

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 95 OF 104

But If Not

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Daniel 3-6
Wisdom Literature	Psalms 144-146
Gospels	John 11:28-12:8
General New Testament	Revelation 1-2

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to put unconditional obedience in front of the class. Three men said God is able to deliver us, and if not, we still will not bow. Daniel prayed at an open window when it was a capital offense. Mary poured out a year's wages on feet that would be pierced within the week. Smyrna was told to be faithful until death with no promise of rescue attached. If your class leaves believing that faithfulness depends on a good outcome, the hour has failed.

Doctrinally, two things are at stake. First, Revelation must be framed correctly from the beginning: a book of comfort to persecuted first century Christians, symbolic in character, assuring them that the Lamb wins. Establish that now and refuse newspaper eschatology for the rest of the program. Second, these narratives must not be turned into a promise that God always rescues the faithful in this life. Read Hebrews 11:35-38 in the same hour you read Daniel 3, or you will leave the suffering people in your class without a category for their own experience.

Formationally, the thread is what a person decides in advance. The three men had decided before the orchestra played. Daniel's habit was already decades old when the decree was signed. Mary had been at Jesus' feet for years before she broke the jar. Ephesus, by contrast, kept every outward practice and let the affection quietly drain away. Put this to your class: name the one thing you have already decided you will not do, whatever it costs, and name the one thing you used to do for the Lord out of love that you have stopped doing. Then ask what it would take to start it again on Monday.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Daniel 3-6. The stories are familiar enough that the class will come prepared, which frees you to press the hard question: what does faith look like when the deliverance does not come. Spend the most time on 3:16-18 and 6:10, and close with Hebrews 11:33-38.

Second session: Take up Revelation 1-2, and use the whole hour to set the foundation. Establish the book's purpose, audience, and symbolic character before touching a single image, then work through the letters to Ephesus and Smyrna. What you settle in this hour governs the rest of the program.

The other two readings: Ask the class to read John 11:28-12:8 in one sitting so they feel the movement from the tomb to the supper table. For the Psalms, point them to Psalm 146:3 and ask them to write down, privately, what they have actually been leaning on this year.

Before Furnace and Lions

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These four chapters are court narratives, and they are all asking one question: who is actually sovereign? Every chapter has a king who believes he is, and every chapter ends with that king saying otherwise. Nebuchadnezzar builds an image sixty cubits high and commands the world to bow at the sound of the orchestra. Three men do not. The king's rage heats the furnace sevenfold, and then he looks in and sees four men walking loose in the fire, and the fourth is not his.

Chapter 4 is remarkable for being written largely in Nebuchadnezzar's own voice. He dreams of a great tree cut down, Daniel tells him plainly what it means and urges him to break off his sins, and twelve months later he is on his roof admiring "Babylon the great, that I have built." The sentence is carried out mid boast. Seven times pass, and when his reason returns he lifts his eyes to heaven and blesses the Most High, who does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.

Chapters 5 and 6 are the contrast and the climax. Belshazzar drinks from the vessels taken out of God's house and praises gods of gold and silver, and the fingers write his account on the wall: numbered, weighed, divided. That night he is killed. Then Darius, a decent man manipulated by his own officials, signs a decree he cannot revoke, and Daniel, now an old man, goes home, opens his windows toward Jerusalem, and kneels three times a day as he had always done. The lions do not touch him, and the king cannot sleep.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Chapters 2 through 7 of Daniel are written in Aramaic, the international language of the Gentile world, and they deal mainly with God's rule over Gentile kings.
- The furnace, the image, and the lions' den all fit the practices of the ancient Near East. Babylonian and Persian records confirm the general picture of royal decrees that could not be revoked and of execution by fire and by beasts.
- Belshazzar ruled as coregent with his father Nabonidus, which is why the highest honor he can offer Daniel is third place in the kingdom (5:16) rather than second.
- Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C., the night described in chapter 5, and Daniel then serves under a new administration in chapter 6, roughly sixty five years after he was first deported.
- Daniel is an old man by chapter 6. His praying at open windows was not a sudden act of courage but a lifetime of habit that a decree could not interrupt.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Daniel 3:17–18 contains one of the bravest sentences in Scripture, and it turns on the words "but if not." Work out exactly what the three men were claiming about God and what they refused to claim, and discuss what faith looks like when the rescue does not come.*

They claim two things and refuse a third. First, that God is able to deliver them from the furnace and from the king's hand. Second, that whether or not He does, they will not serve his gods or worship his image. What they refuse to claim is that they know what God will do. They will not presume on Him, and they will not bargain with Him. Their obedience is not conditioned on the outcome.

