

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 102 OF 104

Consider Your Ways

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Habakkuk 1-3; Zephaniah 1-3; Haggai 1-2
Wisdom Literature	Song of Solomon 1-2
Gospels	John 18:25-19:27
General New Testament	Revelation 17-18

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to make the class look honestly at what they are building. Haggai supplies the sentence: consider your ways. Habakkuk shows a man who keeps building and waiting when God has not explained Himself. Zephaniah shows men who have quietly concluded that God will do nothing either way. The Song of Solomon shows a good thing guarded on purpose. John shows Pilate weighing truth against his position, and Revelation shows an entire economy weeping over inventory. Four readings, one question about priority.

Doctrinally, two matters stand out. Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the New Testament and is routinely used to teach salvation by faith only; teach the Hebrew sense of faithfulness and let Hebrews 10:38-39 interpret it, since that passage warns in the next breath about drawing back. Then John 18:36 is your clearest opportunity in the Gospels to settle the nature of Christ's kingdom: not of this world, not advanced by force, established on Pentecost, and reigning now. Revelation 17 and 18 give you the chance to teach a sound method for the whole book by letting it identify its own symbols.

The formational thread is loyalty that costs something before anyone is watching. Haggai's people had to stop paneling and start hauling stone. The bride guards a love nobody else can see her guarding. Peter fails at a fire, and Pilate fails at a door, and both failures are made of small evasions. The Christians of Asia had to decline the incense knowing what it would do to business. Ask your class this: name the one place where following Christ is currently costing you money, comfort, or standing, and say what you intend to do about it this week.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up John 18:25-19:27 first. It carries the most weight and the class will be ready for it. Give the heart of the hour to 18:36-37 and settle the nature of the kingdom, then walk through Pilate's trips in and out of the Praetorium and finish at the cross with the seamless coat and Mary.

Second session: Take up Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Haggai together. Do not try to cover eight chapters verse by verse. Give twenty minutes to Habakkuk's dialogue and 2:4, ten to Zephaniah 1:12 and 3:17, and the rest to Haggai's paneled houses and the response of the people.

The other two readings: Assign Revelation 17-18 and Song of Solomon 1-2 to the extended questions. Say a word about how to read the Song before the class disperses: it is inspired poetry about married love, to be read with dignity, and its refrain about not awakening love before its time is the key to the whole book.

Waiting, Wrath, and Rebuilding

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Habakkuk is the book for the person whose faith is not failing but aching. He does not doubt that God exists; he doubts that God is paying attention. Why do You show me iniquity and hold Your tongue? The answer is worse than the question: God is raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation. Habakkuk takes that to the watchtower and waits, and the answer that comes back is 2:4, the pivot of the book. The proud soul is not upright, but the just shall live by his faith. Then he sings the last chapter, where the fig tree does not blossom and he rejoices anyway.

Zephaniah preaches under Josiah, and his subject is the day of the Lord: a day of wrath, trouble, distress, wasteness, darkness, and trumpet. He names Judah's idolatry, the officials, the judges, the prophets, and the men who are simply comfortable, settled like wine left on its sediment, convinced God does nothing. Yet the book does not end there. It ends with a remnant gathered, shame taken away, and the astonishing image of God Himself singing over His people. Wrath and love in this book are not two moods; they are one holiness dealing with sin and with the sinner who returns.

Haggai is the shortest distance between a sermon and an obedient response anywhere in the Old Testament. The returned exiles have been home sixteen years, and the temple foundation is still a foundation. Haggai asks one question about paneled houses and tells them twice to consider their ways. Twenty three days later they are building. Then he encourages the old men who wept because the new house looked small, promising that the glory of the latter house would exceed the former, a promise that finds its meaning in the One who would one day walk in it.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Habakkuk prophesies in Judah shortly before the Babylonian invasions, around 610 to 600 B.C. The Chaldeans he is told about arrive within his lifetime.
- Zephaniah is a descendant of Hezekiah (1:1) and preaches during the reign of Josiah, probably before or during the reforms of 2 Kings 22 and 23.
- Haggai preaches in 520 B.C., in the second year of Darius, alongside Zechariah. The temple was finished four years later (Ezra 6:14–15).
- Habakkuk 3 is a psalm with musical notation (3:1, 19), which means the prophet's wrestling was meant to be sung by the congregation.
- Genre: prophetic oracle, lament, and psalm. Habakkuk is structured as a dialogue, which is unique among the prophets.
- Haggai 2:6–9 is quoted in Hebrews 12:26–28 and applied to the unshakeable kingdom Christians have received.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Habakkuk 1:13 asks how a God too pure to look on evil can use a nation more wicked than Judah to punish Judah. Follow how God answers in chapter 2, and discuss why “the just shall live by his faith” is an answer at all.*

