Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide

WEEK 88 OF 104

Each Gives Account

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Ezekiel 17–21
Wisdom Literature	Psalm 119:137–120:7
Gospels	John 6:22–71
General New Testament	1 Peter 4–5

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is personal accountability, taught in a way that produces hope rather than fear. Ezekiel 18 is the anchor, and it deserves the best hour you have. The exiles wanted to be victims of their fathers, the crowd in John 6 wanted a Messiah who kept the bread coming, and Peter's readers wanted the pressure to stop. In every case God's answer is the same: you cannot outsource this, and you do not have to, because the way back is open to anyone who will take it.

Doctrinally, two great pillars are in this week's readings. First, Ezekiel 18:20 rules out inherited guilt. Nobody is born condemned; guilt begins when a person sins. Teach it directly, and teach the other half too, that a righteous man who turns away dies in his sin, which rules out any doctrine of guaranteed perseverance. Second, John 6:44 must be read with 6:45. The Father draws by teaching, through the gospel, and everyone who hears and learns comes. Those two texts together dismantle both Calvinism and fatalism in a single week. Guard also against reading 6:53 as anything but figurative, and let 6:63 do the work.

Formationally, watch the word "turn." Ezekiel uses it over and over, the psalmist ends by asking to be sought after wandering, the disciples in John 6 turn back and walk no more, and Peter tells Christians to arm themselves with the mind of Christ. Put this to the class before they go: name the direction you are actually walking right now, not the one you intend to walk someday, and name the one turn you will make this week.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Ezekiel 17–21 first, and give nearly the whole hour to chapter 18. Read the proverb of 18:2, the principle of 18:4 and 18:20, and the two turning men of 18:21–24, then finish on 18:30–32. This is the most doctrinally important hour of the quarter.

Second session: Take up John 6:22–71 second. It pairs directly with Ezekiel 18, since both chapters end with individuals deciding. Work 6:44 and 6:45 together as one unit, explain 6:53 by 6:35 and 6:63, and land the class on Peter's question in 6:68.

The other two readings: Assign Psalm 119:137–120:7 and 1 Peter 4–5 for private study. Tell the class to notice where the psalm actually ends, at verse 176, and why. Ask them to read 1 Peter 5:1–4 with your own congregation in mind, and to pray for the elders by name during the week.

GENERAL OLD TESTAMENT Ezekiel 17–21

The Soul That Sins Shall Die

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 17 is a political parable with a gospel ending. A great eagle (Babylon) takes the top of a cedar (Jehoiachin) and plants a seed (Zedekiah) that grows into a low, spreading vine. The vine then reaches toward a second eagle (Egypt), which is exactly what Zedekiah did when he broke his treaty oath. God calls it what it is, an oath despised and a covenant broken, and says He will requite it. Then verses 22 through 24 turn: God Himself will take a tender twig and plant it on a high mountain, and it will become a great tree in whose branches birds of every sort will nest.

Chapter 18 is the doctrinal center of Ezekiel and one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament. The exiles were quoting a proverb that made them victims of their fathers' sins. God forbids the proverb, states the principle (all souls are Mine; the soul who sins shall die), and then argues it case by case through three generations. Verse 20 is the hinge: the son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father the guilt of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked upon himself.

Then the argument turns forward. The wicked who turns from all his sins shall surely live, and none of his transgressions will be remembered against him. The righteous who turns to iniquity shall die in it, and none of his righteousness will be remembered. Both halves offend somebody. Together they say that no past is final and no résumé is permanent. Chapters 19 through 21 follow with a funeral song for the princes, a long and unflattering history lesson, and the sword of the Lord sharpened for slaughter, ending with the promise that the crown will be set aside "until He comes whose right it is" (21:27).

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Still Babylon, still before 586 B.C. Zedekiah was placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar and swore allegiance in God's name, then sought Egyptian help (2 Chronicles 36:13; Jeremiah 37:5–10).
- The sour grapes proverb was popular enough that Jeremiah addresses it too (Jeremiah 31:29–30), which shows it circulated on both sides of the exile.
- Ezekiel 18 is about personal accountability before God, not about whether children are affected by their parents' choices. Scripture plainly says they are (Exodus 20:5 speaks of consequences running through generations), but consequences are not guilt.
- Chapter 19 is written as a qinah, a funeral lament, with its characteristic limping rhythm. It mourns Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin, and then the royal house itself, as a vine plucked up.
- Ezekiel 20:25, "I gave them up to statutes that were not good," describes God giving a rebellious people over to the consequences and to the practices they insisted on (compare Romans 1:24–28 and Acts 7:42). God does not author evil.
- The words of 21:27, "until He comes whose right it is," end the line of Judah's earthly kings and point to Christ, who now reigns (Luke 1:32–33; Acts 2:29–36).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Ezekiel 18:2 quotes a proverb the exiles loved: the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. What were they really claiming with it, and how do God's words in 18:3–4 and 18:20 settle the question of inherited guilt?*

The proverb made them spectators of their own downfall. If the fathers ate the sour grapes, then the children were simply suffering for someone else's meal, which meant repentance was pointless and God was unfair. God's answer has three parts. First, "all souls are Mine," which establishes His right to judge every individual. Second, "the soul who sins shall die," which locates guilt where the sin happened. Third, verse 20, which makes the

principle explicit in both directions: the son does not bear the father's guilt, and the father does not bear the son's.

