

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 71 OF 104

The God Who Carries

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Isaiah 44-49
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 89
Gospels	Luke 18
General New Testament	1 Timothy 3-4

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to move the class from carrying to being carried. Isaiah puts the choice in a picture: gods strapped to the backs of exhausted animals, or a God who says He has carried His people from the womb and will carry them to their gray hair. Luke 18 sorts the same way. The widow, the tax collector, and the infants come with nothing and receive everything; the ruler comes with everything and cannot let go of it.

Doctrinally, three matters are at stake. First, the promise to David is kept in Christ, who reigns now at the right hand of God; Psalm 89 and Acts 2 settle it, and there is no earthly Davidic throne still awaited. Second, Jesus' welcome of infants, together with Ezekiel 18:20, rules out inherited guilt. Third, 1 Timothy 3 gives the qualifications God requires in the men who shepherd a congregation, and 1 Timothy 4:1 states plainly that people who have the faith can depart from it.

The formational thread is empty hands. The tax collector had seven words and no record; the rich ruler had a spotless record and full hands, and he went away sorrowful. Put this to your class before they leave: name the one thing you are holding that you would have the hardest time hearing Jesus ask you to set down, and say what the first step toward opening your hand would be.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Luke 18 first. Four scenes in one chapter make for an easy hour, and the contrast between the tax collector and the rich ruler preaches itself. Begin with the widow and the purpose statement in verse 1, and leave ten minutes at the end for verse 27.

Second session: Take up Isaiah 44-49 second, built around two passages: the carpenter and his log in 44:9-20, and the carts of Babylon in 46:1-4. Use Cyrus in 44:28-45:7 to show how God proves He is God, and do not attempt to cover all six chapters evenly.

The other two readings: Psalm 89 and 1 Timothy 3-4 carry the extended questions. Tell the class before they scatter that Psalm 89 ends with an unanswered question and that Acts 2:29-36 is the answer, a thousand years later. If your congregation is considering appointing elders, 1 Timothy 3 deserves its own separate study.

GENERAL OLD TESTAMENT **Isaiah 44-49**

The God Who Carries You

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These chapters are a courtroom scene that runs for pages. God summons the gods of the nations, asks them to produce evidence, and invites them to predict something, anything, so that we may know they are gods. They stand mute. Then God offers His own evidence: He declared the end from the beginning, and to prove it He names a Persian king, Cyrus, who will not be born for roughly a century and a half, and tells in advance what he will do about Jerusalem and the temple.

In the middle of the argument sits one of the most devastating passages in Scripture, Isaiah 44:9–20. A man plants a tree, the rain waters it, he cuts it down, he warms himself with part of it, he roasts his meat over the coals, and with the remainder he makes a god and falls down before it saying, “Deliver me, for you are my god.” Isaiah’s verdict is not anger but pity: “a deceived heart has turned him aside.” He cannot say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?”

Then comes the contrast that gives the section its heart. Isaiah 46 opens with Bel bowing and Nebo stooping, the idols of Babylon strapped to animals that stagger under the load, and it turns immediately to a God who says, “I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.” By chapter 49 that carrying God is speaking through His Servant, who is given as a light to the Gentiles, and who says a mother might forget her nursing child but He will not forget His people.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- These chapters address the exile in advance, comforting a people who would find themselves in Babylon surrounded by impressive idols and a victorious empire.
- Cyrus the Persian took Babylon in 539 before Christ and issued the decree permitting the Jews to return (2 Chronicles 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4), exactly as Isaiah 44:28 said.
- The idol satire in 44:9–20 is a recognized literary form, and Jeremiah 10:1–16 and Psalm 115:3–8 make the same argument.
- “Servant” shifts in these chapters between the nation (44:1–2, 21) and an individual Servant who restores the nation (49:5–6), which is Christ.
- Isaiah 49:6, “a light to the Gentiles,” is quoted by Simeon over the infant Jesus (Luke 2:32) and applied by Paul to gospel preaching (Acts 13:47).
- The promised restoration of Israel finds its fulfillment in Christ and in His church, where Jew and Gentile are one body (Ephesians 2:11–22; Galatians 3:26–29).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Isaiah 44:9–20 is a sustained piece of satire about a man who cooks his dinner over half a log and worships the other half. What is the prophet trying to make us feel, and where does the same absurdity show up in an ordinary American week?*

Isaiah wants us to feel the absurdity that the idolater cannot feel. The passage moves in slow, deliberate detail precisely so the reader will say out loud what the craftsman cannot: it is the same log. Notice that Isaiah does not accuse him of stupidity. He says the man’s heart deceived him and he has no knowledge to deliver his soul. Idolatry is not first an intellectual failure; it is a heart that wants something it can manage.

