

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



WEEK 84 OF 104

*Mercy in the Ashes*

| THIS WEEK'S READINGS  |                  |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| General Old Testament | Lamentations 1-5 |
| Wisdom Literature     | Psalms 118       |
| Gospels               | John 4:1-45      |
| General New Testament | James 1-2        |

## TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to show the class where God's mercy actually goes. It goes into a burned city and sits down with the mourners. It goes to a stone the professionals threw away. It goes to a well at noon to meet a woman with a reputation. And, according to James, it goes out the door of the assembly to a widow's living room. This is not a week for abstractions. Every reading puts mercy in a specific, uncomfortable, physical place.

Doctrinally, James 2 is the center of gravity and must be taught with care and confidence. Faith without works is dead, and a man is justified by works and not by faith only, which is the only use of that phrase in Scripture and it is a denial. Handle it beside Ephesians 2:8-10 so nobody leaves thinking salvation is earned. John 4:21-24 is the week's second weight-bearing text: worship must be in spirit and in truth, which rules out both empty formality and sincere innovation.

Formationally, watch how often the readings ask you to say something out loud. Lamentations gives grief words. Psalm 118 tells the rescued man to declare the works of the Lord. The Samaritan woman leaves her waterpot and tells a town. James says faith that never shows is dead. Ask your class this: what is the one thing God has done for you, or asked of you, that you have kept entirely to yourself, and who will you tell before next Sunday?

## SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

**First session:** Take up James 1-2. It is the most practical and the most doctrinally important reading of the week, and James 2:14-26 will need the whole second half of the hour. Read Ephesians 2:8-10 aloud at the start so the class knows you are not preaching salvation by merit.

**Second session:** Take up John 4:1-45. Spend the first half on how Jesus approached the woman and the second half on worship in spirit and truth. It is a rare passage that teaches both evangelism and the authority for our worship in a single conversation.

**The other two readings:** Assign Lamentations 1-5 and Psalm 118. Tell the class plainly that Lamentations is a funeral and that they should read it slowly, in one sitting if possible, and let it be sad. Ask them to find Lamentations 3:22-23 in its setting and notice what surrounds it.

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GENERAL OLD TESTAMENT    **Lamentations 1-5**

## A Funeral for a City

## PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Teach this book as what it is: a funeral. Jews have read Lamentations aloud on the ninth of Ab for centuries, sitting on the floor, remembering a destroyed temple. Chapter 1 opens with the word “How,” which in Hebrew is the sound of a wail, and the city is pictured as a widow weeping in the night with no one to comfort her, her friends having dealt treacherously with her. If your class is used to Bible study that arrives at an encouraging application by the last five minutes, tell them at the start that this book will not do that.

The form is deliberate and worth explaining. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 are alphabetic acrostics of twenty-two stanzas. Chapter 3 is a triple acrostic, sixty-six verses, three per letter. Chapter 5 has twenty-two verses but is not acrostic, as though the discipline finally gave out. Grief in this book is given a shape. That is not a way of controlling it or of being tidy; it is a way of getting all the way through it, from A to Z, without stopping early or looking away.

The center of the book is the center of chapter 3, and the placement is the whole point. The man speaking has said God walled him in, broke his bones, made him a target for arrows, and removed his soul far from peace. Then verse 21: “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.” Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed; His compassions are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. He does not say the pain is over or explained. He says God has not finished with him. Then he goes back into the dark for forty more verses, and the book ends with a plea and a question.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Lamentations mourns the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Babylon in 586 B.C. Jewish tradition assigns it to Jeremiah; the book itself does not name its author.
- Genre: funeral dirge, in the qinah meter used for laments. It is poetry meant to be heard and felt, not argued.
- Chapters 1, 2, and 4 are acrostics; chapter 3 is a triple acrostic of sixty-six verses; chapter 5 has twenty-two verses without the acrostic pattern.
- The horrors described in 2:20 and 4:10 had been foretold in Deuteronomy 28:52–57 as the covenant curse for persistent rebellion. The book is not reporting a surprise.
- The book never excuses Judah. Every poem confesses that the people sinned and that God was right (1:18; 3:42).
- Lamentations ends unresolved, with “unless You have utterly rejected us.” The answer comes later, in the return from exile and finally in Christ.

## NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Four of these five poems are acrostics, each stanza beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Why would a grieving man impose that much structure on his grief, and what might that teach a congregation about how to mourn well?*

Because grief without form wanders, and grief with form can be finished. The alphabet gives the poet a beginning and an end and a promise that he will cover the whole of it. It is the same instinct that produces a funeral service with an order to it, or a family that sits down and reads through the obituary line by line. Structure does not minimize sorrow. It holds sorrow steady long enough for it to be fully said.

Draw out the congregational application carefully. Many churches are better at celebration than at mourning, and the result is that grieving members are quietly pressured to be finished. Scripture gives us a whole book of tears, and about a third of the Psalms are laments. Ask the class what it would look like here for someone to be allowed to grieve out loud for a year. Then ask who in the congregation is currently grieving and has been met mostly with silence.

**Question 2.** *Lamentations 3:22–23 is printed on wall hangings everywhere. Read it where it actually sits, after verses 1 through 20 and before verses 40 through 45. How does the setting change what “His mercies are new every morning” means?*

In context the words are startling rather than soothing. Verses 1 through 20 are among the bleakest in Scripture: He has led me into darkness and not into light, He has broken my bones, He has filled me with bitterness, my soul is far removed from peace, I have forgotten prosperity. Then hope appears, and it appears not because anything got better but because the man deliberately calls something to mind. Verse 21 is an act of will: “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.”

So the promise is not that every morning is bright. It is that God’s covenant love has not run out, even here, and that is why the sufferer has not been consumed. Notice what follows immediately: the Lord is good to those who wait for Him, it is good that one should hope and quietly wait. And notice what follows after that, in verses 40 through 45: let us search out our ways and turn back to the Lord, You have covered Yourself with a cloud that prayer should not pass through. Hope and unanswered prayer sit in the same chapter. Do not lift verse 23 out and lose that.

**Question 3.** *Lamentations 2 says again and again that the Lord did this. It does not blame Babylon. Why does the poet insist on naming God as the one who acted, and what would be lost if he blamed only the army?*

Because if Babylon is the real explanation, then the disaster is only politics and the God of Israel is either weak or absent. The poet refuses both. Chapter 2 says the Lord has swallowed up, thrown down, cut off, bent His bow, poured out His fury, become like an enemy. That is a terrible thing to say and a faithful thing to say, because it means what happened was just, and it means the God who did it is the only one who can undo it.

There is a pastoral principle here. When a person will not acknowledge God’s hand in his losses, he usually ends up with either rage at people or a shrug at fate, and neither one leads anywhere. Be careful, though, not to draw the wrong general rule. Lamentations knows exactly why this fell, because the prophets had said so for forty years. Most of our sufferings come with no such explanation, and Job and John 9:1–3 forbid us from assigning causes we have not been told.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *Read Lamentations 1 and list the images used for Jerusalem: a widow, a princess made a slave, and others. What do those pictures have in common?*

She is a widow, once great among the nations and now alone; a princess among the provinces become a slave; a woman weeping bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks; one whose friends have dealt treacherously with her and become her enemies; a daughter whose beauty has departed; a woman whose lovers have abandoned her. The images share isolation and reversal. Everything that once gave her honor has been inverted, and the repeated note is that there is no one to comfort her.

**2.** *Lamentations 3:19–24 sits at the center of the book. Read verses 1 through 18 first, then 19 through 24, and describe exactly what changes at verse 21 and why.*

Verses 1 through 18 are unbroken darkness, ending with, “My strength and my hope have perished from the Lord.” Then verse 21 says, “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.” What changes is not the circumstances but the direction of his thinking. He deliberately remembers the character of God: mercy, compassion, faithfulness. Hope in Lamentations is not a mood that arrives; it is a memory that is chosen.

**3.** *Trace the confessions of sin in 1:8, 1:18, 3:42, 4:13, and 5:16. According to this book, what caused the disaster?*

Jerusalem has sinned grievously and therefore became vile (1:8); the Lord is righteous, for she rebelled against His commandment (1:18); we have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not pardoned (3:42); it was because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests (4:13); woe to us, for we have sinned (5:16). The book never blames God’s injustice or bad luck. It says plainly that the covenant was broken and the promised consequences came.

4. Compare Lamentations 5:19–22 with Jeremiah 29:11–14. How is this ending different from a tidy resolution, and why might God have preserved a book that closes that way?

