

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 104 OF 104

Follow Thou Me

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Zechariah 9-14, Malachi 1-4
Wisdom Literature	Song of Solomon 5:10-8:14
Gospels	John 20:19-21:25
General New Testament	Revelation 21-22

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

This is the last of one hundred and four weeks. Your class has read every book in the Bible, some of it with difficulty, and this week they arrive at the end of the story and find that it is not an ending. Your aim is to send them out rather than to close a book. Say plainly and without ceremony that they have done something most Christians never do, and then spend the hour on what these readings do with a person who has finished: Malachi points ahead to a messenger, John points a restored man forward with two words, and Revelation ends by putting an invitation in the mouth of the church.

Doctrinally, two matters need clear handling. Malachi 3:8-10 must not be used to bind tithing on Christians; teach the principle that what belongs to God must actually be given to God, and then teach the New Testament pattern of free will, purposed, proportionate, cheerful giving laid by in store on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7). And Malachi 4:5-6 was fulfilled in John the Baptist, on Jesus' own authority (Matthew 11:14; 17:12-13), so no one should be waiting for another Elijah. Alongside those, Thomas' confession settles the deity of Christ, and Revelation 22:14 with 21:8 settles that the saved are those who come and keep coming on God's terms.

The formational thread is what a person does after he has been given everything. Peter is forgiven and then handed sheep. The bride of the Song is secure and still calls her beloved to hurry. The church is shown a city with no more tears and immediately told to say, Come. Nothing in this week ends in contemplation; all of it ends in an errand. Ask your class this: you have read the whole Bible now, so name the one person you are going to invite into it, and say out loud when you intend to start.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Revelation 21-22 first. It is the right place to end two years, and the class will want the hour. Give the weight to 21:3-4 and to the invitation of 22:17, and close by reading 22:20-21 aloud without commentary.

Second session: Take up John 20:19-21:25. Give time to Thomas, to John's stated purpose in 20:30-31, and then to the charcoal fire and Peter's restoration. End where the Gospel ends, on follow Me, and let that be the last thing said in the classroom.

The other two readings: Assign Zechariah, Malachi, and the close of the Song to the extended questions, and settle the tithing question plainly. Then mark the finish as a congregation: on a Sunday soon, read Revelation 22:17-21 in the assembly, ask those who completed the reading to stand, and pray for the ones they intend to invite.

The Prophets Have the Last Word

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Zechariah 9 through 14 is difficult, vivid, and full of Christ. These chapters are quoted in the passion narratives more than any other Old Testament section outside Isaiah 53 and the Psalms. A king enters Jerusalem on a donkey. A shepherd asks his price and is weighed out thirty pieces of silver, which are thrown to the potter in the house of the Lord. The shepherd is struck and the sheep scatter. The people look on One whom they pierced and mourn as for an only son, and a fountain is opened for sin and uncleanness. Read these chapters with a New Testament open beside them.

Malachi is the last voice before four hundred years of silence, and he preaches to a people who are not rebellious so much as bored. The temple is rebuilt, the offerings are being made, and the whole thing has gone gray. God brings six charges, and each time the people answer with a question that shows they do not see the problem: wherein have we despised Your name, wherein have we polluted You, wherein have we wearied Him, wherein shall we return, wherein have we robbed You. Boredom with God is harder to repent of than rebellion, because it does not feel like anything.

But Malachi does not end in gray. It ends with a book of remembrance written for those who feared the Lord and spoke often one to another, with God calling them His jewels, and with the sun of righteousness rising with healing in His wings. The last paragraph of the Old Testament promises a messenger in the spirit of Elijah who will turn the hearts of fathers to children and children to fathers. Then the page turns, and the next voice your class will hear is an angel speaking to a priest named Zacharias in that same temple.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Zechariah 9 through 14 shifts from the night visions to two longer oracles, more apocalyptic in style and less tied to the immediate rebuilding.
- Malachi prophesies around 430 B.C., roughly in the days of Nehemiah, and addresses the same problems Nehemiah addressed: neglected offerings, foreign marriages, and a tired priesthood.
- The name Malachi means my messenger, which is also the subject of 3:1 and 4:5.
- Malachi's method is disputation: an assertion, an objection from the people, and God's reply. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is an argument with God recorded so directly.
- Malachi 3:1 is applied to John the Baptist by Jesus (Matthew 11:10) and by Mark in his opening verse.
- After Malachi comes the intertestamental period, four centuries in which no inspired prophet speaks in Israel. The next words are Luke 1.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Zechariah 9:9 announces a king who comes just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, and Matthew 21:4–5 says that is exactly how Jesus entered Jerusalem. What kind of king does a donkey announce, and how does that correct what we instinctively expect power to look like?*

A donkey is the mount of a king coming in peace, not a war horse. Zechariah says he is just and having salvation, lowly, and that he will speak peace to the nations and cut off the battle bow. Jesus chose that entrance deliberately, and Matthew tells us He did it so the prophecy would be fulfilled. The crowd wanted a general. He gave them a King who would be dead within the week, and whose victory would come by dying.