This chapter settles a doctrine that has confused millions of people. Scripture nowhere teaches that a baby is born guilty of Adam's sin or of anyone else's. Sin is something a person does (1 John 3:4), guilt is personal (Ezekiel 18:20), and Jesus held up children as the pattern of what the kingdom's citizens must become (Matthew 18:3; 19:14). Say this plainly, because many in your class have relatives who have been taught otherwise and have never seen the chapter that answers it. Then say the pastoral half: this also means nobody in the room can hide behind a father's failures. God asks each of us about our own hands.

Question 2. *In 18:21–24 a wicked man turns and lives, and a righteous man turns away and dies. Take both cases together and talk about how God actually evaluates a life, and what that says to anyone in the room who thinks it is too late, or too settled, to change.*

Verse 21 is startling: when the wicked turns from all his sins and keeps God's statutes, none of the transgressions he has committed shall be remembered against him. Verse 24 is equally startling in the other direction: when a righteous man turns away and commits iniquity, none of his righteousness shall be remembered. The listener wants one half and not the other. The exiles complained that God's way was not equal (18:25), which is exactly what we say whenever grace goes to someone we had written off or when warning is aimed at someone we had counted safe.

Draw both applications. To anyone who thinks his past disqualifies him: God says He is not keeping the list you are keeping. To anyone who assumes his years of faithfulness have banked something: God says a life is evaluated by where it is going, not by where it once was. Hebrews 3:12–14 and 2 Peter 2:20–22 say the same thing in New Testament terms, and the class will read the Peter text in two weeks. The Christian life is not a status achieved; it is a direction maintained.

Question 3. *Twice God says He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (18:23, 32) and asks, "Why should you die, O house of Israel?" How should that change the picture of God a person carries away from these judgment chapters?*

Ezekiel has spent chapters describing slaughter, famine, and a departing glory, and it is easy for a class to come away thinking of God as mostly angry. Then 18:23 asks, "Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? Would I not rather that he turn from his ways and live?" And 18:32 says, "I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies. Therefore turn and live!" The exclamation point is God's, not ours.

Put those verses beside 2 Peter 3:9, that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance, and beside Luke 19:41, where Jesus weeps over the city He is about to pronounce judgment on. The judgment in Ezekiel is not the opposite of God's love; it is what love does when it has pleaded for a century and been refused. Ask the class how they would describe God to a neighbor after reading these chapters, and keep working at the answer until it includes both the sword of chapter 21 and the plea of 18:32.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the three generations in 18:5–18. Write down what each man does and what God says happens to him, and then state the rule in your own words.*

The first man is just and does what is lawful and right, avoids idolatry and adultery, oppresses no one, restores the pledge, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, lends without usury, and executes true judgment; he shall surely live. His son is violent, an idolater, an adulterer, an oppressor; he shall surely die, and his blood is on himself. That son's son sees his father's sins and does not do them; he shall not die for his father's iniquity but shall surely live. The rule: each generation is measured on its own record, and family history is neither a shield nor a sentence.

2. *Ezekiel 17 opens with a riddle about two eagles and a vine and explains it in 17:11–21. Identify each figure, then read 17:22–24 and say who the tender twig finally turns out to be.*

The first great eagle is Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon; the highest branch he takes is King Jehoiachin, carried to Babylon in 597 B.C.; the seed planted in fertile soil is Zedekiah, made king as Babylon's vassal; the second eagle is Pharaoh of

Egypt, toward whom the vine bends its roots. The offense named in 17:18–19 is the breaking of a sworn oath, and God calls it “My oath” and “My covenant,” because it was sworn in His name. Then in 17:22–24 God does His own planting: a tender twig from the top of the cedar, set on a high mountain, becoming a tree that shelters every kind of bird. That is the Messiah and His kingdom (compare Isaiah 11:1; Ezekiel 34:23–24; Matthew 13:31–32).

