

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 76 OF 104

Mercy at the Table

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Jeremiah 10–15
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 102–103
Gospels	Luke 22:1–30
General New Testament	Philemon

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to let the class feel how mercy actually reaches a person. Jeremiah gets it in the form of an honest God who lets him argue and then calls him back. Psalm 103 gives it in the form of a Father who knows exactly what we are made of. Luke gives it at a table where the bread is handed to a betrayer and to a roomful of men competing for rank. And Philemon gives it in the form of a letter asking a man to take back the person who robbed him. Four different rooms, one God who keeps receiving people.

Doctrinally, several things need care. Jeremiah 13:23 describes the power of habit, not inherited guilt or total depravity. Psalm 103:12 must be read with 103:17–18, so that forgiveness is taught as full for the penitent and not as unconditional amnesty. Luke 22:19–20 establishes the Lord's Supper as a memorial in which bread and the fruit of the vine represent His body and blood, observed by the assembled church on the first day of the week, and it declares the arrival of the new covenant, which means the Old Law ended at the cross. And Luke 22:29–30 concerns the reign Christ entered at His ascension, not a future earthly throne.

The formational thread is what we do with people who have failed. God keeps working with a discouraged prophet. Jesus keeps handing bread to men who will deny and desert Him within hours. Paul spends his own credit to get a runaway received as a brother. So put this to the class before they leave: name the person you have quietly written off, whether a relative, a former member, or someone who owes you something, and name one thing you will do this week that a person who had been forgiven as much as you have would do.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Luke 22:1–30 first. The institution of the supper deserves an unhurried hour, and most members have never heard it taught at length. Give twenty minutes to verses 19 and 20, ten to the betrayer at the table, and close with the argument about greatness and what it looks like here.

Second session: Take up Philemon second, and read the whole letter aloud at the start; it takes three minutes. Then work through Paul's appeal, the offer to pay the debt, and the honest question about slavery. It pairs naturally with the supper, since both are about receiving people we would rather not.

The other two readings: Jeremiah 10–15 and Psalms 102–103 carry the extended questions. Read Psalm 103:8–14 aloud before the closing prayer in one session and say nothing after it. Encourage members to mark Jeremiah 12:5 and 15:19 in their Bibles, since those two verses answer most of the discouragement a faithful Christian meets.

Confessions of a Weeping Prophet

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These six chapters contain the first of what are often called Jeremiah's confessions, passages where the prophet speaks to God with a bluntness that surprises people who think faith requires composure. He asks why the wicked prosper, calls God a deceptive brook, accuses Him of enticing him, and complains that his pain is perpetual. God never rebukes him for the honesty. God does rebuke him for wanting to quit.

Around the confessions runs the theme of a covenant broken. Chapter 11 has Jeremiah proclaiming the words of the covenant in the streets and discovering that the men of his own hometown want him dead for it. Chapter 13 gives the acted parable of the linen sash, worn close to the body like Judah once clung to God, then buried by the river until it is good for nothing. Chapter 14 brings the drought, and the crowd suddenly gets religious, and God sees straight through it.

Notice what God offers Jeremiah in 15:19 through 21. Not an explanation. Not relief. He offers restored standing, a renewed commission, and the same promise given at his call: they will fight against you but not prevail. The book is teaching something a class needs to hear, that God prefers an honest wrestler to a polite stranger, and that the answer to spiritual exhaustion is usually returning rather than resigning.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Chapters 11 through 20 contain Jeremiah's laments or confessions, personal prayers preserved inside a book of public preaching. Nothing quite like them exists elsewhere in the prophets.
- Anathoth was Jeremiah's home village, a priestly town, and the plot of 11:21 means his own relatives and neighbors sought his life.
- The linen sash of chapter 13 was an undergarment worn tight against the skin; God explains the sign Himself in 13:11, so no speculation is needed.
- The Euphrates of 13:4 is a long trip from Jerusalem. Some understand it as the town of Parah a few miles away, since the Hebrew words are nearly identical. The meaning of the sign does not change either way.
- Chapter 14 describes a severe drought, and the people's sudden prayers show a nation willing to be religious when the weather turns but not willing to repent.
- Moses and Samuel are named in 15:1 because both are remembered for successful intercession. God is saying that even they could not turn this judgment aside now.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *In Jeremiah 12:1–4 the prophet asks God why the way of the wicked prospers, and God answers in 12:5 with a question about running with horses. Why does God answer that way instead of explaining Himself, and what is He preparing Jeremiah for?*

