

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 83 OF 104

A Kingdom Unshaken

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Jeremiah 50-52
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 114-117
Gospels	John 3
General New Testament	Hebrews 12-13

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to help the class tell the difference between what can be shaken and what cannot. Jeremiah watches an empire and a temple come down. The psalms are sung by people who had lost a country and kept a God. Nicodemus discovers that his credentials will not get him into the kingdom. And Hebrews says, in the present tense, that we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken. Everything else in the week is commentary on that sentence.

Doctrinally, two texts carry weight. John 3:5 defines the new birth as being born of water and the Spirit, and it must be taught in the light of Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:26-27, and Titus 3:5, with John 3:36 kept next to John 3:16 so that believing is never separated from obeying. Hebrews 12:28 then settles the question of when the kingdom came. It is here, Christ reigns, and His people are already citizens.

Formationally, watch what the readings ask you to let go of. A runner strips off weights. A psalmist refuses credit twice in one line. John the Baptist watches his crowd walk away and calls it joy. Hebrews 13 asks for hospitality, contentment, and giving that costs. Ask your class this: name the one thing you are holding that a runner would drop, and tell us what would happen if you dropped it this week.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up John 3. It is the most important text of the week for anyone in the room who has never obeyed the gospel. Spend the first half on Nicodemus and the new birth, with Acts 2:38 and Romans 6:3-4 open, and the second half on verses 16 through 21 and 36.

Second session: Take up Hebrews 12-13. Give the heart of the hour to the chastening passage and to verses 18 through 29, since together they cover both the pain your class is actually in and the security they actually have. Finish with the benediction in 13:20-21 read aloud.

The other two readings: Assign Jeremiah 50-52 and Psalms 114-117. Tell the class that Jeremiah ends with a prisoner released and a seat at the table, and ask them to notice it. Point out that Psalms 113 through 118 were sung at Passover, so Jesus sang these words on the night He was betrayed.

GENERAL OLD TESTAMENT **Jeremiah 50-52**

The Hammer Broken

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapters 50 and 51 are the longest oracle in the book, and their audience is not Babylon. Babylon will never read this. The audience is a devastated people who have just watched Babylon burn the house of God and who need to know that the empire is not the last word. So God piles up images: Babylon is a hammer that will be broken, a golden cup in the Lord's hand that made the earth drunk, a destroying mountain that will become a burnt mountain. Every image says the same thing. What looks permanent is on loan.

Woven through the judgment is a word for Israel. In those days, the iniquity of Jacob shall be sought and there shall be none. Their Redeemer is strong. My people, go out of the midst of her, and let every one deliver his soul. Jeremiah has been preaching doom for forty years, and here at the end he is given a page of promises. The point to press with your class is that God's judgments on the nations were never the goal. The goal was always a cleansed people who could be His again.

Chapter 51 ends with an unforgettable sign act. Seraiah, traveling to Babylon, is told to read the scroll aloud in the city, tie a stone to it, throw it into the Euphrates, and say, "Thus Babylon shall sink and not rise." Then comes the sentence that ends the book of Jeremiah proper: "Thus far are the words of Jeremiah." Chapter 52 is an appendix recording the fall of the city and the stripping of the temple, and it closes with Jehoiachin brought out of prison after thirty-seven years and given a place at the king's table. It is a small door left open at the end of a very dark hallway.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Babylon fell to Cyrus and the Medo-Persians in 539 B.C., about forty-seven years after the destruction of Jerusalem, exactly as these chapters said.
- Jeremiah 50 and 51 use language later echoed in Revelation 17 and 18, where "Babylon" becomes a symbol for the persecuting world power of that day. The historical city stands behind the symbol.
- The sign act with the scroll and the stone (51:59–64) belongs to a class of prophetic object lessons: Jeremiah's belt, the potter's jar, the yoke, and later Ezekiel's brick and hair.
- Chapter 52 is nearly identical to 2 Kings 24:18–25:30, added as a historical appendix to confirm that everything Jeremiah preached actually came to pass.
- The detailed inventory of temple bronze and gold (52:17–23) mattered because those objects had been made at God's direction for His worship. Their loss was a theological event, not a financial one.
- Jehoiachin's release in 561 B.C. is attested outside the Bible in Babylonian ration records that name him and his sons.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jeremiah 50:6 calls God's people lost sheep whose own shepherds led them astray, and 50:20 says a day is coming when their iniquity will be searched for and not found. How can both sentences be true of the same people, and what has to happen in between?*

Both are true because they describe two different moments in God's dealing with the same people. In 50:6 they are scattered, misled by shepherds who turned them away on the mountains, and they have forgotten their resting place. In 50:20 God is describing the far side of the exile, when He says He will pardon those He preserves. What has to happen in between is judgment, and then repentance, and then forgiveness that is so complete the sin cannot be located when someone goes looking for it.

