

# Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



## WEEK 78 OF 104

*The Word Like Fire*

| THIS WEEK'S READINGS  |                  |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| General Old Testament | Jeremiah 23-27   |
| Wisdom Literature     | Psalms 105       |
| Gospels               | Luke 23:1-43     |
| General New Testament | Hebrews 4:1-6:12 |

### TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to put God's word back in the center of the room as something that acts rather than something we discuss. Jeremiah hears God ask what the chaff is to the wheat and then call His word a fire and a hammer. Psalm 105 shows that same word testing Joseph in a dungeon until the time came. Hebrews says it is living and sharp enough to divide a man from his own motives. And Luke shows a criminal who had almost no information at all responding to the little he had, and receiving a promise from the King.

Doctrinally, this is one of the heaviest weeks in the program. The Branch of Jeremiah 23 is fulfilled in the reigning Christ, not in a future earthly kingdom. Luke 23:34 must be read with Acts 2:38 so that no one concludes the cross pardons the impenitent. The thief on the cross deserves a thorough, gracious answer, since it is the objection your members will hear most often. Hebrews 5:9 says Christ is the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, which settles faith only. And Hebrews 6:4-6 states as plainly as language permits that a saved person can fall away.

The formational thread is what a person does with the word he has been given. The prophets in Jeremiah 23 preached their own dreams and called it revelation. Joseph held a promise in a prison for years. The thief had almost nothing and used all of it. The readers of Hebrews had been taught well and had gone dull. So ask your class this before they go: name the last thing you heard from God's word that you knew required a change, and say out loud whether you made it, and if not, what day this week you will.

### SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

**First session:** Take up Luke 23:1-43 first. Give fifteen minutes to Pilate's three declarations of innocence and the anatomy of cowardice, ten to the prayer of 23:34 with Acts 2:36-38, and reserve the last twenty five for the thief. Do not rush that discussion; your members will be asked about it in their neighborhoods this year.

**Second session:** Take up Hebrews 4:1-6:12 second. Build the hour in three movements: the rest that remains, the High Priest we may approach boldly, and the warning of 5:11 through 6:12. End on 6:9-12, so the class leaves with the writer's confidence rather than only with his warning.

**The other two readings:** Jeremiah 23-27 and Psalm 105 carry the extended questions. Read Jeremiah 23:28-29 aloud at the start of a session and let the chaff and wheat question hang there. Assign the Psalm 105 exercise of writing out ten things God has done in your own household, and ask two members to be ready to read theirs next week.

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**Chaff, Wheat, and a Hammer****PASSAGE OVERVIEW**

Chapter 23 divides cleanly in two. The first eight verses deal with the shepherds, the kings and leaders who scattered the flock, and they end with the brightest promise in the book so far: a righteous Branch raised to David, reigning and prospering, executing judgment and justice, whose name is the Lord Our Righteousness. The rest of the chapter turns to the prophets, and the language gets hot. God says His heart is broken within Him because of them.

The indictment of the prophets is worth reading aloud. They prophesy by Baal, they commit adultery and strengthen the hands of evildoers, they steal God's words from one another, they use their tongues and say, He says. Above all, they tell everyone who despises God that peace is coming. God's test in verse 22 is the sharpest in Scripture: if they had stood in My counsel, they would have turned My people from their evil way. A word from God turns people. A word from a man flatters them.

Chapters 24 through 27 put the message into pictures and history. Two baskets of figs say that the exiles already carried away are the ones God will bless, which is the opposite of what everyone in Jerusalem assumed. Seventy years are announced. Jeremiah is put on trial for the temple sermon and barely escapes, while another prophet is extradited and executed for saying the same thing. And Jeremiah walks around wearing an ox yoke, telling ambassadors from five nations to put their necks under Babylon.

**BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

- The Branch is a messianic title used also in Isaiah 4:2, Jeremiah 33:15, and Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12. The New Testament applies these promises to Christ, who reigns now from the right hand of God.
- The seventy years of 25:11 are a historical period counted from the first deportation, and Scripture records their fulfillment (2 Chronicles 36:20–23; Daniel 9:2; Ezra 1:1). They are not a code for any other span of time.
- The two baskets of figs (chapter 24) were shown after the deportation of 597 B.C., when Jehoiachin and the leading citizens were taken and Zedekiah was left ruling a diminished city.
- The trial of chapter 26 is dated to the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign and concerns the temple sermon of chapter 7. Ahikam, who protected Jeremiah, was the father of Gedaliah, later appointed governor.
- The burden of the Lord in 23:33–40 is a play on a Hebrew word that can mean both an oracle and a heavy load. The people had turned a solemn phrase into a joke, and God says He will make them the burden.
- Jeremiah was the only voice in Jerusalem saying that submission to Babylon was God's will. Every patriotic instinct in the country said the opposite, which is why chapter 27 cost him so much.

**NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Question 1.** *Jeremiah 23:16–22 describes prophets who promise that no evil will come, and God says if they had stood in His counsel they would have turned people from their evil ways. Discuss the test that gives us for any message, including the ones we enjoy hearing.*

Verse 22 gives a test anyone can apply: a word from God turns people from evil. Preaching that leaves hearers exactly as they were, comfortable and confirmed, has failed the test regardless of how skillful it is. God stacks up the marks of the false prophets: they never stood in His counsel, they speak a vision of their own heart, they say to those who despise the Lord, you shall have peace. Notice that none of this is about sincerity. Some of these men surely believed their own dreams.

Then apply it to us, since none of us listens neutrally. Ask the class when a sermon, a class, or a book last changed something in their week. Ask what they would do if a teacher they liked taught something contrary to the plain

text. Deuteronomy 18:20–22 and 1 John 4:1 tell us to test; Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans for searching the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. A congregation that examines everything by the text will be hard to lead astray, and the way to build that habit is to invite people to check you.

**Question 2.** *God promises a righteous Branch from David whose name will be called the Lord Our Righteousness (23:5–6). Trace how the New Testament says that promise came true, and what it means for a person to wear a righteousness that is not his own.*

The Branch is a shoot from a cut down stump, which is exactly what David's line became. God promises a King who will reign and prosper and execute justice, and whose name is the Lord Our Righteousness. The New Testament says the promise landed in Jesus. He is of David's line (Matthew 1:1; Romans 1:3), He was raised and enthroned at God's right hand (Acts 2:29–36), and He was made to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30). Romans 3:21–26 shows how God can be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Be careful in two directions. First, do not push the class into thinking this promise awaits a future earthly throne in Jerusalem; Peter said plainly that God set Christ on David's throne at the resurrection. Second, do not let righteousness that comes from God become an excuse for a life that never changes. The same Lord who is our righteousness executes judgment and justice in the earth, and Titus 2:11–14 says grace teaches us to deny ungodliness. Ask the class what it feels like to stop trying to establish a righteousness of one's own.

**Question 3.** *God tells His people through Jeremiah to accept seventy years under a pagan empire and even to submit to Nebuchadnezzar's yoke. How do faithful people live under a government and a culture they did not choose and cannot fix?*

Jeremiah is telling people to accept a seventy year national humiliation as the discipline of God, and to live under the rule of a pagan king. It sounded like treason, and chapter 27 shows him arguing against every popular prophet in town. Yet it is the same counsel God gives His people in exile: build houses, plant gardens, seek the peace of the city, and pray for it (Jeremiah 29:4–7). The New Testament says much the same thing to Christians living under Rome (Romans 13:1–7; 1 Timothy 2:1–2; 1 Peter 2:13–17).

Bring the discussion into the present without letting it become politics. Christians are citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world, and that kingdom is not threatened by an election. We obey the government except where it commands us to sin (Acts 5:29), we pray for those in authority whether we voted for them or not, and we build, plant, and raise children in the meantime. Ask the class how much of their emotional life is currently being consumed by things they cannot change, and what they would do with that energy instead.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *List the charges God brings against the shepherds in Jeremiah 23:1–4, and then list what He says He will do about His scattered flock.*

The shepherds destroy and scatter the sheep, they have driven them away and not attended to them, and God says He will attend to them for the evil of their doings. Then He promises to gather the remnant of His flock out of all countries, to bring them back to their folds where they will be fruitful, and to set up shepherds over them who will feed them so that they fear no more and none is lacking. The remedy for bad shepherding is not the removal of shepherds but the giving of good ones, which is worth noting when a congregation has been hurt by leadership.

**2.** *Read the vision of the two baskets in Jeremiah 24. Write down what God says about each basket, and note carefully the promise in verse 7.*

The good figs are the captives already carried to Babylon, whom God says He will acknowledge for good, on whom He will set His eyes, whom He will bring back and build and plant. Verse 7 says He will give them a heart to know Him, that they shall be His people and He their God, for they shall return to Him with their whole heart. The bad figs are Zedekiah and those left in the land and in Egypt, destined for sword, famine, and pestilence. The surprise is that the people who looked judged were the ones being preserved.