Modern equivalents will come quickly if you ask the right question, which is not “what do you worship?” but “what do you serve with your money, your calendar, and your anxiety?” A retirement account made by our own hands and then trusted to save us. A child’s athletic future. A political movement. A reputation. The test Isaiah applies is simple: can it save you, and did you make it? Ask the class what in their lives fits both.

Question 2. Set Isaiah 46:1–2 beside 46:3–4. Babylon's gods have to be loaded onto carts, while the Lord says He has carried His people from birth and will carry them to their gray hair. Which of the two arrangements does your daily life actually resemble?

The picture in 46:1–2 is of a defeated city evacuating its gods. Bel bows, Nebo stoops, and the idols are a load for beasts already weary. They cannot deliver the burden; they themselves go into captivity. Then God speaks directly to the house of Israel, "who have been upheld by Me from birth, who have been carried from the womb," and He extends it to the end of life: "Even to your old age, I am He, and even to gray hairs I will carry you."

Bring this to the class as an inventory question. A religion of performance is a god on your back; a relationship with God is being carried. If a person's faith consists mostly of keeping up appearances, managing guilt, and hoping he has done enough, he is hauling a cart. Ask what in their practice of Christianity feels like weight, and be prepared for honest answers about guilt over past sin that God has already forgiven (Hebrews 10:17).

Question 3. God names Cyrus generations before he was born and calls him "My shepherd" and "His anointed" (44:28–45:1), though Cyrus did not know Him. How should that shape the way we think and talk about political powers that have no interest in God?

God says of Cyrus, "I have named you, though you have not known Me." That is a striking sentence. A pagan king who never confessed the God of Israel is nonetheless called His shepherd and His anointed, because God bends the plans of empires toward His own purpose without violating anyone's will. Daniel 4:17 says the same: the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He chooses.

The application is directly practical in a politically anxious age. Christians should be sober citizens, should pray for rulers (1 Timothy 2:1–2), and should be neither despairing nor triumphant about elections, because God has never once needed a friendly administration to accomplish anything. Ask the class how much of their emotional energy each week goes to political outcomes, and what Isaiah 46:10 would do to that number.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Go through Isaiah 44 through 46 and list every place God says something like "I am the Lord, and there is no other." Count them, and note what He offers as proof each time.

The statements come repeatedly: 44:6, 44:8, 45:5, 45:6, 45:14, 45:18, 45:21, 45:22, 46:9, and others nearby, well over a dozen in these three chapters. The proof God offers each time is the same: He alone declared things before they happened and then brought them to pass. Fulfilled prophecy is God's own chosen evidence of His uniqueness, which is why the naming of Cyrus sits in the middle of the argument.

2. Isaiah 45:7 says God forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates calamity. Read Amos 3:6 and Lamentations 3:37–38, then explain in what sense that is true and what it does not mean about God and moral evil.

The Hebrew word rendered "calamity" or "evil" in 45:7 means disaster or trouble, not moral wickedness. God is claiming sovereignty over both prosperity and catastrophe, in direct contrast to Persian dualism, which assigned light and darkness to competing deities. Amos 3:6 asks whether calamity comes to a city and the Lord has not done it. God brings judgment and permits trouble, and He governs the consequences of sin, but James 1:13 says God tempts no one to evil, and 1 John 1:5 says in Him is no darkness at all.

3. Trace the Servant's mission in Isaiah 49:1–7. Then read Acts 13:46–47 and note which verse Paul and Barnabas apply to their own work, and why they could do that.

The Servant is called from the womb, given a mouth like a sharp sword, hidden in God's hand, despised by the nation, and given the task of bringing Jacob back and of being a light to the Gentiles that God's salvation may reach the end of the earth. Paul and Barnabas apply 49:6 to themselves in Acts 13:47 when the Jews at Antioch rejected the message. They could do that because the Servant's mission is carried out through the preaching of His servants; the light shines through the ones He sends.