Follow the shape of the answer. God does not explain Himself. He tells Habakkuk to write the vision plainly, says that it will surely come and will not tarry, and then draws a line between two kinds of men. The proud soul is lifted up and is not upright in him. The just shall live by his faith. Then chapter 2 spends five woes describing exactly how the Babylonian empire will collapse under the weight of its own greed and violence. The answer is not a timetable. It is a character and a promise.

Be careful here, because this verse is the single most misused sentence in the Minor Prophets. The Hebrew word rendered faith carries the sense of steadiness, faithfulness, reliability. It does not mean believing something and nothing more. Hebrews 10:38 quotes it and immediately adds, but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him, then says we are not of them who draw back. The just man lives by a trust that keeps going to the watchtower, keeps building, keeps obeying, when he cannot see why. Ask the class what they are being asked to do right now without an explanation.

Question 2. *Haggai asks whether it is time to live in paneled houses while God's house lies waste (1:4), and then twice tells the people to consider their ways. Where does that same arrangement show up in our calendars, our budgets, and our Saturdays?*

Haggai's question lands because it is about sequence, not about houses. He does not say paneling is sinful. He asks whether it was time for that while this lay waste. The people had not voted to abandon God's work; they had simply let it slip to the bottom of a long list, and had developed an excellent reason for it, namely that the time had not come (1:2). Sixteen years is a long time for the time not to have come.

Bring it to specifics without producing guilt for its own sake. Look at the actual calendar and the actual bank statement, which are the two most honest documents in most households. What gets scheduled first? What gets funded first? Then notice the encouragement in the text: when they obeyed, God said, I am with you (1:13), and promised blessing from that very day (2:19). The point of the sermon is not shame. It is that God is easy to return to.

Question 3. *Zephaniah spends two chapters on wrath and then says the Lord your God in your midst will rejoice over you with singing (3:17). How do those two pictures belong to the same God, and what would be lost if we kept only the one we like?*

Both pictures are the same God facing two different postures. Zephaniah 1 describes people who have concluded that God is indifferent, and to them the day of the Lord comes as fire. Zephaniah 3:17 describes a remnant that sought the Lord and took refuge in His name, and to them the same God is a mighty Savior in their midst who quiets them with His love and rejoices over them with singing. The Hebrew picture is startlingly warm: God is not tolerating these people. He is delighted with them.

If you keep only the wrath, you produce Christians who obey out of fear and never rest. If you keep only the singing, you produce a congregation that cannot take sin seriously and cannot explain the cross. Romans 11:22 holds them together, the goodness and severity of God. Ask which half your class habitually forgets, and then ask what that has done to how they pray.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out Habakkuk's two complaints and God's two answers in order. Where does the prophet stand while he waits (2:1), and what has changed in him by 3:17-19?*

First complaint (1:2-4): how long will God tolerate violence and a paralyzed law in Judah? First answer (1:5-11): God is raising up the Chaldeans. Second complaint (1:12-2:1): how can a holy God use a nation more wicked than the one being punished? Second answer (2:2-20): write the vision, it will come, the proud will fall, the just shall live by his faith, and five woes follow. He waits on his watchtower, on the rampart. By 3:17-19 nothing in his circumstances has improved, and he says that though the fig tree does not blossom he will rejoice in the Lord. The change is in the man, not the news.

2. *Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the New Testament: Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38. Read Hebrews 10:38-39 with its next verses. What kind of faith is being described there?*

Hebrews 10:38-39 describes a faith that endures and does not draw back to perdition, and the chapter has just warned about willful sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth (10:26). The faith in view is living trust that keeps obeying, which is also how Romans 1:17 functions in a letter that begins and ends with the obedience of faith (Romans 1:5; 16:26), and how Galatians 3:11 functions in a letter that says faith works through love (Galatians 5:6).

Habakkuk 2:4 is not a proof text for salvation by faith only; it is the description of the man who goes on trusting God when the evidence is against him.

