

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 92 OF 104

Hearts of Flesh

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Ezekiel 36–40
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 136–137
Gospels	John 9
General New Testament	1 John 2:28–5:21

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to move the class off the exhausting idea that the Christian life is something we generate. Four readings, four pictures of God doing what no one could do for himself: bones that reassemble, a stone heart replaced with a heart of flesh, blind eyes opened by a man who made mud, and children born of God who did not arrange their own birth. Let the class leave knowing that God starts what He finishes, and that our part is to respond rather than to originate.

Doctrinally, three pressure points sit in these pages. First, the dry bones must be read as God interprets them, the restoration of a nation, with the resurrection of individuals taught where Scripture actually teaches it. Second, Gog and Magog must be refused as a map of modern nations, and the temple vision beginning in Ezekiel 40 must be framed now as a symbolic picture of God's restored presence rather than a building to be erected in a future age. Third, 1 John 5:13 must be taught as genuine assurance grounded in a life of obedient faith, never as a guarantee that behavior cannot endanger.

Formationally, watch for people who keep telling the truth when it costs them. The healed man tells it until he is thrown out. The exiles refuse to turn Zion's songs into entertainment for their captors. John writes to a congregation that had just watched teachers walk out the door. The heart of flesh God gives is a heart willing to be honest at a price. Ask your class this: name the one room you walk into each week where being honest about Jesus would cost you something, and say what you intend to do about it before next Sunday.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Ezekiel 36–40. It carries the week's central image and the week's hardest interpretive questions. Spend most of the hour on the new heart of chapter 36 and the valley of chapter 37, then take five minutes to set the ground rules for reading the temple vision that begins in chapter 40.

Second session: Take up 1 John 2:28–5:21. It says in New Testament terms what Ezekiel promised in covenant terms, and it gives you the week's clearest opportunity to settle the question of assurance. Save at least fifteen minutes for 5:13 and the passages that keep it balanced.

The other two readings: John 9 reads well alone and its questions almost teach themselves, so commend it warmly and ask two people to report what struck them. For the Psalms, warn the class before they read that Psalm 137 ends harshly, and give them one sentence about imprecatory prayer so the ending does not ambush them.

New Hearts, Living Bones**PASSAGE OVERVIEW**

Chapter 36 is where the book turns from ruin to restoration. The mountains of Israel had been mocked by the nations and emptied by the sword, and God addresses them directly. Then He addresses the people, and He is careful to say three times that the motive is His own holy name, profaned among the nations by Israel's behavior. Grace is not owed. What follows is the language every believer since has borrowed: clean water sprinkled, the stony heart removed, a heart of flesh given, and God's own Spirit placed within.

Chapter 37 is the most famous scene in Ezekiel, and God interprets it for us in verses 11 through 14 so that we are not left guessing. "These bones are the whole house of Israel." The nation believed itself dead and buried in Babylon, its hope gone, and God says He will open the graves of exile and plant them again in their own land. The vision is about national restoration, and it is a stunning display of God's power to give life where there is none. The resurrection of individuals is taught plainly elsewhere; here, let the text say what it says.

Chapters 38 and 39 picture a great coalition under Gog gathering against a peaceful, unwarlike people, and being broken by God without Israel lifting a hand. Then chapter 40 opens the long closing vision, dated fourteen years after Jerusalem fell, in which a man whose appearance is like bronze measures a temple gate by gate. Tell your class now where this is heading so they are not lost for the next three weeks.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Ezekiel was a priest carried to Babylon in the deportation of 597 B.C. and preached to fellow exiles settled along the Chebar canal. His oracles carry dates, which makes the book unusually easy to place.
- The book has three movements: judgment before Jerusalem fell (chapters 1–24), oracles against the nations (25–32), and hope after the city fell in 586 B.C. (33–48). This week sits at the beginning of the third.
- Ezekiel works in visions, signs, and heavy symbolism. Expect pictures rather than prose reports, and read the pictures the way the book itself reads them.
- Gog, Magog, Meshech, Tubal, Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Togarmah are peoples of Ezekiel's own world, arranged as a picture of the farthest and fiercest enemies imaginable.
- Ezekiel 40:1 dates the closing vision to the twenty fifth year of the captivity. The temple had been rubble for fourteen years, and a priest in exile is shown a house of God measured and whole.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Ezekiel 36:22 says plainly that God is not doing this for Israel's sake but for His holy name. How does that sentence change the way you hear the promise of a new heart in verses 25 through 27?*

