

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 101 OF 104

What the Lord Requires

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Micah 1-7; Nahum 1-3
Wisdom Literature	Ecclesiastes 9-12
Gospels	John 17:1-18:24
General New Testament	Revelation 14-16

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to put a plain question in front of the class and refuse to let it stay abstract: what does God actually require of a person, and are we doing it? Micah answers in one line, Solomon answers at the end of a long and honest book, Jesus answers by keeping the Father's word all the way to a garden in the dark, and Revelation shows the saints answering with their lives. Four very different writers, one requirement.

Doctrinally, three matters deserve your attention. First, Ecclesiastes 9:5 must be handled carefully, because it is the standard proof text for denying conscious existence after death; teach the vantage point of the book and then give the New Testament evidence. Second, Micah 4 and Micah 5 must be kept clear of premillennial readings; the mountain of the Lord's house is the church, and the Ruler from Bethlehem reigns now. Third, Revelation 14:12 joins keeping the commandments to the faith of Jesus, which is the right place to say plainly that Scripture never teaches salvation by faith only.

The formational thread is endurance that shows up in ordinary obedience. Micah wants justice done in a land transaction. Solomon wants a man to work with his might at whatever his hand finds. Jesus asks the Father to sanctify His men by the truth and send them back into the world. John tells dying Christians that their works follow them. Ask your class this: name the one thing you know God requires of you that you have been postponing, and say out loud what you will do about it before Sunday.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Revelation 14-16 first. The Lamb on Mount Zion sets the tone for the week, and the class will need the hour for symbolism, the 144,000, and Armageddon. Settling the interpretive method here will serve you through the last three weeks of the program.

Second session: Take up John 17:1-18:24. It is the most personal reading of the four and the one most likely to move people. Give the bulk of the time to the prayer, especially verses 3, 17, and 20 through 21, and save ten minutes for Peter at the fire.

The other two readings: Micah, Nahum, and Ecclesiastes 9-12 carry the extended questions well. Ask the class to mark Micah 6:8 and Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 and read them side by side. If someone raises Ecclesiastes 9:5 during the week, answer it briefly in class rather than leaving it hanging.

From Bethlehem to Nineveh

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Micah is a country preacher with a national audience. He comes from Moresheth, a small town in the Judean lowlands, and he preaches in the same years as Isaiah, who worked in the capital. That location shapes the book. Micah knows what it feels like when a powerful man in Jerusalem decides he wants your field (2:1-2). The sins he indicts are not abstractions; they are what the strong do to the weak while religion continues on schedule.

The book moves in a repeated rhythm of judgment and hope. Samaria falls, Jerusalem is threatened, and then suddenly the mountain of the Lord's house is exalted and the nations stream to it (4:1-5). Judah is besieged, and then a Ruler comes out of Bethlehem whose goings forth have been from of old (5:2). God brings a lawsuit against His people, and the answer is not more sacrifice but justice, mercy, and humility (6:8). The book ends by asking who is a God like ours, who pardons iniquity and casts sin into the depths of the sea.

Nahum is the other half of the Jonah story. About a hundred and fifty years after Nineveh humbled itself at the preaching of a reluctant prophet, Nahum announces that the city is finished. The poetry is fierce and fast, full of cracking whips and rattling wheels, and it is not written to satisfy anyone's appetite for revenge. It is written to a small nation living under a cruel empire, to tell them that God has not lost track of what Assyria has done.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Micah prophesied in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Micah 1:1), roughly 735 to 700 B.C., a contemporary of Isaiah and Hosea.
- Micah 3:12 was still remembered a century later and was credited with moving Hezekiah to repentance (Jeremiah 26:17-19), which is a striking record of preaching that worked.
- Micah 5:2 is quoted by the chief priests in Matthew 2:5-6 and fulfilled in the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem.
- Nahum writes after the fall of Thebes in 663 B.C. (Nahum 3:8-10) and before Nineveh's fall in 612 B.C., so the book is a prediction, not a report.
- Assyria was the superpower that destroyed Samaria and deported the northern tribes, and was known even in its own inscriptions for calculated terror.
- Genre: both books are Hebrew prophetic poetry, heavy with imagery, wordplay on place names, and sudden shifts between doom and deliverance.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Micah 6:6-8 puts an escalating list of offerings in a worshiper's mouth and then answers him with three requirements. Walk through the three in order, and name the places where we still try to settle with God by activity instead.*

The worshiper in 6:6-7 bids upward: burnt offerings, calves a year old, thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil, finally his firstborn child. It is the logic of a man who thinks the problem is the price. Micah's answer takes the ground out from under him. God has already told him what is good. Do justly is how you treat people when you have the advantage. Love mercy is the settled affection behind it, the Hebrew word for covenant loyalty. Walk humbly with your God is the root of the other two.