3. *Jeremiah 23:29 compares God's word to fire and to a hammer that breaks rock. Read Hebrews 4:12 and Acts 2:37 alongside it. What do these passages say the word does to a person who actually hears it?*

Hebrews 4:12 says the word is living and powerful, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Acts 2:37 says that when they heard Peter's sermon they were pierced in their hearts and asked what they should do. The word does not merely inform; it burns, breaks, cuts, and exposes. A hammer is not gentle, but it is what rock requires.

4. *Read the trial in Jeremiah 26. Who defended Jeremiah, what precedent did they cite, and what happened to the prophet Urijah in the same chapter?*

The priests and prophets demanded his death; the princes and the people ultimately protected him. Certain elders cited the precedent of Micah of Moresheth, who in Hezekiah's day prophesied that Zion would be plowed like a field, and whom Hezekiah did not put to death. Ahikam the son of Shaphan stood with Jeremiah so that he was not handed over. In the same chapter Urijah preached the same message, fled to Egypt, was extradited, and was executed by Jehoiakim. The two outcomes in one chapter are a sober reminder that faithfulness is not always rewarded with survival.

5. *Name one area where you have been choosing chaff over wheat: a teacher, a podcast, a friend, or a habit of reading that tells you what you want to hear. What will you replace it with this month?*

Answers will vary. Look for honesty about inputs. Most of us have curated a set of voices that agree with us, and the algorithm on a phone will do it for us if we do not. Press for a specific replacement rather than a vague resolve: a book of the Bible read slowly, a class attended, a teacher whose material corrects rather than confirms, a friend given permission to disagree.

## HANDLE WITH CARE

- The Branch and the name the Lord Our Righteousness are fulfilled in Christ, who reigns now (Acts 2:29–36; 1 Corinthians 1:30). Do not allow a premillennial reading that postpones this to a future earthly kingdom.
- The seventy years are a specific historical period whose fulfillment Scripture records. They are not a formula for calculating anything about our own time. Refuse date setting firmly and kindly.
- Jeremiah 24:7, that God will give them a heart to know Him, describes what God does through His covenant and His word for a people who return with their whole heart, as the same verse says. It is not irresistible grace.
- God's complaint that He never sent these prophets raises the question of modern claims to revelation. Teach plainly that the faith was once for all delivered (Jude 3) and that Scripture furnishes us completely (2 Timothy 3:16–17), and do it without sarcasm toward sincere people.

## He Remembered His Promise

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 105 is history sung as praise. It opens with eight verbs of worship, give thanks, call, make known, sing, talk, glory, seek, remember, and then it does what it just commanded: it remembers. From verse 8 to the end it is the story of God keeping one promise made to one man, through four hundred years of delay, a famine, a prison, an empire, and a wilderness.

Notice how the psalm reads events. Joseph is not merely sold by his brothers; God sent a man before them. The famine is not merely weather; He called for a famine on the land. The Egyptians' change of heart is not merely politics; He turned their heart to hate His people. This is not fatalism. It is a settled conviction that the God who promised is the God who governs, and that nothing in the story fell outside His purpose.

The verse most classes miss is 19: until the time that his word came, the word of the Lord tested him. Joseph had a promise from God in the form of two dreams, and the promise itself was the instrument of his testing. Between the dream and the palace lay a pit, a false accusation, and a forgotten prisoner. That verse alone is worth the hour, because half the people in your class are somewhere between a promise and its fulfillment.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The first fifteen verses of this psalm appear in 1 Chronicles 16:8–22, sung when David brought the ark to Jerusalem. The psalm was written for public worship.
- Psalms 105 and 106 are a deliberate pair. Psalm 105 tells the story from the side of God's faithfulness; Psalm 106 tells the same story from the side of Israel's failure. Neither is complete without the other.
- Touch not My anointed ones (105:15) refers to the patriarchs, whom God protected from kings like Pharaoh and Abimelech while they wandered as strangers.
- The land promise of verse 11 was fulfilled. Joshua 21:43–45 says God gave them all the land He swore to their fathers and that not one word of all His good promises failed.
- The psalm ends where Israel's obligation begins, with statutes and laws, which is the standard Old Testament order: redemption first, then obedience (Exodus 20:2 before 20:3).

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Psalm 105 is built on the command to remember (105:5). Why does God keep telling His people to remember, and what would a Christian version of this psalm look like for your own life?*

God commands remembering because human beings forget at an astonishing rate. Israel forgot the Red Sea within weeks. So God built memory into the calendar with feasts, into the landscape with stones of remembrance, and into worship with psalms like this one. He knows that gratitude is not a personality trait but a practice, and that a forgotten mercy becomes an assumed right within about a month.