God does not defend Himself. He asks Jeremiah how he expects to run with horses if footmen have already worn him out, and how he will manage in the thickets of the Jordan if he stumbles in open country. It is not cruelty; it is honesty about what is coming. The siege, the famine, the mud of the cistern, and the burning city are all ahead. God is telling His prophet that the present difficulty is the training ground, not the crisis.

There are two lessons for the class. First, God permits the question. Jeremiah asks what Job asked, what Habakkuk asked, and what Psalm 73 asked, and heaven does not fall. Second, God's answer to hard providence is more often a promise of His presence and a call to endure than a chart explaining His reasons. Ask the class where they have been waiting for an explanation and have missed an invitation to grow strong enough for what is next.

Question 2. *Jeremiah 13:23 asks whether an Ethiopian can change his skin or a leopard his spots, and says that is how hard it is for people accustomed to evil to do good. How much can a person change himself, and where does real change come from?*

Be careful here, because this verse gets misused in both directions. Jeremiah is not saying that people are born incapable of doing anything good; the same book is filled with calls to repent, which would be pointless if repentance were impossible. He is saying that habits practiced long enough become a second nature, so that a person accustomed to evil finds right doing as unnatural as changing his complexion. The whole verse is about people who are accustomed to doing evil.

Then name the good news without softening the diagnosis. Self improvement runs out of road, but God changes people. That is the very thing promised later in this book (Jeremiah 24:7; 31:33) and delivered in Christ, where a person is buried with Him in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-6; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Guard the class from concluding that people are born guilty or totally depraved. Each person becomes guilty when he himself sins (Ezekiel 18:20).

Question 3. *God tells Jeremiah in 15:19 that if he returns, he will stand before God again and be His mouth. What is the difference between complaining to God honestly and drifting away from Him, and how do you tell which one you are doing?*

Notice that God does not treat Jeremiah's complaint as sin. He treats the direction as the problem. In 15:18 Jeremiah has moved from asking God a question to accusing Him of being an unreliable stream, a wadi that runs dry in August. God's reply is not a lecture but a door: if you return, I will restore you; take the precious from the worthless and you will be My mouth; let them turn to you, and do not you turn to them.

Help the class draw the line. Honest complaint is spoken to God, stays in the relationship, and still shows up for duty. Drifting talks about God to other people, quietly stops praying, and starts letting the crowd set the terms. The psalms are full of the first and warn against the second. Ask each person which direction he has been moving over the past six months, and what returning would look like by Wednesday.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Jeremiah 10:1-16 contrasts idols with the living God. Make two columns and list what each is said to be and to do. Which contrast is sharpest?*

Idols are cut from a tree by an axe, decorated with silver and gold, fastened with nails and hammers so they will not topple, upright as a palm tree but unable to speak, carried because they cannot walk, unable to do evil or good. The Lord is the true God, the living God, the everlasting King, the portion of Jacob, the former of all things, who made the earth by His power and at whose wrath the earth trembles. The sharpest contrast is in 10:5: they must be carried, He carries.

2. *Read Jeremiah 11:18-23 about the plot by the men of Anathoth, Jeremiah's own village. Compare Luke 4:24 and John 1:11. What do the two passages have in common?*

The men of Anathoth, Jeremiah's own townspeople and kin, plotted to kill him and told him not to prophesy in the name of the Lord. Jesus said no prophet is accepted in his own country, and John 1:11 says He came to His own and His own did not receive Him. The pattern is that rejection usually starts closest to home, where a messenger is most easily dismissed as merely familiar.