3. *List everything Haggai 1:5–11 says had gone wrong in the people's fields, homes, and wages. How does God connect those troubles to the state of His house?*

They sowed much and brought in little, they ate without being filled, drank without being satisfied, clothed themselves without being warm, and earned wages that went into a bag with holes. The heaven withheld dew and the earth its fruit, and God says He called for a drought on the land, the grain, the new wine, the oil, and the labor of their hands. God connects it directly in 1:9: you looked for much and it came to little, because My house is waste and every man runs to his own house. This is covenant discipline under the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 28), not a formula guaranteeing that poor crops today mean neglected worship.

4. *Zephaniah 1:12 describes men settled on their dregs who say the Lord will do neither good nor evil. Compare 2 Peter 3:3–4. What does that settled comfort look like in a churchgoing person?*

Answers will vary, but the text is precise: these are not atheists, they are men at ease who assume God is not going to act, so present choices carry no eternal weight. Peter says scoffers will reason the same way, since all things continue as they were. In a churchgoing person it looks like attendance without expectation, giving what is left over, and a settled private conviction that the warnings in Scripture apply to somebody else.

5. *Haggai 2:15–19 promises blessing from the very day they began to build again. Name the one thing you have been putting off in the Lord's work, set a date for it this week, and tell one person the date.*

Answers will vary. Listen for one thing, dated, and told to a witness, because the third part is what turns intention into action. Note that in Haggai the blessing is promised from the day the work restarted, not from the day it was finished.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Habakkuk 2:4 must not be taught as salvation by faith only. The Hebrew term means faithfulness, and the New Testament writers use it that way in letters that everywhere require obedient response (Romans 6:17; Galatians 5:6; Hebrews 5:9; James 2:24). Say this plainly and kindly; many in your community have been taught otherwise.
- Haggai's promise that the glory of the latter house would exceed the former (2:9) is not a prophecy of a rebuilt temple in our future. Hebrews 12:26–28 applies Haggai 2:6 to the unshakeable kingdom Christians have already received.
- Do not turn Haggai 1 into a fundraising sermon. The house of God under the new covenant is the church, the people themselves (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19–22), so the application is about priority and personal investment, not building programs.
- Zephaniah's day of the Lord language has a near fulfillment in the Babylonian destruction and a pattern that Scripture later applies to final judgment. Teach the historical setting first, and resist mapping the imagery onto current events.

A Love Worth Guarding

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The Song of Solomon is the least preached book in most congregations, and the silence has a cost. Scripture is not embarrassed about married love. God made it, blessed it before the fall, and included eight chapters of poetry celebrating it in His word. Your class will take its cue from you. If you handle the book with unhurried, matter of fact reverence, they will too. If you smirk or apologize, the hour is lost.

These first two chapters establish the voices and the tone. The bride speaks first and speaks most, which is itself worth noticing in an ancient text. Her longing is direct, and it is neither rebuked nor made indecent. Her self consciousness about her appearance is answered with specific, generous praise. The language is agricultural and domestic: flocks, henna, cedar beams, lilies, an apple tree, a house of wine with love as its banner. Nothing here is coarse, but nothing is evasive either.

The governing note for a class is 2:7, the charge not to awaken love until it pleases. The Song is not an argument that desire should be followed wherever it leads. It is a celebration of desire inside the fence God built for it, which is the lifelong covenant of one man and one woman. Read that way, the book protects the very thing it praises, and it gives a teacher a natural and honest way to speak about purity without shaming anyone.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The title is literally the Song of Songs (1:1), a Hebrew way of saying the finest of songs. Solomon is named in the first verse.
- Genre: Hebrew love poetry, exchanged between a bride and her beloved with a chorus, the daughters of Jerusalem, responding. It is not narrative and should not be forced into a plot.
- Many readers through the centuries have taken the Song allegorically of Christ and the church, and the New Testament does use marriage that way (Ephesians 5:25–32; 2 Corinthians 11:2). The Song itself never says it is an allegory, so any such application should be offered as illustration rather than as the meaning of the text.
- The imagery is drawn from a world of shepherds, vineyards, spice caravans, and royal architecture, so many comparisons that sound odd to us were flattering then.
- This is wisdom literature in the broad sense, standing alongside Proverbs, which also praises the wife of one's youth (Proverbs 5:15–19).
- The book assumes the creation ordinance of Genesis 2:24 and celebrates it; it never commends love outside that covenant.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Twice in these chapters the bride charges the daughters of Jerusalem not to stir up or awaken love until it pleases (2:7). What is the wisdom in that warning, and how would you put it to a sixteen year old this week without sounding like a lecture?*

The warning is about timing and about ownership of one's own heart. Awakening love before its time means stirring desire where there is no covenant to hold it, which is cruel to the person and dangerous to the one doing the stirring. The bride does not tell her friends that love is shameful. She tells them it is powerful, and that powerful things are handled on purpose rather than by accident.