This is the sentence to leave with the class, because most of our faith is quietly conditional. We obey with an unspoken expectation that God will make it work out, and when it does not, obedience is suddenly negotiable. Hebrews 11 puts the delivered and the undelivered in the same chapter and calls both faith. Ask the class where they are currently waiting to see whether obedience pays before committing to it.

Question 2. *Daniel 6:10 says that when Daniel learned the decree was signed, he went home and prayed as he had always done. Which of your habits are settled enough that a law against them would not change them, and which would quietly disappear?*

The key phrase is “as was his custom since early days.” Daniel did not become brave when the decree was signed; he simply did not change. A habit that has been practiced for decades does not require a decision on the day it becomes costly. That is the whole argument for building disciplines while nothing is at stake, so that they are already load bearing when something is.

Make the class inventory honestly. If attending the assembly became legally risky, who would still come? If reading Scripture required getting up early rather than having free time, who would still read? Ask which one habit they most want to be able to count on in ten years, and what building it would look like starting Monday. Do not accept general answers about being more disciplined.

Question 3. *Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4 and Belshazzar in chapter 5 both come under God’s verdict on pride, and only one of them is restored. What made the difference between those two men, and where do you see the beginnings of each in yourself?*

Nebuchadnezzar was warned and rejected the warning, and God humbled him until he lifted his eyes to heaven. When he did, his reason returned, his kingdom was restored, and the chapter ends with him praising the King of heaven, because those who walk in pride He is able to put down. Belshazzar had all of that history available to him, knew it, and deliberately profaned the vessels of God’s house anyway. Daniel says it directly: you knew all this, and you have not humbled your heart.

The difference is not the severity of the sin but the response to light already given. That is the uncomfortable part for a class of lifelong church members, who have had more light than either king. Ask where they have been told the truth about themselves recently, by a spouse, a friend, a sermon, a verse, and have simply moved on. Pride rarely announces itself. It usually just declines to respond.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace what Nebuchadnezzar says about God at the end of chapter 2, chapter 3, and chapter 4. How does his understanding grow, and what did each stage cost him personally?*

At the end of chapter 2 he falls on his face and says Daniel’s God is a God of gods and a revealer of secrets, which costs him nothing but admiration. At the end of chapter 3 he decrees that no one may speak against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, which costs him a public reversal. At the end of chapter 4 he says, in his own voice, that he praises and honors the King of heaven, whose works are truth and whose ways are justice, and that cost him his sanity, his throne, and seven seasons in a field. Knowledge of God tends to arrive at the price of self importance.

2. *Read Daniel 3:24–28 and note who the king says was in the fire and who Daniel’s account credits with the rescue. Then read Isaiah 43:1–2 and write down what God promises there and what He does not promise.*

The king says he sees four men loose in the fire and that the form of the fourth is like a son of the gods, which is a pagan king describing something he has no vocabulary for. Verse 28 gives the sober account: God sent His angel and delivered His servants. Isaiah 43:2 promises that when you pass through the waters God will be with you and that the flame will not scorch you. Note carefully what it promises: His presence and His keeping. It does not promise that there will be no river and no fire.

3. *Daniel 5:22–23 says Belshazzar knew everything that had happened to his father and still did not humble himself. List every specific charge Daniel brings against him.*

Daniel charges him with knowing what happened to Nebuchadnezzar and refusing to humble his heart, with lifting himself up against the Lord of heaven, with bringing in the vessels of God’s house for a drinking party, with praising gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone which cannot see or hear or know, and with failing to glorify the God who holds his breath in His hand and owns all his ways. That last charge is the one that should unsettle a comfortable reader.