3. *Ezekiel 20 walks through Israel’s history in stages: Egypt, the wilderness, the second generation, and the land. List what God says He did at each stage, and why He says He did it.*

In Egypt He made Himself known, promised to bring them out, and told them to cast away their idols, which they would not do; He acted for His name’s sake. In the wilderness He gave statutes and sabbaths, and they rebelled; He withheld destruction for His name’s sake. To the children He said not to walk in their fathers’ statutes, and they rebelled too; again He acted for His name’s sake. In the land they saw every high hill and offered there. The refrain, repeated through the chapter, is that God acted for His name’s sake, that His name should not be profaned among the nations. Grace in this chapter is rooted in who God is, not in what Israel deserved.

4. *Set Ezekiel 18:31, “make yourselves a new heart,” beside 11:19, “I will give them a new heart.” How do both statements stand together without contradiction? See Philippians 2:12–13.*

Both are true and neither cancels the other. God supplies what a person cannot manufacture: He grants repentance, gives the new covenant, writes the law on the heart. But He never does it over a person’s objection. Ezekiel 18:31 puts the responsibility on the will: cast away your transgressions, make yourselves a new heart, why should you die? Philippians 2:12–13 holds both halves in one sentence: work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you. Man cannot save himself, and God will not save a man who refuses to turn.

5. *Ezekiel 18:30–32 calls for repentance in three verbs: repent, turn, and cast away. Name the one thing you will cast away this week, and tell one person who will ask you about it on Sunday.*

Answers will vary. The three verbs are worth pressing, because most people will settle for the first. Repent is a change of mind, turn is a change of direction, and cast away is the act of getting rid of the thing itself. A man can feel sorry about a habit for years without ever throwing anything away. Listen for a named object, a named account, a named appointment, and for a named person who will follow up.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Ezekiel 18 is the clearest text in Scripture against inherited guilt. Teach it directly: no one is born guilty of another’s sin, infants are safe, and each person becomes guilty when he himself sins (18:20; Matthew 18:3; 19:14; 1 John 3:4). Be firm on the doctrine and kind toward those who were taught otherwise.
- Do not let 18:21–24 be flattened into salvation by works. The chapter is about the direction of a life under God’s covenant, and the New Testament answers the question of how anyone is forgiven (Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 3:5). What the chapter does establish, plainly, is that a faithful person can turn away and be lost, which rules out any doctrine of guaranteed perseverance.
- Ezekiel 20:25 does not mean God gave evil laws. It describes God giving a stubborn people over to the practices they demanded and to the consequences of them, exactly as Romans 1:24–28 describes. Explain it before someone in the class stumbles over it.
- Ezekiel 17:22–24 and 21:27 point forward to Christ and His kingdom, established at Pentecost and reigning now (Acts 2:29–36; Colossians 1:13). Do not let them be read as predictions of a future earthly throne in Jerusalem.

A Lost Sheep and a Long Exile

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The final stanzas of Psalm 119 gather everything the psalm has been saying and press it down into a few unforgettable lines. Tsadde: God is righteous and upright in His judgments, His word is very pure, and "I am small and despised, yet I do not forget Your precepts." Koph: "I cry out with my whole heart," rising before dawn and staying awake through the night watches to meditate. Resh: "Consider my affliction and deliver me," and then the summary statement of the whole psalm, "The entirety of Your word is truth."

Shin gives the two most beloved verses in the section. "Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments," and "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble." Then Tav ends not with a flourish but with a plea: let my cry come before You, give me understanding, let Your hand help me, and finally, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, for I do not forget Your commandments." One hundred and seventy-five verses of love for the word, and the last word is a confession of wandering.

Psalm 120 then begins the Songs of Ascents, the fifteen psalms pilgrims sang going up to Jerusalem. It is a strange opening for a set of travel songs: a man in distress, worn down by lying lips and deceitful tongues, saying "Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar." The ascent begins where most ascents begin, with someone who is sick of where he is. Point out the seam to your class; the transition from 119:176 to 120:1 is one of the most natural in the psalter.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This reading covers the last five stanzas of Psalm 119: Tsadde (137–144), Koph (145–152), Resh (153–160), Shin (161–168), and Tav (169–176), plus all seven verses of Psalm 120.
- Psalms 120 through 134 are the Songs of Ascents, sung by pilgrims traveling up to Jerusalem for the feasts, and they move from distress far from home toward blessing in the house of the Lord.
- Meshech lay far to the north, near the Black Sea, and Kedar was a nomadic Arab people to the southeast. No one lived in both; naming them together is a way of saying "I am surrounded by foreigners wherever I turn."
- The coals of the broom tree (120:4) burn hotter and longer than most wood, which is the point of the image: God's answer to a slanderer is not light.
- Night watches (119:148) divided the night into set periods for sentries. The psalmist is timing his meditation the way a soldier times a watch.
- The psalmist loves the Law of Moses. His reverence and his practice transfer to the completed Scriptures, though his covenant does not bind Christians (Colossians 2:14–17).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 119 ends at verse 176 with a confession you would not expect after one hundred and seventy-five verses about loving God's word. Read it aloud. Why is that the right ending for this psalm, and what does it protect us from?*

Verse 176 keeps the psalm honest. A person could read the first one hundred and seventy-five verses and conclude that the writer had arrived, that loving Scripture had made him proof against failure. The last verse says otherwise: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep." Yet notice the second half, "for I do not forget Your commandments." He has wandered, and he still knows where home is, and he asks God to come get him. That is not despair; it is the prayer of a sheep who still recognizes the shepherd's voice.

