

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 100 OF 104

The Lamb Overcomes

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Obadiah, Jonah
Wisdom Literature	Ecclesiastes 7-8
Gospels	John 16:5-33
General New Testament	Revelation 12-13

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to put two things side by side that we usually keep apart: God's mercy toward people we despise, and God's victory over powers that terrify us. Jonah could not bear the first and had to be taught it under a dead plant. The seven churches desperately needed the second and were shown a dragon already thrown down. In between, Obadiah warns that pride cannot survive contact with God, and Ecclesiastes admits that from ground level the wicked often look comfortable. The class should leave humbled and unafraid, in that order.

Doctrinally, hold three lines. The promise of John 16:12-13 that the Spirit would guide into all truth was given to the apostles and produced the completed New Testament; we are not waiting for more. The Spirit convicts the world through the gospel preached, as Acts 2:37 plainly shows, not by a direct operation apart from the word. And Revelation 12 and 13 are symbolic assurance to persecuted first-century Christians, not a code for current events; the mark is allegiance, the numbers are symbols, and the Lamb has already won.

The formational thread is what we do with people who do not deserve it. Edom watched a neighbor burn. Jonah wanted a city to burn. The beast demanded that everyone bow, and the saints refused without hating. Jesus, hours from the cross, spent His last free evening comforting men He knew would abandon Him. Put this question to your class before they go: name the person you would honestly be disappointed to meet in heaven, and then tell God what that reveals about you and ask Him to change it.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: This is the hundredth week of the program; say so and thank them. Take up Obadiah and Jonah. Give ten minutes to Obadiah on pride, then move through Jonah quickly to chapter 4 and spend the last twenty minutes there. Do not let the fish take the hour.

Second session: Take up John 16:5-33. It answers Jonah with a God who comforts frightened men on the worst night of His life. Work carefully through the Helper's two works, then close by reading 16:33 aloud and asking the class to memorize it before next week.

The other two readings: Assign Ecclesiastes 7-8 and Revelation 12-13 with the extended questions. Say in advance that Ecclesiastes 7:16 is not permission to sin moderately and that 7:20 speaks of personal sin, and that Revelation 12 and 13 are to be read as first-century comfort rather than as tomorrow's headlines.

Pride Brought Low, Mercy Poured Out**PASSAGE OVERVIEW**

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament and it burns hot. Edom, the nation descended from Esau, lived in the high red rock country south of the Dead Sea, in fortresses cut into cliffs that no army wanted to besiege. When Babylon broke Jerusalem, Edom stood at the fork in the road, cheered, looted the city, and handed over refugees who were trying to escape. Obadiah's verdict is that pride told them they could not be touched, and that God brings down nests built among the stars.

Jonah is the strangest of the prophetic books, because the prophet is the problem. Sent to Nineveh, the capital of an empire famous for cruelty, he books passage in the opposite direction. God sends a storm, pagan sailors behave better than the prophet does, and Jonah is thrown into the sea and swallowed. He prays, is delivered, preaches eight words of warning, and watches an entire city repent from the king on his throne down to the animals in the stalls.

Then comes chapter 4, which is the reason the book exists. Jonah is furious, and his complaint is remarkable: he says he ran in the first place because he knew God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in lovingkindness, and relents from doing harm. He would rather die than watch it. God gives him a plant, takes it away, and then asks the question the book ends on: should I not pity a city of a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left? The reader never hears Jonah answer. That silence is aimed at us.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Obadiah preaches against Edom, Esau's descendants, most likely soon after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Edom's hostility toward Israel runs from Numbers 20:14–21 through the exile.
- Petra, with its rock-cut fortresses, lay in Edomite territory and helps explain the taunt about dwelling in the clefts of the rock.
- Jonah son of Amittai is a real prophet from Gath Hepher in Galilee who also prophesied in the days of Jeroboam the second (2 Kings 14:25), which places him in the same era as Amos and Hosea.
- Nineveh was the great city of Assyria, the empire that would destroy Samaria in 722 BC. Assyrian kings boasted in their own inscriptions about flaying and impaling captives, which is background your class needs to feel Jonah's reluctance honestly.
- Jesus treats Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh as history (Matthew 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–32), and He makes Jonah's three days a sign of His own burial and resurrection.
- Nahum, which your class reads next week, addresses Nineveh again about a century later, when the repentance had not held.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Obadiah says the pride of Edom's heart deceived them, because they lived in the clefts of the rock and felt untouchable. Why is pride so difficult to see in ourselves, and what still makes people feel out of reach today?*

Edom's pride had an address. It lived in rock walls and narrow passes, in a place an invading army would rather go around than through. Obadiah says the pride of their heart deceived them, and deception is the right word, because pride does not feel like arrogance from the inside. It feels like realism. Edom looked at their cliffs and drew a reasonable conclusion. God's reply is that height is no protection from Him: though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down.