The sentence is deliberately deflating, and it is meant to be. Israel is not being restored because she repented her way back into favor, or because God noticed some remaining goodness in her. She is being restored because God had attached His name to this people, and when they were scattered the nations concluded that the God of Israel was too weak to keep His own. God acts to vindicate His name in the eyes of the watching world.

Now bring the promise back. Verses 25 through 27 are pure gift: I will sprinkle, I will give, I will put, I will cause. Nothing in the list is something a person manufactures. But notice that God does not bypass the human will. Ezekiel 18:31 had commanded these same people to make themselves a new heart, and 36:31 says that when God acts they will loathe themselves for their sins. God supplies what we cannot; He does not repent for us.

Question 2. *In Ezekiel 37:3 God asks the prophet whether the bones can live, and in verses 11 through 14 He tells us what the vision means. Walk through the explanation God Himself gives, and discuss why that meaning was better news to an exile than a general statement about life after death would have been.*

Read verses 11 through 14 out loud before anyone speculates. The bones are the whole house of Israel. Their own words are quoted: "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off." That is a nation talking about exile, not an individual talking about a cemetery. God promises to open the graves, bring them up, put His Spirit in them, and place them in their own land, and He does exactly that under Cyrus.

Then let the class feel why this mattered more than a general doctrine would have. A discouraged exile did not need to be told that somewhere far off the dead rise. He needed to know that God could reassemble a people who had been dismembered by an empire. And the vision does teach us something permanent about God: nothing is too far gone for Him. Let that be the application rather than turning the chapter into a proof text it was never asked to carry.

Question 3. *Ezekiel 38 and 39 announce an invader's defeat before he has even set out. Where are you living as though some threat in your own life has never once been taken into account by God?*

Ezekiel 38 and 39 are constructed to make one point unmistakable. The enemy comes from the far north with a vast coalition, the attack is real, and the outcome is decided before the first spear is thrown. Israel does not win this battle; Israel buries the dead afterward. God says He will be known among the nations by what He does here.

Press the class toward the specific. Most of us carry one worry we have quietly filed as beyond God's reach: a diagnosis, a child who has walked away, a company about to announce layoffs. We pray about smaller things. Ask each person to name the one threat he has been handling alone, and to say out loud that God has already taken it into account. Naming it is usually the hardest part.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every promise God makes in Ezekiel 36:24–30. Which of them could Israel have produced for herself, and which could only come from God?*

The list includes being gathered from the nations, being brought home, being sprinkled with clean water, cleansing from idols, a new heart, a new spirit, the stony heart removed, God's Spirit within, obedience to His statutes, a restored covenant relationship, deliverance from uncleanness, and abundant grain instead of famine. Israel could produce none of them. Every verb of consequence in the paragraph belongs to God.

2. *Read Ezekiel 37:15–23 and note what the two sticks stand for. Then read John 10:16 and note how Jesus speaks of the same gathering.*

The two sticks are Judah and Joseph, that is, the divided southern and northern kingdoms, joined into one nation under one king. In John 10:16 Jesus says He has other sheep not of this fold, and that there will be one flock and one shepherd. The gathering Ezekiel saw in outline is accomplished in Christ, who makes Jew and Gentile one body (Ephesians 2:14–16).

3. *Hebrews 8:8–12 quotes Jeremiah on a covenant written inside people rather than on stone. Set it beside Ezekiel 36:26–27 and write down everything the two passages have in common.*

Both passages promise an inward covenant rather than an external code: God's law placed in the mind and written on the heart, sins forgiven and remembered no more, and a relationship in which God is their God and they are His people. Ezekiel adds the gift of God's Spirit and the removal of the heart of stone. Hebrews cites the promise to show that the new covenant in Christ is the fulfillment, and that the first covenant is therefore obsolete.