The Christian version is not hard to construct. We have the Lord's Supper every first day of the week, which is a memorial by the Lord's own command (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24–26). We have baptism as a date and a moment that can be named. We have the accumulated answers to prayer that nobody wrote down. Ask the class whether anyone in the room keeps a written record of God's dealings with them, and let those who do describe what it has done for them. Then assign the exercise in the last self study question.

**Question 2.** *Psalm 105:17–22 says Joseph was laid in irons until the time that his word came, and that the word of the Lord tested him. How does God's promise itself become a test, and where have you felt that?*

The dreams came to Joseph at seventeen. The fulfillment came at thirty, after slavery, false accusation, and two forgotten years in a prison. Verse 19 says the word of the Lord tested him, which means the promise itself was the

crucible. As long as Joseph believed the dream, every day in the dungeon was evidence against it. That is precisely the kind of testing that reveals whether a person trusts God or merely trusts the outcome he expected.

Get the class to name the space they are standing in. A couple praying for a child. A man out of work. A parent waiting on a son who left the faith. A widow waiting on a homecoming she can barely imagine. Say clearly that waiting is not a sign that God has forgotten, and note how the psalm phrases it: until the time that his word came. There was a time. God knew it. Joseph did not, and Joseph kept working faithfully in whatever room he was locked in, which is the only counsel Scripture gives for the in between.

**Question 3.** *The psalm ends by saying God gave them the lands of the nations so that they might keep His statutes and observe His laws (105:44–45). Talk about the relationship between what God gives and what God then expects.*

The psalm's last two verses are the hinge of the whole Bible's pattern. God gave them the labor of nations and the lands of peoples, and the purpose clause follows: that they might observe His statutes and keep His laws. God does not give in order to be repaid, and He does not give as a reward for obedience already performed. He gives, and then He expects the gift to produce a life shaped by Him.

That is the New Testament pattern too. We were saved by God's mercy, not by works of righteousness we had done, and we are His workmanship created for good works (Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 3:5–8). Grace does not eliminate obligation; it creates it. Ask the class where they have received something from God, a marriage, health, a job, a congregation, and have not yet asked what obedience the gift was meant to produce.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *Outline the psalm by naming each stage of the story in order. How many verses does it spend on Joseph, and why might that be?*

Verses 1 through 7 are the call to worship, 8 through 15 the covenant with Abraham and the wandering years, 16 through 22 the famine and Joseph, 23 through 25 the descent into Egypt and the growth of the nation, 26 through 36 Moses and the plagues, 37 through 41 the exodus and the wilderness provision, and 42 through 45 the land and its purpose. Six verses go to Joseph, more than any other individual episode. Joseph is the clearest case in Israel's memory of God working through what looked like disaster.

**2.** *Psalm 105:8–11 says God remembered His covenant to a thousand generations and confirmed it to Jacob. Read Galatians 3:16 and 3:26–29. Who does the New Testament say the promised seed is, and who inherits the promise now?*

Galatians 3:16 says the promises were made to Abraham and to his Seed, singular, who is Christ. Galatians 3:26–29 says that those who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ, and that if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. The inheritance comes through Christ to all who are in Him, Jew and Gentile alike. That is why no future political arrangement is needed to complete these promises.

**3.** *Psalm 105:37 says they came out with silver and gold and that there was not one feeble person among their tribes. Compare Exodus 12:35–36. What does that detail say about God's care in a rushed departure?*

Exodus 12:35–36 says the Israelites asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and clothing, and the Lord gave them favor so that the Egyptians granted the request. A people who had entered Egypt as a hungry family and lived as slaves for generations left with wages in hand and without a straggler. God does not merely rescue; He attends to the details of the rescue, including the health of the elderly and the pay owed for four hundred years of labor.

**4.** *Read the first ten verses of Psalm 106, which you will study next week, beside Psalm 105. What does each psalm choose to talk about, and why do we need both?*

Psalm 105 tells the story as God's faithfulness: He remembered, He sent, He brought them out with joy. Psalm 106 tells the same story as Israel's failure: they did not remember, they lusted, they made a calf, they murmured, they forgot God their Savior. We need both because one alone produces either presumption or despair. Together they give the true picture, a faithful God dealing patiently with an unfaithful people, which is the story every Christian is living.

5. Write your own list of ten things God has done in your life and in your family, in order, the way this psalm does. Read it aloud to someone in your household before the week ends.

Answers will vary, and this assignment is the point of the psalm. Encourage chronological order rather than a ranked list, since the order is what shows the pattern. Reading it aloud matters; Psalm 105 was written to be sung in public, not filed privately. Families with older children should hear the parents do this, because most children have never been told the specifics of how God has dealt with their own household.