Ask what our cliffs are. For some it is money, which quietly removes the need to depend on anyone. For others it is competence, health, a good name, a family that has never had a scandal, or a congregation with a strong reputation. None of those is sinful. Each of them can become the reason a person stops praying like someone who needs God. Ask the class what they would still have if the thing they feel safest in were taken away this year.

Question 2. *Jonah 4 is the real point of the book, and Jonah's complaint in 4:2 is that he knew all along God would be merciful. Who is the Nineveh you would rather God not forgive, and what does your honest answer expose in you?*

Jonah 4:2 is one of the most honest sentences any preacher ever spoke. He did not run because he doubted God. He ran because he was certain of Him, and he could not bear the thought of Assyrians being forgiven. Assyria had done real things to real Israelite towns, and would do worse. Jonah's anger is not petty; it is the anger of a patriot who has seen what these people do. That is exactly why the book is so uncomfortable.

So make the question personal and let it sit. Every person in the room has a category of people whose repentance would feel like an injustice: the abuser, the drunk driver, the man who walked out on his family, the political enemy, the relative who wrecked a family reunion, the whole country whose name is in this week's news. God's last question to Jonah is not, were you wronged. It is, should I not have pity? Ask who in the class is currently sitting outside a city, waiting for fire.

Question 3. *Jesus points back to Jonah in Matthew 12:39–41 and says the men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment with His generation. How does the Lord's use of this account settle the questions people raise about it?*

Jesus does two things with Jonah, and both are decisive. First, He makes the three days and nights in the fish a sign of His own burial and resurrection, which means the episode is not a moral fable He borrowed; it is a real event He compared to a real event. Second, He says the men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with His generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and a greater than Jonah was standing in front of them. Ghosts do not testify at judgment.

That settles the question of historicity without requiring your class to win an argument about marine biology. The Lord treated Jonah as history, and He is a better witness than any commentary. Then press the second half of what He said, which is the part we skip. A pagan city repented at eight words from a reluctant prophet. What has our generation done with far more preaching and a far greater Preacher?

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read Obadiah 10–14 and list what Edom actually did on the day Jerusalem fell. Count how many of the charges are about standing by and watching rather than striking a blow.*

They stood on the other side, they looked on with satisfaction, they rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction, they spoke proudly in the day of distress, they entered the gate of God's people and looked down on their affliction, they laid hands on their possessions, they stood at the crossroads to cut down those who escaped, and they delivered up the survivors. Notice how the list begins: standing, looking, rejoicing, speaking. The violence came last, and it grew out of a posture that was already comfortable with someone else's ruin.

2. *Trace the direction Jonah travels in 1:3–5 and 2:6: down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the lowest parts. What is the writer showing you about running from God?*

Jonah goes down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the lowest parts of the ship, and then down to the moorings of the mountains and the bottom of the sea. The writer is showing you that running from God is never lateral movement; it is always descent. The irony is that the further down Jonah goes, the more clearly he sees, and his prayer from the bottom ends with the line the whole book turns on: salvation is of the Lord (2:9).

3. *Compare Jonah 4:2 with Exodus 34:6 and Joel 2:13. Jonah is quoting Scripture back to God as a complaint. Write down what that tells you about him and about the God he knew.*

Jonah quotes the description God gave of Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6, the same words Joel used to call Judah home in Joel 2:13. Jonah knows his Bible perfectly and hates how it applies. What that reveals is that knowing the

truth about God's character is not the same as sharing it, and that our doctrine can be sound while our heart is at war with it. It also reveals, painfully, that the God Jonah fled is the God who had been patient with Jonah.

4. *Read Jonah 3:5–9 and list everyone in Nineveh who responded, from the greatest to the least. Compare their response with the way Israel answered her own prophets in Hosea 6:4 and Amos 4:6–11.*

The people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least. The word reached the king, who rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes, then decreed that man and beast should fast, cry out to God, and turn from evil and violence. Compare Hosea 6:4, where Israel's goodness evaporates like morning dew, and Amos 4:6–11, where God says five times that disaster came and yet they did not return. The pagan city repented; the covenant nation would not.