That last image is worth dwelling on. The iniquity will be sought and there will be none. Compare Micah 7:19 and Hebrews 8:12. God does not merely overlook sin; He removes it. Then ask the class the pastoral question: is there a sin God has forgiven that you still go looking for? Many Christians keep a file God has already destroyed, and Jeremiah 50:20 is a good verse to hand them.

Question 2. *Babylon was God's chosen instrument of judgment and is now judged herself (50:23; 51:20–24). How do you hold together the truth that God uses wicked nations and still holds them fully accountable for their wickedness?*

Scripture holds both without apology. Habakkuk asked this exact question and God answered it in Habakkuk 2. Isaiah 10:5–15 says Assyria was the rod of God's anger, and then says God will punish Assyria for the arrogance of her heart, because the axe does not get to boast against the man who swings it. Babylon did what she wanted to do, for her own reasons, with her own cruelty, and God used it. Her intentions were never God's intentions.

Bring it home two ways. First, for reading history and the news: God is not the author of anyone's wickedness, and no nation gets a moral exemption because God used it. Second, and more personally, someone in the room has been hurt by a person God used in their life. Genesis 50:20 belongs here: you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. God's ability to use an injury does not excuse the one who inflicted it, and it does not require the injured to call it good.

Question 3. *Jeremiah ends with an exiled king let out of prison, given clean clothes, and seated at the table for the rest of his life (52:31–34). Why would a book this dark end there, and where do you need an ending like that right now?*

Because Jeremiah's message was never only judgment. The book is built on the commission of 1:10: to root out and pull down and destroy and throw down, and also to build and to plant. Forty chapters of tearing down end with four verses of planting. Jehoiachin, taken away as a teenager, sits in a Babylonian prison for thirty-seven years, and then a new king takes his head out of the dust, speaks kindly to him, changes his prison clothes, and gives him bread at the royal table every day for the rest of his life.

Notice also whose line he is. Jehoiachin appears in the genealogy of Matthew 1:11–12 as Jeconiah. The royal line that looked extinguished in a prison cell runs on to Bethlehem. Let the class sit with that, then ask the personal question gently. There are people in your class serving a long sentence of their own: a chronic illness, an estranged child, a marriage that has been cold for years. The end of Jeremiah does not promise a schedule. It promises that God is still writing after the last thing you can see.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Collect the images used for Babylon in chapters 50 and 51: hammer, golden cup, destroying mountain, threshing floor, and others. List them, and say what each one claims about her.*

Babylon is the hammer of the whole earth (50:23), a golden cup in the Lord's hand that made all the earth drunk (51:7), a destroying mountain that will become a burnt mountain (51:25), a threshing floor at treading time (51:33), and a sea whose waters will be dried up (51:36). Each image claims something about her power and her limit: she was a real instrument of God's judgment, she intoxicated the nations, and every one of those images ends with her broken, burnt, threshed, or dried up.

2. *Read Jeremiah 51:59–64 about Seraiah, the scroll, and the stone. Describe exactly what he was told to do, and explain what the sinking scroll was meant to teach.*

Seraiah, the quartermaster traveling with Zedekiah to Babylon, was to take the scroll of all the evil that would come on Babylon, read it aloud there, then say a prayer, tie a stone to the book, throw it into the Euphrates, and declare, "Thus Babylon shall sink and not rise from the catastrophe that I will bring upon her." The sinking scroll made the word visible. God's word does not merely predict what will happen; it accomplishes it (Isaiah 55:11).