Press for specifics or the class will nod at a famous verse and go home unchanged. Where does a Christian do injustice? In how an employer pays, in how a review is written, in what we repeat about someone. Where is mercy withheld? Usually from the person who has already been forgiven once and blew it. Ask each person to name one of the three and one name attached to it.

Question 2. *Micah 5:2 promises a Ruler out of a village too small to be counted. Read Matthew 2:3–6 beside it. Why would God stake the arrival of His King on a place like that, and how does it unsettle our habit of measuring by size?*

Bethlehem Ephrathah was a village of perhaps a few hundred people, distinguished only by being David's hometown. Micah says it is little among the thousands of Judah, and that is precisely the point. The One who comes from it is described in the same breath as having goings forth from of old, from everlasting, which is language no mere descendant of David could carry. Matthew 2 shows the chief priests able to quote the verse accurately and unable to walk five miles to see whether it had happened.

The application is not merely sentimental affection for small towns. God has consistently worked through what the world overlooks: a younger son, a barren woman, a carpenter's household, twelve men from the provinces, a congregation that will never be large. Ask what your class has quietly written off because it seemed too small to matter, including their own congregation and their own influence.

Question 3. *Nineveh repented when Jonah preached, and Nahum announces its ruin roughly a hundred years later. Talk through what that says about the shelf life of somebody else's repentance, and about how a family or a congregation can lose in one generation what it gained in another.*

Jonah's Nineveh repented genuinely, and God relented genuinely (Jonah 3:10). Nahum's Nineveh is a different generation that returned to the old cruelty. Repentance is not inherited. Neither is faith. Every generation stands before God on its own account, which is both the sober warning of Nahum and the reason Judges 2:10 reads the way it does: another generation arose that did not know the Lord.

Turn this toward the room. Congregations live off borrowed convictions for about one generation. The grandchildren of people who sacrificed to build something often cannot say why it was built. Ask what is being handed down in their homes deliberately, by teaching and by example, and what is merely being assumed. Then ask what they will do about it this month, since assumption is exactly how Nineveh got a second chapter.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the specific sins Micah names in chapters 2 and 3: what the landowners do, what the judges do, what the prophets do. Which of the three could you commit this month without noticing?*

Chapter 2 names men who lie awake devising evil and seize fields and houses because they have the power to do it (2:1–2), and who drive women from their homes (2:9). Chapter 3 names rulers who hate good and love evil and treat the people like meat in a pot (3:1–3), prophets who preach peace to whoever feeds them and war against whoever does not (3:5), and judges who judge for reward and priests who teach for hire while leaning on the Lord and saying no evil can come (3:11). The easiest to slip into is the third: religious talk floating free of ordinary honesty.

2. *Micah 4:1–3 speaks of the mountain of the Lord's house established in the last days. Compare Isaiah 2:2–4, Acts 2:16–17, and Hebrews 1:1–2. When did the last days begin, and what was established in them?*

The last days began with the coming of Christ and the establishment of His church. Hebrews 1:1–2 says God has spoken in these last days by His Son, and Peter tells the Pentecost crowd that what they were seeing was what Joel said would happen in the last days (Acts 2:16–17). The mountain of the Lord's house established above the hills, with nations flowing to it and the law going forth from Zion, is the kingdom Christ set up in Acts 2 and is not a political arrangement still awaited.

3. *Read Micah 7:18–20 and write out every word or phrase Micah uses for what God does with sin. Which of them is hardest for you to believe He does with yours?*

Micah says God pardons iniquity, passes by transgression, does not retain His anger forever, delights in mercy, has compassion, subdues our iniquities, and casts all our sins into the depths of the sea. Note that the verbs are active: God does something with sin, He does not merely overlook it. Answers will vary on which is hardest; many will say the casting into the sea, because they keep dredging up what God has drowned.

