

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 85 OF 104

The Weight of a Word

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Ezekiel 1-5
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 119:1-56
Gospels	John 4:46-5:17
General New Testament	James 3-5

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to give the class a right sense of the weight of words. God's word is heavy enough to be eaten, hidden in the heart, sung in a foreign country, and trusted for twenty miles with nothing else in hand. And our own words are heavy too, heavy enough that James spends a chapter on a muscle two inches long. A class that leaves taking Scripture more seriously and its own speech more seriously has had a good week.

Doctrinally, two places call for care. Ezekiel 1 tempts a class into speculation, and the answer is to keep the focus where the text puts it, on the glory of God arriving among exiles. James 5:14-16 tempts a class in the other direction, toward either dismissing the passage or endorsing modern faith healing. Teach the duty plainly, teach the purpose of miraculous gifts plainly, and be tender with the people in the room whose prayers for healing were answered with a funeral.

Formationally, watch the theme of the word taken inside. Ezekiel eats the scroll before he preaches. The psalmist hides the word in his heart so he will have it when he needs it. A father believes a sentence and walks home on it. James says a man who hears and does not do is looking in a mirror and forgetting his own face. Ask your class this: what is one sentence of Scripture you will carry with you every day this week, and what decision will you let it make for you?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up James 3-5. The tongue, worldliness, and the paragraph on prayer and the elders will fill the hour easily. Decide in advance how much time you will give to James 5:14-16 and prepare it carefully, because it will draw the most questions.

Second session: Take up Ezekiel 1-5. Give ten minutes to the vision, name plainly what it meant to exiles, and then move to the eaten scroll and the watchman, which is where the lesson lives. Use the sign acts at the end to show how God made His message impossible to ignore.

The other two readings: Assign Psalms 119:1-56 and John 4:46-5:17. Ask everyone to pick one verse from the psalm and memorize it by next Sunday, and be ready to call on two or three to quote it. Point out that the nobleman had nothing but a sentence and a long walk home.

The Watchman and the Scroll

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Set the scene before you touch the vision. It is 593 B.C., Jerusalem is still standing but Ezekiel is not there. He was carried off with King Jehoiachin in the deportation of 597, and he is living with other Jewish exiles by the River Chebar, an irrigation canal near Nippur. He is thirty years old, which is the age a priest began his service, and he is a thousand miles from the temple where he would have served. That is the man to whom the heavens open.

The vision overwhelms, and Ezekiel's language stumbles on purpose: the likeness of, the appearance of, something like. Four living creatures with four faces and four wings, moving straight forward wherever the spirit went. Beside them wheels within wheels, rims full of eyes. Above them a crystal expanse, a sapphire throne, and on it the likeness of a man ringed with fire and a rainbow. Verse 28 names it: the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. Do not spend the hour on the wheels. The point is that God's throne has wheels, and it came to Babylon. He was not locked in a temple and had not abandoned His people.

Chapters 2 through 5 are the commission and the first sermons, and they are physical. He eats a scroll covered with lamentations, mourning, and woe, and it tastes sweet. He is made a watchman, with the blood of the unwarned charged to him if he keeps silent. Then he is told to draw a siege of Jerusalem on a clay brick, to lie on his left side 390 days and his right side 40, to eat measured bread cooked over dung, and to shave his head with a sword and divide the hair in three. A people who will not hear a sermon may still watch a man do something strange for a year.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Ezekiel was a priest (1:3), deported to Babylon in 597 B.C. with Jehoiachin, eleven years before Jerusalem fell. He prophesied to the exiles while Jeremiah preached in the city itself.
- The River Chebar was a large canal off the Euphrates near Nippur, where a colony of Jewish deportees had been settled.
- Genre: prophetic apocalypse mixed with sign act and oracle. Ezekiel is the most visual of the prophets, and much of his message is acted rather than spoken.
- "Son of man" is used of Ezekiel more than ninety times in the book. It simply means a human being, and it holds him in place as a mortal standing before the glory of God.
- The 390 days and 40 days (4:4-6) correspond to years of iniquity for Israel and Judah. Prophetic sign acts often carry a day-for-a-year ratio (Numbers 14:34).
- Chapters 1 through 3 cover the vision and call, chapters 4 and 5 the first sign acts announcing the siege and fall of Jerusalem, which was still seven years away.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Ezekiel 1 is famous for the wheels, but 1:28 tells you what he actually saw: "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." Notice how carefully he stacks those words. Why does he describe it so indirectly, and what did that vision mean to a man living in a camp of deportees?*

He describes it indirectly because he is a truthful man describing something that will not fit in human categories. Every hedge he uses, the appearance of, the likeness of, is honesty rather than vagueness. He saw the glory of God, and glory is not a shape you can sketch. Compare Exodus 33:20 and 1 Timothy 6:16. His response in the same verse is the right one: when I saw it, I fell on my face.