The correction runs straight at us. We expect power to look like leverage, volume, and winning, and the kingdom keeps looking like a donkey, a towel, a basin, and a cross. Ask the class where they are waiting for God to act in a way that looks impressive, and what they might be missing because it arrived lowly instead. Then ask what this means for how a Christian handles a disagreement, an advantage, or an office.

Question 2. *Malachi 3:8–10 accuses Israel of robbing God in tithes and offerings. The tithe belonged to the Law of Moses and is not bound on Christians. Talk through the principle underneath it, and then read 1 Corinthians 16:2 and 2 Corinthians 9:6–7. How does the New Testament pattern of giving express that same principle?*

Handle this carefully and say it plainly. The tithe was a requirement of the Law of Moses, tied to the Levitical system and the land, and that law was fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:13). Christians are not under a tithe, and no one should preach one as a binding ordinance. But the principle Malachi is defending is not a percentage; it is that what belongs to God must actually be given to God, and that keeping it back is theft even when it is done quietly.

Then show the New Testament pattern, which is in several ways more demanding than a tithe. It is regular, upon the first day of the week. It is individual, let every one of you. It is planned, lay by him in store. It is proportionate, as God has prospered him (1 Corinthians 16:2). And it is purposed in the heart and cheerful, not grudgingly or of necessity (2 Corinthians 9:6–7). A Christian under grace who gives less thought to this than an Israelite gave to his tithe has missed something. Ask the class to name the figure they have actually purposed, and if no one has purposed anything, that is the lesson.

Question 3. *In Malachi 1:6–14 the priests bring the blind, the lame, and the sick to the altar, and God tells them to try offering that to the governor. Where do we quietly hand God the leftovers, and what would it cost us to change that this month?*

The priests were not refusing to sacrifice. They were sacrificing cheaply, bringing animals they could not sell and would not eat, and God asks the withering question: offer it now to your governor, would he be pleased with you? The issue is not the size of the gift but the contempt hidden inside it. A blind lamb on the altar says, in effect, that God will not notice and would not matter if He did.

Get specific, because everyone in the room does this somewhere. The leftover hour of the week for prayer. The tired half of the attention on Sunday. The money that is left after everything else has been funded. The teaching preparation done in the car. Ask each person to name one place where God gets the remainder rather than the first, and to name the single change he will make this month. Do not let the answers stay general.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. Find these four passages in Zechariah and then the verse in the New Testament that quotes each one: 9:9 with Matthew 21:4–5; 11:12–13 with Matthew 27:9–10; 12:10 with John 19:37; 13:7 with Matthew 26:31. Write down what each predicted and how it came about.

Zechariah 9:9 predicted the King entering Jerusalem lowly on a donkey, fulfilled in the triumphal entry (Matthew 21:4–5). Zechariah 11:12–13 named the price, thirty pieces of silver, and the casting of it to the potter in the house of the Lord, fulfilled in Judas' betrayal payment and the potter's field (Matthew 27:3–10). Zechariah 12:10 said they would look on Me whom they have pierced, quoted by John at the spear thrust (John 19:37). Zechariah 13:7 said the shepherd would be smitten and the sheep scattered, quoted by Jesus on the night of His arrest (Matthew 26:31). Written roughly five centuries in advance, and specific enough that no one could have arranged them.

2. *Malachi is built as a running argument. Find every place where God says something and the people answer, "Wherein?" or "What have we said?" List them. What do those replies reveal about the people's self awareness?*

The exchanges run through the book: I have loved you, and you say, wherein have You loved us (1:2); you have despised My name, and you say, wherein have we despised Your name (1:6); you offer polluted bread, and you say, wherein have we polluted You (1:7); you have wearied the Lord, and you say, wherein have we wearied Him (2:17); return to Me, and you say, wherein shall we return (3:7); you have robbed Me, and you say, wherein have we robbed You (3:8); your words have been stout against Me, and you say, what have we spoken so much against You (3:13).