4. *Ezekiel 38:1–6 and 39:6 name specific peoples. Using the text alone, explain why those names belong to the world Ezekiel knew rather than to a modern map.*

The names are peoples known to the sixth century B.C. world: Persia to the east, Cush and Put to the south, Gomer and Togarmah and Meshech and Tubal to the north, with Gog as their chief. Ezekiel 39:9 has them fighting with bows, arrows, javelins, and wooden shields used for firewood. The passage describes the world of its own writer,

gathered into one picture of overwhelming hostile power that God breaks. Attaching those names to nations on a modern map goes well beyond anything the text permits.

5. God promises to put His Spirit within His people and cause them to walk in His statutes. Name one statute you already know and have not been walking in, and count out loud what obeying it this week will cost you.

Answers will vary. Listen for something concrete and uncomfortable rather than a general resolve to do better: an apology that has been postponed, a habit that has to end this week, a Sunday commitment that will cost a shift at work. The promise of the Spirit is not a substitute for obedience; Ezekiel 36:27 says the Spirit causes them to walk in God's statutes.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The valley of dry bones is not primarily a resurrection text. God interprets it in 37:11–14 as the restoration of a dismembered nation. Teach it that way, then say plainly that it does display God's power to give life, and that the resurrection of individuals is taught in Daniel 12:2, John 5:28–29, and 1 Corinthians 15.
- Gog and Magog: refuse identification with any modern nation, army, or headline. The names belong to Ezekiel's world and function as a picture of overwhelming enemy power broken by God. A class hour spent on maps is an hour stolen from the text.
- The new heart is God's gift, but it is not irresistible grace. Set 36:26 beside 18:31, where God commands the same people to make themselves a new heart. God supplies the covenant, the word, and the Spirit; the person must repent and obey. Do not let this passage be used to teach Calvinism.
- Chapter 40 opens the temple vision. Say now, briefly, how you intend to read it: as a symbolic picture of God's restored presence among His people, fulfilled in Christ and His church, not as a blueprint for a building to be erected in some future age. You will save yourself three weeks of confusion.

The Song and the Silence

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 136 is the only psalm built entirely on a refrain, and the shape is the point. A leader names an act of God; the congregation answers, “for His mercy endures forever.” The Hebrew word behind mercy is *hesed*, God’s covenant loyalty, the love that keeps its commitments. Twenty six times the congregation says it, until the truth is no longer an idea being considered but a conviction being rehearsed. The psalm moves from the heavens and the sun and moon, through Egypt and the sea and the wilderness, to the land, and lands finally on daily food.

Psalm 137 is one of the rawest pages in Scripture. The scene is concrete: exiles sitting beside irrigation canals, instruments hanging in the poplars, captors demanding entertainment from a conquered people’s hymnbook. The psalmist refuses, and then binds himself with an oath: let my right hand forget its skill if I forget Jerusalem. The final verses call down on Edom and Babylon what they had done to Judah’s own children.

Do not rush past the ending, and do not apologize for it. This is a prayer, not a plan. The psalmist hands his fury to God rather than to a sword, and what he asks God to do is precisely what God had already announced He would do to Babylon. That is the difference between an imprecation and a vendetta, and your class needs to see it clearly.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalm 136 is part of the Egyptian Hallel tradition and was used in temple worship as an antiphonal liturgy between leader and congregation.
- Psalm 137 is a communal lament, almost certainly written during or just after the Babylonian captivity, which began in stages and ended with Cyrus in 538 B.C.
- An imprecatory psalm is a prayer calling on God to execute His justice. There are several in the Psalter (Psalm 58, 69, 83, 109, 137). They are prayers, not commands, and they always leave the striking to God.
- Edom, Judah’s kinsman nation, cheered the fall of Jerusalem, a betrayal Obadiah devotes an entire book to answering.
- The harps hung in the willows belonged to temple worship under the Law of Moses. The pattern for worship under Christ is sung praise (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), which is worth a sentence if someone asks.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 136 repeats one line twenty six times. Read it aloud as Israel likely sang it, one person reading each first line and the class answering. What does that kind of repetition accomplish that a single clear statement cannot?*

Repetition is not a failure of imagination; it is how convictions get set. A single statement informs you. A refrain repeated twenty six times, out loud, with other people, in your own voice, works its way into the place where fear lives. By the twentieth verse the congregation is no longer evaluating whether God’s mercy endures. They are standing on it.