4. *Nahum 1:2–3 sets God's jealousy and vengeance beside His slowness to anger. How do those hold together, and what is lost if a person keeps only one of them? See Romans 11:22.*

Both are true of the same God and neither is safe alone. A God of vengeance without patience would have ended the human story in Genesis 4. A God of patience without justice would be indifferent to the women and children Assyria impaled. Romans 11:22 names them together, the goodness and severity of God. Nahum 1:3 is careful to say He is slow to anger and great in power and will not at all acquit the wicked, in one sentence.

5. *Micah 6:8 asks for justice, mercy, and a humble walk. Pick the one you are furthest from, name the person it touches most directly, and do something specific about it before next Sunday.*

Answers will vary. Listen for a named person and a dated action, not a resolution to be more just in general. If someone picks humility, help them make it concrete: an apology owed, a position surrendered, a piece of credit handed to someone else.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Micah 4:1–4 is not a premillennial passage. The mountain of the Lord's house, the nations streaming in, and the law going forth from Zion describe the church established on Pentecost (Isaiah 2:2–4; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). Christ reigns now. Do not leave room for a future earthly kingdom centered on national Israel.
- Micah 5:2 is fulfilled in the birth of Christ, as Matthew 2:5–6 states. Say so plainly and resist the temptation to attach a second, future fulfillment to it.
- Nahum's language of vengeance is God's prerogative exercised through history, not a warrant for personal retaliation (Romans 12:19). If a class member is carrying a grievance, this book can be misused; teach it as comfort to the oppressed and warning to the oppressor.
- Micah 6:8 is often quoted as though it replaced worship and obedience with social ethics. It does not. Micah is condemning sacrifice offered by men whose lives contradict it, exactly as Samuel did in 1 Samuel 15:22. God still specifies how He is to be worshiped.

Remember Now Your Creator

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These chapters are the landing of a long argument. Solomon has spent the book examining life “under the sun,” that is, life measured by what a man can see from inside it, without factoring in God’s throne. From that vantage point the conclusions are bleak and accurate: death takes the wise and the fool alike, no one knows what a day holds, and the workers who build are forgotten. Solomon is not being faithless here. He is being honest about what the evidence looks like when you leave heaven out of the accounting.

What he does with that honesty is the surprise. He does not counsel numbness or indulgence. He counsels engagement: eat your bread with joy, enjoy your wife, work with your might, be generous before you know the outcome, sow in the morning and in the evening because you cannot tell which will prosper. This is the wisdom of a man who has stopped demanding guarantees from a life God never guaranteed, and has decided to live faithfully inside the uncertainty.

Chapter 12 is one of the great poems of the Old Testament: the keepers of the house trembling, the grinders ceasing because they are few, the silver cord loosed and the golden bowl broken. It is old age and death described so gently that a class may not notice what it is reading until you tell them. Then the Preacher drops the veil in 12:13–14. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man, and God will bring every work into judgment. That verse is where the whole book has been going.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature, written by the Preacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem (1:1), traditionally Solomon.
- The book’s controlling phrase is “under the sun,” appearing about thirty times. It marks the limited vantage point from which most of the book argues.
- “Vanity” translates a Hebrew word for breath or vapor: not worthlessness, but fleeting insubstantiality, something you cannot get your hands around.
- Ecclesiastes is written before the fuller revelation of life and immortality brought to light in the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). It asks the questions the New Testament answers.
- The conclusion at 12:13–14 is the book’s own key. Read the parts in the light of the ending, not the ending in the light of an isolated part.
- These chapters have been read at more funerals than almost any other Old Testament passage, so some in your class will arrive with grief already attached to the text.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Ecclesiastes 9:5 says the dead know nothing, and people quote it to prove that death ends conscious existence. Read it inside Solomon’s phrase “under the sun,” then set it beside Luke 16:22–23 and 2 Corinthians 5:6–8. What is he actually claiming, and what is he not claiming?*

Solomon’s argument in 9:5 is about what the dead do under the sun, not about the state of the soul before God. The dead “have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten,” and they have no more portion in anything done under the sun (9:6). That is plainly true: a dead man draws no wages, casts no vote, and is soon unremembered in the town where he worked. Notice that 12:7 in the same book says the spirit returns to God who gave it, which would be nonsense if the writer believed death ended existence.