The replies reveal people who have lost the ability to see themselves. Familiarity with religion had dulled their conscience, which is the most dangerous condition in this book.

3. *Malachi 4:5–6 promises Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Read Matthew 11:13–14, Matthew 17:12–13, and Luke 1:17. Who did Jesus Himself say that prophecy was about, and when was it fulfilled?*

Jesus said plainly that the prophecy was about John the Baptist. In Matthew 11:13–14 He says that if you are willing to receive it, this is Elijah who was to come. In Matthew 17:12–13 He says Elijah has come already and they did not know him, and the disciples understood He spoke of John the Baptist. The angel had told Zacharias that his son would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). The prophecy is fulfilled. It is not awaiting a future fulfillment, and no one should be looking for another Elijah.

4. *Malachi 3:16–18 describes people who feared the Lord and spoke often one to another, and a book of remembrance written before Him. Who are the people you speak with that way, and what do you talk about when you are together?*

Answers will vary. The text is describing ordinary conversation among believers that God considered worth writing down, which is a striking picture. Listen for whether anyone has such a relationship at all. Many faithful Christians attend for decades and never once talk with another member about anything beyond weather, ballgames, and health, and Malachi 3:16 suggests that is a loss God notices.

5. *Before next Sunday, decide what proportion of your income you will purpose to give, write the figure down, and set it aside on the first day of the week as 1 Corinthians 16:2 directs. Give it cheerfully or do not give it at all (2 Corinthians 9:7).*

Answers will vary and should not be reported aloud. What you are listening for is whether anyone has ever actually decided in advance. Most Christians give reactively. The New Testament asks for a purposed, proportionate amount set aside on the first day of the week, which is a decision made at the kitchen table before it is an act performed in the assembly.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Malachi 3:8–10 must not be used to bind tithing on Christians. The tithe belonged to the Law of Moses, which was fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13). Teach the principle of giving God what is His, and then teach the New Testament pattern: free will, purposed, proportionate, cheerful, and laid by in store on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 8:12; 9:6–7).
- Malachi 4:5–6 was fulfilled in John the Baptist by Jesus' own statement (Matthew 11:14; 17:12–13; Luke 1:17). Do not leave room for a future Elijah.
- Zechariah 14 is highly symbolic and is a favorite passage of premillennial writers. Read it as prophetic imagery of God's victory and the gospel age, with living waters going out from Jerusalem, which began at Pentecost (Isaiah 2:3; Acts 1:8; 2:1–5). There is no earthly reign of Christ from Jerusalem to come.
- Malachi 2:13–16 on divorce will be painful for some in the room. Teach God's view of marriage honestly, including Jesus' words in Matthew 19:3–9, and do it with pastoral care rather than as a weapon. Some present are living with the consequences of decisions that cannot be undone.

Love Strong as Death

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

This final section of the Song is the richest and the most demanding to teach. It contains another extended poem of admiration in chapter 7, a picture of the couple going out together into the villages and vineyards, and then in chapter 8 the passage that gives the whole book its weight. Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy cruel as the grave, its coals coals of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.

Notice what that passage claims. Love here is not a mood; it is a force with the durability of death itself, and the jealousy named beside it is not petty suspicion but the rightful exclusiveness of a covenant. Then comes the commercial clause: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be despised. Love cannot be bought, which in a world of arranged advantage and purchased alliances was a radical thing to write down, and in a world of transactional relationships still is.

The book ends without resolution in the ordinary sense. She calls him to make haste, to be like a young stag on the mountains of spices, and the poem stops. That unfinished quality is fitting. Married love in this life is never a completed project, and the longing the Song ends on is the same note Scripture itself ends on a few hundred pages later, when the bride says, Come.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Genre: Hebrew love poetry with alternating voices. The final chapters move between private admiration and public setting, the couple going out to the fields and villages.
- Song of Solomon 8:6–7 is widely regarded as the summit of the book and the closest it comes to a thesis statement.
- A seal was a personal signet used to authenticate documents and mark ownership; to be a seal on the heart and arm is to be bound to affection and action alike.
- The vineyard let out to keepers in 8:11–12 contrasts Solomon's many holdings with the bride's one vineyard, which is her own to give.
- The wall and the door in 8:9 picture a young woman who is either guarded or easily entered, and the family's stated intention to help her be the former.
- The Song assumes and celebrates the marriage of Genesis 2:24 throughout, and this closing section is its strongest defense of that exclusiveness.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Song of Solomon 8:6–7 says love is strong as death, that its coals are a most vehement flame, that many waters cannot quench it, and that a man who offered everything he owned for it would be utterly despised. Work through those images one at a time. What kind of love is being described, and how is it different from what our culture means by the word?*