Actually do it in class. Read verse by verse and let them answer. Then ask what happened in the room. This also opens a door to the way congregational singing teaches (Colossians 3:16): what we sing together, repeatedly, becomes what we believe when the week goes badly. It is worth asking what your class has been singing lately, and what it has been teaching them.

Question 2. *Psalm 137 closes with words about Babylon's little ones and the rock. How should a Christian read a prayer like that, and where does Romans 12:19 put the business of vengeance?*

Handle the ending with honesty, not embarrassment. First, name what Babylon actually did: the siege of Jerusalem, starvation, the slaughter recorded in Lamentations, including the deaths of children. The psalmist is not fantasizing about an unprovoked cruelty; he is asking God to measure back to Babylon what Babylon measured out. Second, note that he asks God. He does not pick up a weapon, and he is not in a position to.

Then set the Christian's rule beside it. Romans 12:19 says vengeance belongs to God and tells us to give place to wrath rather than to take our own. Matthew 5:44 tells us to pray for those who persecute us. Both can be true: God's justice is real and will be satisfied, and our assignment in the meantime is love. Let the class say out loud where they are currently rehearsing a grievance they have never once handed to God.

Question 3. *The exiles say they cannot sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. When has grief made worship feel impossible for you, and what did you finally do with that silence?*

Answers will vary, and this is a question to let breathe. Most adults in the room have had a season when the singing was mechanical or impossible: after a funeral, in the middle of a marriage coming apart, during a stretch of unemployment. Psalm 137 gives them permission to admit it. Scripture does not require us to pretend.

But move the conversation toward what came next. The exiles did not stop being God's people, and the same generation that hung up its harps produced Daniel, Ezekiel, and eventually a remnant that went home singing (Psalm 126). Grief is honest, and it is not final. Ask what someone else did for them in that silence, and who in the room might need that done for them now.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the story Psalm 136 tells, verse by verse, from creation to the gift of the land. Which kinds of events does the psalmist count as evidence of mercy?*

The psalm moves from creation (verses 5–9) to the exodus and the Red Sea (10–15), the wilderness (16), the defeat of Sihon and Og (17–22), and then rescue from a low estate and food for all flesh (23–25). Notice the range: cosmic acts, national deliverances, and the plainest daily provision all carry the same refrain. God's covenant love is at work in the sun rising and in the sea parting.

2. *Psalm 136:25 moves from defeated kings to giving food to all flesh. Why would the psalmist set an ordinary meal in the same list as the Red Sea?*

Because covenant love is not reserved for emergencies. A psalm that thanked God only for spectacular rescues would teach Israel to look for Him once a decade. By ending with food given to all flesh, the psalm puts God's hand on the table at supper. Jesus does something similar when He teaches us to ask for daily bread.

3. *Read Psalm 137:1–4 alongside Jeremiah 29:4–7, which was written to the same exiles. How do the grief of the one and the instructions of the other fit together?*

Psalm 137 gives the grief; Jeremiah 29 gives the assignment. Jeremiah tells the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and seek the peace of the city where God had sent them, because the captivity would last seventy years. Together they show a people permitted to mourn honestly and still commanded to live faithfully in a place they never chose. Lament and obedience are not competitors.

4. *The psalmist asks that Babylon receive exactly what Babylon had done (137:8). Look up Jeremiah 51:24 and Obadiah 10–14. Is he inventing a wish of his own, or asking God to keep a word already spoken?*

He is asking God to keep His word. Jeremiah 51:24 says God will repay Babylon for all the evil done in Zion, and Obadiah 10–14 charges Edom precisely with standing by, rejoicing, and cutting off the escaping. The psalmist is praying the announced judgment of God back to God. That does not remove every difficulty from the verse, but it does show that he is not inventing a cruelty; he is asking for justice already promised.

