

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 103 OF 104

While It Was Yet Dark

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Zechariah 1-8
Wisdom Literature	Song of Solomon 3:1-5:9
Gospels	John 19:28-20:18
General New Testament	Revelation 19-20

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to give the class confidence in the outcome. Zechariah's people were building in the dark and needed to be told that God had already returned to them with mercies. The bride searches a night street. Mary stands weeping at a tomb before sunrise. John's readers were dying under an empire that looked permanent. Every one of these readings says the same thing from a different angle: the darkness is real, it is not final, and God is already at work in it before anyone can see Him.

Doctrinally, this is the most demanding week of the block. Revelation 20 is the passage on which whole systems of end time speculation are built, and your class deserves a calm, well prepared hour. Establish the plain passages first: one return, one resurrection of the just and the unjust together, one judgment, and the dissolution of this present order at His coming. Then read the symbolic chapter in that light. Alongside it, Zechariah 6:13 gives you the positive truth: Christ is a priest upon His throne now, and John 19:30 with Colossians 2:14-17 settles that the Law of Moses finished its work at the cross.

The formational thread is people who kept going when they could not see the outcome. Zerubbabel laid stone on a mountain sized problem. Joseph and Nicodemus came out into the open on the worst possible day. Mary went to a grave with spices at dawn because that is what love does when there is nothing left to do. Ask your class this: name the thing you are doing right now that seems to be accomplishing nothing, and say what would change in you this week if you truly believed God has already settled the outcome.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Revelation 19-20. This is the most important hour of the block, so prepare it thoroughly and do not improvise. Build the framework from the plain passages first, then read chapter 20 in that light, and leave ten minutes for the great white throne and the book of life.

Second session: Take up John 19:28-20:18. After the weight of Revelation, the class will be ready for a garden at dawn. Give time to the evidence John records, the courage of Joseph and Nicodemus, and the moment Jesus says Mary's name. End with the errand He gave her.

The other two readings: Assign Zechariah 1-8 and Song of Solomon 3:1-5:9 to the extended questions. Point the class especially to Zechariah 3 and 4:6, and remind them that the Song is read for its themes of seeking, exclusivity, and public covenant, with the same dignity you would bring to any other Scripture.

Visions in the Night

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Zechariah preaches to the same congregation Haggai does, in the same year, with a different tool. Haggai gives them a shove; Zechariah gives them a vision. These are people who came home from Babylon expecting glory and got rubble, a small town, hostile neighbors, and a temple foundation that made the old men weep. What they need is not scolding. They need to be told that the God who seemed absent has been awake the whole time, and that what they are building is connected to something far larger than they can see.

The eight night visions run in a deliberate order. They begin with horsemen reporting that the earth is at rest, which is bad news when your oppressors are the ones resting, and they move to God's jealousy for Jerusalem, the removal of the nations' horns, a city too full to need walls, a high priest cleansed and clothed, a lampstand that never runs dry, sin carried out of the land, and chariots going out to the four winds. Cleansing and commission, over and over. God deals with their guilt before He gives them their work.

Chapters 7 and 8 come two years later and answer a practical question: should we keep fasting for the destroyed temple now that we are rebuilding it? God's answer goes underneath the question. When you fasted, did you fast at all unto Me? Then He tells them what He actually wants: true judgment, mercy, compassion, no oppression of the widow, the stranger, the fatherless, the poor, and no evil imagined in the heart against a brother. The chapter ends with old men and women sitting in the streets and children playing in them, which is what God intends peace to look like.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Zechariah prophesies beginning in 520 B.C., the same year as Haggai, in the second year of Darius, to the remnant returned from Babylon (Ezra 5:1–2).
- He is himself of a priestly family (Nehemiah 12:16), which shapes his interest in Joshua the high priest and in the temple.
- Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor are the two leaders of the restoration and stand behind the two olive trees of chapter 4.
- Genre: apocalyptic vision mixed with prophetic oracle. Zechariah is the most Revelation like book in the Old Testament, and the imagery is interpreted for him by an angel as he goes.
- Zechariah is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more than any other Minor Prophet, especially in the passion narratives and in Revelation.
- Redemptive history: this is the last century of Old Testament narrative. After Malachi there will be silence until an angel speaks to a priest named Zacharias in the temple.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Zechariah 3 shows Joshua the high priest standing in filthy garments with Satan at his right hand to accuse him, and God removes the clothes and puts new ones on him. Walk through what happens in that scene and who does the acting. How does a person come to be clothed like that today (Galatians 3:26–27)?*

Notice who does what. Joshua stands; Satan accuses; the angel of the Lord rebukes the accuser; the attendants are commanded to take away the filthy garments; and God says, I have caused your iniquity to pass from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes. Joshua contributes nothing but his need. He does not clean himself up before he is received, and he does not argue with the accusation, because the accusation is true. The filthy garments are a priest's actual condition, and God does something about them.

