

Session 2 · When Doing Right Goes Wrong

Tobit 2:1-3:6 · Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Participants will discover that Tobit is deliberately written as a Job story: a righteous man whose obedience is answered with humiliation, whose own wife turns his piety against him, and whose honest prayer of anguish God receives without rebuke. They will learn from the text that faith is not the absence of anguish but the address on the envelope.

Catholic Touchstone. The problem of suffering, met the Catholic way: no cheap answers, real lament, and a providence that is already in motion before the sufferer can see it. This session also models something rare in parish life: watching Scripture present a saint with a real flaw, and refusing to airbrush him.

What You Need to Know

Chapter 2 opens at Pentecost, the feast of weeks, with Tobit restored to his home and a good dinner in front of him. The scene is engineered for irony. Tobit's first instinct at a feast is to send his son to find a poor man of our brethren who is mindful of the Lord to share the meal. Tobias returns instead with news of a body: a man of their people strangled and thrown into the market place. Tobit leaves his dinner untouched, retrieves the body before sundown, and buries it after dark. The neighbors mock him for it: he once fled for his life over exactly this, and here he is doing it again. Righteousness in Tobit has a sense of humor about its own cost.

Then comes the absurdity your group must be allowed to feel. Tobit, ritually unclean from the burial, sleeps outside by the courtyard wall. Sparrows on the wall drop fresh droppings into his open eyes, white films form, and the physicians make it worse. The great work of mercy ends in blindness by bird droppings. Resist any urge to dignify this; the text chose an undignified wound on purpose. Suffering in real life is rarely cinematic, and the book knows it. Note also verse 10: it is Ahikar, the nephew planted in Session 1, who feeds Tobit for two years. The seed in the palace is already bearing fruit, and nobody in the story calls it providence yet.

The emotional center of the session is the collision with Anna. She goes to work, weaving; her employers add a young goat to her wages; and Tobit, hearing it bleat, accuses his own wife of theft and refuses to believe her. He is wrong, and the text lets him be wrong. Then Anna strikes the deepest wound in the book: Where are your charities and your righteous deeds? You seem to know everything! It is Job's wife standing in a Nineveh doorway. Tobit's grief breaks open into the prayer of 3:1-6, where he confesses the sins of his people, declares God righteous, and asks to die. Read that prayer several times before the session. It is theologically impeccable and emotionally shattered at the same time, and that combination, not serenity, is what biblical faith under pressure actually sounds like.

One pastoral note for your own preparation: Tobit asks God to take his life, and next session Sarah's anguish runs even darker. Some of your participants have prayed prayers like Tobit's. Do not treat 3:1-6 as a museum exhibit. Treat it as permission: the Church's saints have prayed from the bottom, God received them there, and his answer was already moving before they said amen. If a participant discloses real despair, receive it with warmth, follow up privately, and help them connect with their pastor or other competent help.

OT Roots and Fulfillment

The author is writing Job in miniature and wants you to notice. The righteous sufferer, the mocking bystanders, the wife whose challenge cuts deeper than any enemy's, the plea for death, the refusal of the text to explain itself: every beat is Job's. Tobit's prayer also stands in the tradition of Israel's great corporate confessions, alongside Daniel 9 and Ezra 9, where one faithful man owns the sins of his whole people. And his plea to die places him in surprising company: Moses (Numbers 11:15), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), and Jonah (Jonah 4:3) all asked God for death, and in every case God answered the need beneath the request rather than the request itself.

The fulfillment line runs to two places in the Gospel. Tobit's instinct to fill his festal table with the poor anticipates Jesus' instruction in Luke 14:12-14: when you give a feast, invite the poor, and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. And the whole shape of the session, righteousness answered by humiliation, walks straight toward the cross, where the only perfectly righteous man is answered with the most unjust suffering in history, and where God's hidden providence does its greatest work. Do not preach that connection tonight; plant it. The group should feel Holy Saturday without the word being said.

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine of Hippo · *Sermon 88, on the blind men of Jericho (early 400s)*

Preaching on blindness and sight, Augustine points to Tobit as the great paradox: a man blind in his eyes who nevertheless showed his son the way of life, teaching him the path of God. For Augustine, Tobit's darkened eyes and illumined heart prove that the truest sight is not in the body, a word your group will need when the meaning of this suffering stays hidden.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory the Great · *Moral Reflections on Job, Preface (c. AD 590)*

Gregory, the great interpreter of Job, teaches that God permits the just to suffer for different reasons than the wicked: sometimes as correction, sometimes as protection, and sometimes purely so that hidden virtue may be revealed and increased. He warns against the arithmetic of Job's friends, who read every wound as a punishment. Tobit's neighbors, and at her lowest moment even Anna, do that arithmetic; Gregory forbids us to join them.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom · *No One Can Harm the Man Who Does Not Injure Himself (c. AD 405)*

Writing from his own unjust exile, Chrysostom argues that no external catastrophe, poverty, slander, sickness, or banishment, can damage a person's real treasure, which is a soul set on God; only sin can do that. Tobit loses property, standing, and sight, yet the one thing that made him Tobit is untouched. Chrysostom would say the sparrows took nothing that mattered.