Take the images in order. Strong as death means unyielding: death does not negotiate, and neither does this. Jealousy cruel as the grave means a rightful exclusiveness that will not share what belongs to it, the same word the Old Testament uses for God's jealousy over His people. Coals of fire and a most vehement flame mean it burns and gives heat rather than merely glowing. Many waters cannot quench it means circumstance, hardship, and time do not put it out.

Our culture uses the word love for an emotional weather pattern, something that happens to a person and can therefore stop happening. The Song describes something with the properties of a covenant: exclusive, durable,

unpurchasable, and costly. That is also how the New Testament describes the love of Christ for the church, which is why Paul tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (Ephesians 5:25). Ask the class which definition their marriage is actually running on, and what would change tomorrow under the other one.

Question 2. *Asked what makes her beloved different from anyone else, the bride praises him at length and then lands on, this is my beloved, and this is my friend (5:16). Why might friendship be the last word in a love poem, and what happens to a marriage when the friendship is allowed to lapse?*

After sixteen lines of admiring his appearance, she finishes with a word that has nothing to do with appearance. He is her friend. That is the word that outlasts everything else in the poem, because looks change, circumstances change, and the couple who have not become friends have nothing left when the rest quiets down.

Friendship in a marriage is built out of unglamorous materials: shared work, shared laughter, actual conversation, time spent together with no agenda. It lapses the same way it is built, by increments, usually through busyness rather than conflict. Ask the couples present when they last did something together purely because both enjoyed it, and ask them to schedule one such thing this week. For the widowed and the single in the room, the same principle holds in friendship generally, which Proverbs 18:24 and Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 commend.

Question 3. *In 8:8–9 the family looks at a younger sister and asks what they will do for her when she is spoken for, and answers in terms of walls and doors. How do a family and a congregation actually build that kind of protection around a young person today?*

The family is not being repressive; they are being responsible. They have a young sister, they know the day is coming when she will be spoken for, and they decide in advance what they will do. If she is a wall, meaning settled and guarded, they will build on that and adorn it. If she is a door, meaning easily entered, they will enclose her with boards. They intend to help either way.

Translate it. Today it looks like parents who know their children's friends, a congregation where teenagers have three or four adults who know them by name and ask real questions, older women teaching younger women (Titus 2:3–5), and honest conversation about purity long before it is urgent. Ask the class who is doing that for the young people in their own congregation, and whether any of those young people could name one adult besides their parents who knows what is going on in their life.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read 8:6 and note that the bride asks to be set as a seal upon his heart and upon his arm. A seal marked ownership and authenticity. What is she asking for, and what does it say about what love wants?*

A seal was pressed into wax or clay to mark a document as belonging to its owner and as genuine. On the heart is affection; on the arm is action and strength. She is asking to be his in both the inner and the outer life, to be the one his heart belongs to and the one his work is done for. What love wants, according to this verse, is not a feeling but a claim, publicly acknowledged and permanently attached.

2. *Compare Song of Solomon 8:7 with Ephesians 5:25–33. What does each passage say love is willing to spend, and where does Paul locate the pattern for a husband's love?*

The Song says that if a man gave all the substance of his house for love it would be utterly despised, which means love cannot be bought at any price. Ephesians 5:25 says Christ gave Himself for the church, which means it was bought at the highest price. The two are not in conflict: love cannot be purchased from another, but it can be poured out by the one who loves. Paul locates the pattern for a husband's love in Christ's sacrificial giving of Himself, not in the wife's desirability or performance, which is why it can survive.

3. *Trace the vineyard image from 1:6 to 8:11–12. At the start she has not kept her own vineyard; at the end she says her vineyard is before her. What has changed across the book?*

In 1:6 she says her mother's sons made her keeper of the vineyards and her own vineyard she has not kept: she is at the disposal of others and self-conscious about it. By 8:12 she says my vineyard, which is mine, is before me, and she speaks of it as hers to give. Solomon can have his thousand pieces of silver from his leased vineyard at Baalhamon;

she has one, and she gives it freely to the one she loves. Across the book she moves from being used to belonging, and the belonging is her own free act.