4. *Isaiah 48:10 says God refined His people in the furnace of affliction. Compare 1 Peter 1:6–7 and Hebrews 12:7–11. What purpose does Scripture consistently assign to the fire?*

Refinement, not destruction. Isaiah says God refined Israel, though not as silver, and tested them in the furnace of affliction, for His own sake. Peter says trials come so that the genuineness of faith, more precious than gold that perishes though tested by fire, may be found to praise and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 12 says God disciplines us for our profit, that we may share His holiness. The fire is not evidence of abandonment; it is evidence of ownership.

5. *Isaiah 49:15–16 says God has inscribed you on the palms of His hands. Copy the verse out by hand, name the specific fear it speaks to in you, and decide one thing you will stop doing about that fear this week.*

Answers will vary. The image is of a name cut into the palms, permanently visible every time the hand is opened, which most readers cannot hear without thinking of nails. Listen for the fear underneath: being forgotten, being replaced, being a burden, having sinned past the point of being wanted. The second half of the question matters most; press for what will be stopped, not merely what will be believed.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The naming of Cyrus is one of the strongest prophecies in Scripture, and it is the reason many critics insist a second author wrote these chapters after the fact. Answer it simply: the New Testament attributes the whole book to Isaiah (John 12:38–41), and God says naming the future is exactly the point (46:9–10).
- Isaiah 45:7 does not make God the author of moral evil. Teach the word as disaster or calamity, and pair it with James 1:13.
- The restoration promises in these chapters are fulfilled in Christ and His church. Do not turn them into predictions about modern Middle Eastern politics.
- Watch the two uses of “servant.” Confusing the nation with the Messiah will muddle the Servant Songs when you reach Isaiah 53 in a few weeks.

The Covenant That Looked Broken

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 89 is one long argument with God conducted entirely in faith. The first half is a sustained celebration. God's mercy is built up forever, His faithfulness is established in the heavens, the heavens praise His wonders, and no one among the sons of the mighty is like Him. Then Ethan recites the covenant with David in detail: I have found David My servant, My hand shall be established with him, his seed shall endure forever and his throne as the days of heaven.

The turn at verse 38 is brutal and deliberate: "But You have cast off and abhorred, You have been furious with Your anointed. You have renounced the covenant of Your servant; You have profaned his crown by casting it to the ground." Whether the occasion is the Babylonian catastrophe or an earlier humiliation, the psalmist is looking at a broken throne while holding an unbreakable promise, and he refuses to pretend he is not.

Notice how he handles the contradiction. He does not deny the promise, and he does not deny the ruins. He takes both to God and asks how long, reminding God of the brevity of life and asking where His former lovingkindnesses are. The psalm ends without an answer, followed by the doxology that closes Book III. The answer came, but it came about a thousand years later, in a manger and then at the right hand of God, and Peter preached it at Pentecost.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The psalm is ascribed to Ethan the Ezrahite, named with Heman among the wise men of Solomon's era (1 Kings 4:31).
- The covenant recited here is the one God made with David through Nathan in 2 Samuel 7 and repeated in Psalm 132.
- The crisis behind verses 38 through 51 is best understood as the collapse of the Davidic monarchy, whether in an earlier humiliation or in the fall of Jerusalem in 586 before Christ.
- Verse 52 is not part of the psalm proper; it is the doxology closing Book III of the Psalter, as at 41:13, 72:18–19, and 106:48.
- Peter treats the promise to David as fulfilled in the resurrection and enthronement of Christ (Acts 2:29–36), and Gabriel says the same in advance (Luke 1:32–33).
- The genre is a royal psalm that becomes a communal lament, which is why it swings so sharply in tone.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 89 spends thirty-seven verses celebrating a promise and then thirteen verses saying it appears to be in ruins. Why is it good for us that the Holy Spirit did not stop this psalm at verse 37?*

It is good for us because most believers eventually stand exactly where Ethan stood, holding a promise in one hand and a wreckage in the other. A Bible that only recorded the celebration would leave such a person with nowhere to go but pretense or silence. Psalm 89 gives him a script, and the script is addressed to God rather than about Him.

Point out that the psalm does not resolve. That is not a flaw; it is a picture of faith operating in real time. Ethan kept singing about the covenant while looking at a crown in the dust, and roughly a thousand years later God kept every word of it. Ask the class what they would have concluded in 586 before Christ, and then ask what they are currently concluding about a prayer that is only five years old.