For a teenager, abstractions fail. Say it concretely and without panic: guard what you let your heart practice, because feelings rehearsed have a way of demanding a stage. Name the particular pressures they face, and be honest that the fence exists because what is inside it is good. Then point them to 1 Corinthians 6:18–20 and

Hebrews 13:4, and tell them the church is on their side. Answers will vary in the room; make sure the parents present leave with one sentence they could actually say at home.

Question 2. *The Song spends its time on delight rather than duty, and God put it in the Bible. Why does that matter for how Christians talk about marriage, and what happens in a congregation where the subject is never spoken of at all?*

A congregation that never speaks about married love cedes the entire subject to a culture that will teach it badly. Silence does not produce purity; it produces ignorance plus curiosity, which is a poor combination. God's inclusion of this book says that the physical and emotional delight of a husband and wife is His gift, not a concession, and that it can be spoken of with dignity.

The other half of the answer is equally important. Because the Song is Scripture, it also fences the subject. Delight belongs inside the lifelong union of one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24; Hebrews 13:4; Matthew 19:4-6). Teaching the book therefore lets you say two things at once that our culture cannot hold together: this is good, and this has a boundary. Ask the class how a congregation could speak about it more helpfully without ever becoming coarse.

Question 3. *Song of Solomon 2:15 asks that the little foxes be caught, because it is the little ones that spoil the vines. Name the small things, not the scandals, that quietly ruin affection between a husband and a wife.*

The foxes are small and the damage is to the blossoms, which is to say the damage is done early and quietly, before there is fruit to lose. Marriages rarely fail in one dramatic evening. They fail through a hundred small withdrawals: sarcasm that gets a laugh, a courtesy dropped because it is no longer noticed, a grievance filed away rather than raised, a screen that is always more interesting than the person across the table.

Push for real examples and then for one correction apiece. Note that the text says catch the foxes, plural and active. Nobody catches a fox by intending to. Ephesians 4:26 and 4:32 give the working instructions: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, be kind, be tenderhearted, be forgiving. Have each married person name one fox and one specific action, and then move on before the discussion turns into complaints about absent spouses.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read 1:9-17 and 2:1-6 and note who is speaking in each section. Write down what each says about the other. Which one does more praising?*

In 1:9-11 and 1:15 the beloved speaks, comparing her to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots, praising her cheeks, her neck, and her eyes. In 1:12-14 and 1:16-17 she answers, calling him a bundle of myrrh and a cluster of henna, and admiring the cedar and fir of their house. In 2:1-2 she calls herself a rose of Sharon and a lily of the valleys, and he answers that she is a lily among thorns; in 2:3-6 she compares him to an apple tree among the trees of the wood. They praise nearly equally, which is part of the point: this is mutual, spoken, specific admiration, and most marriages starve for the specific part.

2. *Song of Solomon 2:16 says my beloved is mine and I am his. Compare Genesis 2:24 and 1 Corinthians 7:3-4. What conviction do the three passages share about belonging?*

All three say that a husband and wife belong to each other. Genesis 2:24 makes them one flesh; 1 Corinthians 7:3-4 says the wife does not have authority over her own body but the husband does, and likewise the husband's belongs to the wife; the Song simply sings it: my beloved is mine, and I am his. Belonging in Scripture is mutual, exclusive, and permanent, which is exactly what makes it safe.

3. *The bride says in 1:6 that she did not keep her own vineyard. Trace the vineyard images through these two chapters. What does she seem to mean about herself?*

The vineyard is both literal and personal. Her brothers were angry with her and made her keeper of the vineyards, and she says her own vineyard she has not kept, apparently meaning her appearance, sun darkened from outdoor labor. Later in the book the vineyard image returns for herself (8:12). She is saying, in effect, I have been busy taking care of everyone else's field and I am not what I wish I were. His answer never argues with her self assessment; he simply tells her she is lovely.

4. The refrain of 2:7 appears again at 3:5 and 8:4. Find all three and note what comes just before each. Why would a love song need a restraint repeated three times?