4. *The Song ends with the bride calling her beloved to make haste (8:14). Compare Revelation 22:17 and 22:20. Why is longing an appropriate note for a book of Scripture to end on?*

Because the relationship is alive and unfinished. Scripture ends the same way: the Spirit and the bride say, Come, and the last words of the Bible are, even so, come, Lord Jesus (Revelation 22:17, 20). A faith that has stopped longing for anything has usually stopped loving as well. Longing is what love does when the beloved is not yet fully present, which is exactly the Christian's position now.

5. *Do one thing this week that costs you something for the sake of the closest covenant relationship God has given you: a day off taken, a purchase declined, an evening cleared, a conversation you have been avoiding. Name it before you leave class.*

Answers will vary. Insist on something that costs time or money, since those are the two things that reveal actual priorities, and insist that it be named aloud so that it is real. Follow up next week.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Chapter 7 is the most physically frank passage in the book. Read it plainly, do not comment image by image, and steer the class discussion to chapter 8, where the Song states its own theme. Your composure sets the tone for everyone.
- If children are present, teach the themes of covenant love, friendship, protection of the young, and the fact that love cannot be bought, and let the reading carry the rest without elaboration.
- It is fair to note that Scripture pictures Christ and the church as bridegroom and bride (Ephesians 5:25–32; Revelation 21:2), and to draw illustration from the Song. Do not present verse by verse allegory as the meaning of the text, and do not use allegory to avoid what the book plainly celebrates about marriage.
- Everything the Song commends belongs inside the lifelong union of one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6; Hebrews 13:4). Say so once, clearly, and do not allow the book to be recruited for anything else.

Peace, Thomas, and Breakfast

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The resurrection appearances in John are remarkably domestic. A locked room, a wounded man showing His hands, a meal, a fire on a beach, a question asked three times. Jesus does not appear to Pilate or to the council or to the crowd. He appears to the frightened, the doubtful, and the failed, and He gives each of them the same two things: peace, and a job.

Thomas deserves better than his nickname. He is not a skeptic in the modern sense; he is a grief stricken man who has learned what happens to people who hope. What is striking is that Jesus grants his exact terms, reach here your finger, and then calls him to stop being unbelieving and be believing. Thomas responds with the highest confession anyone makes in this Gospel, my Lord and my God, and Jesus receives worship that no prophet or angel in Scripture ever accepts. Then the blessing turns outward to everyone who will believe through the written testimony instead of by sight, which is to say, to your class.

Chapter 21 is the restoration. Peter had denied his Lord three times beside a fire of coals, and John uses the same rare word for the fire on the beach. Three questions, three answers, three commissions: feed My lambs, tend My sheep, feed My sheep. Jesus does not minimize the failure and does not rehearse it either. He does what nobody else can do, which is to put a man back to work, and then tells him plainly that it will one day cost him his life. And then, follow Me.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The appearances in this reading run from the evening of the resurrection, to eight days later, to a later morning by the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee.
- John 20:30–31 is the stated purpose of the Gospel and one of the clearest purpose statements in the New Testament.
- The word for the fire of coals in 18:18 and 21:9 occurs only in those two places in the New Testament, which is almost certainly deliberate.
- The one hundred and fifty three fish is reported as an eyewitness detail; the net not breaking is the point John makes about it.
- Jesus' words about the manner of Peter's death (21:18–19) were understood by the early church as pointing to his crucifixion.
- John closes with a deliberate hyperbole: the world itself could not contain the books that could be written. It is the last sentence of the Gospel and the writer knows what he is doing.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *John states his purpose in 20:30–31: these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life through His name. How should a stated purpose like that change the way we read the whole book, and what has John been doing all along to accomplish it?*

A stated purpose is a gift to a reader. John tells us he has selected from many signs and recorded these so that we will believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and have life in His name. That explains the shape of the whole book: seven signs, seven great I am statements, a long trial in which witnesses testify, and a steady accumulation of evidence. John is not writing a biography. He is building a case, and he tells us at the end what verdict he is after.

It also tells us what to do with the book. A case is presented so that someone will decide. Notice that believing in John is never mere assent: John 3:36 sets believing over against not obeying, and John 8:31 makes continuing in

His word the mark of a real disciple. Ask the class what verdict they have actually returned, and what in their week would look different if the evidence John has assembled were fully acted upon.