3. *Jeremiah 15:16 says he found God's words and ate them, and they were the joy of his heart. Look up Ezekiel 3:1-3 and Psalm 119:103. What picture do these three passages share, and what would it take for Scripture to be food rather than duty?*

All three picture taking Scripture into oneself the way food is taken in: found and eaten, sweeter than honey, the joy and rejoicing of the heart. Answers will vary on the second half. Look for concrete change: reading at a time when a person is awake rather than exhausted, reading less and thinking longer, reading with a pen, praying the passage back. Food is chewed slowly; duty is swallowed whole.

4. Trace how God exposes the false prophets in Jeremiah 14:13–16. What were they promising, and what test does the passage give for distinguishing a true message from a comfortable one?

The false prophets promised assured peace, saying there would be no sword or famine in that place. God says He did not send them, that they prophesy a lying vision and the deceit of their own heart, and that they will themselves perish by the sword and famine they denied. The test in the passage is twofold: was the man sent, and does the message merely tell people what they want? A word that never costs the hearer anything deserves suspicion.

5. Name one situation where you have been complaining to God for months. Write out what returning to Him would look like in that situation this week, and then do the first thing on your list.

Answers will vary. Watch for the difference between naming a hardship and naming a response. Returning may mean resuming a discipline abandoned months ago, confessing a resentment toward God to a mature Christian, or going back to the duty a person quit doing while he waited on an answer. Ask for the first action and a day.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Jeremiah 13:23 describes the power of settled habit, not inherited guilt or total depravity. Say so explicitly, because a class member who has heard Calvinistic preaching will hear the verse that way.
- Jeremiah 10:23, that the way of man is not in himself, teaches that human beings are not competent to direct their own steps apart from God. It does not deny free will or moral responsibility, which this very book assumes on every page.
- Jeremiah 10:2–5 is about carving and decorating an idol for worship. It is not about any modern seasonal custom, and someone will raise that. Answer briefly, keep the passage in its subject, and do not bind where God has not spoken.
- God's instruction in 14:11 not to pray for this people concerns a specific judgment already settled on a nation. Do not let it become a principle for writing off a person today.

He Remembers We Are Dust

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 102 has a title unlike any other: a prayer of the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed and pours out his complaint before the Lord. The details are physical and awful. His days vanish like smoke, his bones burn, his heart is withered like cut grass, he forgets to eat, he keeps vigil like a solitary sparrow on a rooftop, and his enemies use his name as a curse. Nothing is tidied up. God preserved this prayer for the people who would need it.

The turn comes at verse 12, and it is not a change of circumstance but a change of subject. But You, O Lord, endure forever. From there the psalmist reasons outward: God will arise and have mercy on Zion, He regards the prayer of the destitute, and this will be written for a generation to come. His own days are shortened, but the years of God have no end, and the heavens will be changed like a garment while God remains the same.

Psalm 103 is the sunrise after that night. David speaks to his own soul, which is worth pointing out to a class, since most people only listen to their souls instead of instructing them. Forget not all His benefits. Then come forgiveness, healing, redemption, crowning, satisfying, renewing, and finally the great sentence: He knows our frame, He remembers that we are dust. The God who sits enthroned in verse 19 is the God who kneels down in verse 14.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 102 is traditionally counted among the penitential psalms, though its dominant note is affliction rather than confession. The title is unusually specific about its use.
- References to Zion's stones and to rebuilding suggest a setting near the exile, whether written in it or for those in it.
- Hebrews 1:10–12 quotes Psalm 102:25–27 and applies words addressed to the Lord directly to Jesus, which is one of the strongest arguments for the deity of Christ in Scripture.
- Psalm 103 is a psalm of David, built on Exodus 34:6–7, where God proclaims Himself merciful, gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.
- Hebrew poetry works by parallel lines and by concrete comparison rather than abstraction, which is why Psalm 103 measures mercy by the height of the sky and the width of the horizon.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 102 spends eleven verses describing misery before it says anything hopeful. Why does God put prayers like that in the Bible, and what does its presence permit for a Christian having a terrible year?*

God includes prayers like this because His people actually pray them. If Scripture contained only serene devotion, every suffering believer would conclude that his own experience disqualifies him. Instead, roughly a third of the psalms are laments, and they follow a recognizable shape: address God, describe the trouble without editing it, and then turn to what is true about God whether or not the trouble lifts.