3. *Compare Jeremiah 51:6 and 51:45 with Revelation 18:4. What is the identical command, and what does it ask of God's people who are living inside a doomed system?*

The command is, "Flee from the midst of Babylon, and every one save his life," and Revelation 18:4 repeats it as "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins and lest you receive of her plagues." It asks God's people living inside a corrupt system not to physically abandon society but to refuse complicity with it, and to be willing to lose position and profit rather than share in its sins. Compare 2 Corinthians 6:17 and Romans 12:2.

4. *Jeremiah 52:17–23 inventories the bronze pillars, the carts, the sea, the pots, and the pomegranates carried out of the temple. Why spend that much space on furniture, and what is the writer grieving?*

Those objects had been made by God's own specification for His worship, and some of them, like the two bronze pillars and the sea, had stood since Solomon. The writer lists them one by one the way a man lists what was in the house that burned. He is grieving a lost relationship, not lost metal. Everything that had marked Israel as the people among whom God dwelt is now being weighed and carted off by foreigners.

5. *Jeremiah 50:34 says, "Their Redeemer is strong; the Lord of hosts is His name." Name the situation you have privately concluded is beyond repair, and say what it would look like to pray that verse over it every day this week.*

Answers will vary. Listen for situations that have quietly been filed as hopeless: a grown child who will not speak, an addiction that has beaten a family for years, a spouse who has stopped coming. The verse does not promise a date. It asserts that the Redeemer is strong, which is precisely what the exiles could not see from where they sat. Ask the student to pray it specifically, by name, daily, and to report back.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not identify Babylon in Revelation with a modern nation or a current political power. In Revelation it is a symbol for the persecuting world power of that day, and the book is a message of comfort to Christians under pressure, not a coded newspaper.
- The restoration promises in Jeremiah 50 and 51 were fulfilled historically in the return under Cyrus and ultimately in Christ and His church. They are not a prediction of a future political kingdom for national Israel.
- God's use of Babylon does not make God the author of Babylon's sin. Teach Isaiah 10:5–15 alongside these chapters so the class keeps divine sovereignty and human accountability together.
- Chapter 52 is grim reading. Keep the class moving to verses 31 through 34 so they leave with the door that God left open.

Not Unto Us

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 114 is a small masterpiece of eight verses. Israel goes out of Egypt, and the created world panics: the sea saw it and fled, the Jordan turned back, the mountains skipped like rams and the little hills like lambs. Then the poet taunts them. What ails you, O sea, that you fled? And the answer comes in the last two verses: tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord. This is poetry doing what poetry does, making a class feel something they already know. The God who splits water for His people is not a tame idea.

Psalm 115 makes the sharpest contrast in the group. Verse 1 refuses credit twice over, not unto us, not unto us, and then answers the nations who ask, where is now their God? Our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands, with mouths that do not speak and eyes that do not see. Then verse 8 lands the blow: those who make them are like them, so is everyone who trusts in them. We become like what we worship. That is the sentence to write on the board.

Psalm 116 is personal where 115 is corporate. A man was near death, the pains of Sheol laid hold of him, and he called on the Lord. What he does with the deliverance is the lesson: he loves the Lord because He heard him, he takes up the cup of salvation, he pays his vows in the presence of all God's people, he offers the sacrifice of thanksgiving, he calls himself God's servant. And then Psalm 117 opens the door outward to every nation, which is exactly where the story has been headed since God told Abraham that in his seed all families of the earth would be blessed.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalms 113 through 118 form the Egyptian Hallel, sung at Passover and at the other great feasts. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung before the meal and 115 through 118 after it.
- Matthew 26:30 says Jesus and the apostles sang a hymn before going out to the Mount of Olives, which would have been this collection.
- Genre: Psalm 114 is a historical hymn, Psalm 115 a hymn with polemic against idolatry, Psalm 116 an individual thanksgiving, Psalm 117 a short call to praise.
- Paul quotes Psalm 117:1 in Romans 15:11, in a chain of Old Testament passages showing that God always intended the Gentiles to glorify Him.
- The idol polemic of Psalm 115:4–8 also appears in Psalm 135:15–18 and Isaiah 44:9–20. It is one of the Old Testament's standing arguments.
- "Paying vows" (116:14, 18) refers to fulfilling a promise made to God in distress, usually by a public thank offering (Leviticus 7:16; Deuteronomy 23:21–23).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 115:4–8 says that those who make idols become like them: mouths that never speak, eyes that never see, ears that never hear. Given what we actually give our attention to, what are we in danger of becoming like?*

Start with the psalm's own logic. An idol is manufactured, so it can only ever be as large as its maker's imagination, and it is dead, so it can only ever make its worshiper more like a dead thing. Mouths that do not speak, eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear, hands that do not handle, feet that do not walk. Then verse 8: those who make them are like them. Worship is formative. Whatever you give your attention to is slowly shaping you into its own likeness.