For the exiles the message was everything. Their theology had a temple at the center, and the temple was in Jerusalem, and they were not. Had God stayed behind? Was Babylon's god stronger? Chapter 1 answers by showing a throne that moves, borne on wheels that go in any direction without turning, attended by creatures

that go wherever the Spirit goes. God had come to Chebar. Ask the class where they have assumed God is more present than He is in their own ordinary week, and what changes if the throne is mobile.

Question 2. *Ezekiel is told to eat the scroll before he opens his mouth (2:8–3:3). Why does the message have to go all the way into a man before it goes out of him, and what happens to teaching that skips that step?*

Because a messenger who has not digested the message will always deliver something else, usually himself. Notice the order in 2:8: do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. The first requirement on the prophet is that he not be like the people he is sent to. And the scroll is not pleasant reading; it is written on both sides with lamentations, mourning, and woe. Yet in his mouth it was as sweet as honey, because it was God's. Compare Jeremiah 15:16 and Revelation 10:9–10.

Teaching that skips this step goes wrong in predictable ways. It becomes performance, or opinion with verses attached, or a hobby horse ridden into every lesson, or harshness without grief. Ezekiel is told in 3:15 that he sat among the exiles seven days, astonished, before he said a word. Ask the teachers and the parents in the room what it would look like to sit with a passage for a week before trying to hand it to somebody.

Question 3. *Ezekiel 3:16–21 makes him a watchman and says the blood of the unwarned will be required at his hand. What responsibility does that lay on a Christian who knows the truth, and where does that responsibility stop?*

Take the passage on its own terms first. God appoints Ezekiel as a watchman over the house of Israel and tells him that if he fails to warn the wicked, that man will die in his iniquity and God will require his blood at the watchman's hand; if he warns and is ignored, he has delivered his soul. The prophet is accountable for the warning, not for the response. That distinction is the mercy in the passage, and your class needs to hear it.

The principle carries into the New Testament, though the office does not. Paul told the Ephesian elders, "I am innocent of the blood of all men, for I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26–27), which is watchman language. So the responsibility on us is to speak the truth in love, plainly and in time. Where it stops is at the other person's will. You are not guilty because a neighbor refused, and Ezekiel 18:20 says each soul bears its own sin. Ask the class to name one person they have been meaning to warn, and then be careful not to send anyone home with false guilt.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read Ezekiel 1 and list what moves and what does not. Where is the throne located in the vision, and who is seated on it?*

Almost everything moves: the whirlwind, the fire, the living creatures darting like lightning, the wheels going in any of four directions without turning, the spirit in the wheels. What does not move is the expanse above their heads and the throne above the expanse, and the One seated on it, described as having the likeness of a man, glowing like amber and fire, ringed with a rainbow. The structure of the vision says that all the motion in the universe happens underneath a settled throne.

2. *Count how often God addresses Ezekiel as "son of man" in these five chapters. What is that title emphasizing, especially coming right after chapter 1?*

It appears repeatedly, beginning at 2:1 and running through the book more than ninety times. The title keeps Ezekiel in his place. He has just seen the glory of God, and God's first word to him is a reminder that he is a man, dust, mortal, standing only because the Spirit set him on his feet (2:2). It also quietly prepares the reader for the One who took that title for Himself (Daniel 7:13; Matthew 16:13).

3. *Trace the four sign acts of Ezekiel 4 and 5: the brick, the lying on his side, the rationed food, the shaved hair. Write down what each one was acting out.*

The brick with a siege drawn on it and an iron plate between him and it enacted the coming siege of Jerusalem and God's barrier against the city's prayers. Lying on his left side 390 days and his right side 40 bore the iniquity of Israel and of Judah, a day for a year. The measured bread and water cooked over fuel of dung enacted famine rations and

defilement during the siege. The shaved hair divided in three, burned, struck with the sword, and scattered to the wind, enacted the three fates of the population, with a few hairs bound in his robe as a remnant.