What it permits is honesty without unbelief. The psalmist never stops praying, never stops calling Him Lord, and never pretends. Tell the class plainly that a Christian in a terrible year is not required to feel fine or to speak in slogans. Then show them the hinge at verse 12, because the psalm does not stay in the dark. Ask who in the room has learned to make that turn, and how.

Question 2. *Psalm 103:12 says our transgressions have been removed as far as the east is from the west. Talk about what that removal actually means, and why forgiven people keep digging up what God has carried away.*

East and west never meet; they are the one pair of directions with no meeting point. North and south have poles. The comparison is deliberate. Removal here means God has dealt with the guilt so completely that it is no longer between Him and the sinner. Compare Isaiah 38:17, Micah 7:19, and Hebrews 8:12, where God says He will remember their sins no more, which is not divine amnesia but a promise never to hold them against us again.

Why do we keep digging? Partly because the consequences remain, and we mistake consequence for continued guilt. Partly because shame is a habit. Partly because some of us secretly want to pay for it ourselves, since being forgiven means owing a debt we can never settle. Be pastoral. Someone in the room has confessed the same sin for years, unable to believe it is gone. Read 1 John 1:7–9 aloud to them, and note Psalm 103:17–18, which attaches these promises to those who fear Him and keep His covenant, so that no one mistakes this for a blanket amnesty on unrepented sin.

Question 3. *Psalm 103:13–14 says God pities us as a father pities his children because He knows our frame and remembers we are dust. How does that tenderness differ from God excusing our sin?*

The word translated pity is the word for a father's deep compassion. It is not indulgence, and the psalm does not say God excuses us. Verses 8 through 10 already said He does not keep His anger forever and has not dealt with us according to our sins, which assumes real sins deserving real judgment. What verse 14 adds is that God factors in our fragility. He is not surprised by our weakness, and He is not disgusted by it.

Draw the distinction sharply for the class. A good father does not pretend the broken window is unbroken; he takes into account that the child is seven. God calls us to holiness and gives real commands, and He knows precisely how much dust we are made of. That is why He gave a Mediator who was tempted in all points as we are (Hebrews 4:15). Ask the class how differently they would approach God after failure if they genuinely believed verse 14.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the benefits David tells his soul not to forget in Psalm 103:3–5. Which one have you experienced most clearly in the past year?*

He forgives all your iniquities, heals all your diseases, redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, satisfies your mouth with good things, and renews your youth like the eagle's. Notice that forgiveness heads the list, before healing or provision. Answers will vary on the second half; teachers should be ready to name one from their own year first, since that usually unlocks the room.

2. *Hebrews 1:10–12 quotes Psalm 102:25–27 and applies it to Jesus. Read the two passages together and state what the writer of Hebrews is proving about the Son.*

Psalm 102:25–27 addresses the Lord who laid the foundation of the earth, whose years do not fail while the heavens perish and are changed like a garment. Hebrews 1:10–12 applies those words to the Son. The writer is proving that Jesus is not the greatest of created beings but the eternal Creator Himself, unchanging, superior to angels, and rightly worshiped. The whole argument of Hebrews stands on that.

3. *Trace the three comparisons of Psalm 103:11–13: as high as, as far as, and like as. What is each one measuring, and what would be lost if any of them were removed?*

As high as the heavens are above the earth measures the size of God's mercy toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west measures the distance He has put between us and our sins. Like as a father pities his children measures the quality of His attitude toward us. The first gives scale, the second gives finality, and the third gives warmth. Remove any one and you get either a distant God, an anxious conscience, or a sentimental one.

4. *Psalm 103:17–18 says God's mercy is on those who fear Him, to such as keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments. What conditions does the psalm attach to the promises of the verses before it?*

The mercy of the Lord is on those who fear Him, His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant and to those who remember His commandments to do them. The psalm places these promises inside a

covenant relationship of reverence and obedience. That is not earning mercy; it is the difference between a person walking with God and a person using God's name while going his own way.