Now make it current without being glib. Ask what has the class's attention: the screen that gets four hours a day, a career, a team, a political movement, a house, a physique, a grandchild. Then ask the diagnostic question that follows from verse 8: what have I become less able to do since this thing took over? Less able to hear a rebuke, to see a person in need, to speak an uncomfortable truth, to walk across a room to a stranger. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says the opposite is also true: beholding the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image.

Question 2. *Psalm 116 is one man's thanksgiving after God spared his life. Walk through verses 12 through 19 and describe what he promises. What does gratitude look like in this psalm, and how is it different from merely feeling grateful?*

Read verses 12 through 19 slowly and count the actions. He asks what he shall render to the Lord. He takes up the cup of salvation and calls on the Lord's name. He pays his vows in the presence of all God's people, twice repeated. He offers the sacrifice of thanksgiving. He calls himself God's servant, the son of God's maidservant, and says God has loosed his bonds. And he says all of it in the courts of the house of the Lord, in the midst of Jerusalem. Gratitude here is public, costly, and specific.

The difference from feeling grateful is the entire point. Feelings evaporate by Tuesday. This man gives something, says something out loud in front of the congregation, and hands his life over as a servant. Ask the class what they promised God during their worst week last year, and whether it was ever paid. Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 is worth reading here: it is better not to vow than to vow and not pay.

Question 3. *Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible, and Paul quotes it in Romans 15:8-12 to prove that the nations were always meant to praise God. Why would two verses carry that much weight in an argument?*

It carries that weight because of who is addressed. "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!" is in Israel's own hymnbook, sung at Israel's own Passover. Paul is arguing in Romans 15 that God receiving the nations is not a change of plan or an afterthought forced on Him by Jewish unbelief. It was in the songs they had been singing for centuries, and in Moses, and in Isaiah. The shortest psalm in the book turns out to be one of the widest.

Ask the class where the reach of their own congregation stops. Every church has an unspoken idea of who belongs here, formed by neighborhood, income, race, age, and habit. Psalm 117 has a reach of all nations and all peoples, and the reason given in verse 2 is simply God's merciful kindness toward us. People who have received mercy are the natural carriers of it. Name one person this congregation would find it hardest to welcome, and ask what that says.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read Psalm 114 and list the four parts of creation that reacted to God's presence. What is the poet doing by describing the sea and the mountains that way?*

The sea fled, the Jordan turned back, the mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills skipped like lambs. The poet is using vivid personification to say that the exodus was not a political event but a cosmic one. Creation itself recognized its Maker moving among His people. Do not literalize the skipping hills; feel what the picture is doing, which is putting the reader in the presence of overwhelming power.

2. *Psalm 115:1 says, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory." Think of one thing you did well this month, and write down honestly how you have handled the credit for it.*

Answers will vary. Look for honesty rather than piety. Most of us handle credit in small ways: repeating a compliment at home, steering a conversation back toward our own part, resenting it when someone else is thanked. The psalm does not say, take no satisfaction in good work. It says the glory belongs to God, and it gives the reason in the same verse: because of His mercy and His truth.

3. *Psalm 116:15 says that the death of His saints is precious in the sight of the Lord. Read Revelation 14:13 and Philippians 1:21-23 beside it, and describe how a Christian should think about a faithful believer's death.*

It means their death is costly and weighty in His sight, not casual, not unnoticed, not cheap. He does not lose track of one of them. Revelation 14:13 says blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, for they rest from their labors and their

works follow them. Philippians 1:21–23 says to depart and be with Christ is far better. A Christian grieves real loss (1 Thessalonians 4:13) without grieving as those who have no hope.