It protects us from two things. First, from thinking Bible knowledge is the same as faithfulness; a man can love the word and still drift. Second, from believing that drifting is the end. Isaiah 53:6 says all we like sheep have gone astray, and Luke 15:4 says the shepherd goes after the one that is lost until He finds it. Ask the class which is harder to admit out loud, that they have wandered or that they need to be sought. Most of us would rather find our own way back.

Question 2. *Verse 165 promises great peace to those who love God's law and says nothing shall cause them to stumble. Given the trouble described in verses 143, 157, and 161, what kind of peace is he describing, and what kind is he not promising?*

He is not promising a life without trouble, because the same psalm reports trouble on nearly every page: trouble and anguish have overtaken him (143), the wicked are far from God's law (155), persecutors and enemies are many (157), princes persecute him without cause (161). The peace of verse 165 is not the absence of pressure. It is the settled steadiness of a man who has already decided what is true, so that nothing catches him off balance and nothing becomes an occasion for falling.

The Hebrew behind "nothing causes them to stumble" carries the sense of no stumbling block, no trap that trips a person into sin. Compare Philippians 4:6–7, where the peace of God guards the heart in the middle of anxiety rather than after the circumstances change, and John 16:33, where Jesus promises peace in Him and tribulation in the world in the same sentence. Ask the class where they have been sold a false version of this promise, and what it cost them when trouble came anyway.

Question 3. *Psalm 120 begins the Songs of Ascents with a man surrounded by lying lips who says, "I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war." Where do you live like that, and notice what this man did first about it.*

Verse 1 answers the question before the complaint begins: "In my distress I cried to the Lord, and He heard me." He talked to God first. Only then does he describe the lying lips, the deceitful tongue, the warrior's sharp arrows, the coals of the broom tree, and the exhaustion of living among people whose default setting is hostility. Verse 7 is the heartbreak of the psalm: "I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war."

Most people in your class live somewhere in verse 7, at a job, in an extended family, in a neighborhood, in a comment section. Draw two lessons. First, the Christian is not promised that peacemaking will be reciprocated; Romans 12:18 says "if it is possible, as much as depends on you," which quietly admits it is not always possible. Second, this man took it to God rather than to the arsenal. Verses 3 and 4 hand the sharp arrows and burning coals to God as His business, which is precisely what Romans 12:19 tells us to do with vengeance.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Count the references to crying out, rising early, and waking through the night watches in 119:145–152. What sort of praying does that describe, and how does it compare with yours?*

He cries out with his whole heart (145), cries out again (146), rises before the dawning of the morning (147), and his eyes are awake through the night watches (148). That is prayer that costs sleep. It is also prayer with content: he says he cries out in order to keep God's statutes, and that he stays awake in order to meditate on God's word. Answers about our own praying will vary, but the honest comparison is the point. Most of us pray in leftover time; this man prayed in prime time and took it out of his rest.

2. *Verse 160 says the entirety of God's word is truth and every one of His righteous judgments endures forever. Compare John 17:17 and 2 Timothy 3:16–17, and write out what the three passages claim together.*

Psalm 119:160 says the sum of God's word is truth and His righteous judgments endure forever. John 17:17 records Jesus praying, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." Second Timothy 3:16–17 says all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable, so that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. Together: God's word is true in its parts and in its whole, it does not expire, it is the instrument God uses to make people holy, and it is sufficient. That last claim, sufficiency, is why we neither need nor expect new revelation today (Jude 3).

3. *Read 119:153–160 and make two columns: every request he makes, and every reason he gives God for granting it.*

   Requests: plead my cause, redeem me, revive me (154), revive me according to Your lovingkindness (156), revive me according to Your word (159), deliver me (153), consider my affliction (153), consider how I love Your precepts (159). Reasons: because he does not forget God's law (153), because salvation is far from the wicked but God's mercies are great (155–156), because he does not turn from God's testimonies (157), because he grieves over the treacherous (158), because he loves God's precepts (159). Notice that he never argues from his own merit as a payment. He argues from God's lovingkindness and from his own settled attachment to God's word.