Catechism Connection

CCC 164 names our situation exactly: we walk by faith and not by sight, and faith is often lived in darkness, tested by the experience of evil and suffering. CCC 309 insists there is no quick answer to the problem of evil, and that only the whole of Christian faith, creation, fall, covenant, cross, and resurrection, constitutes the answer. CCC 312 gives the session's hidden thesis in one sentence: in time we can discover that God in his almighty providence can bring a good from the consequences of an evil,

quoting Joseph of Egypt, what you meant for evil, God meant for good. CCC 1500-1501 acknowledge that illness can lead to anguish and even revolt against God, and can also make a person more mature, helping them discern what is essential.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

- 1. The works of God, hidden.** Tonight the thread goes underground on purpose. Nothing visible is redeemed; that is the point. Next session the reader is taken behind the curtain while the characters stay in the dark, so let this session end unresolved.
- 2. Almsgiving as treasure.** Anna weaponizes the thread: where are your charities now? The whole study turns on whether her question gets an answer. Do not answer it tonight.
- 3. The seed in the palace.** Ahikar quietly feeds Tobit for two years (2:10). Point at it lightly: who is caring for Tobit, and where did we meet him? Providence is already working through the footnote.

Sealed guesses stay sealed. If someone asks, smile and tell them Session 8.

Session Goals

1. Participants can name at least three deliberate parallels between Tobit 2-3 and the book of Job.
2. Participants can articulate why Tobit's prayer of anguish is an act of faith rather than a failure of it.
3. Participants can state the Catholic answer to suffering in the key of CCC 309 and 312: no cheap answer, and a God who brings good out of evil in his own time.
4. Participants notice one instance of hidden providence already operating in the text (Ahikar) without the leader naming it for them.

Time Note (90 minutes)

Win 12 min · Build 56 min · Send 12 min · Live It and closing prayer 10 min. The Anna exchange (questions 5-6) and the theodicy press (question 8) are the load-bearing walls; give them room. If you are running long, cut in this order: drop the Dig Deeper on the prayers for death, fold question 3 into question 2 as a single observation, and shorten the Pentecost table discussion to the Luke 14 discovery alone.

When Doing Right Goes Wrong

Tobit 2:1-3:6 · Discussion Guide · 90 minutes

Opening Prayer

Father, your servant Tobit did what was right and lost his sight for it, and still he called you righteous. Give us tonight the honesty to bring you our real questions, the humility to sit where Scripture refuses easy answers, and the faith to trust that you are working where we cannot see. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win · Opening the Door (12 minutes)

W1. Last week you tried a costly work of mercy and a two-minute canon answer. How did it actually go? No polishing; the real version.

W2. Have you ever done something genuinely good and had it blow up in your face? What did that do to your view of God, honestly?

Build · Into the Text (56 minutes)

A Feast Interrupted

1. Read Tobit 2:1-7. It is Pentecost, and dinner is on the table. Walk through Tobit's evening step by step: what is his first instinct at a feast, what news actually arrives, and what does the interruption cost him?

Live discovery. Before discussing, have someone find and read Luke 14:12-14. Whose voice does Tobit's dinner instruction sound like, centuries early?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Tobit's first instinct is to send Tobias to find a poor man of their people to share the feast: Jesus' own banquet instruction, invite the poor, and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just, is already Tobit's table policy in Nineveh. What arrives instead is a corpse in the market place. Tobit leaves the meal untouched, weeps, retrieves the body, and buries it after dark, taking on ritual uncleanness at the feast itself. The cost is his dinner, his comfort, his cleanness, and, as the neighbors are about to remind everyone, potentially his life again. Mercy in this book always interrupts something.

2. Look at the neighbors' mockery in 2:8. What exactly is funny to them? And what does it tell you that Tobit does it anyway, knowing everything it cost him last time?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The joke is that Tobit is a slow learner: he already lost everything and fled for his life over burying the dead, and here he is with the shovel again. The neighbors treat consequences as a verdict, as if the cost of an act proves its foolishness. Tobit's repetition is the text's quiet definition of virtue: not a single heroic decision but a habit that survives its own punishment. He does not bury the dead because it works out; he buries the dead because of who God is and who that body was.