Question 2. *Thomas demands evidence, and Jesus gives it to him without a word of rebuke, then adds a blessing on those who have not seen and have believed. What does that exchange say about honest doubt, and how should a congregation treat the person asking hard questions?*

Jesus does not scold Thomas. He comes back eight days later, apparently for him, and meets his terms exactly. That tells you something about how the Lord handles honest doubt: He is not threatened by questions and He does not shame the questioner. What He will not permit is doubt cultivated as an identity, which is why He says, be not faithless but believing. There is a difference between a man who wants to know and a man who has decided not to be persuaded.

A congregation should be the safest place in town to ask a hard question. Many are not, and the result is that people take their doubts somewhere else, usually to the internet at midnight. Ask the class what would happen in their class if someone said out loud that he was not sure he believed in the resurrection. Then note the blessing Jesus pronounces on those who have not seen: the faith of everyone in the room rests on testimony, which is exactly why John wrote it down (20:31; 1 John 1:1-3).

Question 3. *Three times at a charcoal fire Peter had denied Him, and three times at a charcoal fire Jesus asks whether Peter loves Him and then gives him work to do. Where has failure made you hold back from serving, and what does Jesus do about that in this scene?*

The scene is constructed with care. The same kind of fire, the same number of statements, the same man. Jesus takes Peter back over the ground of his failure not to punish him but to let him say out loud, three times, the thing he had three times denied. Then each answer is met with work: feed My lambs, tend My sheep, feed My sheep. Restoration in Scripture is not merely being forgiven. It is being trusted again.

That is the part most people find hardest to believe. Many Christians serve at half strength for decades because of something in the past they have never let God close out. Jesus does it in front of the other disciples, which matters; the men who would follow Peter needed to see him restored. Ask, gently and without requiring an answer aloud, where each person has been benched by his own history, and what one act of service he will take up this week as his answer.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List what Jesus does in 20:19-23: what He says, what He shows them, what He gives them, and what He sends them to do. Compare 20:23 with Acts 2:38 and Acts 10:43. Were the apostles given personal authority to pardon, or the message by which God pardons?*

He says peace be unto you twice, shows them His hands and side, sends them as the Father sent Him, breathes on them and tells them to receive the Holy Spirit, and speaks of remitting and retaining sins. On 20:23, compare Acts 2:38 and 10:43, where Peter does exactly what this authorizes: he announces the terms on which God forgives. The apostles were guided into all truth (John 16:13) and given the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). They declared God's terms of pardon; they did not dispense pardon personally, and no man since has authority to absolve sin.

2. *Thomas answers, my Lord and my God, and Jesus accepts it. Trace John's claims about who Jesus is at 1:1, 1:18, 8:58, and 10:30. What has the whole book been building toward in that one sentence?*

John opens with the Word who was with God and was God (1:1), says the only begotten Son has declared the Father (1:18), records Jesus' own before Abraham was, I am (8:58), and I and My Father are one (10:30). Thomas gathers all of it into four words, my Lord and my God, and Jesus does not correct him. Compare how Peter refused worship in Acts 10:25-26 and the angel refused it in Revelation 22:8-9. The Gospel has been building toward this confession from its first sentence, and John places it at the end as the verdict he wants from every reader.

3. Read 21:15–17 and write down the three questions and the three charges. Then read 18:17, 18:25, and 18:27. What is Jesus doing for Peter, and why do it in front of the other six?

Do you love Me more than these; feed My lambs. Do you love Me; tend My sheep. Do you love Me; feed My sheep. Against three denials at a fire, three affirmations at a fire. Doing it publicly restored Peter in the eyes of the men who would soon be following his leadership, and it kept the whole thing from being a private arrangement that others might have doubted. Grace is not only received; sometimes it has to be witnessed.

4. Peter turns, sees John, and asks what will happen to him, and Jesus answers, what is that to you, follow Me (21:21–22). Where does comparison with other Christians most often derail your own obedience?

Answers will vary. The pattern is universal: we measure our assignment against someone else's, resent an easier road, envy a more visible work, or excuse ourselves because of what someone else is not doing. Jesus' answer is blunt and freeing. What another servant is given is the Master's business. Yours is two words long.

5. Jesus asked Peter one question three times, and it was not about his competence. Answer it yourself this week by doing what He told Peter to do: name one member of the flock who is struggling, and go feed that sheep.