5. *Name the person or the group you have quietly written off as beyond God's reach. Pray for them by name every day this week, and take one concrete step that would help them hear the gospel.*

Answers will vary, and this is the assignment of the week. Listen for real names rather than categories, and expect discomfort, because naming the person is most of the work. Daily prayer for someone you resent is one of the few practices that will not let bitterness survive. Watch also for the class member who says he has nobody on that list; Jonah did not think he had one either until God sent him there.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not let the fish consume the hour. The text says the Lord prepared a great fish, so the miracle belongs to God rather than to marine biology, and the book never treats it as the main event. Jesus settles the historical question for us (Matthew 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–32); spend your time where Jonah spends his, which is chapter 4.
- Jonah's prejudice and anger are recorded, not approved. Scripture regularly reports the sins of its heroes without endorsing them. The book deliberately leaves his final answer blank so the reader has to supply his own.
- When 3:10 says God relented, it does not mean God changed His nature or was mistaken. His unchanging character responds differently to a changed people, which is exactly the principle He states in Jeremiah 18:7–10.
- Obadiah closes with deliverance on Mount Zion and the kingdom belonging to the Lord (verse 21). That is fulfilled in Christ and His church (Acts 2; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:22–23), not in a future political arrangement in the Middle East.

Wisdom at the Graveside

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These two chapters read like a notebook rather than an essay, and the entries are dark, sober, and useful. The opening run of comparisons all point the same direction: mourning teaches, feasting distracts; rebuke helps, flattery ruins; patience beats pride; the end of a thing beats its beginning. The Preacher is not a gloomy man who enjoys funerals. He is a wise man who has noticed that people learn almost nothing about life while they are being entertained, and almost everything about it in a room where someone has died.

Then he takes up the problem that has bothered honest people in every generation: the righteous man who dies young and the wicked man who lives long and comfortably. He does not explain it. He says he has seen it, that it is vapor, and then offers two warnings. Do not be overly righteous, which in context means do not become the kind of self-appointed expert on righteousness who thinks his careful bookkeeping obligates God. And do not be wicked either. Fear God, and you will come out of both extremes.

Chapter 8 continues with the wisdom of a man who has served in government. Keep the king's commandment. Do not be hasty to leave his presence. Know that no man has power over the spirit to retain it, or power in the day of death. Then 8:11, the sharpest observation in the chapter: because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, people become bold in doing evil. Yet the Preacher holds his ground in 8:12: it will be well with those who fear God, even though under the sun it does not always look that way.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The Preacher is still working “under the sun,” from observation. His honesty about unfair outcomes is a feature of the method, not a lapse of faith.
- Hebrew wisdom often uses comparison, the “better than” form, to rank two goods rather than to condemn one of them. A feast is not sinful; a funeral is simply more instructive.
- Chapter 8:2–5 reflects life in an ancient court where the king's word was final and a careless subject could lose everything. The counsel is prudential.
- Ecclesiastes 7:20 states the plain fact of universal personal sin, the same truth Paul states in Romans 3:23 and John states in 1 John 1:8.
- The Preacher's repeated admission that he cannot find out the work of God (7:24; 8:17) sets up the conclusion of the book, where the answer comes from above the sun rather than under it (12:13–14).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Ecclesiastes 7:2–4 says it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. Why would a funeral teach you more than a party, and when did a loss last actually change the way you live?*

A party asks nothing of you. A funeral hands you an agenda whether you want one or not. In the house of mourning the living lay it to heart, as verse 2 says, because the room makes it impossible to pretend that the ordinary rules do not apply to you. Sorrow, the Preacher says, makes the heart better. That is not a recommendation of misery; it is an observation that grief has a clarifying power that entertainment does not and cannot have.

Give the class a moment to answer the second half. Most people can name a funeral that changed something: a reconciliation attempted, a will finally written, a habit dropped, a faith taken seriously for the first time. Then ask the honest follow-up. How long did the change last? Most of us leave the cemetery resolved and are back to normal by the end of the month, which is precisely the pattern Hosea 6:4 described. Ask what would make the lesson stick this time.