Set the New Testament beside it without apology. Luke 16:22–23 shows conscious existence and awareness after death. Paul says to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord and calls it far better (2 Corinthians 5:6–

8; Philippians 1:21–23). Revelation 6:9–11 shows souls under the altar speaking. Teach your class a method here, not just a verse: a passage that argues from a stated vantage point cannot be lifted out of that vantage point and made to settle a question it was never addressing.

Question 2. *Given everything Solomon has said about death leveling everyone, 9:10 could have concluded with a shrug. Instead it says to do whatever your hand finds with your might. Why is that the honest conclusion rather than despair?*

Verse 10 is the answer of a man who has stopped waiting for life to become manageable. Because the grave is coming and there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in it, the time to work is now, and the place to work is where your hand already is. That last part matters. He does not say find a grander task. He says do what your hand finds. Most of what God gives us to do arrives already in reach.

The alternative conclusions are both available and both wrong. One is paralysis: nothing matters, so do nothing. The other is indulgence: nothing matters, so take what you can. Solomon refuses both, and the New Testament sharpens his reasoning. Because the night comes when no man can work (John 9:4), and because we will give account (2 Corinthians 5:10), ordinary work done with your might has eternal weight. Ask the class what they have been postponing until conditions improve.

Question 3. *Chapter 12 describes the body slowly closing down, dimming windows and silenced songs, and then says remember your Creator before all of it. Where do you see people waiting to get serious with God, and what would it cost you to stop waiting?*

The poem is deliberately indirect. The keepers of the house tremble: hands shake. The strong men bow: legs weaken. The grinders cease because they are few: teeth are lost. Those that look out of the windows are darkened: sight fails. The daughters of music are brought low: hearing goes. Fear of heights and of the road, the almond tree blossoming into white hair, the grasshopper a burden, desire failing. Read it aloud slowly and the room will get very quiet.

The command that governs the poem comes first, in 12:1: remember now your Creator in the days of your youth. Not after the career, not after the children are grown, not at the end when the accounting feels urgent. The pastoral danger here is guilt without a next step, so give the class a next step. For the older members, the word is not too late; the thief on the cross settles that. For everyone else, ask what specific thing they are postponing and put a date on it before they leave the room.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read Ecclesiastes 9:1–6 and mark every phrase that limits Solomon's claim to what a man can observe from ground level. How many times does the phrase "under the sun" occur in these four chapters?*

The limiting phrases are everywhere: "all this I considered in my heart" (9:1), "this is an evil among all things that are done under the sun" (9:3), "neither have they any more a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun" (9:6), "I saw under the sun" (9:11), "this wisdom have I seen also under the sun" (9:13). The phrase "under the sun" occurs several times in these chapters (9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5), and about thirty times in the book. Solomon is reporting what observation yields, not delivering a doctrine of the afterlife.

2. *Ecclesiastes 11:9 and 12:14 both end at judgment. Compare Acts 17:31 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. Who is judged, by whom, and on what basis?*

God is the judge, judgment is by Jesus Christ whom He has ordained (Acts 17:31), and it reaches every person: "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:10). The basis is "every work, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:14), which matches "the things done in his body, according to that he hath done." Note that 11:9 addresses a young man enjoying his strength, which means judgment is not only for the notorious.

3. *List the small, ordinary counsels in chapters 10 and 11: a dead fly in the ointment, a broken hedge, a dull axe, watching the clouds, sowing morning and evening. What kind of life do they add up to when you put them together?*

A dead fly spoils good ointment, so a little folly outweighs a reputation for wisdom. A man who digs a pit may fall into it and one who breaks a hedge may be bitten. A dull axe means more strength spent, so sharpen it. Watching the wind and clouds too closely means never sowing or reaping. Sow in the morning and in the evening because you do not know which will prosper. Together they describe a life of attentive, unglamorous faithfulness: small things guarded, work prepared for, generosity practiced without a guaranteed return.

4. *Ecclesiastes 12:11 calls the words of the wise goads and nails. A goad moves you and a nail holds you. Which sentence in these four chapters has functioned as a goad for you, and which as a nail?*

Answers will vary. Listen for whether the student can quote the sentence that moved him. A goad usually shows up as discomfort about something postponed; a nail usually shows up as a settled conviction that steadied him in grief. If someone names nothing, ask what he read that he would not want his children to miss.