Answers will vary. Insist on a name and a specific act: a visit, a meal, a phone call that is not a text, a ride to services. Note that Jesus measured Peter's love by what he would do for the sheep, which is a measurement worth keeping.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- John 20:23 gives no priestly power to absolve sins. The apostles, guided by the Spirit, announced the terms of pardon (Acts 2:38; 10:43). Say this plainly and kindly, since many neighbors have been taught otherwise.
- Thomas' confession is direct evidence of the deity of Christ, and Jesus' acceptance of it is decisive. Have 1:1, 8:58, and Revelation 22:8–9 ready if someone raises the question.
- Believing in John always includes obedient response (John 3:36; 8:31; 14:15). Do not let 20:31 be read as salvation by faith only.
- Peter's restoration and commission give no basis for supremacy over the other apostles. Peter himself writes later as a fellow elder (1 Peter 5:1), and Galatians 2:11 records Paul withstanding him to the face.

All Things New

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

After the throne and the books, John is shown the outcome, and it is not a disembodied cloud. It is a city, and a wedding, and a home. The controlling sentence is 21:3: the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them and be their God. That is the sentence the whole Bible has been reaching for since a man and a woman were put outside a garden. Everything else in these two chapters is commentary on it.

The description is deliberately overwhelming: a city of gold like clear glass, foundations of jasper and sapphire and emerald, twelve gates each a single pearl, a wall measured in hundreds of feet, dimensions that are a perfect cube like the holy of holies. John is not drafting architecture. He is saying, in the only language available, that what God has prepared exceeds what you can picture. Then come the absences, and they are just as eloquent: no sea, no death, no sorrow, no crying, no pain, no temple, no sun, no night, no curse, nothing that defiles.

And then the book, and the Bible, ends with water. A pure river proceeding from the throne, a tree of life bearing fruit every month with leaves for the healing of the nations, and an invitation repeated four times in one verse: the Spirit says come, the bride says come, let the one who hears say come, and let whoever is thirsty come and take the water of life freely. Two thousand years of Scripture, and the last word is an open door. Do not let your class leave the room without noticing who is holding it open.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- These chapters close the book and the New Testament, written to congregations under persecution who needed to know what they were holding out for.
- The new heaven and new earth language comes from Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, and Peter uses it of what follows the dissolution of the present order (2 Peter 3:10–13).
- The city is described as a bride (21:2, 9), the same figure used of the church elsewhere (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25–32).
- The cube shape of the city recalls the holy of holies (1 Kings 6:20), the place where God dwelt among His people.
- The tree of life and the river reverse Genesis 2 and 3: what was lost at the beginning of the Bible is restored at its end.
- Genre remains apocalyptic. The gold, gems, and measurements convey glory, security, and perfection rather than dimensions to be surveyed.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Revelation 21:4 says God will wipe away every tear, and that there will be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain. Read it slowly and name what is removed and what is promised. How should that shape the way a Christian grieves at a funeral (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)?*

Read it slowly enough that the class hears each item. The tears are wiped away by God Himself, which is a startlingly personal act. Death is gone, and with it every funeral. Sorrow, crying, and pain are gone, and the reason given is that the former things are passed away. Notice the promise is not that the losses were unimportant. It is that they are over, and that the One who wipes the tears knows exactly what they were for.

Christians still grieve. Paul does not say do not sorrow; he says do not sorrow as others who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Jesus wept at a grave He was about to open. The difference is not the absence of tears but

the presence of a future. Ask the class how that shows up practically at a funeral, in what we sing, in what we say to a widow, and in what we do six months later when everyone else has stopped calling.

Question 2. *The city has no temple, no sun, no moon, and no night (21:22–25). Take each absence in turn and say what it means that the thing is not needed. What is John telling us about what it will be like to be with God?*

No temple, because a temple exists to bring people near to God, and God is now directly present. No sun or moon, because the glory of God lightens it and the Lamb is its lamp; the created lights were always borrowed. No night, which in this book has meant danger and evil and the hour when things are done in secret. The gates are never shut, which in the ancient world meant a city with nothing to fear.

Each absence is a subtraction of distance. Every institution of religion in the Bible, temple, priesthood, sacrifice, veil, has existed to manage the distance between a holy God and sinful people. In the end there is no distance to manage, so the machinery is retired. Ask the class what they currently experience as distance from God, and let them sit with the promise that the day is coming when there is none.