Question 2. *God swore that David's throne would endure as long as the sun (89:35–37). Read Acts 2:29–36 and Luke 1:32–33. How was that promise actually kept, and what does it teach us about the shape of God's answers?*

Acts 2:29–36 is the answer to Psalm 89. Peter stands in Jerusalem, reminds the crowd that David died and was buried and that his tomb was still there, and says David spoke as a prophet, knowing God had sworn to seat one of his descendants on his throne. That descendant is Jesus, raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God, where He reigns now. Gabriel told Mary the same thing before the birth: the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

Two things follow. First, God's promises are not kept on our timetable or in our expected shape; the throne endured, but not in Jerusalem and not by a line of kings. Second, this rules out waiting for a future earthly Davidic kingdom. Christ is already reigning (1 Corinthians 15:24–25; Colossians 1:13). Teach that plainly here, because Psalm 89 is where many people first ask the question.

Question 3. *Verses 30 through 34 say that if David's sons forsake God's law they will feel the rod, and that God still will not take His lovingkindness from them. How do discipline and covenant love work together in a household or a congregation without either one canceling the other?*

Verses 30 through 34 are one of the clearest statements in the Old Testament of how God's covenant love and His discipline work together. Sin brings the rod and stripes; it does not bring abandonment. God says He will not break His covenant nor alter the word that has gone out of His lips. That is not a promise that disobedience has no consequences. It is a promise that the relationship is not renegotiated every time a son fails.

Applied to a family, this means correction that is certain, proportionate, and never accompanied by a threat to the relationship itself. Applied to a congregation, it means discipline that aims at restoration and keeps calling the person a brother (2 Thessalonians 3:15; Galatians 6:1). Ask the class which half they lean toward by temperament, and what the other half would require of them next month. And note carefully that God's faithfulness here does not mean a person can never fall away; Scripture is equally clear that one can (Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4).

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything God promises David in 89:19–37, then read 2 Samuel 7:12–16 and mark which items appear in both passages.*

God promises help and exaltation for His chosen one, anointing with holy oil, an established hand, protection from the enemy, the crushing of his foes, faithfulness and mercy with him, a horn exalted, dominion from the sea to the rivers, the title of firstborn and highest of the kings of the earth, mercy kept forevermore, a covenant that stands fast, seed that endures forever, a throne as the days of heaven, chastening with the rod for disobedience, and an oath by God's holiness that He will not lie to David. Second Samuel 7:12–16 contains the same core: a seed after him, an established kingdom, a house for God's name, a throne established forever, chastening with the rod of men, and mercy that will not depart.

2. *Find the turn at verse 38 and write down each thing the psalmist says God has done. Notice the change in pronouns and in tone, and ask why the psalm keeps addressing God directly.*

He says God has cast off and abhorred, been furious with His anointed, renounced the covenant, profaned the crown, broken down the hedges and strongholds, made him a reproach to his neighbors, exalted his adversaries, turned back the edge of his sword, made his glory cease, cast his throne to the ground, shortened his days, and covered him with shame. The pronouns are all second person, "You have," which is the striking thing. Every accusation is spoken to God's face, which is the posture of a man who still believes God is there and still believes He answers.

3. *Psalm 89 ends with "How long, Lord?" Find that question in Psalm 13:1, Habakkuk 1:2, and Revelation 6:10. What does it tell you that God preserved so many prayers with that question in them?*

It tells us that God is not offended by the question. He inspired its preservation in poetry, in prophecy, and in the last book of the Bible, where it is asked by martyrs already in His presence. A believer who asks how long is in excellent

company. What Scripture never sanctions is walking away while asking it; every one of these passages is a prayer, addressed to God, by someone who has not let go.

4. *Compare Psalm 89:27, where God calls David His firstborn and highest of the kings of the earth, with Colossians 1:15–18 and Hebrews 1:5–6. In what sense is Christ the firstborn, and how does that clarify what God promised David?*

Firstborn in Hebrew usage signals rank and right, not chronological birth; David was the youngest son of Jesse and is called firstborn here. Colossians 1:15–18 says Christ is the firstborn over all creation and the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence, and Hebrews 1 applies the language of 2 Samuel 7 directly to the Son. So the promise to David reaches its intended end in Christ, who holds the rank the title always described.