4. *Psalm 120:5 speaks of dwelling in Meshech and among the tents of Kedar, two places at opposite ends of the known world. Look up where each one was, and explain why he names both.*

   Meshech was a distant northern people near the Black Sea, and Kedar was a nomadic Arab tribe in the Syrian desert to the southeast. A person could not literally live in both. Naming the two extremes is a way of saying, wherever I look, I am a foreigner among people who do not share my God or my values. It is the ancient version of saying, I feel like a stranger everywhere. First Peter 2:11 says exactly that of Christians: sojourners and pilgrims.

5. *Verse 176 asks God to seek His servant. Is there an area of your life where you have drifted without ever deciding to? Name it, tell one person, and take one concrete step back this week.*

   Answers will vary, and drift is the word to press. Almost nobody decides to stop praying, stop attending, or stop caring; they simply find one day that they have. Listen for a specific area and a specific step: a conversation reopened, a habit restarted, a Sunday no longer optional. And make sure the class hears the second half of verse 176. The sheep did not find his own way home; he asked to be sought.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 120:3–4 hands the slanderer's punishment to God. Teach it as an appeal to divine justice, not as permission for personal vengeance (Romans 12:17–21).
- Verse 165 is a general promise of settled peace for those who love God's word, not a guarantee of a trouble-free life. The psalm itself is full of affliction.
- Do not let the class treat 119:176 as the writer losing his faith. He is confessing a wandering and asking to be sought, which is the posture the whole psalm has been forming in him.
- This reading crosses the seam between two psalms. Tell the class before they read so they notice the change of genre, and introduce the Songs of Ascents, which they will be in for the next several weeks.

The Bread of Life

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Jesus begins by refusing to let the crowd flatter itself. They had crossed the lake looking for Him, which sounds like devotion, and He says plainly that they came because they ate the loaves and were filled. Then He redirects them from perishable food to the food that endures to everlasting life. When they ask what works to do, He answers with one: believe on Him whom the Father sent. When they ask for a sign like the manna, He tells them Moses did not give that bread, His Father did, and the true bread is a person.

From 6:35 the discourse builds: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." Notice how coming and believing are used interchangeably with eating and drinking all through the chapter. That equivalence is the key to the harder verses later. Jesus is not describing a ritual; He is describing what a person does with Him, taking Him in, depending on Him, living on Him.

Then the offense arrives. They murmur because they know His family. He raises the stakes rather than lowering them: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Many disciples say this is a hard saying and stop following. He explains in verse 63 that the flesh profits nothing and that His words are spirit and life, and then turns to the Twelve with the loneliest question in the Gospels: "Do you also want to go away?" Peter's answer is the high point of the chapter.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The setting moves to Capernaum, and 6:59 says this was taught in the synagogue there. The audience includes the crowd from the feeding, local Jews, and a larger circle of disciples beyond the Twelve.
- Passover was near (6:4), so the manna story and the exodus were already in the air. Popular expectation held that the Messiah would repeat the gift of manna.
- This discourse was spoken roughly a year before the Lord's Supper was instituted, to a mixed crowd, most of whom never became disciples. Whatever Jesus meant, it was something they could have done that day.
- John uses "believe" throughout his Gospel as a comprehensive response, not bare mental agreement. Compare John 3:36, where the opposite of believing is refusing to obey.
- "Drawn" in 6:44 translates a verb used elsewhere of drawing a net or a sword; the sense is real influence, not irresistible force. Jesus uses the same verb in 12:32 of drawing all men to Himself by the cross.
- Verse 45 quotes Isaiah 54:13, "They shall all be taught by God," which is how John explains the drawing of verse 44.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *In 6:28 the crowd asks what works they must do, and Jesus gives a single answer in 6:29. Talk about what He means by it, and about why believing on Him is called a work at all.*

They ask about works, plural, the way religious people always do: give us the list. Jesus answers in the singular, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." Everything God wants from a person is bound up in a right response to His Son. That is not a lowering of the bar; it is a raising of it, because believing in Jesus in John's Gospel is never bare agreement. In John 3:36 the contrast to believing is not doubting but disobeying. In John 8:31 the ones who really believe are the ones who continue in His word.

So call it a work in the sense the text does: the one thing God requires is the surrender of the whole person to His Son, which shows itself in obedience. That is why the New Testament can say a man is not justified by works of merit (Ephesians 2:8–9) and also that a man is justified by works and not by faith only (James 2:24) without

contradiction. Ask the class what they would have added to Jesus' answer if they had been in the crowd, and then ask why we find a single, total demand harder than a long list.

Question 2. *Jesus says in 6:44 that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him, and then explains the drawing in 6:45. Read the two verses together as a class. How does God actually draw a person, and what does that rule out?*

Verse 44 standing alone can sound like God selects some and overrides their wills. Verse 45 is Jesus' own explanation, and it removes the mystery: "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me." The drawing is teaching. God draws people by His word, through the gospel, and everyone who hears and learns comes. Note the universal word: they shall all be taught. Note also that hearing and learning are things a person does.

