

Through the Bible in 24 Months



WEEK 84 OF 104

Mercy in the Ashes

Week 84 of 104 • 81% of the way through the Bible

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

THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE

This week begins at a funeral. Lamentations is five poems written over the corpse of a city, and the man writing them is not looking for a silver lining. Yet buried in the middle of the darkest poem is the line about mercies that are new every morning, and it means far more where it actually sits than it ever does on a coffee mug. Psalm 118 sings that God's mercy endures forever and then says the rejected stone became the cornerstone. Jesus sits down tired at a well and spends the afternoon on a woman nobody else would have talked to. And James, blunt as a hammer, says the religion God accepts looks like a visit to a widow. Mercy keeps showing up at the bottom.

How to use this guide: Read all four passages during the week. Your teacher will take up two of them in class, one in each session. For the other two, work through the "Extended Class Discussion or Self-Study" questions on your own and write your answers in the space provided.

GENERAL OLD TESTAMENT Lamentations 1-5

A Funeral for a City

WHAT YOU WILL FIND HERE

Five poems over the ruins of Jerusalem. The city sits like a widow, alone, with no one to comfort her. The second poem says without flinching that the Lord Himself did this. The third is one man's account of affliction, and at its center, surrounded by darkness, are the mercies that are new every morning. The fourth remembers gold gone dim and children begging bread during the siege. The fifth is a prayer that ends without a resolution, asking God to turn them back to Himself.

FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

- 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?
- 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?

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?

EXTENDED CLASS DISCUSSION OR SELF-STUDY

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?
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.
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?
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?
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.

WISDOM LITERATURE Psalm 118

The Stone the Builders Rejected

WHAT YOU WILL FIND HERE

The last psalm of the Passover collection opens with four voices told to say that His mercy endures forever. Then a single man tells his story: he called on the Lord in distress, was surrounded, was pushed so hard he was falling, and was helped. He asks for the gates of righteousness to be opened. He announces that the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone, that this is the day the Lord has made, and that blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

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?

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?
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?

EXTENDED CLASS DISCUSSION OR SELF-STUDY

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

GOSPELS John 4:1–45

Worship in Spirit and Truth

WHAT YOU WILL FIND HERE

Jesus is tired and thirsty at noon, sitting on Jacob’s well, when a Samaritan woman comes alone to draw water. He asks her for a drink, and the conversation goes from a bucket to living water, from living water to five husbands, from five husbands to a two-hundred-year-old argument about which mountain to worship on, and from there to the plainest claim He had yet made about Himself. She leaves her waterpot and brings her town. They believe, and then tell her they no longer need her word for it.

FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

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?
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?
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?

EXTENDED CLASS DISCUSSION OR SELF-STUDY

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.
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?
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?
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.
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?

GENERAL NEW TESTAMENT James 1–2

Faith That Shows

WHAT YOU WILL FIND HERE

James writes in short, blunt sentences to scattered Christians. Count it all joy when trials come, because testing produces endurance. Ask God for wisdom without wavering. Do not blame God for temptation; desire conceives

and gives birth to sin. Be swift to hear and slow to anger. Be a doer of the word, not a hearer who forgets his own face in the mirror. Then chapter 2 walks a rich man and a poor man into the assembly to see who gets the good seat, and ends by calling faith without works dead.

FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

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?
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?
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?

EXTENDED CLASS DISCUSSION OR SELF-STUDY

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?
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.
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.
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?
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.

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

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