Question 2. *Ecclesiastes 7:16 warns against being overly righteous and overly wise. Read it with 7:15–18 and 7:20, and work out what the Preacher is and is not saying, since no one imagines God wants less obedience.*

Start by ruling out the wrong reading. The Preacher is not telling anyone to sin moderately, and verse 17 forbids wickedness in the same breath. Read verse 15 first, because it sets the problem: he has seen a righteous man perish in his righteousness and a wicked man prolong his life. Verse 16 warns against the response that problem usually provokes, which is to become a self-appointed auditor of righteousness, making yourself a specialist in rules and wisdom so that God will owe you an outcome.

Verse 18 gives the resolution: it is good to take hold of the one and not let go of the other, for he who fears God will escape them both. The alternative to self-righteous excess is not laxity; it is reverence. Ask your class where they have seen the overly righteous type, the person whose scruples became a way of controlling God and judging everyone else. Then ask, more gently, whether anyone has stopped trying because the accounting did not seem to pay.

Question 3. *Ecclesiastes 8:11 says that because the sentence against evil is not carried out speedily, people set their hearts to do evil. Where do you see delayed consequences quietly teaching people, including you, to take God less seriously?*

This is one of the truest sentences in the Bible about human nature. Consequence delayed is read by the human heart as consequence canceled. The man who has cheated on his taxes for six years and never been audited is not more careful in year seven; he is bolder. The same is true of the private sin that has never been discovered, the spending that has not yet caught up, the drinking nobody has mentioned. Patience from God gets filed away as approval.

Peter answers this directly: the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). The delay that emboldens the fool is mercy meant to produce repentance (Romans 2:4). Ask the class where they are currently mistaking God's patience for God's permission, and remind them that Ecclesiastes ends with every work brought into judgment, including every secret thing (12:14).

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the “better than” statements in 7:1–12. Which one is hardest for you to believe, and what would have to change in you for it to ring true?*

A good name is better than precious ointment; the day of death better than the day of birth; the house of mourning better than the house of feasting; sorrow better than laughter; the rebuke of the wise better than the song of fools; the end of a thing better than its beginning; patience in spirit better than pride in spirit; and wisdom with an inheritance is a defense as money is a defense, but knowledge gives life to those who have it. Most classes stumble hardest at the day of death and at sorrow being better than laughter. The Preacher is ranking what teaches, not what feels good.

2. *Read Ecclesiastes 7:20 with Romans 3:23 and 1 John 1:8–10. What do these passages affirm about every accountable person, and what do they carefully not say about infants?*

They affirm that every accountable person has actually sinned. Ecclesiastes 7:20 says there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin; Romans 3:23 says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 1 John 1:8 says that if we claim to have no sin we deceive ourselves. What none of them says is that anyone is born guilty. Guilt in Scripture attaches to a person's own sin (Ezekiel 18:20), and Jesus held up a child as the picture of what one must become to enter the kingdom (Matthew 18:3; 19:14).

3. *Trace what the Preacher says about the fear of God in 8:12–13, and notice the phrase he uses in the middle of contrary evidence. Where does he land, and on what basis?*

He says that although a sinner does evil a hundred times and his days are prolonged, yet surely he knows that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him, and that it will not be well with the wicked. The phrase “yet surely I know” is the hinge. He is not reasoning from the evidence, which points the other way; he is holding to what

he knows about God while the evidence is still unresolved. That is what faith looks like in the middle of an honest investigation.

4. *Compare Ecclesiastes 8:8 with Hebrews 9:27 and Luke 12:16–21. Write down what all three agree on regarding the limits of human control.*

Ecclesiastes 8:8 says no one has power over the spirit to retain it, nor power in the day of death, and that there is no discharge in that war. Hebrews 9:27 says it is appointed for men to die once, and after this the judgment. Luke 12:16–21 tells of a man whose barn-building plans were interrupted by the sentence, “This night your soul will be required of you.” All three agree that the one appointment no human being can reschedule is the one that matters most, and that planning as though we control the timetable is folly.

5. *Ecclesiastes 7:5 says the rebuke of the wise is better than the song of fools. Name the person whose correction you have been avoiding, go to them this week, and ask them plainly to tell you the truth.*