This rules out irresistible grace and unconditional election. If the Father dragged men in against their wills, verse 45 would not describe a process of hearing and learning, and Jesus would not have wept over a Jerusalem that "would not" come (Matthew 23:37). It also rules out the opposite error, that a person can come to Christ on his own terms without God's initiative. Nobody would ever have come if God had not spoken first. Paul's summary is exact: God called us by our gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14), and faith comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17).

Question 3. *6:53 says they must eat His flesh and drink His blood, and 6:63 says the flesh profits nothing and His words are spirit and life. Hold those two verses together and describe what Jesus was really asking of the people in front of Him.*

Start with what the text itself supplies. In 6:35 Jesus says the one who comes to Him will never hunger and the one who believes in Him will never thirst. Coming and believing are the eating and drinking. In 6:54 the one who eats and drinks has everlasting life and will be raised at the last day; in 6:40 the one who sees the Son and believes has everlasting life and will be raised at the last day. The promises are identical, so the actions are the same action described two ways.

Then give the class the three reasons this cannot be a reference to a ritual meal that transforms into literal flesh. First, Jesus says in verse 63 that the flesh profits nothing and that His words are spirit and life. Second, the Lord's Supper had not been instituted, and the crowd could not have obeyed a command about something that did not yet exist. Third, taking it literally would have required these Jews to drink blood, which the Law forbade absolutely (Leviticus 17:10–14). What Jesus asks is total dependence on His life given up in death, taken in personally, the way food becomes part of a body. The Lord's Supper later pictures that same reality beautifully (1 Corinthians 11:23–26), but the Supper is a memorial, not a transformation.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the crowd's four questions in 6:25, 6:28, 6:30, and 6:42. Write beside each one what it reveals about what they actually wanted from Him.*

In 6:25 they ask, "Rabbi, when did You come here?" which is curiosity about logistics rather than about Him. In 6:28 they ask what they must do to work the works of God, which is a request for a manageable list. In 6:30 they ask for a sign, which is astonishing the morning after a miracle that fed thousands of them, and it exposes that yesterday's bread had already stopped counting. In 6:42 they ask, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" which is not a question at all but an objection to His origins. Taken in order, the questions move from curiosity to bargaining to demand to dismissal.

2. *Find the four places where Jesus promises to raise someone up at the last day (6:39, 40, 44, 54). Note in each verse who is raised and on what condition.*

In 6:39 it is the will of the Father that of all He has given the Son, He should lose nothing but raise it up at the last day. In 6:40 it is everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him. In 6:44 it is the one whom the Father draws, that is, the one who has heard and learned (6:45). In 6:54 it is the one who eats His flesh and drinks His blood, which the

chapter has already defined as coming and believing. In every case the promise is individual, conditioned on a response, and located at the same point: the last day. There is no hint of separate resurrections at separate times.

3. *Compare 6:31–33 with Exodus 16:13–15. According to Jesus in 6:49–51, in what specific ways is He better than the manna their fathers ate?*

The manna came through Moses, but Jesus corrects them: it was the Father who gave it, and the true bread comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. The manna fed the body for a day and had to be gathered again every morning; those who ate it are dead (6:49). Christ is bread a person eats once and lives forever (6:51, 58). The manna was for one nation in one wilderness for one generation; this bread is given for the life of the world. And the manna was a thing; this bread is a person who gives His own flesh.

4. *6:66 says many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Read Hebrews 3:12–14 and 1 John 2:19, and describe how the New Testament accounts for people who leave.*

Hebrews 3:12–14 warns brethren against an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God, and says we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end. First John 2:19 says of those who left, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.” Put together, the New Testament says plainly that people do leave, that leaving reveals what a person had become, and that the safeguard is exhorting one another daily. It does not say that departure was impossible or that the departed were never really among the disciples; John 6:66 calls them disciples.

5. *Peter’s answer in 6:68 is conviction, not enthusiasm: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” Write out your own answer to that question in your own words, and name the cost that has most tempted you to walk away.*

Answers will vary, and the second half of the question matters most. Peter’s words are not a burst of feeling; he says Jesus has the words of eternal life and that they have come to believe and know that He is the Christ. That is conviction arrived at over time. Listen for the named cost: a relationship, a career decision, an unanswered prayer, a disappointment with the church. Peter’s question does not deny that following is hard. It simply asks where else a person would go.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- 6:53–58 does not teach transubstantiation or that the Lord’s Supper conveys life by itself. Use 6:35 and 6:63 to interpret it, and note that the Supper had not yet been instituted. Handle the subject respectfully, since many neighbors have been taught otherwise.
- 6:44 must be read with 6:45. God draws by teaching, through the gospel, and everyone who hears and learns comes. This is not irresistible grace, and it is not unconditional election.
- 6:37 and 6:39 speak of those the Father gives the Son. Read them in light of the whole chapter, where coming is conditioned on hearing, learning, and believing, and where real disciples do in fact turn back (6:66).
- Do not reduce “believe” in this chapter to mental assent. John’s Gospel defines belief as a response that continues and obeys (3:36; 8:31), and the same writer records Jesus commanding new birth of water and the Spirit (3:5).