Jeremiah 29 promises a future and a hope after seventy years, with God to be found by those who seek Him with all their heart. Lamentations 5 ends, “You, O Lord, remain forever; Your throne from generation to generation. Why do You forget us forever? Turn us back to You, O Lord, and we will be restored. Unless You have utterly rejected us, and are very angry with us.” There is no resolution, only a plea and a fear. God preserved it because His people sometimes live in exactly that place, and they need a book that does not pretend otherwise.

5. Name one grief in your life or in your congregation that has never been given words. Write it out this week as honestly as Lamentations writes, and then pray it aloud.

Answers will vary, and this one may need to be assigned privately rather than discussed. Look for the losses that congregations tend to keep quiet: a miscarriage, a child who has walked away from the faith, a divorce, a diagnosis, a career that never happened. Encourage the student to write in full sentences, addressed to God, without editing. Lamentations gives permission to say the whole thing.

### HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not rush to comfort. The book itself takes five chapters, and a teacher who arrives at the encouraging verse in ten minutes has taught against the text.
- Keep 3:22–23 in its dark context. Taught out of context it becomes a slogan; taught in context it becomes a lifeline.
- Lamentations knows why Jerusalem fell because the prophets had announced it. Do not turn that into a rule that every personal suffering is punishment for a specific sin (John 9:1–3; Luke 13:1–5).
- The starvation scenes in 2:20 and 4:10 are horrifying. Handle them briefly and soberly in a mixed class, noting that Deuteronomy 28:52–57 had warned of exactly this, and do not linger.
- The imprecations in 3:64–66 are appeals to God’s justice, not a model for personal vengeance (Romans 12:19).

## The Stone the Builders Rejected

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 118 closes the Egyptian Hallel, the collection sung at Passover, and it is built like a liturgy. The opening four verses call on Israel, the house of Aaron, and all who fear the Lord to say the same sentence: His mercy endures forever. Then a single voice takes over and tells a story of being surrounded, pushed, and helped. Then comes a procession to the temple gates, a request to enter, and a shout of thanksgiving. The psalm ends where it began, with the refrain about mercy that does not run out.

At the center are two lines that shaped the New Testament. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” Jesus quoted it at the end of the parable of the wicked vinedressers and applied it to Himself in front of the chief priests, who understood exactly what He meant. Peter quoted it to the Sanhedrin with the builders identified as “you builders,” and then wrote it into his first letter for Christians who were themselves being rejected.

Then the psalm’s most misquoted verse. “This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it” is not a general observation about waking up in a good mood. In context it is the day the rejected stone was vindicated, the day the gates of righteousness were opened, the day salvation arrived. Verse 26 follows: blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. That is what the crowds were shouting on the road to Jerusalem, which means they were singing a psalm about the coming of the King at the very moment He came.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 118 is the last of Psalms 113 through 118, the Egyptian Hallel, sung at Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Jesus and the apostles sang it at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:30).
- Genre: a thanksgiving psalm with a processional liturgy, likely used as worshipers approached the temple gates.
- Verse 22 is quoted by Jesus (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17), by Peter before the council (Acts 4:11), and by Peter in writing (1 Peter 2:7). It is one of the most used verses in the New Testament.
- Verse 26 was shouted at the triumphal entry (Matthew 21:9) and referenced by Jesus in Matthew 23:39.
- The cornerstone was the stone that set the line and angle for an entire building. A stone rejected as unusable becoming the cornerstone is a complete reversal of judgment.
- The repeated refrain, “His mercy endures forever,” is Israel’s standing confession, used at the dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 5:13) and throughout Psalm 136.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Psalm 118:8–9 says it is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man or in princes. Where have you quietly been leaning on a person, a leader, or an institution, and how would you even know you were doing it?*

Start by admitting that trusting people is not the sin here; Scripture tells us to honor leaders, follow faithful examples, and bear one another’s burdens. The psalm is about where final confidence rests. The tell is usually what happens when the person fails. If a preacher leaves and your faith wobbles, if an elder disappoints you and you stop attending, if an election goes the wrong way and you cannot sleep, the confidence had migrated.

Give the class a practical test. Ask: when trouble hits, whose name comes to mind first? Where does your mind go at three in the morning? What do you check before you pray? Jeremiah 17:5–8 is the best cross-reference, with its contrast between the shrub in the desert and the tree planted by the water. Then ask what one change would look like this week: praying before calling, giving before checking the balance, obeying before polling the family.