4. *Compare Ezekiel 2:5 with Ezekiel 33:33. God tells the prophet in advance that the people will not listen, and sends him anyway. How does that reframe the way we measure faithful service?*

Ezekiel 2:5 says, “whether they hear or whether they refuse, they will know that a prophet has been among them,” and 33:33 says, “when this comes to pass, surely they will know that a prophet has been among them.” God defines success as faithful delivery, not as visible response. That reframes teaching, parenting, and personal evangelism. We are responsible for the warning and for the love with which it is given; the results belong to God (1 Corinthians 3:6–7).

5. *Ezekiel’s obedience cost him comfort, dignity, and years of his life. Name one thing obeying God has actually cost you in the last twelve months, and if you cannot name anything, sit with that for a while.*

Answers will vary. Do not accept vague answers about being busy. Look for real costs: money given, a friendship strained by a stand taken, a promotion declined, a habit surrendered, an hour of sleep traded for service. If a student genuinely cannot name anything, the useful follow-up is not shame but a question: what would it cost you if you started?

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not let the class spend the hour on the wheels and the creatures. The point of chapter 1 is that God’s glory is mobile and came to the exiles. Resist speculation about the mechanics of the vision.
- The vision is not a map of heaven and not a description of anything modern. Teach it as what Ezekiel says it is, the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.
- The watchman passage is a commission to a prophet under the old covenant. Apply the principle through Acts 20:26–27 and 2 Timothy 4:2, and guard against sending sensitive members home convinced they are guilty of a neighbor’s lost condition.
- The sign acts are strange and will draw questions. Explain prophetic sign acts as a category (Jeremiah’s yoke, Isaiah’s bare feet) rather than defending each detail, and note that God Himself modified the fuel in 4:15.

Hidden in the Heart

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 119 is an acrostic of acrostics. Twenty-two stanzas, one for each Hebrew letter, eight verses in each stanza, every verse in a stanza beginning with that letter. That is a great deal of labor for a single theme, and the labor is part of the message: this is a man who wants to say everything that can be said about the word of God, in order, without leaving anything out. Nearly every one of the 176 verses mentions Scripture under one of eight terms.

The tone is not academic. Aleph opens with the blessedness of those who walk in the law of the Lord and then breaks into the first person: “Oh, that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes!” Beth asks the question every parent wants answered, how a young man can cleanse his way, and answers by taking heed to God’s word and hiding it in the heart. Gimel prays for open eyes and calls the psalmist a stranger in the earth. Daleth finds him with his soul clinging to the dust, asking to be revived. He, Waw, and Zayin ask for understanding, liberty, courage before kings, and comfort in affliction.

Two verses in this section deserve special attention in class. Verse 11, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You,” makes memorization a moral strategy rather than a childhood exercise. And verse 54, “Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage,” pictures a man far from home turning God’s commands into traveling music. Both assume something your class may not: that Scripture is portable, internal, and usable in the middle of a hard day, not a book that stays on a shelf between Sundays.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible, 176 verses in twenty-two eight-verse stanzas, each stanza built on one letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
- Eight terms for God’s revelation run through it: law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgments, word, and ordinances. Almost every verse contains one.
- The author is unnamed. The psalm reflects a man under pressure from proud men and princes, likely in or after the exile, who has nothing left but the word of God.
- “Law” translates torah, which means instruction rather than mere legislation. The psalmist loves God’s teaching, not a system of merit.
- The psalm praises the revelation Israel had. Christians apply its principles to the completed Scriptures, including the New Testament under which we live (2 Timothy 3:16–17; Hebrews 8:13).
- This reading covers stanzas Aleph through Zayin, verses 1 through 56.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 119:9 asks how a young man can keep his way pure, and verse 11 answers it. Why does the psalmist speak of hiding the word in his heart rather than simply reading it, and what is the practical difference between the two?*

Reading puts the word in front of you; hiding it puts the word inside you. The difference shows up at the moment of temptation, which almost never happens with an open Bible in your hand. The psalmist says he hid it in his heart “that I might not sin against You,” which makes memorization a defense rather than a decoration. Jesus answered the wilderness temptations by quoting Deuteronomy three times from memory, and He was quoting a book He had learned as a boy.