5. *Name the promise of God you have privately begun to doubt because of how long it has taken. Pray it this week the way Ethan does: recite what God has said, tell Him honestly how it looks from where you stand, and then ask.*

Answers will vary. Look for a promise actually found in Scripture rather than a wish, since much disappointment with God comes from expecting things He never said. Then encourage the three-part pattern Ethan uses: recite, lament, ask. A prayer that includes all three is usually more honest and more durable than one made only of requests.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The Davidic covenant is fulfilled in Christ, who reigns now at God's right hand. Settle that here rather than allowing a future earthly kingdom in Jerusalem to be read into the psalm.
- Verse 39, "You have renounced the covenant," is the language of lament describing how things look, not a doctrinal statement that God broke His word. Verses 33 through 36 are the doctrine.
- Do not use verses 30 through 34 to teach that a person cannot fall away. The passage concerns God's faithfulness to His promise, not the impossibility of apostasy (Hebrews 3:12–14; 2 Peter 2:20–22).
- Verse 52 closes Book III of the Psalms and is not the psalmist's resolution of his lament. Say so, or the class will think the problem was tidied up.

Persistent Prayer, Empty Hands

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke 18 is built out of contrasts, and each one is about who comes to God with nothing. The widow has no leverage; she has only persistence, and she wins. The tax collector has no record to present; he has only a request for mercy, and he goes home justified. The infants can contribute nothing at all, and Jesus says the kingdom belongs to such as these. Then a man arrives who has everything: wealth, position, moral record, and sincere interest, and he is the only one in the chapter who leaves without what he came for.

The parable of the unjust judge is often misread as though God were reluctant and had to be worn down. Jesus says the opposite. The judge is the contrast, not the comparison. If a corrupt man who cares nothing for justice will act because a woman keeps showing up, then the God who is neither corrupt nor indifferent will certainly avenge His own elect who cry out day and night. The startling turn is the last line: when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth? The question is not whether God will answer but whether we will still be asking.

The chapter closes with the third passion prediction and the blind man at Jericho. Luke sets them side by side on purpose. The Twelve are told plainly that the Son of Man will be delivered to the Gentiles, mocked, spit upon, scourged, killed, and raised, and the text says three times over that they did not understand. Then a man who cannot see at all identifies Jesus correctly as the Son of David and will not be silenced. The sighted are blind and the blind man sees.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Luke 18 nears the end of the travel narrative; by 19:28 Jesus is going up to Jerusalem for the last time.
- A widow in that world had no standing to press a case; the repeated Old Testament command to defend widows (Deuteronomy 10:18; Isaiah 1:17) makes the judge's indifference worse.
- Pharisees fasted twice a week beyond what the law required and tithed scrupulously; this man's claims were accurate, which is the point.
- Tax collectors were Jews working for Rome and were regarded as traitors; the man's posture, standing afar off, beating his breast, matches the shame of that position.
- "Received Him as a little child" concerns disposition, not age, but Jesus' welcome of infants also shows they are already safe with Him rather than guilty at birth.
- The parallel accounts are in Matthew 19:13–20:34 and Mark 10:13–52; Mark names the blind man Bartimaeus.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The parable of the widow argues from the lesser to the greater: if an unjust judge finally acts, how much more will God. Why, then, does Jesus end it by asking whether He will find faith on the earth when He comes?*

Because the parable is not finally about God's willingness but about our endurance. Jesus states the purpose in verse 1: men always ought to pray and not lose heart. God has already settled the question of whether He will act; He will avenge His own elect speedily. What remains uncertain is whether the praying will still be going on when He comes. That is why the story ends with a question rather than a promise.

Ask the class about prayers they have abandoned. Most people can name one: a wayward child, a marriage, a health matter, the salvation of a friend. Then ask what caused the stopping. Usually it is not a decision but an erosion, a slow conclusion that nothing is happening. The widow's only strategy was to keep showing up, and Jesus commends it. Consider asking the class to adopt one another's stalled prayers for a month.

Question 2. *Everything the Pharisee says in his prayer is true. He really did fast and tithe. So what exactly is wrong with it, and where do we pray that way without ever hearing ourselves?*

Nothing in the content is false and everything in the posture is wrong. He prayed “with himself,” Luke says, and every line is a comparison. He thanks God, but only for his own superiority, and he uses another man in the room as the measuring stick. Verse 9 gives Luke’s own summary of the audience: those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others. Those two always travel together. Self-trust requires someone to look down on.