#### **HANDLE WITH CARE**

- The land promise was fulfilled (Joshua 21:43–45; 23:14). Do not let anyone treat it as an unpaid debt requiring a future earthly kingdom; the promises to Abraham are inherited in Christ (Galatians 3:29).
- Touch not My anointed (105:15) refers to God's protection of the patriarchs. It is not a shield against the examination of preachers or elders, and it is sometimes misused that way. Elders are to be rebuked publicly when necessary (1 Timothy 5:19–20).
- The psalm's strong language about God turning hearts and sending famine describes His government over history. Read it alongside the plain teaching of Scripture that each person chooses and is accountable (Ezekiel 18:20; Joshua 24:15).
- Psalm 105 leaves out Israel's sins on purpose, and Psalm 106 supplies them. Say so, or a careful reader will think the psalm is whitewashing the record.

## Between Two Criminals

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Luke structures the trial to make one point: everybody with authority knew He was innocent. Pilate says it three times. Herod finds nothing worthy of death. Even the criminal on the cross says this man has done nothing wrong. Luke is writing for a Roman audience, and he wants it on record that the King of the Jews was executed not because of evidence but because of a crowd and a career.

Then Luke gives details the other gospels do not. Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross behind Jesus, which is the very phrase Jesus used about discipleship. The women weeping, and His warning that they should weep for themselves and their children, pointing toward the horror of A.D. 70. The prayer for the executioners, which is the first of the three sayings Luke records from the cross. And the conversation between two dying men that has comforted more sinners than almost any passage in the Bible.

Do not rush the thief. He is hanging next to Jesus, in agony, having mocked Him earlier according to Matthew, and something changes. He rebukes his companion, confesses the fear of God, admits he is getting what his deeds deserve, declares Jesus innocent, calls Him Lord, believes He has a kingdom on the far side of death, and asks only to be remembered. That is more faith than the apostles showed that afternoon, and Jesus answers with a promise that is both immediate and personal: today, with Me.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Rome reserved capital punishment to itself, which is why the Sanhedrin had to bring Jesus to Pilate, and why the charges were reframed as sedition: perverting the nation, forbidding tribute, claiming to be a king.
- Pilate was politically vulnerable. Earlier incidents had already brought complaints to Rome, and the threat implied in John 19:12 about not being Caesar's friend was a real one.
- Herod Antipas, who had executed John the Baptist, ruled Galilee and was in Jerusalem for the feast. Luke alone records this hearing.
- Crucifixion was designed for public humiliation as much as for death, and Rome used it on slaves and rebels, not on citizens. The charge was posted above the head.
- Paradise translates a Persian loan word for a walled garden. In Luke 16:22–23 the righteous dead are described as comforted in a conscious state awaiting judgment; Scripture speaks of the intermediate state with reserve, and so should we.
- The great commission, including the command to baptize, was given after the resurrection (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16), and the new covenant took effect at the death of Christ (Hebrews 9:15–17).

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Pilate declares Jesus innocent three separate times and sentences Him anyway (23:4, 14, 22). Walk through the pressures on him, and talk honestly about how decent people end up doing terrible things.*

Lay out the pressures without excusing him. Pilate had already been reported to Rome for provoking the Jews, he was governing a volatile province at a feast when the city was full, the crowd was becoming a riot, and the leaders finally said the one sentence he could not ignore: if you release this man you are not Caesar's friend. He tried every evasion available. He sent Him to Herod. He offered Barabbas. He proposed a beating instead. He washed his hands. Luke says he finally gave sentence that it should be as they required.

Then turn it on the room, gently. Nobody in your class will ever sentence an innocent man to death. Everybody in your class will face a moment when doing right costs a position, a friendship, or a family's goodwill, and the temptation will not be to choose evil but to find a procedure that lets them avoid choosing. Ask what the modern

equivalents of washing your hands look like: staying out of it, saying nothing, letting someone else decide, going along while privately disagreeing. Pilate's sin was not cruelty. It was cowardice with paperwork.

**Question 2.** *Jesus prays, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (23:34). Discuss what that prayer reveals about Him, and then read Acts 2:36–38 to see what those same people were later told they had to do.*

The prayer reveals a Savior interceding for His executioners while they gamble for His clothes. It is what Isaiah 53:12 said He would do, make intercession for the transgressors, and it is the pattern Stephen follows when he dies (Acts 7:60). It also shows that ignorance is real; Peter later tells the crowd, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did your rulers (Acts 3:17). Ignorance does not make sin harmless, but it leaves a door open.