4. *Hebrews 11:33–34 mentions stopping the mouths of lions and quenching the violence of fire, and then verses 35 through 38 turn to believers who were tortured, sawn in two, and killed. Which single lesson about faith does that one chapter teach by putting both groups together?*

That God is glorified both in rescue and in endurance, and that faith is not measured by which one you get. The same chapter, in the same breath, praises those who escaped the edge of the sword and those who were killed by it, and says of the second group that the world was not worthy of them. Deliverance is a gift, not a wage. If we teach the Daniel stories without Hebrews 11:35–38, we set up every suffering Christian in the room for a crisis.

5. *The three men decided before the music ever played. Write down one thing you will not do this year regardless of what it costs you, tell one person what you have written, and ask him to hold you to it.*

Answers will vary. Insist on the telling. A resolve kept private is not really a resolve, and the three men in chapter 3 stood together. Listen for lines that are specific and checkable: what he will not watch, what he will not drink, what he will not sign, what he will not say about a coworker. Then ask about it in a month.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not let these stories become a promise that faithfulness always produces rescue. Read Hebrews 11:35–38 in the same hour. The three men themselves refused to make that promise.
- The fourth figure in the furnace is described by a pagan king in pagan terms. Daniel 3:28 says God sent His angel. You may note that some see a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, but do not preach as certain what the text leaves open.
- Nebuchadnezzar's madness is described, not diagnosed. Avoid speculation about the condition, and keep the class on what the chapter says it means: those who walk in pride, God is able to put down.
- Daniel's praying toward Jerusalem three times a day follows Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8:46–49 and is not a binding pattern for Christians. Commend the constancy, not the posture or the direction.

Not in Princes

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Psalm 144 opens like a warrior's psalm, with God as rock, fortress, and trainer of hands for battle, and then stops short in verses 3 and 4 to ask the question that keeps the Psalter honest: what is man, that You take knowledge of him? The answer is deflating. He is like a breath; his days are a passing shadow. Then, without apology, David asks for exactly the ordinary things people want, that sons be like grown plants, that daughters be like carved pillars, that barns be full and oxen strong and no outcry in the streets. The psalm ends where it should: happy are the people whose God is the Lord.

Psalm 145 is the last psalm attributed to David in the Psalter, and it is an acrostic, one verse for each Hebrew letter, which is a way of saying that praise should be thorough. Its themes are God's greatness and God's goodness held together. He is great and unsearchable, and He is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, good to all, tender over all His works. Verse 13 names His kingdom everlasting, and verse 14 says He upholds all who fall and raises all who are bowed down.

Psalm 146 begins the great Hallelujah finale, five psalms each opening and closing with praise. Its center is a contrast. Do not trust princes, in whom there is no help; his breath goes out, he returns to the earth, and that very day his plans perish. Happy instead is the man whose help is the God of Jacob, who made heaven and earth, keeps truth forever, and executes justice for the oppressed. After a week in Daniel, where kings rise and fall on almost every page, the class will feel the point without your help.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Psalms 144 and 145 are ascribed to David; Psalm 146 begins the closing Hallelujah collection (146–150) that ends the Psalter.
- Psalm 145 is one of several acrostic psalms, a form used for teaching and memorization as well as for completeness of praise.
- Psalm 145:13 has long been used in Jewish daily prayer, which tells you how central its picture of God's kingdom and kindness became.
- Psalm 146:3 uses the ordinary Hebrew phrase "son of man" simply to mean a human being, with no messianic claim in view, unlike its use in Daniel 7.
- These psalms sit deliberately at the end of the collection. After a book full of lament, the Psalter closes in unbroken praise, which is itself a statement about where the life of faith is headed.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Psalm 144:3–4 asks why God takes any notice of man, who is like a breath and a passing shadow, and the same psalm then asks God for barns, flocks, and children. How do those two things belong in one prayer?*

They belong together because both are true and neither is the whole truth. A man really is a breath, and his days really are a shadow that passes, and if the psalm stopped there it would be Ecclesiastes without the fear of God. But the same God who knows how brief we are also cares about barns and children and streets without screaming in them. Smallness does not mean insignificance; it means dependence.

Be careful how you apply the second half. These are petitions, not guarantees, and the psalm is not a formula for prosperity. Note that the closing line does not say happy are the people with full barns; it says happy are the people whose God is the Lord. Ask the class what they would still call themselves if the barn emptied, and whether their prayers over the last month have sounded more like verse 13 or verse 15.