Then be careful to teach the whole counsel of God about how a person is clothed. Galatians 3:26–27 says that as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ, which is the same picture in New Testament terms: not a robe we weave but one we are given, received in the obedience of faith. Revelation 7:14 says the same thing from the other end, robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. Ask who in the room is still trying to wash the garment before coming, and what that has cost them in peace.

Question 2. *God tells Zerubbabel that the work will be done not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit (4:6), and then asks who has despised the day of small things (4:10). Where does a congregation, or a Christian, most often confuse God's work with human resources?*

The context matters. Zerubbabel is trying to rebuild a temple with a small, poor, harassed population, and the mountain in front of him looks impassable. God says the mountain will become a plain, not because Zerubbabel finds more resources, but because the work is God's. The lampstand in the vision is fed continuously by two olive trees with no one carrying oil. The supply is not managed by the man who lights the lamps.

We confuse God's work with our resources constantly, and usually in one of two directions. Either we attempt nothing because we are small, which is what verse 10 answers, or we attempt much and measure it by attendance, budget, and buildings, which is what verse 6 answers. Ask what your congregation would attempt if it believed 4:6, and ask each Christian where he has quit because he counted heads. Small things are how God has almost always worked: a shepherd boy, a borrowed manger, twelve men, a jar of oil.

Question 3. *In chapter 7 men come asking whether they should keep a fast they have kept for seventy years, and God answers with a question about who they were fasting for. What kinds of religious habits do we keep without ever asking that question?*

The men from Bethel ask a perfectly reasonable liturgical question, and God asks about motive twice, once for the fasting and once for the eating. Did you fast unto Me, even to Me? When you ate and drank, did you not eat for yourselves? A religious act aimed at nobody in particular is just a habit with a Bible verse attached. Then in 7:9–10 God restates what He had told their fathers, and in 7:11–12 He says they refused, pulled away the shoulder, and made their hearts as an adamant stone.

Make this concrete without becoming cynical about routine. Habits are good; Jesus had them (Luke 4:16). The question is whether the habit is still aimed at God. Ask about attendance, about giving, about prayers said at meals, about the Lord's Supper on Sunday. When was the last time any of those was consciously offered to Him rather than simply performed? Then ask what one of them would look like this week if it were deliberately aimed.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out the eight night visions of chapters 1 through 6 in order, one line each. Which of them are about cleansing, and which are about God dealing with the nations?*

The horsemen among the myrtle trees reporting the earth at rest (1:7–17); four horns and four craftsmen who come to fray them (1:18–21); the man with the measuring line and a Jerusalem without walls (2:1–13); Joshua the high priest cleansed and clothed (3:1–10); the golden lampstand and two olive trees (4:1–14); the flying scroll of curses against thieves and perjurers (5:1–4); the woman named Wickedness carried in a basket to Shinar (5:5–11); and four chariots going out to the four winds (6:1–8). Visions four, six, and seven deal with cleansing God's people; one, two, and eight deal with God's government of the nations; three and five deal with the future of the city and its work.

2. *Zechariah 6:12–13 says the Branch will build the temple and be a priest upon His throne, with the counsel of peace between both offices. Compare Hebrews 7:1–3 and 8:1. Why could no king of Judah hold both offices, and who does?*

Under the Law of Moses the priesthood belonged to Levi and the throne to Judah, and no man could hold both. Uzziah tried and was struck with leprosy (2 Chronicles 26:16–21). Hebrews 7 answers by pointing to Melchizedek, who was both king of Salem and priest of the Most High God, and says Christ is a priest after that order, so that the combination Zechariah saw crowned on Joshua's head is realized in Jesus, who is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens (Hebrews 8:1). Notice that this means Christ is reigning now, as priest, on His throne.

3. Trace the word return through 1:3. God says return to Me and I will return to you. Where else in these chapters does God describe what He has already done before the people moved?

God's initiative runs all through these chapters and nearly always precedes the human response. He says He is jealous for Jerusalem with a great jealousy (1:14) and that He is returned to Jerusalem with mercies (1:16). He says He will be a wall of fire around her and the glory in her midst (2:5). He removes Joshua's iniquity in one day (3:4, 9). He says He will save His people and bring them and dwell in the midst of Jerusalem (8:7-8). The command to return in 1:3 is an invitation into something God has already begun.