Now guard the point carefully, because this verse is sometimes used to teach automatic universal pardon. Look at what happened to those very people. In Acts 2 Peter tells them that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. They are cut to the heart and ask what they should do. He does not say, you were forgiven at the cross. He says repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins. The prayer of Jesus opened the way; the blood provided the pardon; and the pardon was received when they obeyed. Teach that sequence plainly, and let the class see that the answer to Luke 23:34 is written in Acts 2:38.

**Question 3.** *The criminal beside Jesus was saved without being baptized, and many people use him to argue that baptism is unnecessary today. Work through that argument carefully: when did he live, under which covenant did he die, and when was the great commission given?*

This is the single most common objection raised against the necessity of baptism, so take it slowly and answer it thoroughly, with warmth. Start by granting everything the text says. This man was saved. He was not baptized, so far as we know. Jesus told him he would be in paradise that very day. None of that is in dispute, and no honest teacher should try to explain it away.

Then give the reasons it does not settle what God requires of us. First, timing. The new covenant did not take effect until Jesus died; Hebrews 9:15–17 says a covenant is in force only after the death of the one who made it, and Colossians 2:14 says the old law was nailed to the cross. The thief lived and died under the Old Covenant, before the new one began. Second, authority. During His earthly ministry Jesus forgave sins directly on His own word (Luke 5:20–24; 7:48–50), and He had every right to do so; nobody argues that a paralyzed man in Capernaum shows baptism is unnecessary. Third, the commission. The command to baptize was given after the resurrection (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16), and the first gospel sermon under it was preached at Pentecost, weeks after this man died. Fourth, we do not actually know he was unbaptized; Luke 7:29–30 says all the people and the tax collectors, having heard Jesus, justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. Fifth, and most importantly, the question is not how God dealt with a man under a covenant that has ended, but what the risen Christ commands now. The answer is consistent from Acts 2 to the end: Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6:3–4, Galatians 3:26–27, 1 Peter 3:21, Mark 16:16. Close pastorally. Very often the person raising the thief is not arguing; he is grieving someone who died unbaptized, or he is afraid for a family member. Say that God alone judges the individual soul, that we have no authority to pronounce on anyone's eternal destiny, and that our business is to do what He has told us plainly to do, while we still can.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *List everyone who mocks Jesus in this passage and what each one says. What do they all have in common in what they demand He prove?*

The rulers sneer that He saved others and should save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God. The soldiers mock and offer sour wine, saying if you are the King of the Jews, save yourself. One of the criminals rails, saying if you are the Christ, save yourself and us. All three demand the same proof: come down. It is the same temptation Satan offered in the wilderness, the demand that He use His power for His own rescue. The salvation of the world depended on His refusing.

2. Read Luke 23:26–31, where Jesus speaks to the daughters of Jerusalem. Compare Luke 19:41–44 and 21:20–24. What event is He telling them to weep about?

He tells them not to weep for Him but for themselves and their children, because days are coming when people will call the barren blessed and will beg the mountains to fall on them. He is speaking of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, which He had already described in 19:41–44 and 21:20–24. Even walking to His own execution, His concern is for the city that rejected Him.

3. Matthew 27:44 says both criminals reviled Him. Compare that with Luke 23:39–43 and trace what the second man came to believe while hanging there. How many separate things does he confess in two sentences?

Matthew says both reviled Him, so the second man changed his mind while hanging there. In two sentences he confesses the fear of God, admits that he and his companion are justly condemned, declares that Jesus has done nothing wrong, calls Him Lord, believes that He has a kingdom beyond death, and asks to be remembered in it. That is at least six things, and he has no Bible, no baptism available, no church, and a few hours to live. Faith can grow very fast under the right circumstances.

4. The word *paradise* appears in Luke 23:43, 2 Corinthians 12:4, and Revelation 2:7, and Luke 16:22–23 describes the state of the dead. What can you say with confidence about where Jesus promised the man would be, and what should you not claim?

You can say with confidence that the man would be with Jesus that same day, consciously, in a state of comfort rather than torment, since Luke 16:22–25 describes the righteous dead as comforted. Paradise is also used of the place Paul was caught up to and of the presence of God in Revelation 2:7. What you should not claim is a detailed geography of the unseen world, or that the thief received his final reward before the resurrection. Scripture speaks about the intermediate state briefly and about the resurrection at length; keep the same proportions.

5. The dying man asked only to be remembered, and he got far more than he asked. Name one person you have written off as too far gone, and pray for that person by name every day this week.

Answers will vary. The point is that the last person anyone would have expected became the first person Jesus welcomed. Encourage the class to be specific: the estranged brother, the neighbor who has said no twice, the son who has not been inside a building in ten years. Daily prayer by name for a week changes the one praying as much as it may change the one prayed for.