4. *Trace the verbs in Psalm 116:1–9 that describe what God did for this man. Then list everything he says he will do in response.*

God heard his voice and his supplications, inclined His ear to him, delivered his soul from death, his eyes from tears, and his feet from falling, dealt bountifully with him, preserved the simple, saved him when he was brought low, and loosed his bonds. In response he says he will love the Lord, call on Him as long as he lives, walk before the Lord in the land of the living, take up the cup of salvation, pay his vows publicly, and offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving.

5. *Psalms 113 through 118 were sung at Passover, so Jesus very likely sang Psalm 116 on the night He was betrayed (Matthew 26:30). Read it again with that in mind, and write down the line that strikes you differently.*

Answers will vary. Many will point to 116:3, the pains of death surrounding Him, or 116:13, the cup of salvation, on the night He spoke of a cup He would rather not drink, or 116:15, sung by the one whose own death was about to be the most precious of all. This is a good place to let the class sit quietly for a moment rather than filling the silence.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 114 is poetry. Teach the personification as the powerful literary device it is, and do not turn skipping mountains into a geological claim.
- Psalm 115:8 applies directly to modern idolatry, but resist the temptation to make the application a list of other people's idols. Turn it on the class and on yourself.
- Psalm 116:15 does not mean God takes pleasure in a believer's death or that He causes each death for a reason we can name. It means He values His saints and does not lose them.
- These psalms belong to the Passover liturgy of the Old Covenant. Draw the connection to Christ, our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7), without binding Passover observance on Christians.

Born of Water and Spirit

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Nicodemus comes at night, which John probably intends us to notice in a chapter that ends by talking about light and darkness. He opens with a careful compliment: Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs unless God is with him. Jesus does not accept the compliment or answer the implied question. He says, most assuredly, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. In one sentence He tells the finest religious man in Jerusalem that everything he has is not enough.

The conversation turns on verse 5: unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Jesus is not describing a mystical experience but an entrance, and the New Testament tells us plainly where that entrance is. Peter, preaching the first gospel sermon of the kingdom, told convicted hearers to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul says we are buried with Him through baptism into death, to walk in newness of life. Titus calls it the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. Water and Spirit, exactly as Jesus said.

Then the chapter opens out. Verses 14 and 15 reach back to a bronze serpent on a pole, where dying people had only to look and live. Verse 16 gives the reason behind the whole plan, and verse 17 insists that God sent His Son to save rather than to condemn. And the last third of the chapter belongs to John the Baptist, whose disciples come complaining that everyone is going to Jesus. John's answer is the healthiest sentence in the New Testament about ministry: the friend of the bridegroom rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. He must increase, but I must decrease.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. Jesus calls him "the teacher of Israel" in verse 10, which suggests real standing.
- "Born again" can also be rendered "born from above," and both senses are present. The point is a birth a person cannot produce for himself.
- The bronze serpent account is in Numbers 21:4–9, and 2 Kings 18:4 records that Hezekiah later destroyed it because Israel had begun burning incense to it.
- John 3:22–36 takes place while both Jesus' disciples and John's disciples are baptizing, before John's imprisonment (3:24).
- The kingdom in verse 5 is the reign of Christ, established on Pentecost and entered by the new birth (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13).
- Many scholars think the red letters end around verse 15 or 21, with verses following as John's commentary; either way the words are inspired Scripture.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and a teacher of Israel, and Jesus told him he had to start over from birth. Why would a moral, religious, respected man need that, and what does it say about religious respectability in general?*

Because birth is the one thing a person cannot do for himself, and that is exactly the point Jesus is making. Nicodemus had descent from Abraham, a spotless record, a seat on the council, and a lifetime of study, and Jesus tells him he needs to be born. Not improved. Not informed. Born. Everything Nicodemus possessed was on the wrong side of the line. Notice too that Jesus says he cannot even see the kingdom without it; he is not able to recognize what is happening in front of him.

The application to religious respectability is uncomfortable and necessary. There are people in every congregation who were raised in the church, know the answers, attend faithfully, and have never obeyed the gospel. There are others who obeyed decades ago and have been coasting on the memory. Ask the question kindly and directly: can you say when you were born again, and what happened? Do not shame anyone. Do make it possible for someone to say out loud that he is not sure.