5. Write down three specific benefits from the last twelve months that you had already forgotten. Then tell one person about one of them this week, out loud.

Answers will vary. The exercise works because gratitude fades faster than grievance. Push for genuinely forgotten items: a bill that got covered, a diagnosis that came back clear, a friendship repaired, a temptation avoided because someone called at the right moment. Telling it out loud is part of the assignment, since blessing the Lord in Psalm 103 is a spoken act.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 103:12 must be taught alongside 103:17–18. Forgiveness is full and final for the penitent; it is not an unconditional guarantee to a person living in unrepented sin (1 John 1:7–9; Acts 8:22).
- Lament is legitimate. Do not let the class treat Psalm 102 as weak faith, and do not let anyone leave thinking a Christian must always feel victorious.
- Psalm 103:3 speaks of God healing diseases. Read it as praise for God's general goodness in a covenant relationship, not as a promise that every believer will be healed of every illness.
- Hebrews 1:10–12 uses Psalm 102 to affirm the full deity of Christ. Make that point positively; it will be needed again in a few weeks.

The Supper and the Strife

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke frames the supper with betrayal on one side and vanity on the other. Judas has already gone to the chief priests and settled a price. The apostles are about to argue over status. Between those two failures Jesus institutes the meal His church has kept ever since. That arrangement is not an accident of chronology; Luke wants the reader to see grace handed to people who do not deserve it, by a Lord who knows exactly what they are.

The meal itself is Passover, and that matters. For fourteen centuries Israel had eaten a lamb and remembered a deliverance. Jesus takes the bread of that meal and says, this is My body given for you; do this in remembrance of Me. He takes the cup after supper and says it is the new covenant in His blood, shed for you. He is announcing that the old arrangement is ending and a new one is being ratified, and He is the sacrifice that ratifies it.

Then comes the strife. It is almost comic if it were not so familiar: within minutes of the cup, they are ranking themselves. Jesus contrasts the kings of the Gentiles, who exercise lordship and love to be called benefactors, with His own way: the greatest becomes as the youngest, the leader as the one who serves. And He points to Himself sitting there among them as the one who serves. Every congregational squabble about position has its ancestor in this room.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This is Thursday of the final week. The Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover had merged in common usage into a single festival week.
- Passover commemorated the night in Egypt when the blood of a lamb on the doorposts turned aside the destroyer (Exodus 12). Paul calls Christ our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7).
- The elements Jesus used were the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine present at the Passover table. The New Testament names no other elements.
- Acts 20:7 shows the disciples coming together on the first day of the week to break bread, and 1 Corinthians 11:20–34 assumes a regular assembly for it. The weekly first day observance follows that pattern.
- Luke alone records the dispute over greatness at the supper. He also records that Jesus had already told them plainly, more than once, what was coming (9:22, 44; 18:31–33).
- The kingdom Jesus appoints in 22:29–30 is the reign He entered at His ascension (Acts 2:33–36; Colossians 1:13), with the apostles given a unique place of authority in its foundation (Ephesians 2:20; Matthew 19:28).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. Read Luke 22:19–20 slowly. What did Jesus say the bread and the cup mean, and what is a Christian actually doing when he eats and drinks on the first day of the week?

Jesus said the bread is His body given for them and the cup is the new covenant in His blood shed for them, and He commanded that it be done in remembrance of Him. Teach the elements as He explained them: the bread and the fruit of the vine represent His body and His blood. He was sitting there in His body, holding bread, when He said it, which is the plainest answer to the idea that the elements change substance. Nothing in Scripture supports an altar, a priest, or a repeated sacrifice; Hebrews 10:10–14 says the offering was once for all.

Then answer the second half practically. When a Christian eats, he is remembering a person, proclaiming the Lord's death till He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26), examining himself (11:28), and discerning the body, which includes recognizing the brethren around him. Ask the class what they actually think about during the supper, and

whether their minds are on the cross, on the week ahead, or on nothing at all. A gentle, specific answer to that question can change a congregation's Sundays.

