem.

5. *Paul urges prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks for all men (2:1). Write down the names of three people in authority over you, including one you did not vote for, and pray for each by name every day this week.*

Answers will vary. Expect resistance at the phrase "one you did not vote for," which is exactly why it is there. Look for people who come back reporting that their attitude changed before the circumstances did. That is the fruit Paul expects from 2:1–4.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Teach the roles of men and women plainly and graciously, from creation as Paul does, and be sure to name all the ways women are to serve and teach, so the class hears the whole New Testament and not only a restriction.
- First Timothy 2:15, "she will be saved in childbearing," is difficult. The most natural reading is that women are not saved by taking the man's role but in faithfully continuing in faith, love, and holiness in the life God gave them, including the bearing and raising of children. Say what you believe, acknowledge the difficulty, and do not build a doctrine on the verse.
- First Timothy 2:4 and 2:6, that God desires all men to be saved and that Christ gave Himself a ransom for all, stand squarely against unconditional election and a limited atonement. State it positively rather than polemically.
- "Lifting up holy hands" (2:8) describes a common posture of prayer; the emphasis is on holy hands, without wrath and doubting, not on a required form.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Isaiah 44–49 · Psalm 89 · Luke 18 · 1 Timothy 3–4

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