## HANDLE WITH CARE

- The thief on the cross deserves unhurried, gracious treatment. He died under the Old Covenant, before the new one took effect (Hebrews 9:15–17), Jesus forgave sins directly during His ministry, and the great commission had not yet been given. Present those facts calmly; the tone matters as much as the content.
- Luke 23:34 does not teach that everyone was pardoned unconditionally. Acts 2:36–38 shows the same crowd being told to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins.
- Guard the tone on the role of the Jewish leaders and the crowd. Peter says they acted in ignorance, and he then offered them the gospel. This passage is not a warrant for contempt toward any people.
- Speak carefully about paradise and the state of the dead. Say what Luke 16 and Luke 23 say, and refuse to speculate beyond them.
- Someone will raise the thief because of a specific person they have lost or fear losing. Judgment belongs to God (Romans 14:12); our responsibility is to obey what He has revealed. Say both things, and say the second one kindly.

## The Rest That Remains

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The argument that began with Psalm 95 in chapter 3 finishes here. Joshua brought Israel into Canaan, yet God still spoke of a rest long afterward through David, so the rest in view is not a piece of real estate. There remains a rest for the people of God, and the writer's conclusion is a paradox worth pausing over: let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one falls by following the same pattern of disobedience. Rest is received, and it is also pursued.

Then comes the double edged sword and the high priest, and the two belong together. The word exposes us completely, and there is no creature hidden from His sight; everything is naked and laid bare before the eyes of the one to whom we must give account. That is terrifying until the next paragraph, where the one before whom we stand exposed is the one who was tempted in all points as we are. So the invitation is not to hide but to come boldly, and to find mercy and grace at the moment of need.

Chapter 5 turns to the priesthood and stops abruptly. The writer wants to talk about Melchizedek and says he cannot, because they have become dull of hearing. They should be teachers; they need milk. Then he presses on anyway and issues the warning of 6:4–8, about people who were enlightened, who tasted the heavenly gift, who shared in the Holy Spirit and tasted the good word of God, and who fell away. It is the plainest statement in Scripture that a saved person can be lost, and the writer immediately adds that he expects better things of his readers.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The word translated rest in 4:9 is a different Greek word from the one used earlier, and it means a Sabbath rest or Sabbath keeping. The writer uses it to describe the final rest of God's people, not a weekly observance.
- Melchizedek, introduced at 5:6 and 5:10, is held over until chapter 7 because of the readers' dullness. Next week's reading picks it up.
- Hebrews 5:7 refers to Gethsemane, where He offered prayers with strong crying and tears.
- The foundation items of 6:1–2 are the elementary teaching a Jewish convert would receive: repentance, faith, teaching about washings, laying on of hands, resurrection, and eternal judgment.
- The plural baptisms in 6:2 most likely reflects teaching that distinguished Christian baptism from Jewish ceremonial washings and from John's baptism.
- This letter was written to people under real pressure to go back. Everything in it, including the warnings, is pastoral rather than theoretical.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Hebrews 4:9–11 says a rest remains for the people of God, and then says to labor to enter it. How can a rest be something you have to work at, and what is the writer actually asking us to do?*

Start by saying what the rest is not. It is not the land of Canaan, since Joshua gave them that and God still spoke of a rest afterward. It is not the seventh day, since the writer is arguing from the Sabbath, not for it. The rest that remains is the final rest of God's people with Him, entered through Christ and enjoyed in part now by those who have ceased from trying to justify themselves by their own works.

Then explain the paradox of verse 11. The labor is not earning; it is holding on. The wilderness generation fell not through insufficient effort but through unbelief and disobedience, and the writer says do not copy that pattern. Diligence here looks like continuing to believe, continuing to obey, continuing to assemble and be exhorted daily,

and refusing to drift. Ask the class what drifting actually looks like in an average life. Nobody decides to drift. A boat that is not rowed still moves.

**Question 2.** *Hebrews 4:14–16 says our High Priest was tempted in every way we are, yet without sin, so we should come boldly to the throne of grace. How would praying like that differ from the way most of us actually pray?*

Most of us pray as if God needs to be persuaded to listen, or as if we must clean ourselves up first. The passage says two things that dismantle both habits. Our High Priest is not out of touch with our weaknesses; He has been through the whole catalogue of temptation without sinning, which means He understands it better than we do, since only the one who never gives in knows how strong the pull really is. And His throne is a throne of grace, approached boldly, where mercy is found for failures already made and grace for help in time of need.