5. *Solomon says to remember your Creator in the days of your youth. Name one young person in your family or your congregation, and this week give that person an unhurried hour and one honest sentence about why you serve God.*

Answers will vary. Look for a name and a time on the calendar. Press gently against the two easy substitutes: giving money instead of attention, and lecturing instead of telling the truth about one's own faith. Note that 12:1 is addressed to the young by someone older, which makes this reading a direct assignment to the adults in the room.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Ecclesiastes 9:5–6 is the passage most often used to deny conscious existence after death. Teach the vantage point of the book, then give the positive evidence (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Luke 16:19–31; 2 Corinthians 5:6–8; Philippians 1:23; Revelation 6:9–11). Be kind; many who use this verse have been taught it sincerely.
- Do not let “eat, drink, and be merry” language be read as hedonism. Solomon everywhere ties enjoyment to the fear of God and to judgment (11:9; 12:13–14), and he is commending gratitude for daily gifts, not self-indulgence.
- Guard against fatalism. Because the book argues from observation, isolated verses can sound like the world is meaningless. Keep 12:13–14 in view all hour.
- If someone in class has recently buried a spouse or a parent, chapter 12 will land hard. Slow down, and make room for the hope the New Testament adds (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18).

The Prayer Before the Garden

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

John 17 is often called the high priestly prayer, and the name fits. Jesus is about to offer the sacrifice, and before He does He intercedes. The prayer falls into three movements: verses 1 through 5 for Himself, verses 6 through 19 for the apostles He is leaving, and verses 20 through 26 for everyone who would believe through the apostles' word. That last phrase is worth marking on the board, because it tells you how every subsequent Christian comes to faith: through what the apostles preached and wrote.

The dominant notes are glory, truth, and oneness. Jesus asks to be glorified with the glory He had before the world was, which is a claim no created being could make. He asks the Father to sanctify the apostles by the truth and says plainly, Your word is truth. And He asks that believers be one as He and the Father are one, so that the world may believe. Unity here is not sentiment or a merger of institutions; it is a shared life in the truth the apostles delivered.

Then the prayer ends and the arrest begins. John records no agony in the garden, no sweat like blood; he has already given us Jesus' own account of His mind in chapter 17. What John gives us instead is composure. Jesus goes out to meet the soldiers, asks whom they seek, identifies Himself, and negotiates the release of His men. Peter's sword is an interruption, not a defense. Within a few hours the man who swung it will be standing at a fire denying he knows the Lord at all.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- John writes late in the first century, after the other gospels, selecting material to establish that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30–31).
- The prayer of chapter 17 concludes the upper room discourse that began in chapter 13, delivered on the night of the betrayal.
- The Kidron is a ravine east of Jerusalem separating the city from the Mount of Olives; the garden is Gethsemane, identified by name in Matthew and Mark.
- Annas was the former high priest and the father in law of Caiaphas, and still the real power behind the office. The nighttime hearing before him was irregular by the Jews' own standards.
- The detachment sent to arrest Jesus included Roman soldiers as well as temple officers (18:3, 12), which shows how far the cooperation against Him had gone.
- Genre: eyewitness narrative. John repeatedly notes small details he alone records, such as the name Malchus and the fact that a relative of Malchus later challenged Peter (18:10, 26).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *John 17:3 defines eternal life as knowing the Father and the Son whom He sent. How is knowing a person different from knowing about Him, and how could a man tell honestly which one he has?*

Eternal life is defined relationally: that they might know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. The verb is the ordinary word for knowing a person, the same word used for the intimacy of a marriage and the loyalty of a servant. It is not mystical, and it is not merely factual. A man can pass a Bible test and not know God, and Jesus said as much in Matthew 7:23 when He told confident workers, I never knew you.

Give the class a usable test rather than leaving it vague. John himself supplies one: he that says I know Him and keeps not His commandments is a liar (1 John 2:3–4). Knowing God shows up in obedience, in love of the brethren, and in a settled preference for His will over our own. Ask each person to name one area where knowing about God has not yet become knowing Him, and what obedience would look like there this week.