Make it practical or the class will agree and change nothing. Ask how many verses each person could quote accurately, and do not embarrass anyone. Then give a plan: one verse a week, written on a card, carried in a

pocket or taped to a mirror, reviewed out loud. In a year that is fifty-two verses. Also press the word “heart” in Hebrew usage, which includes mind and will. Hiding the word there means letting it decide things, not merely storing it.

Question 2. *Count the different words used for Scripture in these verses: law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgments, word. What is the psalmist communicating by circling the same subject with so many different terms?*

The variety is the psalmist walking around the same treasure and describing it from every side. Law is instruction, testimonies are God’s witness about Himself, precepts are entrusted charges, statutes are things engraved and fixed, commandments are the authority of a superior, judgments are righteous decisions, word and saying are God speaking. Taken together they say that Scripture is instruction, witness, charge, decree, command, verdict, and speech all at once.

Draw the application toward how the class treats the Bible. Some people hold only one of those terms: Scripture as rulebook, or as comfort, or as history, or as devotional material. The psalmist holds all of them, and the result is affection rather than mere compliance. Ask which of the eight comes least naturally to each person. The man who loves the promises and resents the commands, and the man who obeys the commands and never tastes the promises, both need this psalm.

Question 3. *Verse 45 says, “I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts.” Most people assume commandments and freedom pull in opposite directions. Where in your own life has obedience actually produced freedom?*

Begin by admitting how strange the sentence sounds. Liberty, in verse 45, is the result of seeking precepts. The psalm assumes what experience confirms, that some of the heaviest chains a person wears are self-forged: debt, addiction, a reputation that has to be managed, a lie that must be maintained, a temper that costs him relationships. Obedience does not add a burden to a free man; it lifts a burden off a captive. James calls it the perfect law of liberty (James 1:25), and Jesus says the truth will make you free (John 8:31–32).

Then get specific and let people testify. The man who began giving and found money loosened its grip. The couple who put their marriage under Scripture and stopped keeping score. The person who quit drinking and got his evenings back. The teenager who decided in advance what he would not do and stopped having to relitigate it at every party. Ask what one boundary the class member has resisted, and what freedom might be waiting on the other side of it.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read verses 1 through 8 and list every term used there for God’s word. Then keep a running tally as you read on through verse 56.*

Verses 1 through 8 use law, testimonies, ways, precepts, statutes, commandments, righteous judgments, and word. Running the tally through verse 56 shows that nearly every verse contains at least one term, the exceptions being few. The exercise itself is the lesson: the psalmist cannot write a sentence about his life without mentioning God’s revelation.

2. *Verse 18 prays, “Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law.” Describe what that prayer assumes about Bible reading, and say when you last prayed something like it before you opened the book.*

It assumes that the words on the page are wonderful and that our eyes are the problem, not the text. It assumes God is willing to give understanding to those who ask. And it assumes Bible reading is a spiritual act rather than a purely intellectual one. Answers will vary on the second half; most students will admit they open the book without praying first. Suggest making verse 18 the sentence they say before every reading for a month.

3. *Trace the verbs this psalmist attaches to the word: hide, meditate, delight, cling, run, love, remember, sing. List them with their verse numbers.*

Among them: walk in it (verse 1), keep it (4), meditate on it (15), delight in it (16, 24, 35, 47), hide it in the heart (11), declare it (13), long for it (20), cling to it (31), run its course (32), love it (47, 48), lift his hands to it (48), remember it

(52), and sing it (54). The list moves from attention to affection to action, which is the movement the whole psalm makes.

4. Verse 25 says, “My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to Your word.” Set it beside verse 50. Where does this man go when he is at his lowest, and what does he expect to happen there?

He goes to the word. Verse 25 asks to be revived according to God’s word, and verse 50 says, “This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life.” He does not expect the word to explain his suffering or remove it. He expects it to keep him alive in it. That is a realistic and durable expectation, and it is worth contrasting with the notion that Bible reading should always leave a person feeling better.

5. Verse 11 is an argument for memorizing. Choose one verse from this reading, write it on a card, carry it with you, and know it by heart before Sunday.