The refrain follows moments of intensity: the embrace of 2:6, the reunion of 3:4, and the resting of 8:3. Each time the poem reaches a height, the warning follows. That placement is the lesson. The book repeats the restraint precisely because it is describing something strong enough to need one. Love that can be awakened out of season can also be wasted, and the Song wants it spent where it belongs.

5. Choose one of the little foxes you named and deal with it this week: a habit of interrupting, a tone, a phone at the table, a courtesy you stopped offering. Tell your spouse what you are doing and why. If you are not married, do the same for the closest relationship God has given you.

Answers will vary. Listen for something small, specific, and already within the person's power, and discourage anyone from announcing a change that is really an accusation. For unmarried members, the same principle applies to a parent, a roommate, or a friend: the little courtesies are what hold relationships together.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Tone is the whole assignment in a mixed class. Read the text aloud plainly, use ordinary language, do not joke, do not apologize, and do not linger over the physical descriptions. Treat it as you would treat Genesis 2:24 or 1 Corinthians 7, with dignity and no awkward pauses. Your composure gives everyone else permission to be at ease.
- Decide in advance what you will do if children are present. It is entirely appropriate to teach the themes of exclusive love, restraint, and covenant, and to leave the more frank imagery to the reading itself without comment in class.
- Handle the allegorical reading honestly. It is legitimate to note that Scripture elsewhere pictures Christ and the church as bridegroom and bride (Ephesians 5:25–32), and to use the Song as illustration. It is not legitimate to claim that verse by verse allegory is what the Song means, or to use allegory as a way of avoiding what the text plainly says about marriage.
- Do not allow the book to be used to endorse love outside of marriage. Everything the Song celebrates is set within the covenant of one man and one woman for life (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6; Hebrews 13:4).

The Trial in the Courtyard

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

John structures the trial around a door. Pilate goes out to the crowd, comes in to Jesus, goes out again, comes in again, seven movements in all, and the shuttling is the man. Outside is the mob and his political survival; inside is a bound prisoner talking about truth. Pilate never settles anywhere, which is precisely his condemnation. He is not an atheist or a villain in the ordinary sense. He is a man who knows what is right, says so out loud three times, and does the other thing because the cost of being right is too high.

The theological center is 18:36–37. My kingdom is not of this world; if it were, My servants would fight. To this end was I born, that I should bear witness unto the truth. The King stands bound in front of the empire and calmly claims a throne. That claim is the reason for everything that follows: the mockery of the purple robe, the crown of thorns, the sign over the cross naming Him King of the Jews in the three languages of the ancient world. Rome meant it as a joke. John records it as an announcement.

Then John does what John does and slows down for a detail no one else records. Soldiers gambling over a seamless tunic, and a dying man arranging His mother's care. The universe is being reconciled, and Jesus is thinking about where His mother will sleep. Let the class sit with that. Nothing about Him is ever too large to be personal.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Pontius Pilate governed Judea from about A.D. 26 to 36. Historical sources describe a career marked by provocations of the Jews and by complaints to Rome, which explains why he could be pressured with the phrase, you are not Caesar's friend.
- The Jewish leaders would not enter the Praetorium so as not to be defiled before the Passover (18:28), an irony John expects the reader to feel.
- The Sanhedrin under Roman rule could not lawfully execute (18:31), which is why the charge had to be recast from blasphemy to treason.
- Scourging with a Roman flagrum was severe enough that some prisoners died under it. The crown of thorns and purple robe were mockery of a royal claim.
- Golgotha, the place of a skull, was outside the city wall, which Hebrews 13:12 later invests with meaning.
- John, writing as an eyewitness, records details the other gospels omit, including the seamless tunic and the committal of Mary to his own care.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus tells Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world, and that if it were, His servants would fight. What does He mean by that, and what does it rule out about the kind of kingdom He came to establish?*

Jesus is answering a political charge. Pilate asks whether He is a king, and Jesus grants the title while denying the category. His kingdom is not from this world: not established by armies, not maintained by force, not bounded by geography, not competing with Rome for the same territory. The proof He offers is empirical. If it were that kind of kingdom, My servants would fight. Peter had already tried, and had been stopped.

This verse rules out any expectation of an earthly, political reign of Christ, whether in the first century or in some future age. The kingdom was established on Pentecost, Christians have already been translated into it (Colossians 1:13), and Christ reigns now at the Father's right hand until the last enemy is destroyed (Acts 2:33–36; 1 Corinthians 15:24–26). Say that plainly. Then ask the harder question: if His kingdom does not advance by force,

what does that say about how Christians are to advance it, and about the weapons they are tempted to reach for in an argument at work or online?