Question 2. *In 17:20–21 Jesus prays for those who would believe “through their word,” and asks that they all be one. On what basis does He ask for that oneness, and what does His basis say about how division actually gets healed?*

The basis is stated twice: that they may be one as We are one, and that they may be one in Us. The model is the unity of the Father and the Son, which is a unity of will, purpose, and shared life, not a committee agreement. And notice what verse 20 has already established: these are people who believe through the apostles’ word. Unity is not achieved by setting the word aside to make room for one another; it is achieved by all parties coming to the same word.

Ephesians 4:4–6 names what that oneness actually consists of: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. Paul’s appeal in 1 Corinthians 1:10 is that all speak the same thing. Division is healed where people are willing to be corrected by the same book. Be honest with the class that this is costly on both ends: it forbids the sectarian spirit and it forbids buying peace by surrendering truth (17:17).

Question 3. *Peter draws a sword in the dark and Jesus tells him to put it away, then speaks of the cup the Father has given Him. Where are we still swinging at something God has handed us to drink?*

Peter’s instinct is not cowardice; it is the wrong kind of courage. He is willing to die swinging. What he is not willing to do is watch God accomplish something through a defeat. Jesus’ answer is quiet and total: the cup which My Father has given Me, shall I not drink it? The cross was not an accident that a faster sword could have prevented. It was the Father’s cup, accepted.

Now turn it. Most of us have something we keep fighting that God has handed us to drink: a chronic illness, a child who has walked away, a limitation, a loss that will not be reversed. The point is not passivity or pretending the thing is pleasant. Jesus asked three times in Gethsemane for the cup to pass. The point is where the wrestling ends. Ask what each person is still swinging at, and what it would look like to put the sword up.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace every request Jesus makes in John 17 and note who each is for: Himself, the eleven, or later believers. How many of the requests are for their comfort, and how many for their mission?*

For Himself: glorify Your Son (17:1, 5). For the eleven: keep them in Your name (17:11), keep them from the evil one (17:15), sanctify them by the truth (17:17). For later believers: that they all may be one (17:21), that they may be with Him and behold His glory (17:24), and that the love of the Father be in them (17:26). Only one request concerns their protection from harm, and even that one is aimed at their usefulness. The weight falls on holiness, unity, and mission, which is a striking correction to how most of us pray for the people we love.

2. *Jesus says in 17:4 that He has finished the work the Father gave Him, before the cross has happened. Compare 19:30. What does that tell you about how He regarded what was coming?*

He regarded the cross as already accomplished because the Father had given it and He had accepted it. The work was finished in purpose before it was finished in fact, and at 19:30 He says it again from the cross with one word. It tells you He went to Calvary as a priest offering a sacrifice, not as a victim overtaken by events. Compare John 10:17–18, where He says no one takes His life from Him.

3. *Read 17:14–18. Jesus does not ask that His people be taken out of the world. List the four things He does ask instead, and what each one protects them from.*

He asks that the Father keep them from the evil one (17:15), that He sanctify them by the truth (17:17), and He states that He is sending them into the world as the Father sent Him (17:18) and that He sanctifies Himself for their sakes (17:19). Protection is from the evil one, not from difficulty; sanctification is by the word, not by withdrawal; and the sending is the reason for both. Christians are meant to be distinct in the world rather than absent from it.

4. *Set Peter’s confidence in 13:36–38 beside his words at the fire in 18:17, and read 1 Corinthians 10:12. What happened in the hours between, and where does that sequence begin in a person?*

Between the boast and the fire came a garden Peter slept through, a sword swung at the wrong moment, a rebuke, a flight, and then a slow walk back to warm himself among the enemies of Christ. The sequence begins long before the

denial: with self confidence, with prayerlessness, and with a choice about where to stand. 1 Corinthians 10:12 is the summary. The man most likely to fall is the one certain he will not.

5. *Jesus prayed aloud so that His friends could hear what He was asking the Father for them. This week, pray out loud, by name, with someone who needs to hear you ask God for them.*

Answers will vary. Look for it to actually happen, and for the person prayed with to be named. Many Christians have never once heard another believer pray for them out loud and by name, and the effect of it is out of all proportion to the effort.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The unity of John 17 is unity in truth. Verse 17 and verse 20 fence it: sanctified by the word, believing through the apostles' word. Do not let the chapter be used to argue that doctrinal agreement is unimportant, and do not let it be used to justify a sectarian spirit either. Both misuse the prayer.
- Peter's denial is a warning against the doctrine that a saved man cannot fall. Peter was restored, but he genuinely fell (compare 1 Corinthians 10:12; Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4). Teach it as a warning and a comfort at once.
- John 17:2, on Christ giving eternal life to as many as the Father has given Him, is sometimes read as unconditional individual election. Read it with 6:44–45, where those given to the Son are those who hear and learn from the Father, and with 3:16. The Father gives to Christ those who respond to His teaching.
- Avoid speculating about Gethsemane details John does not include. He assumes his readers know the other accounts and chooses a different angle; let him.