We pray that way more often than we notice, usually in the form of quiet comparison: grateful that our children turned out better, that we have never done what that family did, that at least we are here on Sunday. A useful diagnostic for the class: when you pray, do you ever ask for mercy, or only for help? The tax collector’s prayer is seven words, and Jesus says he went down to his house justified rather than the other.

Question 3. *Jesus told this ruler to sell everything, but He never said that to Zacchaeus or to Nicodemus. What was He after in this particular man, and what do you think He would put His finger on in you?*

Jesus was after the man’s actual god. His first move is to test the young man’s use of the word “good,” and his second is to quote commandments from the second table of the law, the ones about neighbors, omitting the one about coveting. When the man claims to have kept them all, Jesus names the single thing that would prove it, and the man’s sorrow answers the question for everyone watching. Mark 10:21 adds that Jesus loved him as He said it.

The instruction is specific, not universal. Zacchaeus kept half his goods and was told salvation had come to his house. The point for the class is that Jesus is willing to name the one thing we have quietly exempted from His authority, and it is different for each person. Ask them to sit with the question rather than answer it aloud: what would He name in me? Then note verse 27, which keeps the passage from despair. What is impossible with men is possible with God.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read the two prayers in 18:10–14 side by side. Count how many times the Pharisee says “I,” and write down exactly what the tax collector asks for and what Jesus says he received.*

The Pharisee uses “I” four or five times in two verses: I thank You, I am not like other men, I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I possess. The tax collector asks for one thing, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” and the word he uses carries the sense of atonement, of mercy made possible by a sacrifice. Jesus says he went down to his house justified rather than the other, and then states the principle: everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

2. *Jesus says the kingdom must be received as a little child (18:16–17). Read Matthew 18:3–4 and 19:14 as well. What is it about a child that He is pointing to, and what does that settle about the spiritual condition of children?*

Jesus points to the child’s dependence, lowliness, and readiness to receive rather than to earn. A small child has no achievements to plead and no status to protect. The passages also settle something else. Jesus does not tell children to become like adults in order to be saved; He tells adults to become like children in order to enter the kingdom, and He says of infants that the kingdom belongs to such as these. Children are not born guilty of anyone else’s sin. Guilt comes when a person sins himself (Ezekiel 18:20).

3. *List everything the rich ruler had in his favor in 18:18–21, and then what Jesus said he still lacked. Compare 1 Timothy 6:17–19 and Matthew 6:19–21.*

He had wealth, position as a ruler, youth, moral seriousness, a genuine question about eternal life, and by his own account a lifelong record of keeping the commandments he was asked about. What he lacked was a single thing: sell what you have, distribute to the poor, and come follow Me. Paul tells the rich in 1 Timothy 6 not to trust in uncertain riches but to be rich in good works, laying up a good foundation for the time to come, and Jesus says in Matthew 6 that the heart follows the treasure. The ruler’s heart was already where his treasure was, and he could not move it.

4. *In 18:31–34 Jesus foretells His death and resurrection in unmistakable detail, and the apostles understand none of it. Read Isaiah 53:3–6 and consider why the plainest prophecy in the Bible was the hardest thing for them to accept.*

Jesus gives them everything: Jerusalem, the Gentiles, mockery, spitting, scourging, death, and the third day. Luke says the saying was hidden from them and they did not know the things which were spoken. Isaiah 53 had said it centuries earlier, despised and rejected, wounded for our transgressions, and the Jewish expectation still had no category for a crucified Messiah. What we want to be true shapes what we are able to hear, even when the words are plain. That is a warning to every Bible class, not only to the Twelve.