Question 2. *Pilate states three times that he finds no fault in Jesus, and hands Him over anyway (18:38; 19:4, 6). Walk through the pressures on him. What makes a man do what he knows is wrong while insisting on his own innocence?*

Pilate is under real pressure, and it is worth naming so the class does not congratulate itself too quickly. He has a poor record with Rome, a volatile province, and a crowd forming. He tries every maneuver available: send Him to Herod, offer Barabbas, scourge Him and hope that satisfies them, appeal to their pity with behold the man, put the decision back on them. Every attempt is an effort to do right without paying for it.

The washing of hands in Matthew 27:24 is the summary of the man. He wants the verdict of innocence and the benefit of the crime. Most of us know what that is. We know the conversation we should have had, the report we should have corrected, the friend we should have defended, and we know the small ritual we performed instead so that we could still think well of ourselves. Ask the class where they are currently managing a conscience instead of obeying it.

Question 3. *The chief priests answer Pilate with, we have no king but Caesar (19:15). Given who they were and what they claimed to believe, how did they get there, and where do we say the same sentence in quieter words?*

The sentence is stunning coming from the chief priests, who had spent their lives confessing that the Lord is King and who had endured Rome precisely because they believed a greater King was coming. To get that sentence out of their mouths, the plan had to grow larger than the faith. It happened by degrees: an inconvenient preacher, then a threat to the temple arrangement, then a calculation that it is expedient that one man die for the people (11:50), and finally a public renunciation of everything they claimed to believe.

We say it in quieter words whenever we let a lesser loyalty settle a question that belongs to Christ. We have no king but the career, the family peace, the party, the customer, the reputation. Ask each person to finish the sentence honestly for himself, out loud if the class is close enough for that: when it costs me, the king I actually obey is _____. Then ask what one decision this week would put Christ back on the throne of that area.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace Pilate's movements in and out of the Praetorium through 18:28–19:16. Count the trips, and note what he says inside and what he says outside. What does the pattern reveal about him?*

Pilate goes out to them (18:29), goes back in and calls Jesus (18:33), goes out again with no fault found (18:38), has Jesus scourged and brings Him out (19:4–5), goes in again and asks where He is from (19:9), and brings Him out to the judgment seat (19:13). Outside he is political and evasive; inside he asks real questions, including what is truth. The pattern reveals a man who genuinely wanted to know and never stood still long enough to find out. Curiosity is not conversion.

2. *Compare Peter's three denials (18:17, 25–27) with what Jesus is saying in the same hours (18:20–21, 36–37). Set the two columns side by side. What does the contrast teach about courage?*

In those same hours Jesus says He spoke openly to the world and taught in the synagogue and the temple where the Jews always resort, and He tells Pilate that He was born to bear witness to the truth. Peter, warming himself at the enemy's fire, says three times that he is not one of them. One man speaks the truth to power under arrest; the other cannot admit an association to a servant girl in a courtyard. Courage is not an emotion; it is what you say when the truth costs something, and it is nearly always tested in small rooms before great ones.

3. *Read 19:23–24 and then Psalm 22:18. List the details of the crucifixion in this reading that fulfill Scripture written centuries earlier.*

The soldiers divide His garments into four parts and cast lots for the seamless coat, which John says fulfills Psalm 22:18. In the verses just past this reading, John also notes the hyssop and the vinegar (Psalm 69:21), the unbroken bones (Exodus 12:46; Psalm 34:20), and the pierced side (Zechariah 12:10). The details no one could have staged are precisely the ones the prophets named.

4. Pilate wrote a title in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin and refused to change it (19:19–22). Why would John bother to record the three languages, and what did Pilate say more truly than he knew?

John records the three languages because they are the languages of religion, culture, and government in that world, which means the announcement was made to everybody. The chief priests understood exactly what the sign claimed and asked Pilate to soften it to a claim He made. Pilate refused: what I have written, I have written. He intended an insult to the Jews and instead published the truth of the gospel over the head of the dying King in every language a passerby could read.

5. From the cross Jesus made provision for His mother (19:26–27). Name one person in your life whose care you have assumed someone else is handling, and this week make an actual arrangement for them.