**Question 2.** Verse 22 says the stone the builders rejected became the chief cornerstone. Read Matthew 21:42, Acts 4:10–12, and 1 Peter 2:4–8. Who is the stone, who are the builders, and what do the apostles do with this verse?

The stone is Christ. The builders are the religious leaders of Israel, the men whose job was to build God's house and who examined this stone and threw it on the pile. Jesus quoted the verse to them directly after the parable of the vinedressers, and Matthew says they perceived He was speaking of them. Peter, standing before those same men in Acts 4, said, "This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone," and then added the sentence that allows no alternatives: nor is there salvation in any other.

Peter's use in 1 Peter 2:4–8 is the pastoral one, and it is worth the class's time. Christians are living stones being built into a spiritual house, resting on the stone the world rejected. To those who believe He is precious; to the disobedient He is a stone of stumbling. Ask the class where they have felt the sting of being on the rejected side, at work, in a family, in a culture that finds their convictions embarrassing. The cornerstone was rejected first.

**Question 3.** The crowds shouted verse 26 at Jesus on the road into Jerusalem, and He very likely sang this psalm at the Passover table the night before He died. How does that change the way you hear verses 17 and 24?

It puts the psalm in a real throat on a real night. Verse 17, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord," is sung by the man who knows exactly what tomorrow holds and knows also that death will not hold Him. Verse 18, "The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death," follows immediately. And verse 24 becomes a resurrection line: the day the Lord has made is the day the stone was vindicated.

This is a good moment to slow the class down. Jesus sang a hymn with them and went out to the Mount of Olives, and this psalm was that hymn. Read verses 22 through 29 aloud and let the room be quiet for a moment. Then ask what it means that our Lord fortified Himself on the worst night of His life by singing Scripture with His friends, and whether anyone in the class has Scripture memorized well enough to do the same.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** Count how many times Psalm 118 says that His mercy endures forever, and note where those lines fall in the psalm. What is the refrain framing?

The refrain "His mercy endures forever" appears in verses 1, 2, 3, 4, and again in verse 29, framing the entire psalm. Four voices are called to say it at the opening: Israel, the house of Aaron, those who fear the Lord, and the psalmist himself. What it frames is a story of distress and rescue, which means the psalm is arguing that God's covenant love is the beginning and the end of the account, and everything in between is illustration.

**2.** List what the psalmist says the Lord did for him in verses 5 through 14. What was his situation before God answered?

He called on the Lord in distress and the Lord answered and set him in a broad place. The Lord was on his side so he did not fear what man could do. The Lord helped him against those who hated him. All nations surrounded him, they surrounded him like bees, they were quenched like a fire of thorns. He was pushed violently so that he was falling, and the Lord helped him. The Lord became his strength, his song, and his salvation. Before God answered, he was cornered, outnumbered, and already going down.

**3.** Psalm 118:22 is quoted or echoed repeatedly in the New Testament. Find at least three of those places, and note what each writer is using the verse to prove.

Matthew 21:42 and its parallels in Mark 12:10 and Luke 20:17, where Jesus applies it to Himself against the chief priests; Acts 4:11, where Peter tells the council they are the builders and Jesus is the stone, and then says there is salvation in no other name; and 1 Peter 2:4–8, where Peter uses it to encourage rejected Christians that they are living stones in God's house. Ephesians 2:20 also calls Christ the chief cornerstone.

**4.** Verse 24 says, "This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." Read verses 22 through 24 as one unit. Which day is actually being spoken of?

Verses 22 through 24 are one thought: the rejected stone has become the cornerstone, this was the Lord's doing and it is marvelous, this is the day the Lord has made. The day in view is the day of that reversal, the day God vindicated the rejected One and opened the gates of righteousness. It is not a general statement that every twenty-four hours is

a gift, true as that is. Christians naturally connect it to the resurrection and to the first day of the week on which we assemble.

5. Verse 17 says, *“I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.”* Name one work of God in your own life that you have never told anyone, and tell it to someone before Sunday.

Answers will vary. Watch for two things. Some have a story and have never been asked for it; give them a minute in class and then push them to tell someone outside. Others cannot think of anything, which usually means they have not been looking. Suggest they start by listing three answered prayers from the last year, and note that verse 17 makes declaring the works of the Lord the purpose of being kept alive.