The Harvest of the Earth

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These chapters sit at the center of the book's sequence of sevens and they are structured as relief before storm. Chapter 14 opens not with judgment but with the Lamb standing on Mount Zion surrounded by His own, singing. That is deliberate. Before John shows his readers the bowls, he shows them the outcome. Persecuted Christians in Asia needed to know the ending before they could endure the middle, and so do the people sitting in your class.

The three angels give the book's message in compressed form: an everlasting gospel to be preached to every nation and tongue, the fall of Babylon, and the ruin of those who take the mark of the beast. Then come the two harvests, one gathered with a sickle and one trodden in a winepress. In between stands 14:12–13, the hinge: here is the patience of the saints, and blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Faithfulness to the death is not a defeat in this book. It is how the saints win.

Chapters 15 and 16 bring the seven last plagues, poured out as bowls rather than sounded as trumpets. The trumpets affected a third; the bowls are total. The imagery is drawn straight from Exodus: sores, water turned to blood, darkness, frogs, hail. John is telling his readers that the God who broke Egypt to free His people is at work again against the empire that is killing them. The repeated refrain is not the suffering but the refusal: they repented not to give Him glory.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Revelation was written by the apostle John from exile on Patmos, most likely near the end of Domitian's reign, to seven real congregations in Asia facing pressure to worship the emperor.
- Genre matters more here than anywhere else in the New Testament. This is apocalyptic writing: visions, symbols, and numbers used with meaning, addressed first to first century readers who knew the code.
- Babylon in Revelation stands for the persecuting world power of John's day, Rome, the city on seven hills (17:9, 18), just as Babylon had been the oppressor of an earlier age.
- Numbers in the book are symbolic and consistent: seven for completeness, twelve for the people of God, ten for fullness. One hundred forty four thousand is twelve times twelve times a thousand.
- Armageddon, or Har Megiddo, recalls the plain of Megiddo where Israel's decisive battles were fought (Judges 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29). It is a symbol of decisive conflict, not a map reference for a modern war.
- The purpose of the book is comfort: the Lamb wins, and those who hold fast will reign with Him.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Revelation 14:12 describes the saints as those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. How do keeping and believing belong together here, and why would John put them side by side for people who were being killed for the name?*

The verse puts three things in one sentence: the patience of the saints, keeping the commandments of God, and holding the faith of Jesus. John sees no tension among them, and neither should we. Faith in this book is not a mental transaction completed once; it is loyalty under pressure, the kind that keeps showing up at the assembly when attendance can cost you your trade. Keeping commandments is not earning salvation; it is what loyalty looks like when the Lamb has bought you (14:3–4; 1:5).

This is the place to address faith only, and to do it without heat. James 2:24 says plainly that a man is justified by works and not by faith only. Hebrews 5:9 says Christ became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. Revelation itself repeatedly promises the reward to him that overcomes, not to him that merely assents (2:7, 11,

17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Ask the class what obedience costs them right now, since that is precisely the question John's readers were answering.

Question 2. *Three times in chapter 16 the plagues fall and men blaspheme rather than repent (16:9, 11, 21). What hardens a person to that point, and where does that hardening begin in an ordinary life?*

Hardening is not usually a decision; it is an accumulation. Pharaoh is the pattern: each plague found him more fixed than the last, and the text says both that he hardened his heart and that God hardened it, because the same sun that melts wax hardens clay. By chapter 16 these men know exactly whose hand is on them, since they blaspheme the name of the God who has power over the plagues. Knowledge is not their problem. Will is.

Bring it down to scale. Hardening begins with a small refusal that is never revisited: a sin defended rather than confessed, a rebuke resented, a Bible class where the conviction came and was quietly set aside. Hebrews 3:13 says to exhort one another daily lest any be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, and the word daily is doing real work in that verse. Ask what conviction each person has been carrying unresolved, and how long it has been.