4. Zechariah 8:16-17 lists the things the people are to do. Make the list, and mark the two that name your speech. See Ephesians 4:25 before you answer.

Speak every man the truth to his neighbor, execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates, let none imagine evil in his heart against his neighbor, and love no false oath, for all these are things that God hates. Two of the four concern speech, and Ephesians 4:25 quotes the first of them almost word for word, grounding it in the fact that we are members of one another. The remarkable thing is that God answers a question about fasting by talking about how people speak to each other at the courthouse and in the market.

5. Zechariah 8:23 pictures ten men taking hold of the garment of one Jew, saying, we will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you. Name one person who could say that about watching you this month, and one specific thing you will do this week to make it truer.

Answers will vary. Listen for a name, and gently resist the impulse to name only family members, since the verse pictures outsiders noticing. Ask what specifically would make it truer: a coworker invited, a visible act of integrity, an explanation offered when someone asks why you are the way you are (1 Peter 3:15).

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Zechariah 4:6 is frequently used to argue for a continuing miraculous work of the Spirit today. The verse is about God accomplishing His purpose apart from human power, not about modern miracles. Teach that the confirming signs served to confirm the word and ceased when revelation was complete (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3-4; 1 Corinthians 13:8-10).
- Chapter 2 and chapter 8 promise a restored and populous Jerusalem. These were fulfilled in the return and ultimately in the church, the Jerusalem above (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22-23). Do not read them as predictions about the modern political state of Israel.
- Joshua's cleansing pictures God's gracious forgiveness. Do not let it be turned into a doctrine of imputed righteousness that leaves obedience out, and do not let it be turned into a doctrine of earned cleansing either. God cleanses; we come to Him on His terms (Acts 22:16).
- The visions are symbolic and the angel interprets most of them in the text. Where he does not, say so and let it stand rather than speculating.

Sought and Found

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

This section of the Song moves through three scenes: a night search that ends in finding, a wedding, and a second night scene that ends in loss. Hebrew poetry does not narrate like a novel, so do not strain to build a timeline. Read it the way you would read a sequence of songs on one theme, each one turning the same subject to a different angle.

Chapter 4 is the groom's extended praise of his bride, built image by image from her eyes to her neck. Modern readers find some of the comparisons strange, and it helps to explain that a flock of goats on Mount Gilead or a tower of David hung with shields would have communicated abundance, dignity, and strength to the original hearers. What is not strange, and is worth pressing, is the practice itself. He looks at her carefully, and he says what he sees, out loud, at length. Most marriages do not fail for lack of love; they starve for lack of speech.

Then 5:2–8 turns. He knocks, she is in bed and does not want the trouble of getting up, and by the time she rises and opens the door he has gone. She goes out to search and this time the watchmen strike her. Whatever else the poem does, it is honest: love that is treated as always available eventually is not. A class will make the application to marriage on its own. A teacher may carefully note that Scripture elsewhere uses the same picture for the soul that keeps the Lord waiting at the door (Revelation 3:20), while being clear that the Song speaks of a husband and a wife.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Genre: Hebrew love poetry with alternating voices, not a narrative with a plot. Scene changes are abrupt by design.
- The wedding procession of 3:6–11 reflects an ancient custom in which the groom brought his bride from her home in public celebration, the background of Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:1–13.
- The descriptive praise poem of 4:1–7 follows a recognized ancient form in which a lover catalogs the beauty of the beloved.
- A garden enclosed and a sealed spring were images of value protected: in a dry land, a private water source was wealth worth guarding.
- The Song assumes the marriage of Genesis 2:24 throughout and never commends love outside it.
- Solomon is named in the wedding scene (3:7, 9, 11), and the mention of his mother crowning him on his wedding day is the only reference to that custom in Scripture.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The bride searches the night streets for her beloved (3:1–4) and later hesitates when he knocks and finds him gone (5:2–6). Set the two scenes beside each other. What do they say about what delay costs in a relationship, and where does that same pattern show up in our life with God?*

In chapter 3 she is willing to look ridiculous. She gets up, goes into the streets at night, asks strangers, and when she finds him she holds on and will not let go. In chapter 5 she is comfortable, already undressed, unwilling to get her feet dirty, and the cost of that small unwillingness is an empty doorway. The Song does not moralize about it. It simply shows what happened.