Answers will vary. Verses that students commonly choose from this section include 9, 11, 18, 24, 32, 45, and 50. Ask them to write it out by hand, say it out loud daily, and recite it to one other person, since a verse recited to someone else tends to stay.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- This psalm praises the revelation Israel had under the old covenant. Christians are not under the law of Moses (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13), but every principle here about loving, learning, and obeying God’s word applies with full force to the Scriptures we have.
- Do not let love of law slide into a doctrine of merit. The psalmist repeatedly asks God to revive him, teach him, and be gracious to him. He is a dependent man, not a self-made one.
- Verses about the psalmist’s blamelessness (for example verse 1) describe integrity of direction, not sinless perfection. Compare Psalm 119:176, where he still calls himself a lost sheep.
- The sheer length of this psalm can flatten a class. Take one or two stanzas seriously rather than skimming all seven.

Your Son Lives

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The nobleman of Cana is one of the quietest miracle accounts in the Gospels and one of the most instructive. He is a royal official, probably in Herod's service, a man used to getting results by making requests in person. His son is dying twenty miles away in Capernaum, and he wants Jesus to come down. Jesus answers with what sounds at first like a rebuke about signs and wonders, and then refuses the trip: "Go your way; your son lives." John records the hinge in six words: "So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way."

He went his way. That is a long walk downhill with nothing in hand. He does not arrive frantic; he apparently stops overnight, because his servants meet him the next day. And when he asks the hour the fever broke, it was the seventh hour, the exact moment Jesus spoke. Then John says he believed, and his whole household with him. Belief in the word came first; confirmation came after; and the household came along behind that. That order is worth writing on the board.

Chapter 5 moves to Jerusalem and a pool crowded with sick people. Jesus picks one man out of the crowd, sick for thirty-eight years, and asks, do you want to be made well? The man does not answer yes; he explains why nothing has worked. Jesus heals him anyway, tells him to take up his bed and walk, and disappears into the crowd. Because it is a Sabbath, the objection is immediate, and it is about the mat, not the miracle. When Jesus answers, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working," everything changes. Verse 18 says they understood Him perfectly: He was making Himself equal with God.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The "nobleman" of 4:46 is a royal official, likely attached to Herod Antipas. Cana sits in the hills roughly twenty miles from Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, a downhill walk of several hours.
- This is the second sign John records in Galilee (4:54), following the water made wine in the same town.
- Bethesda was a pool near the Sheep Gate with five covered colonnades, excavated in modern times and matching John's description.
- The explanation of an angel troubling the water (5:3b–4) is absent from the earliest manuscripts and is likely a later scribal note recording popular belief. The account does not depend on it.
- Carrying a burden on the Sabbath was forbidden by rabbinic tradition built around Jeremiah 17:21–22. The objection in 5:10 is to the mat, not to the healing.
- John 5:17–18 is the first open clash over Jesus' identity in this gospel, and it sets up the long discourse of 5:19–47 that the class will read next week.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The father asked Jesus to come down to Capernaum, and Jesus refused to go, handing him one sentence instead (4:49–50). What did the man have to do with only that sentence, and when have you had to act on God's word without any confirmation that it was working?*

He had to turn around and walk home on a sentence. No touch, no visible sign, no travel companion in a white robe, nothing to show his wife when he arrived. Everything he had was a statement made by a man standing twenty miles from the sickbed. John wants us to notice this, which is why he repeats the phrase about the word twice, in verse 50 and again in verse 53. This is faith in a bare promise, which is the only kind most of us ever get.

Bring it to the class's own experience carefully, because someone in the room prayed for a child and the fever did not break. The passage is not promising that every request is granted. It is showing what it looks like to take God at His word before the evidence arrives: to keep giving, to keep forgiving, to keep coming, to keep teaching a child

who is not listening. Ask each person to name the one place they are currently being asked to walk home on a sentence.

Question 2. *Jesus asks a man sick for thirty-eight years, “Do you want to be made well?” It sounds like a strange thing to ask. Why would He ask it, and what can that question expose in a person?*

Because thirty-eight years is long enough for an illness to become an identity. The man has a place, a routine, a reason, and an answer ready for anyone who asks. Notice he never says yes. He says nobody puts him in the pool and somebody else always goes down first. Jesus does not argue with the excuse; He simply gives the command that makes the excuse irrelevant. But the question stands over the whole account, and it is the sort of question only someone who loves us would ask.