5. *The blind man would not be quiet, even when the crowd told him to hush (18:38–39). Name the request you have quietly stopped bringing to God because you got tired of asking, and bring it to Him every day this week.*

Answers will vary. Watch for the reason people stopped, and name it gently: discouragement, embarrassment at repetition, a theology that says God has already decided, or fear of being disappointed again. The blind man was rebuked by the crowd and cried out much more. Encourage one specific daily time and place for the renewed request, and ask someone to check in at the end of the month.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The unjust judge is a contrast with God, not a picture of Him. Do not let anyone leave thinking prayer works by wearing God down.
- “Sell all that you have” addresses this man’s particular idol. It is not a universal command, and it is also not to be softened until it means nothing. Teach both halves.
- Jesus’ welcome of infants, together with Ezekiel 18:20 and Matthew 18:3, rules out inherited guilt and infant baptism. Children are safe; adults must become like them.
- The tax collector went home justified, but this is not justification by faith only apart from obedience. Jesus is contrasting two hearts before the cross and before the gospel was preached; how a person is justified now is answered in Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3–4, and Galatians 3:26–27.

Qualified Men, Faithful Teaching

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 3 is the New Testament's most detailed description of the men who lead a congregation, and the striking thing about it is what is missing. There is no requirement of education, wealth, business success, popularity, or public speaking ability beyond being able to teach. What is required is a man whose life is above reproach, whose marriage is faithful, whose children are believers under control, who is hospitable, gentle, not greedy, not a new convert, and well regarded by outsiders. God appoints shepherds on the basis of what they already are.

In the middle of the chapter Paul explains why all of this matters. He is writing so that Timothy will know how people ought to conduct themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. A pillar holds something up so that everyone can see it. The congregation is not the source of truth; it is the support on which the truth is displayed in a community. Then Paul breaks into what appears to be an early hymn: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory.

Chapter 4 turns to the threat. The Spirit says expressly that in latter times some will depart from the faith, and Paul names the marks: forbidding to marry, commanding abstinence from foods, teaching received through hypocritical liars whose consciences are seared. His answer is not a program but a man. Timothy is to be nourished in the words of faith, to exercise himself toward godliness, to be an example even though he is young, to give attention to reading, exhortation, and doctrine, and to take heed to himself and to the teaching. That last charge, 4:16, ought to be written on the inside cover of every preacher's Bible.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Elder, bishop or overseer, and pastor or shepherd are three terms for the same office in the New Testament (Acts 20:17 and 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–2; Titus 1:5–7).
- Elders always appear in the plural in a congregation, and their oversight is local; there is no New Testament authority for one man over a church or for oversight beyond the congregation.
- Deacons are servants appointed to specific work, as illustrated in Acts 6:1–6, under the oversight of the elders.
- “Departing from the faith” in 4:1 assumes that those who depart once had it, which is a plain statement against the idea that a Christian cannot fall.
- The asceticism Paul condemns, forbidding marriage and certain foods, appeared early and later hardened into systems of clerical celibacy and mandated fasting.
- Timothy was a relatively young man with a Jewish mother and Greek father, raised on the Scriptures (Acts 16:1–3; 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. Read 3:1–7 slowly, item by item. Nearly every qualification concerns character and home rather than talent or education. Why would God qualify shepherds that way, and what does that tell us about the actual work of an elder?

Because the work of an elder is shepherding, and shepherding is done by character over long periods of time rather than by policy. Men follow a man they trust; families open their troubles to someone whose own household is in order; a congregation under strain is steadied by a man who is not quarrelsome, not violent, not greedy, and not quick to defend himself. The one skill named, apt to teach, still requires holding fast the faithful word so as to convict those who contradict (Titus 1:9).

The list also quietly protects the congregation. A man who manages his own house well has already demonstrated the relevant competence; a novice may be lifted up with pride; a man with a bad reputation outside the church will bring reproach on it. Ask the class what they actually look for when they think of appointing elders, and whether that list matches Paul's. Then ask what a congregation owes the men it appoints, since this passage is often used to scrutinize elders and never to support them.

Question 2. *First Timothy 3:15 calls the church the pillar and ground of the truth. What does that make a congregation responsible for, and where should that responsibility be visible on an ordinary Sunday morning?*

A pillar holds the truth up where a community can see it, and a ground or foundation keeps it from sinking. That makes a congregation responsible for guarding sound teaching, for handing it on intact, and for displaying it in the way its members actually live. It is a stewardship, not a copyright; the truth is God's, and the church is its support.

On an ordinary Sunday this ought to be visible in specific ways: teaching that comes from the text rather than from opinion, worship that follows the New Testament pattern rather than the preferences of the room, a class where questions are answered from Scripture, and members who could tell a neighbor why they do what they do. Ask the class what a first-time visitor would conclude about what this congregation believes based only on what he saw and heard for ninety minutes.