The application to marriage is obvious and worth making: affection assumed is affection at risk, and the person who is always available and never sought eventually stops knocking. The application to our life with God is a step further but a fair one, since Scripture uses this exact image. Revelation 3:20 has the Lord standing at a door

knocking, and Jeremiah 29:13 promises that those who seek Him with the whole heart will find Him. Ask the class where they have been comfortable rather than responsive, and what it has already cost them.

Question 2. *The groom calls his bride a garden enclosed, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed (4:12). Talk about what those three images have in common. Why would exclusiveness be praised as a compliment rather than felt as a restriction?*

All three images mean the same thing: something valuable that is not public property. In a semi arid country a sealed spring was not a deprivation, it was security, and a walled garden was where the good things grew undisturbed. The groom is not complaining about a limitation; he is praising her for belonging to one person on purpose.

Our culture hears exclusiveness as loss. Scripture presents it as the condition under which love becomes safe enough to be enjoyed. 1 Corinthians 7:3–4 says the same thing in legal language: each belongs to the other. Hebrews 13:4 fences the bed and calls the whole arrangement honorable. Ask the class how they would explain to a young person, without moralizing, that a fence is what makes a garden possible, and let the married couples in the room answer from experience.

Question 3. *Chapter 3 gives an entire wedding procession, armed men and all, and says it was the day of the gladness of his heart. What has our culture gained and lost by treating a wedding as an event rather than as the public beginning of a covenant?*

What we have gained is mostly photography. What has been lost in many cases is the public, covenantal character of the thing. The procession in chapter 3 is loud and communal on purpose: armed men, perfumed smoke, a crown, the daughters of Zion told to come out and look. Everybody knows, and everybody is now a witness to a promise that was made in front of them.

That public dimension is not decoration. A covenant made before witnesses is harder to abandon quietly, and a community that witnessed it has standing to help hold it together. Ask the class what a congregation owes a couple after the wedding day, and get specific: who calls at the six month mark, who teaches a young husband what his father did not, who sits with a wife when the first hard year comes. This is one of the places where a church can either be family or furniture.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read 4:1–7 and notice how the praise is built: it is specific, it is spoken aloud, and it names particular things. Write down three specific things you admire about your spouse, or about someone God has given you to love, that you have never actually said out loud.*

Answers will vary. Push against generalities: not she is a good person, but she never lets me leave the house without knowing where my keys are, or he has never once complained about the job he took so we could stay here. Specific praise is the whole technique of chapter 4, and it is learnable by anyone willing to look carefully and then speak.

2. *The refrain about not awakening love appears again at 3:5. Note what has just happened in 3:4 and why the warning belongs there. What is the Song protecting?*

The refrain follows the moment she finds him and brings him into her mother's house, that is, right after the intensity of reunion. The placement is consistent throughout the book: the warning arrives at the emotional peak, not in the calm. What the Song protects is the timing of love, so that what is strong enough to consume a person is spent inside a covenant that can hold it rather than awakened where there is nothing to receive it.

3. *Compare 4:12 with 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 and 7:2–5. What do those passages together say about who has a claim on a Christian's body?*

The Song says the bride belongs exclusively to her husband; 1 Corinthians 7:3–4 says husband and wife each have authority over the other's body; and 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 says the Christian's body is not his own at all, since it is the temple of the Holy Spirit and was bought with a price. Put together, a believer's body is God's by redemption and his spouse's by covenant, and it was never simply his own to do with as he pleased. That single conviction answers a great many questions our culture finds impossible.

4. *In 5:2–8 the bride pays a real price for her delay: an empty doorway, a night search, and rough treatment from the watchmen. Trace her steps, and list what each delay cost her.*

She hears him knock and answers with two excuses, that she has taken off her coat and washed her feet (5:3). She feels something stir and rises, but slowly, hands dripping with myrrh. By the time she opens, he has withdrawn and is gone. She calls and he does not answer. She goes out searching and the watchmen who once gave her directions now strike and wound her and take her veil. The cost is cumulative: first his presence, then her peace, then her safety and her dignity. Delay is rarely free.