Question 2. *Jesus says a person must be born of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God (3:5). Read Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3–4, and Titus 3:5 alongside it. What is the new birth, and how does a person actually receive it?*

Take the phrase as Jesus gave it, water and Spirit together, and let the New Testament define it. Acts 2:38 puts repentance and baptism together with the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Romans 6:3–4 says baptism into Christ is a burial with Him and a rising to walk in newness of life, which is birth language. Titus 3:5 calls salvation the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 3:26–27 says we are sons of God through faith, because as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Colossians 2:12 says we are buried with Him in baptism and raised through faith in the working of God.

Answer the common alternatives without heat. Some say “water” means physical birth; but Jesus is describing one birth that has two elements, not contrasting two births, and the natural reading of water in the New Testament context is baptism. Others say baptism is merely a symbol added after salvation; but Acts 22:16 says, arise and be baptized and wash away your sins. Teach it from the text, invite questions, and be ready to study privately with anyone who is troubled. The point is not to win the argument in class but to make sure every person in the room knows how to be born again.

Question 3. *John 3:19–21 says men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil, and that whoever does the truth comes to the light. Where is there something in your life you would rather not bring into the light, and what would bringing it cost?*

Jesus gives the motive for hiding in verse 20: everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. The reason people avoid God is not usually intellectual. It is that coming close would require giving something up. And verse 21 gives the opposite: he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.

Be careful here. This is not an invitation to public confession of private sins in a classroom, and you should say so plainly. It is an invitation to stop hiding from God, and usually to let one trusted person know. Ask the class what the cost would be: an apology, a resignation, a confession to a spouse, a changed password, a conversation with the elders. Then say what James 5:16 and 1 John 1:7 promise on the other side of that cost. Sin loses most of its power the moment it is no longer a secret.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Nicodemus actually says in John 3. Trace his three responses, then look him up in John 7:50–51 and John 19:38–42 and describe the change.*

He says three things: that they know Jesus is a teacher come from God because of the signs; “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”; and “How can these things be?” He begins puzzled and goes quiet. In John 7:50–51 he risks his standing by asking the council whether their law judges a man before hearing him, and in John 19:38–42 he brings a hundred pounds of spices and helps bury Jesus in public. A night visitor becomes a man who shows up in daylight at a funeral.

2. *Jesus points back to Numbers 21:4–9. Read that account, then explain the comparison He draws in John 3:14–15 and what it took for an Israelite to be healed.*

Israel complained, God sent fiery serpents, and many died. When the people confessed their sin, God did not remove the serpents. He told Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who was bitten would live by looking at it. The parallel in John 3:14–15 is exact: the Son of Man must be lifted up, and whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. The cure was provided by God, it was public, it required a response, and the response was within reach of the dying.

3. Write out John 3:16 one phrase at a time. Beside each phrase, note what it claims about God, about the world, and about the condition on which life is given.

Answers will vary in wording but should include: God so loved, the initiative is His; the world, the scope is everyone, not a select few; that He gave, the cost is His only begotten Son; whoever believes in Him, the condition is trust in Him, which John 3:36 defines as obedient; should not perish, the alternative is real and final; but have everlasting life, the gift is life now and forever.

4. Compare John 3:36 in a translation that reads “does not obey the Son.” Set it beside John 3:16 and say what this chapter teaches about the relationship between believing and obeying.

John 3:36 says, “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” The opposite of believing, in this verse, is disobeying. That is the New Testament’s own commentary on what belief means. Faith and obedience are not two separate steps but one response, which is why Hebrews 5:9 says Christ became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.

5. John 3:30 says, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Name one place where you have been quietly protecting your own standing, and say what decreasing would look like there this week.

Answers will vary. Watch for specific, uncomfortable answers: letting a younger man teach the class you have taught for years, not correcting someone who got the credit, stepping back from a role you enjoy because someone else needs to grow, letting your child’s achievement be his rather than yours. John was watching his life’s work walk away from him and called it joy.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The new birth: teach water and Spirit as Jesus joined them, and connect the passage to Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3–4, Galatians 3:26–27, and Titus 3:5. Do not allow the text to be reduced to a decision, a prayer, or an inward feeling.
- Do not let the wind illustration in verse 8 be turned into Calvinistic irresistible grace. The comparison is about the mysterious origin and visible effect of the new birth, not about God choosing individuals unconditionally.
- John 3:16 is often quoted as though believing were the only condition anywhere in Scripture. Read verse 36 in the same breath, where the opposite of believing is disobeying.
- The kingdom of verse 5 is entered now, not at some future date. Christ reigns and His church is His kingdom (Colossians 1:13; Revelation 1:9).