#### **HANDLE WITH CARE**

- Verse 24 is not a slogan about having a positive attitude toward the calendar. Teach it in its place, as the day of the rejected stone’s vindication, and then draw the legitimate connection to the resurrection.
- “The Lord is on my side” (118:6) is a covenant confession, not a warrant for assuming God endorses our side of every dispute or our nation’s policies.
- Acts 4:12 belongs with verse 22. State plainly and kindly that salvation is found in Christ alone, and be prepared for the discomfort that causes in a pluralistic culture.
- These psalms belonged to the Passover liturgy of the old covenant. Connect them to Christ our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) without binding feast observance on Christians.

## Worship in Spirit and Truth

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Set the scene carefully, because the details are the sermon. It is the sixth hour, roughly noon, the hottest part of the day, which is not when women drew water. She comes alone, which says something about her standing in town. Jesus is wearied from the road and sits down on the well while the disciples go to buy food. And He opens with a request, not a rebuke: “Give Me a drink.” The Son of God begins the most important conversation of this woman’s life by asking her for help.

The conversation climbs in stages. Water in a bucket, then living water, then a husband, then five husbands and a man who is not her husband, then the question of the right mountain. Jesus refuses both easy options. He does not pretend her life is fine, and He does not lecture her about it. He names it in one sentence and lets it stand. When she raises the worship question, He does not dismiss it as a diversion. He answers it, and His answer ends an argument that had run for centuries: the hour is coming and now is when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

Then the disciples come back with lunch and cannot understand why He is not hungry, and He tells them the fields are already white for harvest. Meanwhile a woman with a bad reputation is walking through town saying, come see a man who told me everything I ever did. Many believed because of her word, and then they asked Him to stay, and He stayed two days, and after that they told her plainly: now we believe, not because of what you said, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Samaritans descended from the mixed population left in the north after Assyria deported Israel in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:24–41). Jews and Samaritans had despised each other for centuries.
- The Samaritans accepted only the five books of Moses and worshiped at a temple on Mount Gerizim, which the Jews had destroyed about 128 B.C.
- Jacob’s well sits near Sychar, on land Jacob gave Joseph (Genesis 33:19; 48:22; Joshua 24:32). It is one of the few sites in the gospel record whose location is undisputed.
- Rabbis of that era avoided public conversation with women, and a Jew would not normally use a Samaritan’s vessel. John notes the barrier in 4:9.
- “Salvation is of the Jews” (4:22) means the Messiah and the covenant promises came through Israel, not that Jewish people are superior.
- This is the first time in John’s gospel that Jesus states plainly to anyone that He is the Christ (4:26), and He says it to a Samaritan woman.

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *Jesus asked a Samaritan woman for a drink, crossing at least three lines at once: race, gender, and reputation. Which of those lines is hardest for our congregation to cross today, and what would crossing it actually look like?*

Let the class do the honest work here rather than giving them the answer. Jesus crossed a racial and national barrier centuries old, a social convention about men and women speaking in public, and the reputational risk of being seen with a woman known in town for her marriages. John’s parenthesis in verse 9 and the disciples’ reaction in verse 27 both show that His own people found it shocking.

Then ask which barrier is hardest here. In many congregations the honest answer is not race but class or reputation: the family with the police car in the driveway, the young woman who is pregnant and unmarried, the

man who smells like alcohol, the neighbors who speak another language. Push for one name and one action. And note carefully how Jesus began. He did not open with her sin or with an invitation to services. He asked her for a favor, which gave her something to give.

**Question 2.** *The moment her private life is exposed, the woman shifts the conversation to a worship controversy (4:16–20). Jesus does not let the subject drop, but He redefines it. According to verses 21 through 24, what does acceptable worship require, and what does it no longer depend on?*

Jesus says the hour is coming and now is when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such to worship Him, and that God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. Two requirements and one abolition. Worship must be in spirit, that is, genuine, engaged, from the heart rather than mechanical. It must be in truth, that is, according to what God has actually revealed, since Jesus says in John 17:17 that God's word is truth. And it no longer depends on a place, because the covenant that tied worship to a temple was about to be taken out of the way.

This is one of the most practical passages in the New Testament for a congregation, so be plain and be gracious. Sincerity alone is not enough; He said truth. Correctness alone is not enough either; He said spirit. Both together mean we do what God has authorized, from the heart, with attention. Ask the class where they are personally weakest, and be ready for honest answers about singing without thinking, taking the Lord's Supper while planning the afternoon, or attending out of habit. Also note what the passage removes: no holy mountain, no sacred building, no geographic center. The church is people, not a place (Acts 17:24).