Make it practical. Praying this way means bringing the temptation itself to God before it becomes the sin, rather than bringing only the wreckage afterward. It means praying at the moment of need rather than at the scheduled hour. It means telling the truth in prayer about what is actually happening. Ask the class to name the one subject they least want to bring to God, and then read verse 16 to them again.

**Question 3.** *Hebrews 5:11–6:8 warns about people who were enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, and shared in the Holy Spirit, and who then fell away. Read it carefully together. What does the passage teach about whether a Christian can be lost, and how should that be said to a frightened believer?*

Read 6:4–6 aloud slowly and let the description land. Once enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come. No honest reading makes those people anything other than genuine Christians. And then, if they fall away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they are crucifying again for themselves the Son of God and putting Him to open shame. The passage settles the question: a person who has been saved can be lost. Compare Galatians 5:4, 2 Peter 2:20–22, and Hebrews 10:26–31.

Now handle it pastorally, because the way this passage is taught matters enormously. The impossibility is not a limit on God's willingness; it is a description of a person who has deliberately turned back and, in that condition, keeps crucifying Christ afresh. As long as he holds that posture there is nothing left to renew him with, since he has rejected the only remedy. The very next verses say, we are confident of better things concerning you, things that accompany salvation. Note also that the person terrified he has committed this sin almost certainly has not; a hardened apostate does not lie awake worrying about it. Say to the class what the writer says: God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love. And say to the one who has drifted, come back today, because the door is open while it is called today (Hebrews 3:13; Acts 8:22).

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *List everything Hebrews 4:12–13 says the word of God is and does. Which of those descriptions is most uncomfortable, and why?*

It is living, powerful, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow, and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Verse 13 adds that no creature is hidden from His sight and that all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. Answers will vary on which is most uncomfortable; many will say the discerning of intents, because we can defend our actions far more easily than our motives.

**2.** *Hebrews 5:1–10 describes what a high priest must be and then shows how Christ met it. Pay special attention to 5:9, where He is called the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. What does obedience have to do with salvation according to that verse?*

A high priest is taken from among men, appointed to act for men in things pertaining to God, able to have compassion on the ignorant and wayward since he himself is subject to weakness, and does not take the honor to himself but is called by God. Christ was called by God, shared our flesh, prayed in agony, and learned obedience through suffering. Verse 9 says He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. Obedience is not the

ground of salvation, which is His blood; it is the condition God attaches to receiving it, which is why the New Testament speaks of obeying the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 1:22).

3. *Hebrews 5:12–14 contrasts milk with solid food and says the mature have their senses trained by use. Name the skills a person develops by exercise rather than by information alone.*

The passage says the mature are those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Skills that grow only by practice include recognizing a false argument, saying no to a familiar temptation, telling the truth when it costs something, handling money generously, staying calm under insult, and knowing when to speak and when to be quiet. Information can be transferred in an hour; discernment is built by repetition over years.

4. *Write out the six items in the foundation of Hebrews 6:1–2. How many of them are things a person hears at the beginning of his Christian life, and what does the writer want them to move on to?*

Repentance from dead works, faith toward God, the doctrine of baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. All six are things taught at the beginning of the Christian life. The writer is not dismissing them; he is saying a foundation is meant to be built on. He wants them to go on to maturity, which in this letter means grasping the priesthood of Christ and the finished work of the new covenant, and then living like people who understand it.

5. *Hebrews 6:10–12 says God will not forget your work and labor of love toward His name in ministering to the saints. Name one specific act of ministering to a saint that you will do this week, and say when.*

Answers will vary. Push for a named saint and a day: the meal taken, the ride given, the hospital visit, the afternoon spent helping someone move, the card written to a member who has been absent. Hebrews 6:10 is one of the great encouragements in Scripture for people who serve quietly and think nobody noticed.

## HANDLE WITH CARE

- The Sabbath rest of 4:9 is the final rest of God's people, not an argument for Sabbath observance. The Lord's Day is not a Christian Sabbath (Colossians 2:16–17; Acts 20:7).
- Hebrews 5:9 says Christ is the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. Use it to teach plainly that salvation is not by faith only (James 2:24), while making clear that obedience never earns what only His blood can buy.
- Hebrews 6:4–6 teaches that a genuinely saved person can fall away and be lost. Teach it plainly against once saved, always saved, and teach it tenderly, because someone in the room is afraid it describes him.
- Do not let a discussion of 6:4–6 consume the whole hour in speculation about the unpardonable sin. Note 6:9–12, where the writer immediately expects better things, and point people to the open door of repentance (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9).

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**NEXT WEEK'S READING:** Jeremiah 28–32 • Psalm 106 • Luke 23:44–24:12 • Hebrews 6:13–7:28

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