5. *Pick the thing you named in the first question and say it out loud this week, to the person's face, without attaching a request to it.*

Answers will vary. The requirement not to attach a request is the point of the exercise; praise that arrives as a preface to a favor is not praise. Follow up next week and ask what happened, because this is one of the few assignments in the entire program whose results will be visible in the room.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Tone again is everything. Chapter 4 is frank in its admiration of the bride's body. Read the text plainly, do not comment image by image on the physical descriptions, and move the discussion toward the practice of specific spoken praise and the meaning of the enclosed garden. Keep your own manner calm and unembarrassed.
- If children are in the class, teach the themes of seeking, delay, exclusivity, and public covenant, and let the reading itself carry the rest without elaboration.
- Applying 5:2–6 to the soul that keeps Christ waiting is a legitimate illustration and Scripture uses the image (Revelation 3:20), but say clearly that you are illustrating. Do not present allegory as the meaning of the Song, and do not use allegory to avoid what the text plainly celebrates about marriage.
- Guard against any use of this section to justify romance outside the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6; Hebrews 13:4).

Finished, Buried, Risen

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

John writes the death of Jesus with almost no emotion and enormous precision, because he is building a case. Jesus says I thirst, John notes, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. He says it is finished, a single word in Greek that was written across a paid bill. He bows His head and gives up His spirit, and even the word order suggests a handing over rather than a collapse. Then come the medical details: the legs not broken, the spear thrust, the blood and water. John pauses to say he saw it himself and that he is telling the truth so that you might believe.

The burial matters more than most classes realize. Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the council; Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night and been mocked in a meeting for asking a fair question. Both had everything to lose and nothing left to gain, since the movement was apparently over. They ask Pilate for the body, wrap it with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, and lay it in a new tomb in a garden. The care in that description is not incidental. John is establishing that Jesus was really dead, and that His body was really placed in a known and identifiable place.

Then the first day of the week, while it was yet dark. The stone is moved, the two disciples run, and John describes what he saw with the eye of a man who has thought about it for sixty years: the linen cloths lying there, and the cloth that had been about His head not with them, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Grave robbers do not fold laundry. He saw, and he believed. And then the risen Lord spends His first recorded resurrection conversation not with Peter or with the council but with a weeping woman in a garden, and calls her by name.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- John writes as an eyewitness and says so explicitly at 19:35, one of the strongest first person claims in the Gospels.
- Crucifixion normally ended when the legs were broken so the victim could no longer push up to breathe; Jesus was already dead, which fulfilled the Passover lamb requirement of Exodus 12:46.
- The blood and water from the pierced side is consistent with death from the physical trauma He had endured, and John records it as evidence, not as symbol.
- Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:57; Luke 23:50–51); Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews and a teacher of Israel (John 3:1, 10).
- The first day of the week is emphasized in all four Gospels and becomes the day Christians assemble to break bread (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).
- That women are the first witnesses is itself an argument for the account's authenticity; no one inventing a story in that culture would have chosen them.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus said, it is finished, and then gave up His spirit. What was finished at that moment, and what does Colossians 2:14–17 say was nailed to the cross along with Him?*

What was finished was the work the Father had given Him, which He had already said in 17:4 and 19:28. The price was paid in full; the Greek word was the ordinary commercial term for a settled debt. With it ended the sacrificial system that had been pointing to Him for fifteen hundred years, because the reality had come and the shadows had done their work (Hebrews 10:1–14).

Colossians 2:14–17 says the handwriting of ordinances that was against us was taken out of the way, nailed to His cross, and that the feast days, new moons, and sabbath days were a shadow of things to come, the body being of

Christ. This is where you teach plainly that the Law of Moses as a system of covenant obligation is not binding on Christians, and that we live under the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 8:6–13). Do this without contempt for the Law: it was holy, just, and good, and it finished its assignment at the cross.

Question 2. *Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had both been careful, private believers, and they choose the moment of maximum danger to come out into the open. Talk through what it cost each of them. Where is God asking you to stop being a quiet disciple?*

Joseph was a council member, which means he had a seat in the body that had just condemned Jesus, and Luke says he had not consented to their deed. Asking Pilate for the body was a public act. Nicodemus had come by night in chapter 3 and had offered only a procedural objection in chapter 7. Now he arrives in daylight carrying about a hundred pounds of spices, a quantity fit for a king, and helps handle a body that would render him ceremonially unclean for the feast.

The timing is what preaches. They came out when it appeared to cost everything and gain nothing. Most quiet discipleship waits for a safer moment that never arrives. Ask specifically: who at work does not know, which relative has never heard it from you, what conversation have you been managing for years. Then ask what it would actually cost, and whether it is more than a seat on the Sanhedrin.