5. *Psalm 136 thanks God for particular acts, never for blessings in general. Write out twelve specific things God has done for you, add the refrain to each one, and read the whole list aloud to another person before Sunday.*

Answers will vary. The exercise matters more than the answer: specificity turns gratitude from a mood into a practice. Listen for particulars (a diagnosis that came back clear, a friend who showed up, a job that came through) rather than categories like family and health. Reading it aloud to someone else is the part most will skip, so ask the following week who actually did it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 137:8–9 is not a model for personal vengeance and never has been. Teach it as an appeal to God's justice against a specific empire under a specific announced judgment, and set Romans 12:19 and Matthew 5:44 beside it as the Christian's rule.
- Do not skip the hard verses or read a sanitized version. A class that learns you will handle the difficult parts honestly will trust you with everything else.
- The harps of Psalm 137 belong to temple worship under the Law of Moses. If the question arises, answer it briefly and kindly: the Old Covenant has been fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17), and the New Testament pattern for the assembly is singing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Do not turn the hour into a debate.
- Watch for the class member for whom the silence of Psalm 137 is present tense. This is a text that can open a real wound in a good way. Be ready to follow up after class rather than in front of everyone.

One Thing I Know

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

John 9 is a masterpiece of storytelling, and it is built on one reversal: a man who could not see ends the chapter worshipping, and men who insisted they could see end it guilty. Jesus performs the sign in two verses and then disappears from the narrative until verse 35. The bulk of the chapter is cross examination, and the healed man, who began as an anonymous beggar, grows steadily bolder while his interrogators grow more desperate.

Watch his vocabulary. In verse 11 Jesus is “a man called Jesus.” In verse 17 He is “a prophet.” In verse 33 He is a man “from God.” In verse 38 he says, “Lord, I believe,” and worships. He does not receive a theology lecture between those verses. What he receives is pressure, and under pressure he keeps saying what he actually knows: “One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.” Honest testimony, repeated under opposition, matured into full confession.

The chapter also exposes the cost of confession. The parents know the answer and will not give it, because the synagogue had already agreed that anyone confessing Jesus as Christ would be put out. Their son answers anyway and pays for it, and the moment he is cast out of the synagogue, Jesus finds him. That timing is not accidental, and it leads straight into the shepherd discourse of chapter 10.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- John selects seven signs to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30–31). This is the sixth, and it follows immediately on the confrontation of chapter 8.
- The setting is Jerusalem, probably still around the Feast of Tabernacles, during which Jesus had said, “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5). The healing acts out the claim.
- Being put out of the synagogue meant exclusion from the social, economic, and religious life of the community, not merely from a service. It is the reason the parents dodge.
- The pool of Siloam was fed by Hezekiah’s tunnel and was in use during the feast for the water ceremony, which makes John’s note about the name Sent (9:7) deliberate.
- A man blind from birth was a known figure in his neighborhood, which is why John spends verses 8 through 12 on people arguing about whether it is even the same man.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The disciples assume somebody’s sin caused the blindness (9:2). How does Jesus answer that assumption, and where does the same assumption still surface when we hear that someone is suffering?*

Jesus rejects the premise outright: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” He does not say the man is sinless; He says the blindness is not a verdict on anyone’s sin. The disciples were working with a common assumption of their day, that every misfortune is a receipt for a specific transgression, and Jesus will not have it. Ezekiel 18:20 had already said the son does not bear the guilt of the father, and no child is born carrying anyone’s guilt.

The assumption is alive and well. It shows up as “What did she do to deserve this?” and as the quieter, crueler version people turn on themselves: “God is paying me back.” Ask your class where they have heard it, and where they have said it. Then give them Jesus’ redirection: the question is not who is to blame, but what the works of God might look like here. That reframes a hospital visit.

Question 2. *Follow what the healed man calls Jesus in verses 11, 17, 33, and 38. What moves him from one answer to the next, and what does that suggest about how conviction actually grows in a person?*

What moves him is nothing but repeated pressure to deny what happened. Each time he is questioned he restates the facts, and each restatement forces him to take the facts more seriously. By verse 30 he is teaching the

theologians: “Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He has opened my eyes.” His logic in verses 31 through 33 is his own. He has been thinking.