Question 3. *Revelation 14:13 calls the dead who die in the Lord blessed and says their works follow them. Set that beside Ecclesiastes 9:5 from this week's other reading. How do the two fit together without forcing either one?*

The two passages are answering different questions from different vantage points. Solomon is describing what the dead no longer do under the sun: no wages, no share in the business of the living, no memory among men. John is describing what happens on the other side of the veil, which Solomon could not see and the gospel has now revealed (2 Timothy 1:10). Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors.

Then note the last clause: their works do follow them. Not go before them to purchase anything, but follow, as evidence and as fruit. Everything else a person accumulates stops at the grave, exactly as Ecclesiastes says. What was done in Christ goes on ahead in the lives it touched and goes with him in the record God keeps. Ask the class which of their weekly activities would qualify.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Revelation 14:1–5 says about the company standing with the Lamb. Given how the book uses numbers elsewhere, what is the 144,000 describing?*

They stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion, have His name and the Father's name on their foreheads, sing a new song no one else can learn, are redeemed from the earth, are undefiled and follow the Lamb wherever He goes, are firstfruits to God and the Lamb, and have no lie in their mouths. The number is twelve times twelve times one thousand, built from the number of the people of God multiplied and made full. It is not a literal headcount and not a limit; it is the complete company of the redeemed, the same group seen as an innumerable multitude in 7:9.

2. *Revelation 15:3 calls the song "the song of Moses and of the Lamb." Read Exodus 15:1–18. What do the two songs have in common, and why would a persecuted church sing an old deliverance song?*

Both songs celebrate God's deliverance of His people by overthrowing a power that enslaved them, and both credit the victory entirely to God: who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Both are sung by people standing on the far side of water they could not cross on their own. A persecuted church sings Moses' song because the story is the same story. Rome is simply the newest Egypt, and Exodus is the proof that empires do not get the last word.

3. *Compare the bowls of chapter 16 with the plagues of Exodus 7–12 and write down the parallels you find. Why would John reach for Egypt to describe what God is doing to Rome?*

Sores on those with the mark of the beast, sea and rivers turned to blood, scorching heat, darkness over the beast's kingdom, frogs from the mouth of the dragon, and great hail. Six of the seven have direct parallels in Exodus 7 through 12. John reaches for Egypt because his readers knew that story by heart, and because the parallel makes his argument for him: God has done this before to a proud empire that held His people, and He is neither surprised nor slow.

4. *The word Armageddon appears once in the Bible, at 16:16. Read the verses around it and note what actually happens there. Why is it dangerous to read it as a forecast of current events?*

In context an unclean gathering of kings assembles at Armageddon, and then the seventh bowl is poured out and a voice says it is done. No battle is described. The gathering is for judgment, and the outcome is settled before a blow is struck (compare 19:19–21). Reading it as a forecast of current politics requires abandoning the book's own symbolism, ignores that the letter was addressed to seven first century congregations that needed comfort now, and has produced a long line of confident predictions that all failed. Jesus said no man knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36).

5. *Revelation 14:13 says their works follow them. Name one work you are doing now that you would want following you into eternity, and one you would not. Stop the second one this week.*

Answers will vary. Press for two specifics, not a general resolution, and note that the second half of the question is the harder one. Listen for the works people name as lasting: raising children in the Lord, teaching, hospitality, a marriage kept, a neighbor told the truth. Then hold them to stopping the other thing this week.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The single greatest error with these chapters is literalism about symbols. Teach the class to ask what the image would have meant to a Christian in Smyrna, and let the book interpret its own numbers.
- Refuse date setting and the identification of modern nations, armies, or leaders with the figures of the book. State once, kindly and clearly, why the congregation does not teach that, and then go back to the text.
- The 144,000 is not a literal limit on the saved, a special class of Christians, or a group of Jewish evangelists in a future age. Compare 7:4–9, where the same company appears as a multitude no man could number.
- God's wrath in these chapters is not a contradiction of His love. The same God who sent the everlasting gospel to every nation (14:6) finally honors the refusal of those who will not have Him. Say both things in the same breath.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Habakkuk 1–3; Zephaniah 1–3; Haggai 1–2 · Song of Solomon 1–2 · John 18:25–19:27 · Revelation 17–18

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