**Question 3.** *John 4:23 says the Father is seeking such to worship Him. What difference does it make on a Sunday morning to know that God is the one doing the seeking?*

It reverses the direction most people assume. We tend to imagine worship as our effort to get God's attention, so we evaluate a service by how it made us feel, or by whether we got anything out of it. Jesus says the Father is out looking for worshipers. He is the seeker. That means the assembly is not a performance we put on for a distant audience but a meeting arranged by a God who wants us there.

Make it concrete. If God is seeking worshipers, then arriving unprepared, or distracted, or resentful about the drive, is a strange way to answer an invitation. Ask the class what they do in the fifteen minutes before services and what they could do instead. And use this to encourage the discouraged member who has been thinking his presence does not matter. The Father is seeking such. He was seeking one woman at a well at noon.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *Trace how the woman addresses Jesus through the conversation: a Jew, sir, a prophet, the Christ. Mark the moment each change happens and what caused it.*

She begins by identifying Him by race: "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me?" Then she calls Him "Sir" twice as the conversation deepens over the water. After He names her marriages she says, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet." Then she raises the Messiah: "I know that Messiah is coming," and He answers, "I who speak to you am He." Finally she tells the town, "Could this be the Christ?" Four stages, each one triggered by something He said that she could not explain away.

**2.** *Jesus offers living water in 4:10–14. Read Jeremiah 2:13 and John 7:37–39 beside it. What is the living water, and what does it do that well water cannot?*

Jeremiah 2:13 says God's people committed two evils: they forsook Him, the fountain of living waters, and hewed themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. John 7:37–39 says that Jesus was speaking of the Spirit whom those believing in Him would receive. The living water is the salvation and life that come through Christ, with the indwelling Spirit given to those who obey Him (Acts 2:38; Romans 8:9). Well water must be drawn again tomorrow; this becomes a fountain inside a person, springing up into everlasting life.

3. Read John 4:21–24 carefully, then read Colossians 2:14–17 and Hebrews 8:13. How does the change of covenant explain Jesus' answer about Gerizim and Jerusalem?

Jesus says neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will the Father be worshiped, because the hour has come for worship in spirit and truth. Colossians 2:14–17 says the handwriting of requirements was wiped out and nailed to the cross, and that feast days, new moons, and Sabbaths were a shadow of things to come. Hebrews 8:13 says the first covenant is obsolete. The temple system, with its one authorized place, was part of the covenant being replaced, so the question of which mountain was about to become obsolete.

4. The woman left her waterpot and went into the city (4:28–29). Write down exactly what she told them, and note how much she still did not know.

She said, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" She did not yet have a theology of the atonement, a resurrection to report, or even a settled conclusion; she had a question and an invitation. She still had a complicated life. What she had was a firsthand encounter and the nerve to tell the people most likely to mock her, and John says many of the Samaritans believed because of her word.

5. John 4:39–42 distinguishes believing because of what someone told you from believing because you heard Him yourself. Which is your faith resting on right now, and what is one specific step toward the second this week?

Answers will vary. Second-hand faith is a real beginning and should not be belittled; the Samaritans started there. But a faith that rests only on a parent's conviction or a preacher's confidence has no roots of its own. Practical steps toward the second include reading a gospel straight through personally, learning to answer why you believe from the text rather than from memory, and praying honestly rather than by formula. Compare 2 Timothy 1:5 and Acts 17:11.

#### **HANDLE WITH CARE**

- Worship in spirit and truth requires both. Guard against the idea that sincerity alone makes worship acceptable, and equally against a cold correctness. Truth means what God has revealed (John 17:17), which is the basis for a cappella singing, the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, and every other practice for which we must have New Testament authority.
- The woman's five husbands raise the subject of divorce and remarriage. Do not use this passage to settle it; Jesus does not discuss it here. Point to Matthew 19:3–9 and offer private study.
- The woman told her whole town about Christ. That is evangelism, which Scripture everywhere encourages for every Christian. It is not the same question as who may teach or lead in the assembly (1 Timothy 2:11–12), and this passage should not be pressed either direction in a debate.
- "Salvation is of the Jews" affirms the channel of God's promise, not the superiority of a race. Say so plainly if the question comes up.