The pattern is worth naming for the class: conviction usually grows by being made to say out loud what you already know, especially when it is unpopular. This is one of the best arguments for putting new Christians to work talking about their faith early. It is also why avoiding every hard conversation leaves a faith that never quite hardens into confession.

Question 3. *In 9:22 the parents are afraid of being put out of the synagogue, and in 9:34 the man is put out. What did that fear cost each of them, and what would the equivalent cost be for you this year?*

For the parents, fear cost them the chance to stand with their own son at the one moment he needed it, and it cost them the joy of saying what was gloriously true: our boy can see. They hand him off with a phrase we all recognize, “He is of age; ask him.” Fear has a way of making cowardice sound procedural. For the son, honesty cost him his community, and he gained Christ.

Bring it home without moralizing. Almost nobody in your class will be excommunicated this year. But there is a break room, a family table, a group text, a professional setting where being known as a serious Christian carries a price. Ask for the specific room, and the specific sentence they have been avoiding saying in it.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every question the officials ask in John 9 and every answer the man gives. By the end of the chapter, who is really being examined?*

The questions pile up: how were your eyes opened, where is He, what do you say about Him, is this your son, how does he now see, give God the glory, what did He do to you, how did He open your eyes. The man answers plainly, then with irony, then with an argument they cannot answer. By the end the interrogators are the ones exposed, and Jesus says so in verses 39 through 41. John has quietly put the judges on trial.

2. *Jesus says in 9:3 that the man was born blind so that the works of God should be revealed in him. Compare Luke 13:1–5 and John 11:4, and write down what these passages teach about drawing a straight line from suffering back to sin.*

Luke 13:1–5 says the Galileans slaughtered by Pilate and the eighteen crushed by the tower were not worse sinners than anyone else, and turns the question into a call to repent. John 11:4 says Lazarus’ illness is for the glory of God. Together with John 9:3 they forbid us to read a person’s suffering as a scoreboard of his sin. Suffering may be occasion for God to work; it is not evidence that God is settling accounts.

3. *The man was told to go and wash, and he came back seeing (9:7). Why involve his obedience at all, and what parallel do you see in 2 Kings 5:10–14?*

Because faith that never moves is not yet faith. Jesus regularly attached a simple act of obedience to His blessings, not because the mud or the water had power, but because obedience is how trust becomes real. Naaman was told to dip seven times in the Jordan and was insulted by how ordinary it was, until his servants talked sense into him and he obeyed and was clean. The pattern is not earning; it is trusting God enough to do what He said.

4. *Read John 9:39–41 carefully. In what sense does the Pharisees’ claim “We see” leave them holding their guilt?*

Jesus says that if they were blind they would have no sin, but because they say “We see,” their sin remains. The claim to already see is the refusal to be taught. A man who knows he is blind will take a hand; a man who insists he sees will not, and there is no help for him while he insists. Their guilt is not in their ignorance but in their confident refusal of the light standing in front of them.

5. *This man kept telling what he knew when it cost him his place in the community. Name one place this week where saying what you know about Jesus will cost you something, and decide now what words you will use.*

Answers will vary. Press for the room and the sentence. A good answer sounds like “When my brother in law brings up church at Thanksgiving I am going to tell him what happened to me instead of changing the subject,” not “I want to be a better witness.” The healed man’s testimony was short, factual, and personal, which is a model most people can actually manage.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not use 9:3 to teach that God inflicts disabilities in order to display Himself. Jesus is correcting a diagnosis, not offering one. The stress falls on what God will now do, not on why the man was born as he was. Say frankly that Scripture does not always tell us why.
- The disciples' question assumes a child might suffer for sins committed before birth or by his parents. Jesus refuses both. This is a natural place to state plainly that guilt is personal (Ezekiel 18:20) and that no one inherits the guilt of another.
- The clay and the washing are not a sacrament or a formula, and this chapter is not a warrant for present day healing claims. The signs of the Gospels and Acts confirmed the word (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3-4) and served their purpose once revelation was complete (1 Corinthians 13:8-10).
- Be careful with the word blindness in application. Some in your class have real visual impairment or love someone who does. Use the metaphor as John uses it, of willful refusal to see, and say so.