Answers will vary. Look for an actual arrangement, not an intention: a standing visit, a phone call scheduled, a bill taken over, a conversation with siblings about a parent. Note that Jesus did this while dying, which removes most of our excuses about being busy.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- John 18:36 is the strongest single refutation of a coming earthly kingdom in the Gospels. Teach it directly, and connect it to Colossians 1:13 and Acts 2:33–36 so the class sees that Christ reigns now.
- Guard against any hint of prejudice against Jewish people. The New Testament places the guilt on specific leaders and a specific crowd, and Peter preached to that same city that they could be forgiven (Acts 2:36–38; 3:17–19). Every sinner has a share in why the cross was necessary.
- The committal of Mary to John (19:26–27) is a son's provision for his mother, not a basis for devotion to Mary or for any special mediatorial role. There is one mediator (1 Timothy 2:5).
- Apparent differences in the hour of the trial between John 19:14 and Mark 15:25 are a matter of differing reckoning of time, not contradiction. If it is raised, answer briefly and move on rather than spending the hour there.

The Fall of Babylon

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapters 17 and 18 are the extended answer to a question the persecuted churches of Asia were certainly asking: how can something this powerful ever end? John answers with two pictures. First a woman, gorgeously dressed and carrying a golden cup that is full of filth, riding a beast that will eventually turn and destroy her. Then a funeral, in which the entire commercial world of the Mediterranean stands at a safe distance watching the smoke rise and wondering what to do with its inventory.

The most important interpretive note is that the book identifies its own symbols. The seven heads are seven mountains, and Rome was famously the city on seven hills. The woman is the great city that reigns over the kings of the earth (17:18). This is not a coded message about nations that would not exist for eighteen centuries. It is God telling first century Christians, in language borrowed from Isaiah and Jeremiah's oracles against ancient Babylon, that the empire executing them is already under sentence.

Chapter 18 is one of the most searching passages in Scripture about what an economy can do to a soul. The merchants do not mourn the dead; they mourn the market. The cargo list runs from gold and silver through fine linen and spices to cattle and sheep and horses and chariots, and it ends with two words that stop the reader cold: slaves, and souls of men. That is the indictment. A system that files human beings at the bottom of a shipping manifest has already told you what it is.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Revelation was written to seven congregations in Asia Minor under real pressure to participate in emperor worship, most likely in the closing years of the first century.
- Babylon is used as a name for Rome in early Christian writing; Peter appears to use it that way in 1 Peter 5:13.
- Rome sat on seven hills, a fact so well known that Roman coins and poets celebrated it, which makes 17:9 nearly an open identification.
- The lament of chapter 18 deliberately echoes the Old Testament oracles against Tyre and Babylon (Isaiah 13; 23; 47; Jeremiah 50–51; Ezekiel 26–28).
- The harlot image for a city or people unfaithful to God is standard prophetic language (Isaiah 1:21; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 1–3) and is not primarily about sexual sin.
- Genre: apocalyptic vision. The numbers, colors, and beasts carry meaning the original readers were equipped to decode.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The voice from heaven says, come out of her, my people, that you be not partakers of her sins (18:4). Rome was the air those Christians breathed. What kind of separation was being asked for, and what would the same call require of us?*

The call is not to leave the cities or withdraw from society. Paul told the Corinthians plainly that avoiding every immoral person of the world would require leaving the world altogether (1 Corinthians 5:9–10). What is asked for is disentanglement: no participation in her sins, no share in her plagues. In practice, for those readers, it meant refusing the pinch of incense, declining the trade guild feast in the temple, accepting economic loss rather than buying the right to sell (13:16–17).

For us, the separation is rarely dramatic and usually expensive in small increments. It looks like what a Christian will not do to close a deal, will not watch, will not laugh at, will not repeat. Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 6:17 say

the same thing in plainer words. Ask the class to name one specific arrangement they have with Babylon, and let the silence last long enough for someone to answer honestly.

Question 2. *In 18:11–19 the kings, merchants, and sailors weep, and not one of them weeps for a person. Read their lament closely. What does their grief expose about the system they served?*

Read the lament aloud and let the class hear its shape. The kings weep, the merchants weep because no man buys their merchandise anymore, the shipmasters weep because everyone who had ships was made rich by her. Every mourner in the chapter is grieving a revenue stream. Meanwhile 18:24 says that in her was found the blood of prophets and saints and of all who were slain on the earth. The dead have no mourners in this chapter except heaven.