Turn it on the room gently. There are conditions we complain about and quietly protect, because being healed would mean losing the sympathy, or the excuse, or the identity, or having to take responsibility for a life we have blamed on the illness. Ask what each person would have to give up if God answered the prayer they have been praying. This is not a passage for shaming the genuinely afflicted, and say so out loud; it is a passage about the difference between wishing and willing.

Question 3. *Jesus later found the healed man and said, “Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you” (5:14). How do you take that seriously without concluding that every illness is punishment for personal sin (see John 9:1–3)?*

Take it as specific rather than general. Jesus, who knew what was in man, knew something about this man that we are not told, and He gave him a warning suited to it. That is entirely different from a rule that suffering maps onto sin. In John 9:1–3 the disciples asked whose sin caused a man’s blindness and Jesus rejected both options. In Luke 13:1–5 He denied that the victims of Pilate and of the falling tower were worse sinners than anyone else, and then told everyone to repent.

So teach two truths together. Sin does sometimes produce direct physical consequences, and Scripture says so plainly (Proverbs 5:11; 1 Corinthians 11:30; Galatians 6:7). But no Christian is authorized to look at a sick person and infer a hidden sin; that is exactly the error of Job’s friends. And note what Jesus calls worse than thirty-eight years of paralysis. Whatever “a worse thing” means, it is not physical, and it should reorder how the class ranks their troubles.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Compare the father’s two moments of belief in 4:50 and 4:53. What is different about the second, and what had happened in between?*

In 4:50 he believed the word Jesus spoke and started home; that is faith in a promise with no evidence. In 4:53 he knew that the healing happened at the very hour Jesus spoke, and John says he believed, and his whole household. The second belief is fuller, resting on a confirmed sign, and it spreads to his family. What happened in between was obedience: he went his way. Faith grew because he acted on the first installment of it.

2. *Read John 4:48, where Jesus says people will not believe unless they see signs and wonders. Set it beside John 20:29–31 and describe the relationship between signs and faith in this gospel.*

Jesus is not condemning the signs; He performed them constantly, and John selected seven of them to write down. He is naming a weakness in a faith that requires spectacle to function. John 20:30–31 says these signs were written so that you may believe, and John 20:29 blesses those who have not seen and yet have believed. The signs were given as evidence, and once given and recorded, they do their work through the written testimony (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4).

3. *List everything the man at the pool says in John 5:1–15. Then compare him with the Samaritan woman of chapter 4. What does he never do that she did?*

He says he has no man to put him into the pool and that someone else always steps down before him; he tells the objectors that the man who made him well told him to take up his bed; he says he does not know who it was; and

after learning, he goes and tells the Jews that it was Jesus. He never confesses Him, never thanks Him in the record, and never brings anyone to Him. The Samaritan woman, with far less standing, left her waterpot and brought a town.

4. *John 5:16–17 gives the reason the leaders began to persecute Jesus. Write out His answer to them, then read verse 18 and note exactly what they understood Him to be claiming.*

His answer is, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.” Verse 18 says the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. They understood the claim exactly, which is important: Jesus did not correct their understanding, He defended it in the discourse that follows.

5. *Jesus met the man’s physical need first and then went looking for him to deal with his soul (5:14). Name someone whose material need you have met, and take the next step toward his soul this week.*

Answers will vary. Watch for the common stall, which is meeting material needs indefinitely and never opening a spiritual conversation, usually out of fear that it would look like the help had strings on it. Suggest a simple next step: an invitation, an offer to study, a question about what they believe. Compare Acts 3:6 and 1 Thessalonians 2:8.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The miracles of Jesus and the apostles confirmed the word (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4; John 20:30–31). Use this passage to teach the purpose of signs, not to support modern faith healing.
- John 5:3b–4, about an angel stirring the water, is absent from the oldest manuscripts. Handle it honestly and briefly; the account stands without it, and the class will be helped rather than harmed by a straight answer.
- The Sabbath conflict is about a covenant Christians are not under (Colossians 2:14–17). Do not let it become an argument for a Christian Sabbath on Sunday; the Lord’s Day is the day of the assembly by apostolic example (Acts 20:7), not a transferred Sabbath.
- “Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you” must not be generalized into a rule that sickness reveals sin (John 9:1–3; Luke 13:1–5).