Question 2. *Psalm 145:13 says God's kingdom is an everlasting kingdom that endures through all generations. You have been in Daniel this week. Where do the two books say the same thing, and why would an exile have needed to hear it?*

Daniel 2:44 says God will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed and that shall not be left to other people. Daniel 4:34 has Nebuchadnezzar confessing that God's dominion is everlasting and His kingdom endures from generation to generation, which is nearly word for word Psalm 145:13. Daniel 7:14 gives everlasting dominion to the Son of Man. The psalm and the prophet are making the same claim from different directions.

For an exile, this was not a doctrinal nicety. He lived inside an empire that looked permanent, worshiped in a city that had been leveled, and served kings who could kill him for praying. To say that God's kingdom endures through all generations was to say that the thing that appeared unshakable was not, and the thing that appeared finished was not. Then bring it to now: Colossians 1:13 says Christians are already in that kingdom. Ask what difference that should make on a bad Monday.

Question 3. *Psalm 146:3 warns against putting trust in princes, in whom there is no help. Which prince, program, paycheck, or person have you quietly been leaning on, and what would moving your weight onto God actually look like?*

The psalm is not making a political point about any particular ruler; it is making a point about the category. The prince dies, his breath goes out, he returns to his earth, and in that very day his plans perish. Anything that can die cannot be a foundation. Most of us do not consciously trust a politician, but we do lean hard on a job, a retirement account, a doctor, a spouse's competence, or our own health.

Push for the specific lean. A good diagnostic question: what would have to go wrong for you to feel that your life had come apart? Whatever answer surfaces is usually where the weight is resting. Then ask the second question, which is harder and more useful: what would it look like this month to put some of that weight on God, in an actual decision rather than a feeling? Giving, service, and rest are often where it shows.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Psalm 145 is an acrostic, each verse beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Read it slowly and list every statement it makes about God's character. Which one do you most need this month?*

The list is long: great and greatly to be praised, unsearchable, good, gracious, full of compassion, slow to anger, great in mercy, good to all, tender in all His works, glorious in kingdom, everlasting in dominion, upholding all who fall, raising those bowed down, giving food in due season, satisfying every living thing, righteous in all His ways, near to all who call on Him in truth, hearing, saving, preserving. Answers on the last question will vary; listen for the person who names slow to anger or upholds all who fall, and ask him why.

2. *List everything Psalm 146:7-9 says God does, and note who receives each action. Which pattern do you see in the kinds of people named?*

God executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, frees the prisoners, opens the eyes of the blind, raises those who are bowed down, loves the righteous, watches over the strangers, relieves the fatherless and the widow, and turns the way of the wicked upside down. The pattern is unmistakable: almost everyone on the list is powerless, and most of them are the people a prince would overlook. God's attention runs in exactly the opposite direction from human attention.

3. *Psalm 145:18 says the Lord is near to all who call on Him in truth. Read James 4:8 and Acts 17:27, and write down what is required of the person who wants to draw near.*

James 4:8 says draw near to God and He will draw near to you, and immediately adds cleanse your hands and purify your hearts. Acts 17:27 says God is not far from each one of us and that men should seek Him and reach for Him. Psalm 145:18 adds the qualifier that matters: to all who call upon Him in truth. Nearness is offered to everyone and received by those who come honestly, repentantly, and on His terms, not by those who merely use His name.

4. *Psalm 144 lists full barns and strong sons and then says happy are the people whose God is the Lord. Read Matthew 6:31–33 and explain the order that both the psalm and Jesus insist on.*

The psalm asks for the good things and then locates happiness somewhere else, in belonging to God. Jesus says the Gentiles chase after food and drink and clothing, that the Father knows we need them, and that we are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, with everything else added. Both refuse to say that material things do not matter, and both refuse to let them be first. The order is the whole lesson.