Question 3. *In 20:1–10 John notices the grave clothes lying there and the head cloth folded by itself, and says he saw and believed. Why would those details persuade him, and what do they rule out about what happened in that tomb?*

The cloths are lying there, and the head cloth is separately folded and in its own place. Nothing about that scene fits a robbery. Thieves do not unwrap a body weighted with a hundred pounds of spices, and they do not take time to fold a cloth. The other obvious theory, that the disciples took the body, collapses on the same evidence and on the behavior of men who were at that moment hiding behind locked doors.

It also rules out the claim that Jesus merely fainted and revived, since a man in that condition does not unbind himself, fold the head cloth, move a sealed stone, and walk past a guard. The empty tomb by itself proves only that the body is gone; the arrangement inside it is what made John believe. Ask the class how they would answer a coworker who says the resurrection is a legend that grew over time, and point out that 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 was written within a generation, naming living witnesses.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every detail in 19:28–37 that John says fulfilled Scripture, and look up each one: Psalm 69:21, Exodus 12:46, Psalm 34:20, and Zechariah 12:10. Which of them could no one involved have arranged?*

The thirst and the vinegar fulfill Psalm 69:21. The unbroken bones fulfill the Passover lamb requirement of Exodus 12:46 and Psalm 34:20. The pierced side fulfills Zechariah 12:10, they shall look on Me whom they have pierced. In the immediately preceding verses the dividing of the garments fulfills Psalm 22:18. The details Jesus could not have arranged are the ones done by Roman soldiers acting on their own orders: which legs were broken, whose side was pierced, and how the clothing was divided. That is precisely why John points at them.

2. *Read 19:38–42 and write down everything the text says about Joseph and Nicodemus. Then read John 3:1–2 and 7:50–52 for what Nicodemus had done before. How had he moved?*

Joseph is a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews. He asks Pilate for the body and takes it. Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, comes with a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about a hundred pounds. They wrap the body in linen with the spices as the manner of the Jews is to bury, and lay Him in a new tomb in a garden nearby because of the preparation day. Nicodemus had moved from a private nighttime conversation, to a cautious procedural defense in a hostile meeting, to a public and costly act of devotion in broad daylight. That is a picture of a man growing.

3. *Mary tells the disciples, and then tells the angels, and then tells the gardener the same thing: they have taken away my Lord. Trace her words through 20:2, 20:13, and 20:15. What is she certain of, and what has she not yet imagined?*

She is certain of a body and a theft. In 20:2 she tells Peter and John that they have taken away the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid Him. In 20:13 she tells the angels the same thing, and in 20:15 she tells the man she supposes to be the gardener that if he has carried Him away, she will take Him away herself. She has grief, loyalty, and a plan. What she has not imagined, though He told them plainly more than once, is that He would be alive. Grief narrows the range of what we can consider, which is worth saying gently in a class that will contain some who are grieving.

4. *Jesus tells Mary to go to His brethren and say, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God (20:17). Compare Hebrews 2:11–12. Why is that sentence remarkable three days after those same men abandoned Him?*

Three days earlier they had all forsaken Him and fled, and Peter had denied Him three times. The word He chooses for them is brethren, and the relationship He describes is shared: My Father and your Father, My God and your God. Hebrews 2:11–12 says He is not ashamed to call them brethren. The resurrection does not come with a lecture. It comes with a family word and an errand, and He restores them by giving them something to do.

5. *Mary was the first person told to carry the news, and she went immediately. Name one person who has not heard you say plainly that Jesus rose from the dead, and say it to them this week.*

Answers will vary. Insist on a name and on the plain sentence, not on a hint or an invitation to a service. Mary's message was short and personal: I have seen the Lord. Most Christians have never once said anything that direct to anyone outside the church building.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Teach the finished work carefully. The death of Christ ended the Law as a covenant system (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13; 10:9–10), but it did not make obedience optional. Salvation is in Christ, entered by faith, repentance, confession, and baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27).
- Handle the blood and water simply. John records it as evidence of genuine death. Do not build elaborate sacramental symbolism on it.
- John 20:17, touch Me not, is not a statement about ceremonial defilement or a mystery to be solved. The sense is do not cling to Me, with the reason following: there is a message to carry and an ascension ahead.
- Some will ask about the differences among the four resurrection accounts. Answer briefly: four witnesses recording different visits, different groups, and different moments across one long morning is exactly what genuine testimony looks like. Do not spend the hour there.

The Rider and the Throne

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 19 is the victory the whole book has been promising. Four hallelujahs, the only ones in the New Testament, ring out over the fall of the persecuting city. Then the marriage of the Lamb is announced, and the bride is granted fine linen, which John explains: the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Note that. Even at the wedding, the garment is both given and worn. Then heaven opens, and instead of a lamb there is a rider whose robe is dipped in blood, whose name is the Word of God, and whose sword comes out of His mouth, because this King conquers by His word.