Tongue, Wisdom, and Prayer

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 3 begins where the class will not expect it, with a warning to teachers: let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. Then the reason widens into the whole letter's most quoted passage. The tongue is a small thing with disproportionate power, like the bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder on a ship, and like a spark that sets a forest burning. James calls it a world of iniquity, a restless evil, full of deadly poison, and he says that men have tamed every kind of animal but no man can tame the tongue.

That is not a permission slip. The very next lines are an indictment: with it we bless our God, and with it we curse men made in His likeness; out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Then the illustrations turn agricultural. A spring does not send out sweet water and bitter; a fig tree does not bear olives. The tongue is not the disease; it is the symptom, which is why chapter 3 moves straight into two kinds of wisdom, one earthly, sensual, and demonic, and one from above, pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.

Chapters 4 and 5 keep the same directness. Wars and fights come from desires that war inside us. Friendship with the world is enmity with God. Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up. Do not speak evil of one another. Do not plan a year you have not been given. Weep, you rich men who have held back wages. Be patient like a farmer waiting for rain, like the prophets, like Job. Let your yes be yes. Then the closing paragraph on prayer: pray when suffering, sing when cheerful, call the elders when sick, confess to one another, pray for one another, and turn back the one who wanders.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- James writes to Jewish Christians scattered by persecution, probably very early, in the same plain, imperative style as the Sermon on the Mount.
- "Let not many become teachers" (3:1) is not discouragement from teaching but sobriety about it. Teachers answer for what they say (compare Luke 12:48).
- The two wisdoms of 3:13–18 are distinguished by their fruit, not by their cleverness. The test is behavior: "Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom."
- James 4:5–10 draws on Proverbs 3:34, also quoted in 1 Peter 5:5: God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.
- Anointing with oil (5:14) had both medicinal use (Isaiah 1:6; Luke 10:34) and symbolic use as consecration. The New Testament church also had miraculous gifts of healing in that generation (1 Corinthians 12:9, 28).
- James ends without a benediction, closing instead with the recovery of a wandering brother, which tells you what mattered most to him.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *James 3:2–12 says no man can tame the tongue and then insists that blessing and cursing must not come out of the same mouth. If it cannot be tamed, what is he actually asking of us, and where does the help come from?*

He is not asking us to achieve a permanent state of control by willpower. He is asking for consistency, and he is telling us where inconsistency comes from. The fountain illustration is the key: bitter water at the tap means bitter water at the source. Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 12:34, that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. So the project is not merely mouth management; it is heart change, which is God's work in a person who submits to His word (James 1:21).

That said, there is real practical help, and the class will want it. Slow down, since James 1:19 says be swift to hear and slow to speak. Remove fuel, since most of us have particular people and particular settings where the fire starts. Confess specific instances rather than generic faults. Ask a spouse or friend for permission to be told. And pray about it, because James 1:5 promises wisdom to those who ask. Ask each person to name the one conversation this week where his tongue is most likely to do damage, and to plan for it now.

Question 2. *James 4:4 says that friendship with the world is enmity with God. What does worldliness look like in a respectable, church-attending life, and how would you recognize it in yourself rather than in someone else?*

Worldliness in a respectable life almost never looks like debauchery. It looks like the values of the culture quietly setting the agenda: measuring a life by income and comfort, choosing a house or a job without ever asking about the church there, letting entertainment shape what we find funny and what we find normal, keeping score in marriage, an appetite for status, a schedule with no room for anybody else. James 4:1–3 traces it back to desire, and 4:4 calls it adultery, which is covenant language.

Give the class a self-test rather than a list of other people's faults. Where does my money go when nobody is looking? What do I get angry about, and what does that reveal about what I love? What would have to be cancelled if a brother needed me on Saturday? Whose approval do I want most? Then read 4:7–10 aloud, because James does not leave the diagnosis without a remedy: submit to God, resist the devil, draw near to God, cleanse your hands, humble yourselves, and He will lift you up.

Question 3. *James 5:14–16 tells a sick Christian to call for the elders of the church and promises that the prayer of faith will save the sick. How should a congregation obey that today, and what is the passage not promising?*

Start with what the passage plainly says, and do the obvious part. A sick Christian is to take the initiative and call for the elders. The elders come, pray over him, and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. There is prayer, there is the possibility of confessed sin and forgiveness, and there is the mutual practice of confessing to one another and praying for one another. Every congregation can and should obey this. Most of the failure here is not doctrinal; it is that people do not call, and elders are not asked.