5. *Psalm 145:4 says one generation shall praise God's works to another. Name one young person in your life and tell him, before Sunday, one specific thing God has done in yours.*

Answers will vary. The verse assumes praise is transmitted by telling, not by osmosis, and most young people in our congregations have never heard an older Christian say plainly what God has done for him. Push for one specific story rather than a general statement of belief, and for an actual conversation rather than an intention.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Psalm 144:12–15 is a petition, not a promise. Do not let it be read as a prosperity formula. The psalm's own conclusion locates happiness in having the Lord as God, not in the barns.
- Psalm 146:3 applies to every human support, not to one political party or figure. Keep the application at the level the text sets, or the class will divide along lines that have nothing to do with the psalm.
- Psalm 144:9 mentions a ten stringed harp, which belonged to worship under the Law of Moses. If the question comes up, answer briefly: that 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).
- Psalm 145:9 says the Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all His works. Affirm it warmly, and do not let it be stretched into universal salvation; the same psalm ends by saying all the wicked He will destroy (145:20).

Tears and Ointment

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The shortest verse in the English Bible sits in the middle of the greatest sign in John's Gospel, and it is not there by accident. Jesus is described as groaning in the spirit and troubled, and then weeping, at a tomb He fully intends to empty within the hour. Whatever else this means, it means that God does not regard our grief as an overreaction to be corrected. He shares it. The bystanders read His tears two ways, as love and as failure, which is exactly how people read God's involvement in suffering today.

The raising itself is understated. He tells them to take away the stone, and Martha, who had just confessed Him as the Christ, objects on practical grounds. He reminds her of the promise, prays aloud so the crowd will know the Father sent Him, and cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." The man comes out still wrapped, and Jesus says, "Loose him, and let him go." God does what only God can do, and then hands the rest to the people standing there.

The aftermath is where John is headed. Many believe. Others inform the authorities, and the council convenes, worried about Rome. Caiaphas says it is expedient that one man die for the people, and John notes that he prophesied without knowing it. From that day they plotted to kill Him. Then the scene shifts to a supper table in Bethany, with Lazarus alive and eating, Martha serving as always, and Mary at His feet again, pouring out a fortune and filling the house with the smell of it. Judas objects on behalf of the poor, and John tells us plainly what Judas actually was.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Bethany was about two miles from Jerusalem, so the raising of Lazarus happened close enough to the city to be verified by anyone who wished to walk out and look.
- Jewish burial involved wrapping the body in cloth with spices and laying it in a rock cut tomb sealed by a stone; there was no embalming, which is why Martha speaks of the odor on the fourth day.
- The Sanhedrin's fear in 11:48 is political: a popular movement invites Roman intervention, and the leaders stand to lose their position and their nation.
- Spikenard was imported from India, and John values this flask at three hundred denarii, roughly a year's wages for a laborer. It may well have been the family's savings.
- The supper of John 12 takes place six days before Passover, on the eve of the final week, and the anointing of Jesus' feet is a servant's act, which Mary compounds by wiping them with her hair.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus knew He was about to raise Lazarus, and He wept anyway (11:33–35). Why would He grieve over a sorrow He was two minutes from ending, and what does that tell you about how He meets your grief?*

Because the resurrection of Lazarus did not undo the fact of death; it postponed it. Jesus stands in a world under the wreckage of sin, among people He loves who are wrecked by it, and He is angry and grieved. The Greek word behind "groaned in the spirit" carries indignation. He is not weeping because He is uncertain what to do. He is weeping because death is an outrage and these are His friends.

Pastorally this is one of the most useful scenes in the Gospels. Christians often feel that grief is a failure of faith, that a believer should be composed at a funeral because of what he knows. Jesus knew more than anyone in the cemetery and wept anyway. Tell your class plainly: hope does not cancel sorrow, it accompanies it (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Then ask who in the room is grieving now and being quietly brave about it.

Question 2. *In 11:45–53 the same miracle produces faith in some people and a plot to kill in others. Why does identical evidence divide people so sharply, and where have you watched that happen?*

Because evidence does not create willingness. The same event confronted everyone there with the same fact, and the response divided along the lines of what each person had to protect. Those with nothing at stake believed. Those with a position, a livelihood, and an arrangement with Rome to protect calculated the cost and decided the man must die. John says it flatly: they took counsel to put Him to death, and later even considered killing Lazarus too (12:10), which is the logic of a cover up rather than an investigation.