Answers will vary, and most people already know the name before they finish reading the question. Look for a spouse, a parent, an elder, an old friend, or a coworker whose honesty has been avoided precisely because it is reliable. Warn the class that asking for correction and then defending yourself is worse than not asking. Proverbs 27:6 and 9:8–9 belong here, and so does the plain observation of 7:5 that the alternative is a song from people who will tell you what you want.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Ecclesiastes 7:16 is not permission to sin in moderation. Verse 17 forbids wickedness, and verse 18 resolves both by the fear of God. In context the warning is against self-righteous excess and the pretension of thinking one can master God’s ways.
- Ecclesiastes 7:20 teaches universal personal sin by those old enough to sin. It does not teach inherited guilt or total depravity. Each person becomes guilty when he himself sins (Ezekiel 18:20), and children are safe in Christ’s own description of the kingdom (Matthew 18:3; 19:14).
- Ecclesiastes 7:26–28 will trouble some readers. The Preacher is describing his own search among the people of a corrupt court, and his conclusion in 7:29 is about humanity in general: God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. Do not let the passage be used to demean women, which Scripture consistently honors (Proverbs 31:10–31; Luke 8:1–3; Romans 16:1–6).
- Keep the key in place. Chapters 7 and 8 are still observation from under the sun, which is why the Preacher can report unresolved injustice. The resolution comes in 12:13–14 and in Christ, and your class reads that in four weeks.

Sorrow Turned into Joy

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The men in the room have stopped asking where Jesus is going; sorrow has filled their hearts and shut down their curiosity. Into that silence Jesus says something no disciple wants to hear: it is to your advantage that I go away. The reason is the Helper. As long as Jesus walked in one body in one place, the work was limited to wherever His feet were. What is coming is the Spirit-given word that will go everywhere at once, carried by these men, and the presence of God with every Christian in every city.

Then Jesus describes two very different works. Toward the world, the Spirit convicts of sin, because they do not believe in Jesus; of righteousness, because Jesus goes to the Father and is vindicated; and of judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. Toward these apostles, He will guide them into all truth, not speaking on His own authority, and He will show them things to come. Both works happen in Acts. On Pentecost the word is preached and the crowd is cut to the heart, which is exactly what conviction looks like.

The last section is tender. A little while, and they will not see Him; again a little while, and they will. He compares it to labor, where anguish is forgotten for joy that a child is born, and nobody can take that joy away. He tells them they will ask the Father directly in His name, and that the Father Himself loves them. Then He is honest: they will be scattered and leave Him alone. And He gives them the sentence that has carried Christians ever since, that in Him they may have peace, because He has overcome the world.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This is the close of the upper room discourse, spoken on the night of the betrayal to the eleven, hours before the arrest.
- The Helper, or Paraclete, is the Holy Spirit, and the promises of 16:12–13 are made to men who would be inspired to deliver and record the New Testament.
- “Convict” is a courtroom word meaning to expose and prove guilty. The Spirit does this through the preached gospel; Acts 2:37 shows the crowd cut to the heart while Peter preaches.
- Childbirth as an image for anguish turning to joy is common in the prophets (Isaiah 26:17; 66:7–9), and the apostles would have caught the echo.
- The scattering of 16:32 happened within hours (Matthew 26:56), and the restoration of these men afterward is part of why their later courage is such strong evidence for the resurrection.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus says it is to their advantage that He goes away (16:7). Why would these men be better off with Jesus gone and the Helper come, and what does that tell you about what the Spirit came to accomplish?*

Their loss felt total; He calls it an advantage, and He means it. While He was with them in the flesh, the Lord could only be in one place at a time, and the apostles were students who still misunderstood Him constantly. What was coming would give them the completed truth to preach, the power to confirm it, and a gospel that could run to Samaria, Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome at the same time. The departure was not a subtraction; it was how the work went worldwide.

Draw out what the Spirit came to do. He came to convict the world through the message, to guide the apostles into all truth so there would be a word to preach, and to glorify Christ rather than Himself (16:14). That last point is worth naming. Any teaching that puts the Spirit at the center of attention rather than Christ has misread this chapter. Ask what changes when we remember that the Spirit’s work is to make much of Jesus.

Question 2. *In 16:8–11 the Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Read Acts 2:36–37 and trace how that conviction actually reached the hearts of the crowd on the day of Pentecost.*

Watch how the conviction actually arrives in Acts 2. Peter preaches Jesus of Nazareth, His works, His death by wicked hands, His resurrection, and His exaltation, and then says God has made this Jesus both Lord and Christ. Then comes verse 37: when they heard this, they were cut to the heart. Nobody in that crowd had a private experience unrelated to the message. They heard the word and the word did its work, which is exactly what Hebrews 4:12 says about the word of God being living and powerful.