Run, Endure, Receive

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 12 opens with the runner's three instructions, and the order matters. Lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares. Run with endurance the race set before us. And look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Notice that weights are not necessarily sins; a runner strips off anything that slows him, innocent or not. Notice too that the race is set before us, not chosen by us. And notice the model: Jesus, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Then the letter turns to a subject most of your class is living through: hardship inside the Christian life. The writer quotes Proverbs 3 and argues that discipline is proof of sonship, not evidence of abandonment. He is honest, too: no chastening seems joyful for the present, but painful. Yet afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. The phrase to underline is "trained by it," because the same hardship makes one person bitter and another person holy, and the difference is what he does with it.

The climax is verses 18 through 29, one of the great passages in the New Testament. You have not come to a mountain that burned with fire, with darkness, a trumpet, and a voice so terrifying that even Moses trembled. You have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the church of the firstborn, to God the Judge of all, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant. Everything shakeable is being shaken so that what cannot be shaken may remain, and we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Chapter 13 then spends itself on what citizens of that kingdom do on Monday.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Hebrews 12 flows directly out of chapter 11: the witnesses are the faithful just named, pictured as a crowd already finished with their own race rather than as spectators watching us.
- "Chastening" translates a word for the whole training of a child, including instruction and correction, not merely punishment.
- Sinai in 12:18–21 is described from Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 9. Mount Zion in 12:22–24 is the heavenly reality to which Christians have already come.
- "The church of the firstborn registered in heaven" (12:23) is the assembly of God's people. The kingdom language of 12:28 is present tense: it is being received now.
- Hebrews 13:10, "we have an altar," refers to the sacrifice of Christ, not to a physical altar or a repeated offering in Christian worship.
- Hebrews 13:20–21 is one of the great benedictions of Scripture and names Jesus as the great Shepherd of the sheep, brought again from the dead by the blood of the everlasting covenant.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Hebrews 12:5–11 says the Lord chastens every son He receives and that no chastening seems pleasant at the time. How would you tell God's discipline apart from ordinary hardship, and does this passage actually require you to tell them apart?*

The passage does not hand you a test for sorting hardships into categories, and that is worth saying out loud, because Christians torture themselves trying to decide whether a layoff or a diagnosis is punishment. What the writer says is that God deals with us as sons, that a father who never corrects is not loving his child, and that we should not despise the chastening of the Lord or faint when we are rebuked. The counsel is not, identify the cause. It is, respond as a son.

Then look at verse 11 and the word “trained.” Hardship by itself produces nothing good; it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been exercised by it. Two people lose the same job and one grows tender and prayerful while the other grows hard. Ask the class to name a hardship they are in right now and to say what they are doing with it. Also read verses 12 and 13 together, since the writer immediately turns outward: strengthen the weak hands, make straight paths, so that the lame is not dislocated but healed. Our response to our own suffering affects the people limping behind us.

Question 2. *Hebrews 12:28 says we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken. Notice the tense of the verb. What is being claimed about when the kingdom came, and what should a citizen of an unshakeable kingdom worry about less?*

The verb is present: we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken. Not we will receive. This is one of the plainest statements in the New Testament that the kingdom is already here and already ours. Put it beside Colossians 1:13, where God has already translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, and Daniel 2:44, where the kingdom is set up in the days of those kings, and Mark 9:1, where some standing there would see it come with power. The kingdom is the reign of Christ over His church, and it began at Pentecost.

Then draw out the practical side. If everything that can be shaken is being shaken, then a Christian’s anxiety list needs revision. Political outcomes get shaken. Markets get shaken. Health, reputation, institutions, and nations all get shaken; Jeremiah 50 through 52 is this week’s proof. The kingdom does not. Ask what each person in the room is most afraid of losing, and whether it is on the shakeable list. Then note how the verse ends: therefore let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. The response to security is not relaxation but reverent service.