## Faith That Shows

### PASSAGE OVERVIEW

James writes like a man with no time to waste. There are more than fifty imperatives in five chapters, and almost no transitions. The letter reads as though someone took the Sermon on the Mount and turned it into a series of short, practical paragraphs for Christians scattered by persecution. He is the half brother of Jesus, a man who did not believe during the ministry (John 7:5) and who ends up leading the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13).

Chapter 1 is built around trials and the word. Trials produce endurance, and the man who lacks wisdom in them should ask God, who gives generously and without reproach. But temptation is another matter: God tempts no one; each one is drawn away by his own desires and enticed, and then desire conceives and brings forth sin, and sin brings forth death. The remedy runs through the second half of the chapter: receive the implanted word with meekness, and then be a doer of it. The mirror illustration is unforgettable because it is so ordinary. A man looks at himself, walks away, and immediately forgets what he saw.

Chapter 2 gives two case studies. First, partiality. A man with a gold ring and fine clothes gets the good seat; a poor man in filthy clothes is told to stand or sit on the floor. James calls it sin and says such judges have evil thoughts. Second, the great passage on faith and works. If a brother is naked and hungry and you say, be warmed and filled, what does it profit? Faith without works is dead. Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac, and so was Rahab. Verse 24 is the plainest sentence in Scripture on it: a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The writer is almost certainly James the half brother of Jesus, leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13–21; Galatians 1:19). He calls himself simply a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- He writes to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad,” Jewish Christians dispersed by persecution, probably very early, possibly the first New Testament letter written.
- The letter echoes the Sermon on the Mount repeatedly. Compare James 1:5 with Matthew 7:7, James 2:13 with Matthew 5:7, James 5:12 with Matthew 5:34–37.
- James uses “justified by works” to mean the obedient response of faith; Paul in Romans 4 opposes works of law and meritorious works by which a man could boast. They are answering different errors, not each other.
- The assembly scene in 2:2 uses the word for synagogue, the gathering of Christians for worship and teaching.
- “The royal law” (2:8) is the command to love your neighbor as yourself, quoted by Jesus as second only to loving God (Matthew 22:39).

### NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** *James 1:2–4 commands joy in the middle of various trials and then gives a reason. What is the reason, and how does a person actually obey a command about what to think while the trial is still going on?*

The reason is given in verses 3 and 4: knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience, and let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. Joy here is not pleasure in the pain. It is the settled judgment that the trial is doing something, and that God is using it to finish a work in you. Notice James says “count,” which is an accounting word. It means to reckon, to add it up a certain way.

As for how you obey a command about thinking, James answers in the next verse: if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God. The path from despair to joy in this passage runs through prayer, and specifically prayer for wisdom to see the trial rightly. Ask the class to name a trial they are in and to say what they believe God might be

producing through it. Be careful not to let that become a demand that suffering people perform cheerfulness; Romans 12:15 still applies, and Lamentations is in the same week's reading for a reason.

**Question 2.** *James 1:22–25 pictures a man who studies his face in a mirror and walks away having forgotten it. Where are you most likely to hear the word and not do it, and what would a doer have done differently last week?*

Almost everyone will recognize the picture, so move quickly to specifics. Where does hearing routinely fail to become doing? Common answers: hearing a lesson on the tongue and gossiping at lunch; hearing about giving and changing nothing; hearing about forgiveness while a grudge is ten years old; hearing about evangelism and never speaking. James adds a contrast in verse 25: the one who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, being not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, will be blessed in what he does.

Then push on the second half of the question, which is the useful half. What would a doer have done last week? Ask people to name the actual moment: the conversation where they should have spoken, the check they should have written, the apology they owed. Then note James 1:26–27 immediately following, which gives three tests of real religion: a bridled tongue, care for orphans and widows, and a life unstained by the world. James never lets religion float free of behavior.

**Question 3.** *James 2:14–26 says that faith without works is dead and that a man is justified by works and not by faith only. How would you explain that to a friend who has been taught salvation by faith alone, and how does it fit with Ephesians 2:8–9?*

Take it slowly and let the text do the work. James asks in verse 14 whether faith can save a man if he has no works, and the Greek expects the answer no. He gives an example in verses 15 and 16 of a brother who is cold and hungry being sent away with warm words. He says in verse 19 that the demons believe there is one God and tremble, so belief by itself is not what saves. He points to Abraham, whose faith was working together with his works, and whose faith was made perfect by the works. And he concludes in verse 24: you see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. That is the only place in Scripture where the phrase “faith only” appears, and it is denied.