So the Spirit convicts the world through the gospel He gave, preached by people like us. That has two consequences worth stating. First, we should stop waiting for something to happen to our neighbor before we tell him about Jesus; the telling is how it happens. Second, our confidence in evangelism does not rest on our eloquence but on the power of the message (Romans 1:16; 1 Peter 1:23). Ask who the class is praying for and whether anyone has actually spoken to them yet.

Question 3. *The chapter ends, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (16:33). How do those two halves hold together, and what does that sentence ask of someone in this room having a hard year?*

The two halves are not in tension; the second one presupposes the first. Jesus does not promise His disciples an exemption from trouble. He guarantees the trouble in the same sentence in which He commands good cheer. What He offers is not a better set of circumstances but Himself, already victorious over the world that produces the trouble. Peace is “in Me,” and the cheer rests on a finished verb: I have overcome.

For the person in the room having a hard year, this is not a pep talk and should not be delivered as one. It is the assurance that the worst the world can do has already been done to Jesus, and He walked out of the tomb. Ask what it would mean to face a diagnosis, a layoff, a wayward child, or a lonely house with that sentence actually believed. Then ask the class to memorize it this week. Some sentences need to be in the mind before the trouble arrives.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the works of the Helper named in 16:7–15, and write beside each one whether it is aimed at the world or at the apostles in that room.*

Aimed at the world: He convicts of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (16:8–11). Aimed at the apostles: He comes to them when Jesus departs, He guides them into all truth, He does not speak on His own authority but speaks what He hears, He tells them things to come, He glorifies Christ, and He takes what belongs to Christ and declares it to them (16:13–15). The division matters. What the Spirit did for the apostles resulted in a completed revelation; what He does toward the world He does through that revelation preached.

2. *Read 16:12–13 slowly. Whom is Jesus addressing, what is promised to them, and how do Ephesians 3:3–5, 2 Peter 1:3, and Jude 3 describe the result of that promise?*

He is addressing the eleven apostles, the men who had been with Him from the beginning (15:27). He promises that the Spirit of truth will guide them into all truth and show them things to come, and that He will bring to remembrance what Jesus said (14:26). The result is described by Paul, who says the mystery was made known to him by revelation and that readers can understand his insight by reading what he wrote (Ephesians 3:3–5); by Peter, who says we have been given all things that pertain to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3); and by Jude, who says the faith was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

3. *Trace the picture of the woman in labor in 16:20–22. In the apostles’ own experience, what turned out to be the pain, and what turned out to be the joy?*

The pain was the arrest, the trial, the cross, and the three days when everything they had believed appeared to have failed. The joy was the risen Christ in the room with them, and no one took it away. Look at what happened to these same men: they went from hiding behind locked doors to standing in the temple courts telling the nation it had

crucified the Lord of glory. Jesus said their sorrow would turn into joy, not merely be followed by it, and the resurrection is what turned it.

4. *Compare the promise about asking in 16:23–27 with James 4:3 and 1 John 5:14–15. What conditions do the apostles attach to prayer that we often leave off?*

Jesus says that whatever they ask the Father in His name He will give them, and that the Father Himself loves them. James 4:3 says we ask and do not receive because we ask amiss, to spend it on our own pleasures. First John 5:14–15 says this is the confidence we have, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. The conditions we routinely leave off are asking in His name, meaning by His authority and in keeping with His character, and asking according to His will rather than our appetite.

5. *Jesus told these men they would be scattered and then offered them peace (16:32–33). Name the trouble you expect in the next month, and write out the sentence from this chapter you intend to preach to yourself when it arrives.*

Answers will vary. Most people know exactly what is coming in the next month: a medical result, a difficult conversation, a court date, an empty chair at a holiday table. The value of the exercise is having the sentence chosen and memorized before the day arrives. Many will pick 16:33. Some will pick 16:22, that no one will take your joy from you. Encourage them to write it where they will see it, and follow up in a few weeks.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The promise of being guided into all truth (16:12–13) is given to the apostles in that room, and its result is the completed New Testament (Ephesians 3:3–5; 2 Peter 1:3; Jude 3). It is not a promise of continuing revelation to every Christian, and Galatians 1:8–9 warns against any message beyond what was delivered. Teach it plainly and without scorn toward those who believe otherwise.
- The Spirit convicts the world through the gospel preached, not by a direct operation apart from the word. Acts 2:37 shows exactly how it works, and Romans 1:16, Hebrews 4:12, and 1 Peter 1:23 say the same. This point protects a class from waiting on a feeling before obeying.
- John 16:33 promises peace in Christ, not the absence of trouble; the same sentence guarantees tribulation. Do not let it be quoted as though faith exempts a Christian from hardship.
- John 16:32 records the apostles' failure honestly, and their later restoration and courage should be held up together with it. Scripture never hides the collapse of its best men, and it never leaves them there.