Ready to Give Account

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 4 opens with the logic of the whole letter: since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same mind. Peter then describes what conversion looked like for his readers. They used to run with the crowd in the same excesses, and now the crowd thinks it strange that they do not, and speaks evil of them. That is the social cost of following Christ in a pagan town, and Peter neither minimizes it nor apologizes for it. He simply reminds them that everyone involved will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

The middle of chapter 4 is one of the warmest paragraphs Peter writes. The end of all things is at hand, so be serious and watchful in your prayers. Above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Peter's response to a hostile world is not a fortress; it is a family that prays, forgives, opens its doors, and uses whatever it has on each other.

Chapter 5 turns to leadership and to the humility that must run through the whole body. Elders are to shepherd the flock of God among them, serving willingly, eagerly, and by example, with a crown of glory promised when the Chief Shepherd appears. The younger are to submit, and all are to be clothed with humility toward one another. Then the last images of the letter: the mighty hand of God under which we humble ourselves, the care we throw onto Him because He cares for us, the prowling lion, and the God of all grace who will perfect and settle us.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Peter writes near the beginning of open hostility toward Christians in the Roman world, which is why 4:16 can speak of suffering "as a Christian," a name that was still largely used by outsiders.
- "Give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (4:5) is standard apostolic preaching. Compare Acts 10:42, where Peter says the same thing in Cornelius' house.
- 4:6, "the gospel was preached also to those who are dead," refers to people who heard the gospel while alive and have since died. Scripture is clear that there is no second opportunity after death (Hebrews 9:27).
- The gifts of 4:10–11 include both speaking and serving. In the first century some gifts were miraculous and confirmed the word (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4); the principle of stewarding what God has given continues, while the confirming signs ceased when revelation was complete (1 Corinthians 13:8–10).
- Elders, bishops (overseers), and pastors (shepherds) are three words for one office in the New Testament, as 5:1–2 shows by using all three ideas together. Compare Acts 20:17 with Acts 20:28.
- Peter calls himself a fellow elder rather than pulling rank (5:1), and he points to Christ as the Chief Shepherd (5:4). There is no earthly head over the church in this letter.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Peter says the fiery trial should not seem strange (4:12) and then draws a sharp line in 4:15–16. Talk through the difference between suffering because you are a Christian and suffering because you are difficult, and why he bothers to make that distinction.*

Peter draws the line hard: let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. That last one is startling in the middle of that list, and it is there because Christians have always been capable of confusing persecution with the natural consequences of being obnoxious. If a man loses his job

for refusing to falsify a report, that is 4:16. If he loses it for lecturing coworkers about their private lives while doing his work poorly, that is 4:15, and Peter says he should be ashamed.

The distinction matters pastorally and evangelistically. A congregation that cannot tell the difference will read every consequence of its own rudeness as a badge of faithfulness, and it will never ask whether its conduct is beautiful (2:12). Ask the class for real examples from their own week, and be willing to say out loud that some of the friction we experience is our fault. Then honor the genuine article: when it really is for the name, Peter says do not be ashamed, but glorify God in this matter.

Question 2. *In 5:1–4 elders are told to shepherd the flock of God with three contrasts: not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, not as lords but as examples. Describe what a congregation feels like when those are true, and name what the rest of us do to make that possible.*

Look at each contrast. Not by compulsion but willingly: shepherding is not a duty a man is cornered into, and a congregation can feel the difference within a month. Not for dishonest gain but eagerly: the motive is not what the position yields, in money or in standing. Not as lords over those entrusted to you but being examples: authority exercised by going first rather than by pulling rank. The word "flock" controls all of it; sheep are led, fed, protected, and carried, not managed.

Then press the second half of the question, because most classes are content to evaluate their elders and stop there. Hebrews 13:17 tells members to obey and submit, so that the elders may do their work with joy and not with grief. Ask what a member does that makes shepherding joyful: telling them the truth early instead of complaining later, asking for help before a crisis, praying for them by name, refusing to carry anonymous criticism. Note also 5:5, where the younger are told to submit, and everyone is told to be clothed with humility toward one another.