Then harmonize it honestly with Paul. Ephesians 2:8–9 says we are saved by grace through faith, not of works, lest anyone should boast, and verse 10 immediately adds that we are created in Christ Jesus for good works. Paul is excluding works that earn salvation and place God in our debt, including the works of the law of Moses. James is excluding a faith that never obeys. Both agree that salvation is a gift and that the gift is received by a faith that acts. That is why Hebrews 11:8 says by faith Abraham obeyed, and why Peter told believing, convicted hearers to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Say it plainly: nobody earns salvation, and nobody is saved by a faith that refuses to obey.

## NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

**1.** *List the commands in James 1. There are more than you expect. Which three are aimed most directly at the week you are about to have?*

Among them: count it all joy, let patience have its perfect work, ask in faith without doubting, let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, let no one say he is tempted by God, do not be deceived, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, lay aside all filthiness, receive with meekness the implanted word, be doers of the word and not hearers only, bridle the tongue, visit orphans and widows, keep oneself unspotted from the world. Answers will vary on the final three, but press for specifics rather than favorites.

**2.** *James 1:13–15 lays out the anatomy of temptation step by step. Write out the sequence, then compare Genesis 3:6 and 2 Samuel 11:2–4 and see whether it fits.*

Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed; then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Genesis 3:6 fits exactly: she saw that the tree was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable, then she took and ate. So does 2 Samuel 11: David saw, inquired, sent, took, and then killed to cover it. In both, the sin was decided well before the act, and the responsibility lies with the one who wanted it.

3. *James 2:1–9 describes a scene in the assembly. Describe what happened, who received the good seat and why, and note the word James uses for it in verse 9.*

A man with gold rings and fine apparel comes into the assembly along with a poor man in filthy clothes. The usher gives the rich man a good seat and tells the poor man to stand there or sit at his footstool. The reason is obvious: the rich man looks useful and the poor man looks like trouble. James calls it partiality, says they have become judges with evil thoughts, reminds them that God chose the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and in verse 9 calls it sin, convicted by the law as transgressors.

4. *Compare James 2:21–24 with Genesis 22:1–18 and Romans 4:1–5. How can Paul say Abraham was not justified by works while James says he was?*

They are answering opposite errors with the same vocabulary. Paul is arguing against those who thought law-keeping earned righteousness, and Romans 4:1–5 says Abraham had nothing to boast about before God, since he was counted righteous when he believed in Genesis 15, years before the deeds. James is arguing against those who thought a faith that never acts is enough, and he points to Genesis 22, where Abraham's faith was demonstrated and completed by obedience. Paul excludes earning; James excludes idleness. Both would say Abraham trusted God and therefore obeyed Him.

5. *James 1:27 defines pure religion as visiting orphans and widows in their trouble and keeping oneself unspotted from the world. Name one such person, set the day this week, and go.*

Answers will vary, but this one is meant to be done, not discussed. Encourage students to pick someone the congregation has overlooked rather than someone already well cared for, to schedule it rather than intending it, and to go rather than to send. Note that James joins the visit to being unspotted from the world in the same verse, so mercy and holiness are not alternatives.

## HANDLE WITH CARE

- James 2:24 is the plain refutation of salvation by faith only, and it should be taught plainly. Harmonize it with Ephesians 2:8–10 rather than pitting James against Paul, and keep the tone teaching rather than combative.
- James 1:5 is not a blank check. God gives wisdom to those who ask in faith, not prosperity or answers on demand; verses 6 through 8 set the condition.
- Do not let James 1:2 be used to tell a suffering person that he should feel happy. The command is to count the trial a certain way, not to deny the pain (Romans 12:15).
- James 2:10, breaking one point of the law and being guilty of all, refers to the law under which his readers stood. Christians are not under the law of Moses (Colossians 2:14–17), though the principle that partial obedience is not obedience carries over.
- Partiality is a live issue in every congregation. Teach it without letting the class turn it into an accusation against particular members.

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**NEXT WEEK'S READING:** Ezekiel 1–5 · Psalm 119:1–56 · John 4:46–5:17 · James 3–5

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