Let the class name modern versions without turning it into a complaint about unbelievers. Every person in the room has had evidence he did not act on: a sermon that named his sin exactly, a friend who told him the truth, a Bible passage he has learned to read past. Ask what each of us protects that makes us slow to believe what we already know.

Question 3. *Mary pours out ointment worth nearly a year's wages and Judas calls it waste. Which things has following Christ led you to waste, in the world's accounting, and what did that cost you?*

Start with the arithmetic, because Judas was not wrong about the numbers. Three hundred denarii would have fed a great many people. Mary's act was, by any accounting, inefficient. And Jesus defends it completely: she has done a good work, she has kept this for My burial, she has done what she could. There is a kind of love that cannot be justified on a spreadsheet, and the Lord accepts it.

Ask what the class has wasted. It might be a career move declined, a Sunday that could have been overtime, years given to raising children, savings spent on a mission trip or on someone who never said thank you, an evening a week given to a class of nine year olds. The world calls this poor allocation. Then be honest about the other direction: most of us have never given anything to the Lord that anyone would call extravagant. Ask why.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Jesus does and says at the tomb in 11:38–44. Which parts of it could the bystanders do, and which part could only He do?*

He groans in Himself, comes to the tomb, orders the stone taken away, answers Martha's objection with the promise He had already made, lifts His eyes and thanks the Father, says plainly that He prays aloud for the crowd's benefit, cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth," and then tells them to loose him and let him go. The bystanders could roll the stone and unwrap the grave clothes. Only He could call a dead man by name and have him answer. That division of labor is worth noticing: God does what only He can do and gives His people real work to do alongside it.

2. *Read Caiaphas' words in 11:49–52 along with John's comment on them. How could a man say something profoundly true while meaning something entirely different by it?*

Caiaphas meant it as cold political calculation: better to sacrifice one troublesome Galilean than to risk Rome destroying the nation. John says he did not say this on his own authority, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only but to gather into one the children of God scattered abroad. God can speak truth through a man who is serving his own agenda, which should both comfort us and warn us. A true statement on a man's lips is no proof of the man.

3. *Compare where Mary is found in Luke 10:39, John 11:32, and John 12:3. Which detail stays the same in all three scenes, and what does that consistency say about her?*

In every scene she is at His feet: sitting there to hear His word while her sister works, falling there in grief, and kneeling there to anoint Him. Luke records that Jesus said she had chosen the good part which would not be taken from her. Consistency is the point. Mary's extravagance in John 12 is not a sudden burst of devotion; it is what a long habit of sitting at His feet eventually produces.

4. *John 12:6 tells us something about Judas that the other disciples apparently did not know. Trace what that small, private dishonesty had become by John 13:27, and note how long the slide took.*

John says he was a thief and had the money box and used to take what was put in it. By John 13:27 Satan has entered him and he goes out into the night to betray the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. The distance between

pilfering from a common purse and selling Christ is not as far as it looks, and it was covered over about three years while he preached, traveled, and watched miracles. That is the sober lesson: unaddressed private sin does not stay the size it starts.

5. *Jesus said Mary had kept the ointment for His burial and had done what she could. Name one extravagant thing you could do for the Lord in the next month, count honestly what it will cost, and then decide.*

Answers will vary, and the phrase to press is “she did what she could.” Extravagance is relative to capacity, so the widow’s two mites and Mary’s year of wages are both extravagant. Listen for something that will actually register in the budget or the calendar, and gently discourage answers that cost nothing but sound generous.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Lazarus was restored to this present life and died again. This is not the resurrection body of 1 Corinthians 15, and the two should not be blended.
- John 12:8 is not permission to neglect the poor. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 15:11, which commands open handed generosity precisely because the poor will never be absent from the land. He is defending one unrepeatable act of devotion at one unrepeatable moment, not lowering our obligation.
- Do not confuse this anointing with the sinful woman of Luke 7:36–50, and do not identify Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene. Tradition has mixed them; the text does not.
- The tears of Jesus show His full humanity. Affirm both natures plainly if the question arises, and do not let sympathy for His grief erode the deity John has been asserting since chapter 1.