Question 3. *5:6–7 puts humbling ourselves under God's hand and casting our care on Him in a single sentence. Why do you think Peter joins those two, and what does our anxiety usually reveal about where we have placed ourselves?*

Peter joins them because anxiety is usually a form of pride. To carry a load God has not asked you to carry is to assume a place in the universe that belongs to Him, and the antidote is not merely relaxation but relocation: get under the mighty hand of God, which is where a creature belongs, and then throw the weight onto Him. The verb in verse 7 is vivid; it is used in Luke 19:35 of throwing garments onto the colt. It is not a gentle placing but a heave.

The reason clause is the sweetest four words in the letter: "for He cares for you." Not He is able, not He is aware, but He cares. Ask the class what they are currently carrying that God has not assigned them: the outcome of an adult child's choices, another person's opinion of them, a future they cannot control. Then ask what it would look like, practically, to hand one of those over this week. Philippians 4:6–7 gives the mechanics: prayer, supplication, thanksgiving, and a peace that guards.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every command in 4:7–11 and mark the ones that cannot be obeyed alone. What does that tell you about how God intends Christians to live?*

Be serious and watchful in your prayers (4:7), have fervent love for one another (4:8), be hospitable to one another without grumbling (4:9), minister your gift to one another as good stewards (4:10), speak as the oracles of God and serve with the ability God supplies (4:11). Only the first can be done alone, and even that one Peter frames in the context of the church. Four of the five require somebody else in the room. Christianity in this letter is not a private arrangement with God; it is a household. That is also why the New Testament knows nothing of a Christian who has no congregation.

2. *4:17 says judgment begins at the house of God. Read Ezekiel 9:5–6, which you studied two weeks ago, and explain what Peter is drawing on and what he means by it.*

Ezekiel 9 shows judgment beginning at the sanctuary, with God telling the executioners to begin at His house, at the elders in front of it. Peter takes the same principle into the church age: if judgment begins at the house of God, and it

begins with us, what will the end be of those who do not obey the gospel of God? His point is not that God is harder on Christians out of displeasure, but that those who have received most are examined first and most closely (compare Luke 12:47–48; Amos 3:2). Suffering is part of that refining, and Peter has already called it fire that tests gold (1:7).

3. *Write out everything Peter charges elders to do and to avoid in 5:1–4, then compare his list with 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 and note what all three have in common.*

Peter charges them to shepherd the flock of God among them, serving as overseers, willingly and not by compulsion, eagerly and not for dishonest gain, as examples and not as lords, with a crown of glory promised from the Chief Shepherd. First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 add the qualifications: blameless, husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy, gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous, ruling his own house well, with faithful children, not a novice, and of good testimony outside the church. All three passages assume a plurality of men in a local congregation who are known, qualified, and accountable.

4. *In 5:8 the devil is a prowling lion and in 5:9 we are told how to answer him. Read James 4:7 and Ephesians 6:10–13, and describe in practical terms what resisting actually consists of.*

James 4:7 puts submission to God first and then says resist the devil and he will flee. Ephesians 6:10–13 describes standing in the whole armor of God: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God, with prayer running through it. Practically, resistance looks like refusing the second look, the second drink, the second conversation; like putting distance between yourself and the situation; like calling someone before you act rather than after; like having decided in advance what you will do. Peter adds that it is done “steadfast in the faith,” knowing that the same sufferings are being experienced by brethren throughout the world. Isolation is the lion’s favorite condition.

5. *4:10 says each one has received a gift and is to minister it to others. Name yours, name one person who would be served by it this month, and put an actual date on your calendar before you close this page.*

Answers will vary, and many will struggle to name a gift at all, which is itself worth addressing. Help them see the range of 4:11: some gifts are speaking and some are serving, and the serving kind rarely gets noticed. Teaching a class, fixing a widow’s car, carrying a meal, sitting in a hospital waiting room, writing notes, keeping the books honestly, opening a home. Listen for a name and a date. A gift that is admired in class and never used on anyone is not being stewarded.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- 4:6 does not teach a second chance after death. The gospel was preached to people who were alive at the time and are now dead. Compare Hebrews 9:27 and Luke 16:26.
- 4:10–11 teaches stewardship of what God has given; it is not a proof text for continuing miraculous gifts. Those signs confirmed the word and ceased when the revelation was complete (Mark 16:20; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10). Say so plainly and kindly.
- 5:1–4 describes a plurality of qualified men shepherding a local congregation under Christ the Chief Shepherd. There is no hierarchy above the local eldership in the New Testament, and Peter himself claims none.
- 4:18, “if the righteous one is scarcely saved,” is a sober word to Christians, not a denial of assurance. Hold it alongside 5:10, where the God of all grace promises to perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle those who suffer for a while.

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Ezekiel 22–24 · Psalm 121–125 · John 7:1–36 · 2 Peter 1