Question 3. *Paul tells Timothy to be an example in word, conduct, love, spirit, faith, and purity (4:12). Which of those six is hardest for a young Christian to hold onto in our setting, and what support from this congregation would actually help?*

The six are worth naming one by one. Word is what comes out of the mouth, including humor and what is repeated about other people. Conduct is behavior when no one from church is present. Love is how the inconvenient person is treated. Spirit, in the sense of attitude, is what shows under pressure. Faith is steadiness when God is silent. Purity covers both body and imagination, which today means the phone in the pocket.

Most classes will land on purity or on word, and either answer opens a real conversation. Then press on the second half of the question, because Paul does not tell Timothy to manage alone. He tells him to give attention to reading, exhortation, and doctrine, and he surrounds him with faithful men. Ask what practical support exists here for young Christians: who calls them, who studies with them, whose home they are in. If the honest answer is nobody, the class has its assignment.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out the qualifications for elders in 3:1–7 and set them beside Titus 1:5–9. Which items appear in one list and not the other, and what do the two together emphasize most?*

First Timothy adds not a novice, having a good testimony among those outside, and ruling his own house well, with children in submission. Titus adds having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, a lover of what is good, just, holy, self-controlled, and holding fast the faithful word so as to exhort and convict. Together the two lists emphasize proven character, a well-ordered household, self-control, and a firm grip on sound teaching. Note that both assume a man who is the husband of one wife and the father of children.

2. *Compare the qualifications for deacons in 3:8–13 with those for elders. What is shared, what is different, and who are the women of verse 11 most likely to be?*

Deacons share the requirements of dignity, one wife, control of home and children, freedom from greed and from too much wine, and a tested character, and they must hold the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. The difference is that deacons are not required to be apt to teach or to have oversight; their work is service under the elders' direction. The women of verse 11 are most naturally understood either as the deacons' wives or as women who serve alongside them in work among women; the Greek allows both, so state the possibilities honestly and do not build a church office out of an uncertain verse.

3. *First Timothy 4:1–3 describes a falling away marked by forbidding marriage and commanding abstinence from certain foods. Read Colossians 2:20–23 and Hebrews 13:4, then explain why man-made restrictions feel so spiritual while accomplishing nothing.*

Both passages say the same thing from different angles. Colossians says such regulations, “do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. Hebrews says marriage is honorable among all. Man-made restrictions feel spiritual because they are visible, measurable, and produce a sense of accomplishment. They fail because they do not touch the heart, and because binding where God has not bound is itself a sin (Matthew 15:9). Paul’s test in 4:4–5 is that every creature of God is good and is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

4. *Paul says bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things (4:8). Track your hours honestly this week: how many go to your body, and how many to your soul? Write down both numbers before you draw a conclusion.*

Answers will vary, and the exercise is more useful than any lecture. Paul is not against physical exercise; he says it profits a little. He is establishing proportion. Most of us will spend more time this week on a body that will be buried than on a soul that will not. The follow-up question is not guilt but scheduling: where in an actual week does an unhurried half hour with God exist?

5. *Paul tells Timothy to take heed to himself and to the doctrine and to continue in them (4:16). Choose one thing you will read, memorize, or study every day for the next thirty days, then tell someone so they will ask you about it.*

Answers will vary. The strength of the assignment is in the last clause, telling someone. Paul pairs “take heed to yourself” with “and to the doctrine,” so the best answers involve both content and conduct: a book of the Bible read daily, a list of verses memorized, a subject studied because someone at work keeps asking. Thirty days is long enough to become a habit and short enough to finish.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Elders are men who are husbands of one wife with faithful children; do not soften the qualifications, and do not add to them either. Keep the three terms, elder, bishop, and pastor, tied to one office.
- First Timothy 4:1, “some will depart from the faith,” plainly assumes that a person who has the faith can lose it. Use it kindly but clearly against “once saved, always saved.”
- Verse 3:11 is genuinely ambiguous. Say what is certain, name the two reasonable understandings, and do not create an office the New Testament does not clearly authorize.
- “Let no one despise your youth” is not a warrant for young men to push past qualified, appointed leaders. Paul’s remedy is that Timothy be such an example that no one can despise him.

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Isaiah 50–59 • Psalm 90–91 • Luke 19:1–27 • 1 Timothy 5–6

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com