That You May Know

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

This long section is built on tests, and the tests keep circling: belief in Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh, obedience to His commandments, and love for the brethren. John is writing against teachers who had left the congregation (2:19) and who denied the incarnation. His answer is not a clever argument but a family resemblance. Children look like their Father. If a man claims the Father and looks nothing like Him, the claim fails.

Chapter 3 lands hard on the practice of sin. John is not teaching sinless perfection, which he has already excluded in 1:8–10 and again in 2:1. The tense of the verbs describes ongoing practice, the settled direction of a life. One man sins and is grieved and confesses and gets up; another sins as a matter of course and has made peace with it. John says the second man should stop claiming the new birth.

Chapter 4 gives the test of the spirits and then the greatest statement about God's character in the letter: God is love, and love is defined not by our sentiment but by the sending of His Son as the propitiation for our sins. Chapter 5 gathers it up. Faith overcomes the world, the witness of God is greater than the witness of men, and the whole letter aims at 5:13, written so that believers may know.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The apostle John writes late in the first century, probably from Ephesus, to congregations he knows well and addresses as “my little children.”
- The error he opposes denies that Jesus has come in the flesh (4:2–3), an early form of the teaching that matter is evil and the Son only appeared to be human.
- John writes in contrasts: light and darkness, truth and lie, love and hate, children of God and children of the devil. He rarely gives middle ground, which is a feature of the letter, not a harshness in the man.
- The letter has no formal greeting, no named recipients, and no closing salutation, which suggests a circular written for a group of congregations.
- Its stated purpose, 5:13, matches the stated purpose of John's Gospel (John 20:31): the Gospel is written that you may believe, the letter that you may know.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *1 John 3:6–9 says the one born of God does not sin, while 1:8–10 says anyone claiming to have no sin is a liar. How do you hold both statements honestly, and what exactly is John describing in chapter 3?*

Start with the plain vocabulary. In 1:8–10 John forbids the claim to be without sin and provides the remedy, confession, with the promise that God is faithful and just to forgive. In 2:1 he says he writes so that they may not sin, and adds that if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate. So chapter 3 cannot possibly mean that a Christian never commits a sin, or John has contradicted himself inside three pages.

What chapter 3 describes is practice, the habitual course of a life. The New King James captures it with “does not practice sin.” Give the class two pictures: a man who falls in the mud and is horrified and gets cleaned up, and a man who has moved into the mud and furnished it. Both have mud on them. Only one of them lives there. Then press it personally: is there a sin in your life you have stopped fighting?

Question 2. *Work through 1 John 4:1–6. On what basis does John tell Christians to test a teacher, and how do we practice that today without becoming suspicious of every person who opens a Bible?*

John's test in 4:2–3 is doctrinal and specific: does the teaching confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh? Everything the false teachers said about love and spirituality had to pass that gate first. Then 4:6 adds a second marker: those

who know God hear the apostolic message. The standard is not a feeling about a speaker but agreement with what the apostles delivered. Acts 17:11 shows the Bereans doing exactly this, and being commended for it.

For today, this means a Christian tests teaching by the completed word, not by impressive results or a warm personality. Say plainly that the faith was once for all delivered (Jude 3) and that no one is bringing new revelation. Then guard the other ditch. Testing teaching is not the same as assuming the worst about people. The mark of a mature class is that it can examine a claim carefully and still be kind to the person making it.

Question 3. *1 John 5:13 says John wrote so that you may know you have eternal life. Trace what he says that knowledge rests on, and discuss the difference between assurance grounded in obedience and a confidence that no behavior could ever disturb.*

Trace John's own grounds. He has written so they will know, and the knowing rests on things he has already laid out: believing in the name of the Son of God (5:13), keeping His commandments (2:3, 3:24), loving the brethren (3:14), walking in the light with sin confessed and cleansed (1:7–9), and the witness God has given about His Son (5:9–11). Assurance in this letter is real, settled, and available. It is also tied at every point to a life.