Question 3. *Hebrews 13 runs through a rapid list of ordinary duties: brotherly love, hospitality, prisoners, marriage, contentment, leaders, praise. Which one is least natural to you, and what would obeying it cost you this week?*

Walk the list and let people choose honestly. Brotherly love. Hospitality to strangers, which in that world meant taking people into your home. Remembering prisoners as though chained with them. Marriage held honorable by all and the bed undefiled. Conduct free from covetousness, content with what you have. Remembering, imitating, obeying, and submitting to those who lead. Going outside the camp to Jesus, bearing His reproach. Offering the sacrifice of praise continually. Doing good and sharing.

The least natural one is the most useful one to talk about. For some it is hospitality, because the house is not ready and never will be. For others it is contentment, because the next purchase is always already chosen. For others it is submission to leaders, or visiting someone in jail, or praise when nothing feels praiseworthy. Ask for a specific, dated action, and note that verse 16 calls doing good and sharing a sacrifice with which God is well pleased. A sacrifice by definition is something you feel the loss of.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Hebrews 12:1–2 uses the picture of a race. List everything the runner is told to do, and note carefully what he is told to look at.*

He is told to lay aside every weight, to lay aside the sin which so easily ensnares, and to run with endurance the race that is set before him. And he is told to look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who endured the cross for the joy set before Him and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. The runner does not look at the crowd, at the other runners, or at his own feet. Verse 3 adds the reason: consider Him, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

2. *Read Hebrews 12:16–17 and then Genesis 25:29–34. What did Esau trade, why is he called profane, and what was it that he could not recover afterward?*

Esau traded his birthright, the double portion and the family headship, for one meal of stew because he was hungry that afternoon. He is called profane, meaning he treated something holy as ordinary, worth no more than a bowl of food. Genesis 27:30–40 shows what he could not recover: the blessing had been given to Jacob and could not be

called back, and though Esau sought it diligently with tears, there was no way to reverse what his own choice had set in motion. The passage is a warning about trading a permanent thing for an immediate one.

3. Set Hebrews 12:18–24 in two columns: what Israel came to at Sinai, and what Christians have come to now. What is the writer proving by that contrast?

At Sinai: a mountain that could be touched, burning fire, blackness, darkness, tempest, the sound of a trumpet, a voice whose words made the hearers beg that it would stop, a boundary no one could cross, and Moses himself trembling. Now: Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, an innumerable company of angels, the general assembly and church of the firstborn registered in heaven, God the Judge of all, the spirits of just men made perfect, Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. The writer is proving that the new covenant brings access where the old brought distance, and then in verse 25 he argues that greater privilege means greater accountability.

4. Hebrews 13:7 and 13:17 both concern those who lead. List what members are asked to do for their leaders, then read 1 Timothy 3:1–7 for the kind of men those leaders are to be.

Members are to remember those who lead, consider the outcome of their conduct, and imitate their faith (13:7), and to obey and submit to them, because they watch out for souls as those who must give account, so that they may do it with joy and not with grief (13:17). 1 Timothy 3:1–7 describes the men: blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy, gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous, ruling his own house well, not a new convert, and of good reputation with outsiders.

5. Hebrews 13:15–16 calls praise, doing good, and sharing “sacrifices” that please God. Name one act of sharing this week that will genuinely cost you something, and do it without telling anyone you did it.

Answers will vary. Push against two evasions: choosing something painless, and telling somebody afterward. Verse 16 calls it a sacrifice, and Matthew 6:1–4 says the Father who sees in secret will reward openly. Practical answers might include paying a bill for a family that will never know who did it, giving up a day off to help someone move, or sending money you had set aside for yourself.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Chastening: do not let the class conclude that every hardship is punishment for a specific sin, which is the error of Job’s friends. Teach the response rather than the diagnosis.
- Esau in 12:17 found no place of repentance, meaning no way to reverse the consequence of what he had sold. It does not mean God refuses to forgive a penitent person.
- Hebrews 12:22–24 and 12:28 place Christians in the kingdom now. Use this passage to settle any question about a future earthly kingdom, and note the present tense of “we are receiving.”
- Hebrews 13:10, “we have an altar,” is not authority for a physical altar, a priesthood, or a repeated sacrifice in Christian worship. The sacrifice was offered once (Hebrews 10:12).
- Hebrews 13:17 calls for submission to elders within the bounds of Scripture, not for unquestioning obedience to men. Elders are shepherds under the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:1–4).

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Lamentations 1–5 · Psalm 118 · John 4:1–45 · James 1–2

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