Write What You See

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Establish the purpose of the book before anything else, or the class will spend two months in the wrong conversation. Revelation 1:1 says these things must shortly take place, 1:3 says the time is near, and 1:9 tells us that the man writing is himself in tribulation and on Patmos for the word of God. The first readers were Christians in seven real cities under real pressure from Rome and from their neighbors. The book is a letter of comfort to persecuted believers, written in symbols, assuring them that the Lamb wins. Every honest interpretation must fit that.

Chapter 1 gives the vision that makes the rest bearable. John sees One like the Son of Man among the lampstands, and every feature of the description is drawn from Daniel and Ezekiel and Zechariah: white hair, blazing eyes, feet like fine brass, a voice like many waters, a sharp two edged sword from His mouth, a face like the sun. John falls as a dead man. Then the hand, and the words: do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last; I am He who lives and was dead and am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Hades and of Death. To a church watching its members die, that last line is the whole gospel.

The seven letters follow a pattern: a description of Christ drawn from chapter 1, a commendation, a rebuke, a command, and a promise to the overcomer. Read them as real mail to real congregations. Ephesus works hard and hates evil and has lost its first love. Smyrna is poor and is called rich. Pergamos lives where Satan's throne is and tolerates the teaching of Balaam. Thyatira grows in love and service and puts up with a woman leading members into immorality and idolatry. Each is told to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The apostle John writes from Patmos, a small Aegean island used by Rome for banishment, most likely in the mid nineties under Domitian, when pressure to participate in emperor worship was intense.
- The seven cities lie on a circular postal route in the Roman province of Asia, in the order the letters are given, so a courier could carry the scroll from one to the next.
- The genre is apocalyptic, a recognized kind of Jewish literature using vivid symbols, numbers, and visions to speak about God's action in history. Numbers such as seven, twelve, and a thousand carry meaning rather than arithmetic.
- Revelation quotes or alludes to the Old Testament hundreds of times without ever citing it directly. Daniel and Ezekiel, which your class has just read, are its two largest sources.
- Smyrna and Philadelphia receive no rebuke; Laodicea receives no commendation. The letters are not formulas but genuine assessments.
- The Nicolaitans and the woman called Jezebel are named without much explanation, because the original readers knew who was meant. Resist the urge to reconstruct them in detail.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Before anyone asks what the symbols mean, settle what the book is for. Read Revelation 1:1-3 and 1:9, and discuss who first received this letter, what they were living through, and how that should govern everything we do with the book.*

Give the class the three anchors: it is a revelation of Jesus Christ, it concerns things that must shortly take place, and it comes from a man sharing in their tribulation. The first readers were not being handed a coded calendar of events two thousand years away; they were being handed a reason to hold on next week. The Christ who walks

among the lampstands knows their addresses, their poverty, and the name of the man who is about to be executed.

Then say plainly what this rules out. It rules out newspaper eschatology, date setting, and the habit of matching symbols to current headlines. Jesus said no one knows the day or hour (Matthew 24:36), and every generation that has ignored Him on that point has been embarrassed. Tell the class up front how you will read the book: within its own first century setting, according to its own symbols, with the certainty that the Lamb wins. That promise will keep the next several weeks sane.

Question 2. *Jesus tells Ephesus they have left their first love, even though their doctrine, labor, and endurance are excellent (2:2–4). How does a congregation lose its love while keeping everything else intact, and what are the early signs?*

It happens exactly as this letter describes, by degrees and without any doctrinal failure. Ephesus tests false apostles, labors, perseveres, hates the deeds of the Nicolaitans, and has not grown weary. You would be delighted to have them as members. What they have lost is not orthodoxy but affection, and Jesus treats it as serious enough to threaten the removal of their lampstand.

The signs are recognizable. Service continues but is performed grimly. Sound teaching becomes a matter of catching errors rather than loving truth. Visitors are evaluated rather than welcomed. Prayer thins out. Christ prescribes three things in verse 5: remember, repent, and do the first works. Ask the class what their own first works were, the things they did when their faith was new and unembarrassed, and which one they could start doing again this week.

Question 3. *To Smyrna, the poorest and most persecuted of the seven, Jesus offers no correction and no rescue, only “be faithful until death” (2:10). How does a promise like that change what you expect God to do for you?*

Notice what Jesus does not offer Smyrna. No rebuke, which is remarkable, and no deliverance. He says the devil is about to throw some of them into prison, that they will have tribulation ten days, and that they should be faithful until death. The only promise attached is the crown of life and exemption from the second death. He tells them they are rich, which they were not by any measure their neighbors would recognize.