What that exposes is a system in which people had become a category of goods. The cargo list ends with bodies and souls of men. Ask where that logic still operates: in how workers are described in a budget, in industries built on appetite, in what a culture is willing to overlook because the numbers are good. Then ask a harder and closer question: whose labor or dignity quietly subsidizes our own comfort, and what would it cost us to care?

Question 3. *Heaven is told to rejoice over Babylon's fall (18:20) while the same book says God wanted men to repent. How do we hold gladness at God's justice together with genuine love for the people under it?*

Hold both, because Scripture does. Heaven rejoices not at human suffering but at the vindication of the murdered and the end of an evil (18:20; 19:2). The martyrs under the altar in 6:10 asked how long, and this is the answer. To be unmoved by the end of a system built on the blood of the saints is not love; it is indifference to the victims.

At the same time the same God says He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked and would rather they turn and live (Ezekiel 33:11; 2 Peter 3:9), and the everlasting gospel was preached to every nation before the bowls were poured (14:6). The Christian therefore rejoices that God is just and grieves that anyone refused mercy, and those two are not in competition. Practically, ask what this means about how the class speaks of people they disagree with. Nobody who genuinely wants a neighbor saved talks about him the way social media talks about him.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Make a list of the cargo in 18:12–13 and read it in order. Note carefully what the last item on the list is, and what its position says about the whole economy.*

Gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, fine linen, purple, silk, scarlet, every kind of citron wood and ivory and costly wood and bronze and iron and marble, cinnamon, incense, ointment, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses, chariots, and last of all bodies and souls of men. The order runs from luxury down to livestock, and human beings are listed after the horses. That placement is the point. Rome's trade was real and impressive, and it rested on an institution that treated people as freight.

2. *Revelation 17:9 says the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits, and 17:18 identifies her as the great city that reigns over the kings of the earth. Who would a first century reader in Asia have understood this to be?*

A reader in Ephesus or Smyrna would have understood Rome immediately. The seven mountains, the great city reigning over the kings of the earth, the purple and scarlet of imperial luxury, the cup drunk with the blood of the saints, all pointed to one place. This is why the book could function as comfort rather than as a puzzle: its first readers knew exactly who was meant, and were being told that the power crushing them had an expiration date.

3. *Compare Revelation 18 with Jeremiah 50:1–13 and 51:6–10. How much of John's language comes from the older prophecy, and why would he describe Rome in Babylon's words?*

Nearly all of it. Come out of her my people (Jeremiah 51:45), reward her as she rewarded you (Jeremiah 50:15, 29), the sudden fall in one hour, the millstone in the water (Jeremiah 51:63–64), the silence where music used to be. John describes Rome in Babylon's words to make a theological point: this has happened before, God does this to empires that exalt themselves and oppress His people, and the outcome is not in doubt because the pattern is already in the book.

4. *Revelation 17:14 says the Lamb shall overcome them, and describes those with Him as called, chosen, and faithful. Trace that last word through the book (2:10; 13:10; 14:12). What is being asked of these readers?*

Faithful is the word Revelation keeps returning to: be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life (2:10); here is the patience and the faith of the saints (13:10; 14:12). The ones with the Lamb are called, chosen, and faithful, which puts human response inside the description rather than outside it. What is being asked of these readers is endurance under a pressure that will not let up quickly, with the promise that the Lamb has already won.

5. *Babylon seduces before it enslaves. Name one strand of it you have been comfortable with: a spending habit, an appetite, a loyalty that quietly outranks Christ. Cut that one strand this week and tell someone you did.*

Answers will vary, and the telling of someone is not optional if the class is to take it seriously. Listen for concrete strands: a subscription, a habit of buying to soothe, an ambition, a friendship that always pulls the same direction. Guard against letting anyone name a sin that belongs to somebody else.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Identify Babylon as the book itself does, the Rome of John's day (17:9, 18). Do not allow the class to convert it into a modern nation, a political movement, or a particular religious body; that approach abandons the book's own interpretation and has a long record of embarrassment.
- Refuse date setting in any form. Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36), and Revelation was written to comfort Christians who were suffering then, not to supply a schedule now.
- The harlot imagery is prophetic language for unfaithfulness and idolatry, not primarily a lesson about sexual sin. Explain that early, so the class reads the chapters the way they were written.
- Come out of her does not teach withdrawal from society or from ordinary work (1 Corinthians 5:9–10; John 17:15). Teach separation as refusal to share in sin, not as isolation.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Zechariah 1–8 · Song of Solomon 3:1–5:9 · John 19:28–20:18 · Revelation 19–20

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