Question 2. *Jesus says the hand of the one betraying Him is with Him on the table (22:21). How can a person be that close to Christ and still be lost, and what does that warn about proximity to the church?*

Judas had heard every sermon, seen every miracle, been sent out to preach, and held the money bag. He was not an outsider who slipped in; he was an insider who never surrendered. Luke says Satan entered him, and John 13:2 says the devil had already put the thought in his heart, which means Judas was not a puppet. He opened a door, repeatedly, and finally something walked through it.

The warning for a congregation is direct and should be given without cruelty. It is possible to be present every Sunday, to teach a class, to be the third generation of a faithful family, and to be lost. Nearness is not loyalty. Ask the class what habits keep a person spiritually honest: confession to God, an accountable friendship, self examination at the supper, a willingness to hear correction. Then note where Judas had none of them.

Question 3. *The argument about who would be greatest breaks out at the Last Supper, of all places (22:24–27). Where does the hunger for rank show up in a congregation today, and what would Jesus' answer look like if we actually took it?*

Rank hunger shows up wherever recognition is distributed: who leads what, whose name gets mentioned, who is consulted before a decision, who sits where, whose family has been here longest, who gets thanked from the front. It is rarely stated. It surfaces as hurt feelings, as a withdrawal from work, or as a quiet campaign. Jesus does not tell them to stop wanting greatness; He redefines it. The greatest becomes as the youngest, which in that culture meant the one with no claim at all.

Make it concrete. If the class actually took Jesus at His word, the jobs nobody sees would be the most sought after: setting up chairs, cleaning after a meal, sitting with a grieving family for three hours, teaching four year olds. Ask who in this congregation is great by Jesus' definition and has never been thanked publicly. Then ask each member to take one unseen task this month and to resist the urge to mention it.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the steps in Luke 22:1–6 from Satan entering Judas to the search for an opportunity. How many separate decisions does Judas make?*

Satan entered Judas, and then Judas went his way, conferred with the chief priests and captains, discussed how he might betray Him, agreed with them, accepted a promise of money, and sought an opportunity to betray Him away from the crowd. That is at least five deliberate steps after the temptation entered. The passage makes plain both the reality of satanic influence and the reality of Judas' own repeated choices.

2. *Compare Luke 22:19–20 with 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 and Acts 20:7. When did the early church eat this supper, how often, and what did Paul say the eating proclaims?*

Acts 20:7 says the disciples came together on the first day of the week to break bread, and Paul preached to them there. First Corinthians 11:23–26 records the same words Jesus spoke and says that as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. The New Testament pattern is the assembled church on the first day of every week, remembering and proclaiming.

3. *Jesus says in 22:20 that the cup is the new covenant in His blood. Read Hebrews 9:15–17 and Colossians 2:14. When does a covenant take effect, and what happened to the old one?*

Hebrews 9:15–17 says a covenant is in force after men are dead, and has no strength while the one who made it lives. Colossians 2:14 says the handwriting of requirements that was against us was wiped out and nailed to the cross. The new covenant took effect at the death of Christ, and the old law, with its priesthood, sacrifices, feast days, and Sabbaths, was fulfilled and removed there (Hebrews 8:13; 10:9).

4. Read Luke 22:28–30 next to Daniel 7:13–14 and Acts 2:29–36. What kind of kingdom is Jesus appointing, and when did it begin?

Daniel 7:13–14 sees one like the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days and receiving dominion and a kingdom that will not pass away. Acts 2:29–36 says God raised Jesus, seated Him at His right hand, and made Him both Lord and Christ. The kingdom Jesus appoints is His present reign, entered by the new birth, not a future political arrangement. It began on Pentecost, exactly as Mark 9:1 and Daniel 2:44 said it would.

5. Jesus says He is among them as the one who serves. Name one act of service you can do this week that nobody will find out about, and do it without telling anyone afterward.