Chapter 20 is the most disputed chapter in the Bible, and your class deserves a calm hour on it. Begin outside the chapter, not inside it. The rest of the New Testament teaches one return of Christ (Acts 1:11), one resurrection in which the good and the evil come forth together (John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15), one judgment of all men (Acts 17:31), and the end of the present order by fire (2 Peter 3:10–13). Paul says that at His coming He delivers up the kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:23–26). That framework leaves no room for a future earthly reign of a thousand years, and no second chance after He comes.

So read chapter 20 as what it is: a symbolic vision in a symbolic book, written to comfort Christians dying under Rome. Satan is bound, that is, decisively limited, so that he can no longer deceive the nations as he once did, which is what the cross accomplished (John 12:31; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14). The martyrs Rome thought it had silenced are seen alive and reigning with Christ, the point the persecuted needed most. A thousand is ten cubed, the number of completeness, a long and full period. Then the last enemy is thrown down, and the chapter ends where all history ends, at a throne with books.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Revelation was written to seven real congregations in Asia under pressure to worship the emperor, and every chapter must be able to mean something to them.
- Genre: apocalyptic. Numbers, colors, animals, and weapons carry symbolic weight; the book itself interprets many of its images (1:20; 17:9, 18; 19:8).
- Hallelujah, meaning praise the Lord, appears four times in 19:1–6 and nowhere else in the New Testament.
- The rider's sword proceeds from His mouth, the same image used of the word of God in Hebrews 4:12 and Ephesians 6:17.
- The first resurrection language of 20:5–6 is used in contrast with the second death of 20:6 and 20:14, which the text defines as the lake of fire.
- Gog and Magog come from Ezekiel 38 and 39 and function here as a symbol for the massed enemies of God, not as identifiable modern nations.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Revelation 20 is the only chapter in the Bible that mentions a thousand years, and it appears in the most symbolic book in the Bible. Before you read it, read John 5:28–29, Acts 17:31, and 1 Corinthians 15:23–26 together. How many comings, resurrections, and judgments does the rest of the New Testament know, and how should that govern the way we read this chapter?*

Start with the clear passages and let them govern the symbolic one, which is the only responsible order. John 5:28–29 says the hour is coming when all who are in the graves shall hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of damnation, one hour, one voice, both groups. Acts 17:31 says God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world, singular. 1

Corinthians 15:23–26 puts the resurrection at His coming and the delivering up of the kingdom at the same point, with death destroyed last. 2 Peter 3:10–13 says the heavens and earth pass away on that day.

That framework leaves no place for a coming before a coming, an earthly reign between two resurrections, or a rebuilt temple with sacrifices. Teach this without heat and without mockery, because many sincere neighbors have been taught otherwise from childhood. Say what we believe and why, show the passages, and then hand the class a method they can use anywhere: obscure passages are read in the light of plain ones, and no doctrine should rest on a single symbolic chapter.

Question 2. *Satan is bound with a chain and thrown into a pit so that he should deceive the nations no more, and later loosed for a season. Given how the book has used chains, pits, beasts, and numbers all along, what is being pictured here, and what comfort would it have brought a Christian standing before a Roman magistrate?*

Look at what the binding is for. The angel binds him that he should deceive the nations no more, which tells you the limitation is specific rather than total. Peter says the devil still walks about seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8), so the binding cannot mean total inactivity. What changed at the cross was decisive: the prince of this world was cast out (John 12:31), principalities and powers were disarmed and openly triumphed over (Colossians 2:15), and he who had the power of death was rendered powerless (Hebrews 2:14). The nations that had been in darkness now hear the gospel.

For a Christian facing a magistrate, the comfort is enormous and immediate. The power arresting him is on a chain. The martyrs Rome executed are not defeated; John sees them alive and reigning. The loosing for a little season says that opposition will flare again, and the outcome is already recorded: fire comes down and the devil is cast into the lake of fire. Ask the class where they need that particular comfort, because most of them are not facing a magistrate but are facing something that feels unstoppable.

Question 3. *At the great white throne, books are opened and another book is opened, which is the book of life (20:12). Talk through the difference between the two kinds of books. What would it mean to a person to know his name is in the second one, and how does a person get there?*

The books are the record of works, and the book of life is the register of those who belong to the Lamb. Both are opened, and they do not work against each other. Judgment is according to works in both testaments (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Romans 2:6; 2 Corinthians 5:10), and salvation is by the blood of the Lamb, received on God's terms, never earned. A person is judged by what he did and saved by whom he belongs to, and Scripture holds both without embarrassment.