That is what distinguishes it from unconditional security. John never says that a person who abandons the light retains the life. He says, "if we walk in the light," "he who keeps His commandments abides," "he who does not love his brother abides in death." The New Testament elsewhere warns Christians plainly about falling away (Hebrews 3:12–14; 10:26–31; 2 Peter 2:20–22; Galatians 5:4). Teach both halves in the same breath: a faithful Christian may know, and a Christian who stops being faithful is in danger. Neither anxiety nor presumption is the goal.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Count the times the phrase "we know" appears from 1 John 3:2 through 5:20, and list what John says a Christian is able to know.*

The phrase appears more than a dozen times in these chapters. Among the things John says we can know: that we shall be like Him when He appears (3:2), that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren (3:14), that we are of the truth (3:19), that He abides in us by the Spirit He gave (3:24; 4:13), that God has loved us (4:16), that we love the children of God (5:2), that we have eternal life (5:13), that He hears us (5:15), that whoever is born of God does not practice sin (5:18), and that the Son of God has come and given us understanding (5:20). Christianity is not a hopeful guess.

2. *1 John 3:16–18 defines love by what a person does, not by what he feels. Set it beside James 2:15–17 and write down the standard the two passages share.*

John says we know love by this, that Christ laid down His life for us, and then immediately reduces it to a man with goods, a brother in need, and a heart that either opens or shuts. James says the same: telling a cold, hungry brother to be warmed and filled without giving him anything is dead faith. The shared standard is that love and faith are measured at the point of cost. Words are cheap; goods are not.

3. *Read 1 John 5:1–5 with Galatians 5:6 and Hebrews 5:8–9. How do faith, love, and obedience relate to one another in these three passages?*

In 1 John 5, faith in Jesus as the Christ produces new birth, and love for God is proved by keeping His commandments, which John immediately says are not burdensome, and this faith overcomes the world. Galatians 5:6 says what avails in Christ is faith working through love. Hebrews 5:9 says Christ became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. The three refuse to let faith, love, and obedience be separated. Faith that saves is faith that obeys, and obedience that pleases God is obedience that loves.

4. *1 John 4:18 says perfect love casts out fear. Which fear is John talking about (look at the second half of the verse), and which kind of fear does 2 Corinthians 5:10–11 still commend?*

The fear cast out is the fear of punishment, dread before the Judge, the anxiety of a person unsure whether God is for him. That fear has torment in it, and John says a settled confidence in God's love drives it out. But 2 Corinthians

5:10–11 keeps reverent fear in place: knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men. Reverence remains; terror before an uncertain verdict does not have to.

5. *John says a man who shuts up his heart against a brother in need cannot claim God's love lives in him. Name the brother or sister whose need you already know about, and do something measurable about it before this week is out.*

Answers will vary, and the word measurable is doing the work. Listen for a specific person and a specific act with a date on it: groceries delivered Thursday, a utility bill paid, an afternoon spent on a widow's gutters. If someone cannot name a brother or sister in need, that is worth a gentle follow up; it may mean he does not yet know the congregation well enough to see one.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- 1 John 5:13 teaches real assurance, and it must not be turned into unconditional security. Every assurance John gives is tied to walking in the light, keeping His commandments, and loving the brethren. Say clearly that a Christian can fall away (Hebrews 3:12–14; 2 Peter 2:20–22; Galatians 5:4) and that a faithful Christian may nevertheless know he has eternal life.
- 1 John 3:9 does not teach sinless perfection. Read it as the settled practice of sin, and keep 1:8–2:2 open beside it so the class sees John's own balance.
- 1 John 5:16–17 speaks of a sin leading to death. Handle it briefly and honestly: John does not define it, and the safest reading is deliberate, settled rejection of Christ such as Hebrews 6 and 10 describe. Do not build a system on a verse that guards its own silence.
- 1 John 4:1 is about testing teachers by the apostolic message, not about seeking new revelation. Use it to affirm the completeness and sufficiency of the written word (Jude 3; 2 Timothy 3:16–17) rather than to open a discussion of modern prophetic claims.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Ezekiel 41–45 · Psalm 138–140 · John 10 · 2 John

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