Answers will vary. The point of the secrecy is to starve the appetite Jesus is addressing in verses 24 through 27. Suggestions that work: paying for a widow's repair through the deacons anonymously, cleaning a building on a weeknight, writing a note of encouragement unsigned, taking a shift no one wants. Teachers should not ask for reports the following week; that would defeat the exercise.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The bread and the cup represent the Lord's body and blood. Teach against transubstantiation plainly but without mockery, and keep the focus on remembrance, proclamation, and self examination (1 Corinthians 11:23–29).
- The new covenant in His blood means the Old Covenant ended at the cross. Do not bind Old Covenant practice on Christians (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13).
- Luke 22:29–30 is not a promise of an earthly throne room in a future millennium. The apostles' unique place belongs to the foundation of the church, and Christ reigns now.
- Satan entering Judas does not remove Judas' responsibility, and it should not be used to teach that a person can be overpowered against his will (James 1:14–15; 1 Corinthians 10:13).

Receive Him as Myself**PASSAGE OVERVIEW**

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters and the most personal, and it is a small masterpiece of pastoral tact. Paul does not open with the problem. He opens with thanksgiving, telling Philemon that the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by him, and then he asks Philemon to refresh one more. He mentions his own chains twice, mentions that he is an old man, includes Apphia and Archippus and the whole church that meets in the house, and only then names Onesimus.

The legal situation was serious. A runaway slave in the Roman world could be branded, beaten, or killed, and anyone harboring him was liable. Paul sends him back into that risk with a letter, which means he is staking his own reputation and finances on the outcome. Put my name on the bill, he says, writing the promissory note in his own hand, and then adds with a smile that Philemon owes him his own soul.

The theology is hidden in the personal details. Onesimus was once unprofitable and is now profitable. He departed for a season that Philemon might receive him forever. He returns not now as a slave but above a slave, a beloved brother. And whatever he owes, charge it to me. A class that reads this letter slowly will see the gospel enacted between two ordinary men over one runaway.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Paul writes from imprisonment, most likely in Rome around A.D. 62, at the same time as Colossians. Onesimus and Tychicus carried both letters (Colossians 4:7–9).
- Philemon lived in Colossae, was probably converted through Paul, and hosted a congregation in his home. Archippus is named here and in Colossians 4:17.
- Roman slavery was widespread and was not based on race. Slaves included teachers, physicians, and household managers, and many were freed. It was still bondage, and a runaway had no legal protection.
- The letter is a personal appeal, yet Paul addresses the church that met in the house, which means Philemon's answer would be given in front of his brethren.
- The name Onesimus means useful or profitable, a common name for a slave, and Paul builds his gentlest argument on it in verse 11.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul says in verses 8 and 9 that he could be bold to command but for love's sake prefers to appeal. When should Christians use authority, and when is persuasion the better instrument even if you hold the authority?*

Paul held apostolic authority and had every right to use it. He chooses instead to appeal, and he gives his reason: for love's sake, and so that Philemon's good deed would not be by compulsion but voluntary (verse 14). Commanded obedience produces compliance; persuaded obedience produces a changed man. Paul wants Philemon transformed, not merely obedient.

Then give the class the balance, because persuasion is not always right. There are times when a command is the loving act: when sin must be named (Titus 1:13; 2:15), when a congregation is being divided (Titus 3:10), when a child must simply obey. Ask them where they have used authority when patience would have accomplished more, whether with a spouse, an employee, a teenager, or a brother in Christ. Most of us reach for the blunt instrument first because it is faster.

Question 2. *Onesimus had to go back. Paul does not simply keep a useful convert in Rome. Why was returning necessary, and what does it say about how repentance and restitution fit together?*

Repentance in Scripture is never merely internal. Zacchaeus restored fourfold (Luke 19:8). The Israelite who wronged his neighbor made restitution with a fifth added (Leviticus 6:1-5). Paul did not tell Onesimus that since his sins were forgiven, the debt in Colossae no longer mattered. He sent him back to face the man he had wronged, which took more courage than staying.

Draw it into the room carefully. Forgiveness from God is free; the repair of what we damaged is our work, and it is usually the part people skip. Ask what restitution looks like now: the apology given without qualifiers, the money paid back, the truth told to the person who was lied to, the resignation offered. Warn against one error: restitution should not be made in a way that transfers the pain onto an innocent third party, and a wise Christian will get counsel before acting in complicated cases.