The Dragon and the Beasts

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 12 is the widest camera angle in the Bible. A woman appears clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars, and she is in labor. A great red dragon stands in front of her, waiting to eat the child the instant He arrives. The child is born, is destined to rule the nations, and is caught up to God and to His throne. In three verses John has told the story of the incarnation, the cross, and the ascension from heaven's side, and shown you who was really behind Herod's soldiers.

Then the dragon is cast down, and heaven sings the key verse of the book: they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. That is the whole Christian strategy in one line. The dragon, unable to touch the Child, turns on the woman and then on the rest of her offspring, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus. That is your class, and they should know it.

Chapter 13 shows how the dragon works, since he never appears in person. A beast rises from the sea with the features of Daniel's four empires combined, wielding the dragon's authority, admired by the whole world, blaspheming God and making war on the saints for a limited time. Then a second beast rises from the land, with two horns like a lamb and the voice of a dragon, performing signs and enforcing worship of the first, marking everyone who complies so they can buy and sell. Political power and religious propaganda, working together, is a combination every generation recognizes.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The first readers lived under Rome, where the imperial cult was promoted by local priesthoods and where refusing to honor Caesar could shut a Christian out of the trade guilds and the marketplace.
- The woman represents the faithful covenant people of God from whom the Messiah came, and then the church that continues after Him; the child who will rule the nations with a rod of iron is Christ (Psalm 2:9; Revelation 19:15).
- The beast from the sea combines the leopard, bear, and lion of Daniel 7, which pictured successive empires. John is saying that the persecuting power of his day is the same old animal in a new skin.
- The mark on the hand or forehead is the deliberate counterfeit of the seal of God in 7:3 and of the Israelite practice of binding God's word on hand and forehead (Deuteronomy 6:8). It pictures allegiance, not technology.
- Numbers again: forty-two months (13:5) is the same limited period as chapters 11 and 12, and six falling short of seven three times is a portrait of incompleteness and failure.
- The second beast is later called the false prophet (16:13; 19:20), which identifies its role as religious persuasion in the service of the state.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Revelation 12 shows a woman, a child, and a dragon crouched in front of her. Work out from the chapter itself who each figure is, then discuss what this account adds to the Christmas story we usually tell.*

Let the text identify the figures. The child is to rule all nations with a rod of iron and is caught up to God and to His throne, which is Christ and no one else. The dragon is named outright in 12:9: that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world. The woman gives birth to the Messiah and afterward has other offspring who keep God's commandments and hold the testimony of Jesus, so she is the faithful people of God, Israel bringing forth the Christ and the church continuing after Him.

What this adds to the familiar account is the other half of the story. We picture a stable and shepherds; John shows a dragon crouched in front of a woman in labor. Herod's soldiers in Bethlehem were not a political accident. The whole conflict from Genesis 3:15 onward comes to a head at the manger and the cross, and the dragon loses. Ask the class how it changes the way they read the Gospels to know what was standing in the room.

Question 2. *Revelation 12:11 says they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. What kind of overcoming is that, and how is it different from the way we normally picture winning?*

It is overcoming by dying. Notice the three elements and their order: the blood of the Lamb, which is the ground of the victory and none of it is their contribution; the word of their testimony, which is what they said about Jesus when saying it was dangerous; and their willingness to lose their lives rather than deny Him. By every measure the world uses, the martyrs of Smyrna lost. Revelation says they overcame, and the tense is settled.

That is the opposite of how we picture winning, which usually involves outlasting, out-arguing, or out-voting somebody. Be careful here, because the application is not that Christians should seek suffering or be obnoxious about their convictions. The application is that faithfulness is the victory, whatever the outcome looks like from the street. Ask the class to name a Christian they have known who won this way, and let someone tell that story out loud.

Question 3. *Two beasts appear in chapter 13, and the second one exists to make people worship the first. Given who first read this book and what they were facing, what would these beasts have meant to them, and why should we refuse to attach them to names in today's news?*

To the seven churches, the beast from the sea was the Roman imperial power that could imprison, kill, and shut them out of ordinary commerce, and the beast from the earth was the whole machinery of the imperial cult, the local priests and civic festivals that made emperor worship look patriotic and normal. That is what a first-century reader in Pergamos or Ephesus would have seen, and it is why John writes in symbols rather than names in a document that could get its carrier killed.