How does a name come to be there? By hearing and believing the gospel, repenting, confessing Christ, and being baptized into Him for the remission of sins (Acts 2:36–38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27), and then by remaining faithful. Revelation itself twice speaks of names being blotted out or retained in that book (3:5), so the New Testament does not teach that a saved man cannot fall (Hebrews 3:12–14; 2 Peter 2:20–22). Close the discussion by asking whether anyone in the room is unsure, and make it easy for that person to say so.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List everything Revelation 19:11–16 says about the rider on the white horse: His names, His clothing, His weapon, and the army behind Him. Which details identify Him beyond any doubt?*

He is faithful and true; He judges and makes war in righteousness; His eyes are as a flame of fire; on His head are many crowns; He has a name written that no one knew but Himself; He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; His name is called the Word of God; the armies of heaven follow Him on white horses in fine linen, white and clean; out of His mouth goes a sharp sword; He rules with a rod of iron and treads the winepress; and on His robe and thigh is written King of kings and Lord of lords. The Word of God, the eyes of flame from 1:14, and the title of 17:14 identify Him as Christ beyond dispute.

2. Read 20:4–6 slowly and note exactly what John says he saw and where. Are the reigning ones on earth or in heaven, and does the text anywhere say that Christ is on the earth or that Jerusalem is His capital during this time?

John says he saw thrones and those who sat on them, and the souls of those beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast. He sees souls, not bodies, and he sees them where the thrones are, which throughout this book is heaven (4:2; 6:9; 7:9). The text never says Christ returns to the earth in this chapter, never places Him in Jerusalem, never mentions a temple, a throne of David on earth, or a restored nation. Everything the millennial theory needs most is precisely what the chapter never says.

3. Compare Revelation 20:12–13 with John 5:28–29 and Matthew 25:31–46. Who is raised, and are the righteous and the wicked raised and judged together or separately?

John 5:28–29 puts all who are in the graves in one hour, coming out to two different destinies. Acts 24:15 says there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. Matthew 25:31–46 has all nations gathered before Him at once and separated as a shepherd divides sheep from goats. Revelation 20:12–13 has the dead, small and great, standing before God, with the sea, death, and Hades delivering up the dead in them. The consistent picture is one general resurrection and one judgment of all men together.

4. Trace how Revelation uses numbers: seven churches, seven seals, twelve times twelve thousand, three and a half, six hundred sixty six. Given that pattern, what would a first century reader most likely hear in the number one thousand?

Every number in the book carries meaning. Seven is completeness, twelve is the people of God, three and a half is a broken seven and so a limited time of trouble, six hundred sixty six falls short of seven three times over. A thousand is ten times ten times ten, fullness cubed, the way we say a thousand times over or the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10). A first century reader steeped in this book would hear a long, complete, God appointed period, not a calendar span of three hundred sixty five thousand days.

5. Revelation 20:15 turns on one question: whether a name is written in the book of life. If you are not certain yours is, do not let this week end without settling it. Read Acts 2:36–41 and Acts 22:16, and speak with an elder or the preacher before Sunday.

Answers will vary, and this one may be the most important question in the entire program. Do not rush past it. If anyone indicates uncertainty, arrange the conversation before the class scatters, and make sure the person knows exactly what the New Testament asks of him and that someone will walk with him through it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Revelation 20 is the central doctrinal passage of this block. Teach it as symbolic, in a symbolic book, and consistent with the rest of Scripture: one coming, one resurrection of the just and the unjust together, one judgment, and no earthly reign of Christ from Jerusalem (John 5:28–29; Acts 17:31; 1 Corinthians 15:23–26; 2 Peter 3:10–13).
- Refuse date setting and the identification of modern nations, leaders, or armies with Gog, Magog, or the beast. Jesus said no man knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36).
- Do not let the chapter be used to teach unconditional security. Revelation 3:5 speaks of names blotted out of the book of life, and the whole book calls for endurance to the end (2:10; 14:12).
- Be gracious. Many good people in your community hold premillennial views sincerely. State the case from Scripture, answer questions kindly, and do not let the hour become a debate about a neighbor's church.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Zechariah 9–14, Malachi 1–4 · Song of Solomon 5:10–8:14 · John 20:19–21:25 · Revelation 21–22

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