That reframes what Christians should expect. The faith is not a protection plan; it is a claim about who wins in the end and about what death can and cannot do. Tie it back to Daniel 3: our God is able, and if not, we still will not bow. Ask your class what they have unconsciously expected God to guarantee, and what it would mean to let that expectation go while holding on to Him.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the seven churches in the order Jesus addresses them, then write one sentence for each of the first four on what He commends and what He condemns.*

Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea. Ephesus is commended for labor, patience, and rejecting false apostles, and condemned for leaving its first love. Smyrna is commended for faithfulness in poverty and tribulation and receives no condemnation. Pergamos is commended for holding fast Christ's name where Satan's throne is, even when Antipas was killed, and is condemned for tolerating the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Thyatira is commended for love, service, faith, patience, and growth, and condemned for allowing the woman called Jezebel to teach and seduce.

2. *Revelation 1:5–6 says Christ has made us kings and priests to His God. Read 1 Peter 2:5 and 2:9, and explain what a priesthood of all Christians does mean and what it does not mean.*

It means that every Christian has direct access to God through the one mediator, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14–16), and that every Christian offers spiritual sacrifices of praise, service, and a consecrated life (Romans 12:1; Hebrews 13:15–16). There is no separate sacrificing priesthood in the New Testament church. What it does not mean is that all Christians hold the same function in the assembly; the New Testament still gives qualifications for elders and deacons and assigns roles in the assembly (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1; 1 Timothy 2:11–12). Equal access is not interchangeable function.

3. Trace the description of Christ in 1:12–18. Find where each detail reappears in the opening line of a letter in chapter 2, and suggest why He introduces Himself differently to each congregation.

To Ephesus He is the One who holds the seven stars and walks among the lampstands (1:13, 16). To Smyrna He is the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life (1:17–18), which is precisely what a church facing martyrdom needs. To Pergamos He is the One with the sharp two edged sword (1:16), addressing a city where Rome held the power of the sword. To Thyatira He is the Son of God with eyes like a flame of fire and feet like fine brass (1:14–15), the One who searches minds and hearts. He introduces Himself according to the need in front of Him.

4. Revelation 1:10 says John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. Read Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:1–2, and note which day the New Testament church gathered and what they did when they gathered.

Acts 20:7 says the disciples came together on the first day of the week to break bread, and Paul preached to them. 1 Corinthians 16:1–2 instructs each one to lay something aside on the first day of the week. The Lord's Day is the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection, and it is the day the New Testament church assembled to remember the Lord's death in the supper. It is not a Christian Sabbath, and the New Testament nowhere transfers Sabbath regulations to it.

5. Every letter closes with a promise to the one who overcomes. List the four promises given in chapter 2, then name the specific thing you personally have to overcome and the first step you will take this week.

To Ephesus, to eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God. To Smyrna, not to be hurt by the second death. To Pergamos, hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name written on it. To Thyatira, power over the nations and the morning star. Answers to the second half will vary; press for a single named thing rather than a list, since the promises are all to the one who overcomes, singular, and the first step is usually a conversation or a removal rather than a resolution.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Settle the purpose of Revelation in the first hour: comfort for persecuted Christians, written in symbols, assuring them that the Lamb wins. Refuse date setting and the matching of symbols to modern nations and headlines. This single decision will shape the next several weeks.
- Interpret the numbers and images as symbols, as the book itself does when it explains them (1:20). Do not treat symbolic language as literal, and do not treat plain language as symbolic.
- Revelation 1:10 identifies the Lord's Day as the day John received the vision, the first day of the week. Affirm the apostolic pattern of assembling and observing the Lord's Supper on that day (Acts 20:7), and say clearly that it is not a Christian Sabbath.
- Thyatira's Jezebel is condemned for teaching error and leading Christians into immorality and idolatry. Deal with what the text says, and do not let the passage turn into a general debate about women's roles; the New Testament addresses that elsewhere and on its own terms.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Daniel 7–12 · Psalm 147–150 · John 12:9–50 · Revelation 3–4

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