Question 3. *After twenty two chapters of beasts, plagues, and thrones, the Bible ends with the Spirit and the bride saying, Come, and an invitation to whoever is thirsty to take the water of life freely (22:17). Who is meant to be saying that word, and what does it cost to say it to somebody?*

The word is put in the mouth of the Spirit, who speaks in the Scriptures, and of the bride, which is the church, and then of everyone who hears. That is the whole chain. God has arranged that His last invitation reaches people through the people who have already accepted it. There is no other delivery system named. If the bride does not say come, the thirsty person in the next cubicle does not hear it.

What it costs is mostly nerve. It costs the risk of being thought strange, the awkwardness of a first sentence, the possibility of being told no. Against that, weigh what a thirsty person receives. Ask each member to name one person, and make it concrete: what will you say, and when. Then note the two words that qualify the offer, whoever will, and the one word that describes the price, freely. Nobody has to earn a drink; somebody has to be told where the water is.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Make a list of everything the new Jerusalem does not have: read 21:1, 21:4, 21:22–25, and 22:3. What does the absence of each of those things tell you about what life there is like?*

No more sea, which in this book has been the source of the beast and the image of restless danger. No death, no sorrow, no crying, no pain. No temple, because God and the Lamb are its temple. No sun or moon, because the glory of God is its light. No night, and therefore no shutting of the gates. And in 22:3, no more curse, which reaches all the way back to Genesis 3. Each absence removes either a threat, a sorrow, or a barrier. What is left is a life with nothing in it that has to be endured.

2. *The tree of life appears at both ends of the Bible. Compare Genesis 2:9 and 3:22–24 with Revelation 22:2 and 22:14. What happened to human access to that tree, and what has been done about it?*

In Genesis 2:9 the tree of life stands in the middle of the garden, freely available. After the sin of Genesis 3, God drives the man out and stations cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree, lest he eat and live forever in his fallen condition. In Revelation 22:2 the tree is back, on both sides of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, and 22:14 says blessed are they that do His commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life and enter through the gates. The guard has been taken down by the death and resurrection of Christ, and the way back is opened to those who come on His terms.

3. *Read 21:8 and 21:27 honestly, noting who is excluded from the city. Then read 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and pay close attention to the words, and such were some of you. What made the difference for those Corinthians?*

The lists are sobering: the fearful, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars; and nothing that defiles or works abomination or makes a lie. Then Paul names a nearly identical list in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and adds the most hopeful five words in the New Testament: and such were some of you. The difference was that they were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our

God, which in context is the washing of baptism (Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5). No one on that list is beyond reach. Everyone on it must be changed.

4. *Revelation 22:18–19 warns against adding to or taking from the words of this book. Compare Deuteronomy 4:2 and Galatians 1:6–9. What is God protecting, and why does it matter for how we handle Scripture and worship?*

God is protecting His revelation, and therefore His people. Deuteronomy 4:2 forbids adding or subtracting from His word, and Galatians 1:6–9 pronounces a curse on preaching another gospel, even from an apostle or an angel. When men add to what God said, they bind burdens He never bound; when they take away, they excuse what He condemned. Practically, this is why we ask for authority before we act in worship and work, and why we sing as the New Testament directs, observe the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, and refuse to add practices that Scripture does not authorize (Colossians 3:17).

5. *You have now read the entire Bible, from "In the beginning" to "even so, come, Lord Jesus." The last invitation in it is put in the mouth of the Spirit and the bride, and the bride is the church, which means it is put in your mouth. Name one person who is thirsty, decide what you will say first, and say it before this month is out.*

Answers will vary, and this is the last assignment of the program, so do not treat it as a formality. Ask for a name, a first sentence, and a date. If a class member cannot think of a single person, that is worth a kind and honest conversation about the circles he moves in. Two years of reading the Bible should end with somebody else being invited into it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Keep the interpretation of the city symbolic. Gold, gems, pearls, and measurements convey glory and perfection. Do not turn the description into a literal blueprint, and do not speculate about details Scripture does not give.
- The new heaven and new earth follow the coming of the Lord and the dissolution of this present order (2 Peter 3:10–13). There is no earthly millennial kingdom before it and no second opportunity after it.
- Revelation 22:14, on doing His commandments in order to have right to the tree of life, stands with 21:8 and 21:27 against any teaching that a person may be saved by faith only or that a Christian cannot fall away.
- Resist the urge to preach speculation about heaven. Say what the text says, admit what it does not say, and let the promise of God dwelling with His people be the thing the class carries home.