Question 3. *The New Testament regulates the master and slave relationship rather than calling for revolt, and here Paul quietly dissolves it by calling a slave a beloved brother. How would you explain to an honest unbeliever why the Bible handles slavery this way?*

Be honest with the class, because an honest unbeliever deserves an honest answer. The New Testament does not describe slavery as good, and it does not call for armed revolt, which in the first century would have ended in slaughter and would have branded the church as sedition. What it does is more radical and slower. It commands masters to give what is just and equal, forbids threatening, reminds them that they have a Master in heaven, tells them their slave is now a brother, and lists slave trading among the worst of sins (1 Timothy 1:10).

Then point at this letter. Paul does not stage a rebellion; he sends a slave home carrying a letter that calls him a beloved brother and asks the owner to receive him as he would receive Paul. Once a man is your brother in Christ, sharing the Lord's Supper with you, ownership becomes unthinkable. The gospel dissolved the institution from the inside, and where Christianity went deepest, slavery eventually could not survive. Say plainly that Christians who later defended race based chattel slavery were wrong and were contradicting the very letters they claimed to believe.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Paul says about Philemon in verses 4 through 7. How many of those statements are about what Philemon has done for other people?*

Paul thanks God always for him, hears of his love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, prays that the sharing of his faith may become effective, and says he has great joy and consolation in his love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by him. Nearly every statement is about what Philemon has done for other people. Paul praises him for the very thing he is about to ask him to do again.

2. *Paul plays on the name Onesimus, which means useful or profitable (verse 11), and then in verse 18 says to charge anything Onesimus owes to Paul's account. Compare 2 Corinthians 5:21. What does Paul's offer picture?*

Paul offers to assume a debt he did not incur so that a guilty man can be received as though he were innocent. Second Corinthians 5:21 says God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. Philemon 18 is that truth in miniature, written out in Paul's own handwriting as a legally binding note. Receive him as me, and charge what he owes to me.

3. *Read Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 4:1, and 1 Timothy 6:1-2. Write down what the New Testament requires of masters, which few people expect to find there.*

Masters are to do the same things to their servants, to stop threatening, knowing that their own Master is in heaven and that there is no partiality with Him (Ephesians 6:9), and to give what is just and equal (Colossians 4:1). Galatians 3:28 says that in Christ there is neither slave nor free. First Timothy 6:2 tells believing slaves with believing masters not to despise them, because those they serve are brothers. The obligations run in both directions, which was unheard of in Roman moral writing.

4. *In verse 21 Paul says he is confident Philemon will do even more than he asks. What might that more have been, and why would Paul leave it unstated rather than command it?*

Most readers understand the more to be freeing Onesimus, or sending him back to Paul for the work of the gospel, or both. Paul leaves it unstated because a freedom granted under command is not generosity. He has already said in verse 14 that he wants nothing from Philemon by compulsion. He states the principle and trusts a Christian man to see the implication, which is often the most effective way to teach.

5. *Name one relationship where you are the one who took something, walked away, or left a debt unpaid. Write the letter, make the call, or return the money this week, and name the day you will do it.*

Answers will vary. Insist on one concrete act and a date, and warn against the temptation to substitute an easy act for the hard one. If the wronged person cannot be found or would be harmed by contact, counsel giving the equivalent to the Lord's work and confessing it to a mature Christian.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Slavery deserves an honest word. Say that Scripture regulates an existing institution, forbids man stealing (1 Timothy 1:10), commands masters to justice, and turns a slave into a brother, and that this is what eventually dissolved it. Do not defend the institution, and do not let anyone leave thinking the Bible approved it.
- Do not universalize Paul's method into a rule that Christians must never confront directly. Paul commands sharply elsewhere. This letter shows judgment about when to appeal.
- Philemon 22 shows Paul expecting release. Note in passing that his imprisonment did not end his usefulness; some of the richest letters in Scripture came from a chain.
- The church met in Philemon's house. Use that to talk about hospitality and the ordinary settings of New Testament congregational life, not to argue about buildings.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Jeremiah 16-22 · Psalm 104 · Luke 22:31-71 · Hebrews 1-3

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