Now be honest about what it does not promise, and be honest kindly, because someone in the room has prayed and buried a spouse anyway. The apostolic age had miraculous gifts of healing that confirmed the word and ceased when revelation was complete (1 Corinthians 12:9; 13:8–10; Hebrews 2:3–4). Even then, healing was not universal: Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletus, Epaphroditus nearly died, Timothy had a recurring stomach ailment, and Paul's own thorn was not removed. So this passage is not a guarantee of physical recovery on demand, and it is certainly not a warrant for modern faith healers or for telling a suffering Christian that his faith was insufficient. The oil in that culture was a common remedy as well as a token of consecration, which suggests that prayer and ordinary care belong together. What God promises here is that the prayer of a righteous man avails much, that the Lord will raise him up, and that sins will be forgiven, and the final raising up is one no illness can prevent.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the images James uses for the tongue in chapter 3: bit, rudder, fire, beast, fountain, tree. Note what each one contributes that the others do not.*

The bit shows that a small thing can steer a large animal. The rudder shows the same for a ship driven by fierce winds, adding that the pilot's intention determines the course. The fire shows how small a beginning is needed for enormous damage. The untamable beast shows that this is not a problem we solve by technique. The fountain shows that what comes out reveals the source. The fig tree and vine show that a nature produces after its kind. Together they move from power, to damage, to helplessness, to the heart.

2. *Set the two wisdoms of James 3:13–18 in two columns. Which marks of the wisdom from above are hardest for you, and which have you mistaken for conviction?*

From above: pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, without hypocrisy, and sowing in peace. Earthly: bitter envy, self-seeking, boasting, lying against the truth, confusion, and every evil thing. Answers will vary, but the one most often mistaken for conviction is the refusal to yield. James lists

“willing to yield” as a mark of heavenly wisdom, which does not mean compromising truth; it means not needing to win.

3. *James 4:13–17 addresses a man laying out next year’s business. Rewrite your own plans for the coming year in the form James gives in verse 15.*

Verse 15 gives the form: “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” The exercise is not about adding a phrase to our speech but about holding plans with an open hand. Note verse 17 immediately after: to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin. James moves straight from uncertainty about tomorrow to urgency about today.

4. *Read James 5:7–11 on patience. List the examples he gives, and note what he says about the end the Lord finally brought about for Job.*

He gives the farmer waiting for the early and latter rain, the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord, and Job. Of Job he says we count them blessed who endure, and that you have seen the end intended by the Lord, that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful. Job never received an explanation, but he did receive God Himself and a restored life. Patience in James is not passivity; the farmer works the whole time he waits.

5. *James 5:16 says to confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another. Name one trusted Christian you could be honest with, and make the call this week.*

Answers will vary, and this one is meant to be acted on. Note two guardrails. Confession here is to one another, not to a priest or a clergyman, and there is no hint of a required formal system. And it should be to someone who will pray rather than repeat. Encourage students to choose a mature Christian of the same sex, or their elders, and to start with one specific thing rather than a general survey.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- James 5:14–16 must be handled honestly. Teach the plain duty (call the elders, pray, confess, care) and state plainly that the miraculous gifts of healing confirmed the word and ceased when revelation was complete (1 Corinthians 13:8–10; Hebrews 2:3–4). Do not endorse modern faith healing, and never suggest that a sick Christian failed to recover because his faith was too small.
- Confession in 5:16 is mutual confession among brethren, not confession to a priest. Say so, kindly, and guard against any practice that would make private sins public in a class setting.
- James 3:1 should not discourage qualified men from teaching. It calls for sobriety about the weight of teaching, not silence.
- James 4:4 on worldliness should be taught with self-examination rather than as a list of other people’s faults, and 4:7–10 should always be read with it so the class leaves with a remedy.
- James 5:1–6 is addressed to rich oppressors who withheld wages, not to every prosperous Christian. Wealth is not condemned; injustice and self-indulgence are (1 Timothy 6:17–19).

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Ezekiel 6–11 · Psalm 119:57–96 · John 5:18–47 · 1 Peter 1:1–2:12

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