We refuse to attach these figures to current names for two reasons. First, the book was written to be understood by its first readers, and any reading that requires a newspaper from our century would have been useless to them. Second, the identifications never stop; every generation has confidently named the beast, and every generation so far has been wrong. What does carry forward is the pattern: state power hostile to Christ, propped up by religious persuasion, demanding an allegiance that belongs to God alone. Teach the pattern and refuse the guessing.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Revelation 12:9 calls the dragon. Read Genesis 3:15 and Romans 16:20 alongside it, and write down what has already happened to him.*

He is called the great dragon, that serpent of old, the Devil, Satan, the one who deceives the whole world, and in 12:10 the accuser of our brethren who accused them before God day and night. Genesis 3:15 promised that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head while the serpent struck His heel, and Romans 16:20 tells Christians that the God of peace will crush Satan under their feet shortly. What has already happened is the decisive blow: he has been cast down, he has been defeated at the cross, and 12:12 says he has great wrath because he knows he has a short time.

2. *Compare the beast of 13:1–2 with the four beasts of Daniel 7:2–7. Note what John has combined into one animal, and say what he is telling his readers about the empire they lived under.*

John takes the leopard, the bear, and the lion of Daniel 7 and fuses them into one animal with seven heads and ten horns. Daniel's four beasts were successive empires; John's single beast carries all their features at once. He is telling Christians under Rome that the power crushing them is not new and not unique, but the latest form of an old animal, and that the same God who set the limits in Daniel's day still sets them. Notice how often the text says power was "given" to the beast; even its authority is granted and bounded.

3. Trace the imitations running through these two chapters: a dragon, a beast, and a second beast set against the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and a mark set against the seal of 7:3. What does that pattern show about how evil works?

The dragon gives his authority to the beast, which has a head that appears to have been mortally wounded and healed, and the second beast has two horns like a lamb but speaks like a dragon and makes people worship the first. The mark on the right hand or forehead answers the seal on the foreheads of God's servants in 7:3. Evil in Revelation does not invent; it imitates. It offers a counterfeit trinity, a counterfeit resurrection, a counterfeit lamb, and a counterfeit seal of ownership, which is exactly why discernment matters and why the true seal is worth keeping.

4. Given that seven is the number of completeness in this book, work out why a number like 666 would strike the first readers as a portrait of failure rather than a code to crack.

In this book seven is the number of completeness and perfection, used of God, the Spirit, the churches, the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls. A number built of sixes is therefore a number that falls short, three times over, and 13:18 says it is the number of a man. Whatever specific name the first readers may have recognized in it, and Nero has long been the leading suggestion, the meaning John gives is that the beast is a parody that never arrives at seven. It looks enormous and it is not complete.

5. Revelation 13:10 ends, "Here is the patience and the faith of the saints." Name the place where your faith right now needs patience rather than a solution, and decide specifically how you will endure there this month.

Answers will vary, and the distinction in the question is the lesson. Some troubles have solutions and should be solved. Others, a chronic illness, an unbelieving spouse, a prodigal child, a workplace that will not change, require endurance instead, and Revelation keeps saying so (13:10; 14:12). Look for a specific plan to endure: a passage to read daily, a Christian who will check on them, a prayer prayed at a set time, and a decision made in advance about what they will not do when they are tired.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Refuse every attempt to identify the beasts or the mark with modern persons, governments, or technology. The mark is the counterfeit of the seal of God and pictures allegiance and ownership, not a device. Every generation's confident identification has failed, and the book was written to be understood by Christians in Asia Minor.
- Do not be dogmatic about 666. Scripture tells us it is the number of a man and that it falls short of seven; beyond that, hold suggestions loosely and do not let the class spend the hour on arithmetic.
- The woman of chapter 12 is the faithful people of God, not Mary as an object of devotion and not any modern nation. The child is Christ, and His being caught up to the throne is His ascension and present reign (Acts 2:33–36).
- Do not build a tribulation timeline or a millennial scheme from these chapters. The forty-two months is the same symbolic, God-limited period as in chapters 11 and 12, and the assurance being offered is that the Lamb wins and the dragon's time is short.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Micah 1–7; Nahum 1–3 · Ecclesiastes 9–12 · John 17:1–18:24 · Revelation 14–16

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