Blinded by Sparrows

3. Read Tobit 2:9-10 slowly, and do not rush past the absurdity. Of all the ways the author could have wounded his hero, he chose sparrow droppings. Why? What would be different if Tobit had been blinded by, say, a soldier's blow while burying the dead?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A soldier's blow would make the suffering noble, legible, a martyr's wound with an obvious meaning. The sparrows make it meaningless on its face: random, humiliating, almost comic, and inflicted at the exact moment of obedience. That is the kind of suffering most people actually get, the diagnosis, the accident, the absurd small thing that wrecks a season of life, and the author refuses to let us keep suffering dignified and distant. Notice, too, who sustains Tobit through the aftermath: Ahikar, for two years (2:10). Ask the group where they have met that name before, and then say nothing more about it.

Anna's Question

4. Read Tobit 2:11-14a. Blind Tobit hears a goat bleating and accuses his wife of stealing it. He is wrong. Why does the author let his hero be wrong? What has suffering started to do to Tobit's ability to trust?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Scripture does not airbrush its saints, and Tobit's flaw is precisely the shadow of his virtue: a man of exact righteousness becomes a man of exacting suspicion. Pain has curdled into a readiness to believe the worst, even of the wife who is now supporting him. The book is honest that suffering does not automatically sanctify; it can make the righteous brittle, touchy, and unjust in small domestic ways. Letting Tobit be wrong here is what makes him credible everywhere else, and it warns us where our own pain is currently making us unfair.

5. Now read Anna's reply in 2:14b, and let it land with full force: Where are your charities and your righteous deeds? You seem to know everything! What is she really asking? And why does this cut deeper than the neighbors' mockery in 2:8?

Live discovery. Send someone to Job 2:9-10. What scene is the author of Tobit deliberately replaying, and where else tonight have we already seen Job's story echoed?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Anna is asking the question of the whole book: what did all that righteousness actually purchase? The neighbors mocked Tobit's persistence; Anna audits his theology. It cuts deeper because it comes from inside the house, from the person carrying the cost with him, and because there is love and exhaustion in it, not just malice. The author is replaying Job: the righteous sufferer, the wife whose challenge (curse God and die) voices the conclusion the sufferer refuses to draw. And that is the second Job echo of the night, after the mocking bystanders. By now the group should see the design: Tobit is written as a Job story on purpose, and Anna's question, where are your charities, is the one the last chapters of this book will answer. Do not answer it for them tonight.

The Prayer from the Bottom

6. Read Tobit's whole prayer, 3:1-6, aloud and unhurried. Make two lists as a group: everything Tobit says about God, and everything Tobit asks for. What is strange about putting those two lists side by side?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

About God, Tobit says: you are righteous, all your deeds and ways are mercy and truth, your judgments are true. For himself he confesses sin, and notably not private crimes but solidarity with his people's sins, standing in the tradition of Daniel 9 and Ezra 9 where the faithful one owns the guilt of all. And then he asks to die. The strangeness is that flawless theology and bottomed-out anguish share one prayer without contradiction. Tobit never accuses God and never pretends he is fine. Biblical faith under pressure is not serenity; it is anguish that still knows God's address. The prayer is an act of faith precisely because it is aimed at God rather than away from him.

DIG DEEPER

Tobit prays to die, and he is in canonical company: Moses (Numbers 11:15), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), Jonah (Jonah 4:3), and Job (Job 6:8-9) all made the same request. Notice God's pattern: he never grants the request, and he never casts the sufferer away for praying it. He feeds Elijah, presses Jonah with a question, answers Job out of the whirlwind, correcting where correction is needed but never dismissing the one who prays, and, as we are about to see, answers Tobit with a rescue already in motion. God consistently answers the need beneath the prayer rather than the words on top of it. If someone in your group has prayed from that bottom, this pattern is good news with their name on it; receive it gently, and follow up with them personally after the session.

Build, Then Press: If God Is Good, Explain the Sparrows

BUILD, THEN PRESS

The Skeptic's Reading, Given at Full Strength

Give the objection its full weight, because half your group has a version of it in their pocket. It runs: this chapter is the whole case against providence in miniature. A man obeys God at real cost and the universe responds with bird droppings and blindness. His prayers change nothing visible. His wife's question is never refuted in the moment, and the pious answer, God has a plan, is exactly what Job's friends said, and God condemned them for it. Either God cannot prevent such suffering or he permits it, and a God who permits the humiliation of his most faithful servant, for reasons he declines to share, does not obviously deserve the name good. Religious people cope with this by telling stories after the fact; the suffering itself remains the only hard data. Let that stand in the room for a moment before anyone answers.

7. First: which parts of that are true and must be conceded? Then press on what the objection quietly assumes: what would the skeptic need to know, right now, to be certain the sparrows are meaningless? And what does the reader of this book know that Tobit does not?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede honestly: the suffering is real, the humiliation is real, no explanation is offered to Tobit, and God has condemned the tidy explanations of Job's friends. The Catechism itself concedes the core: to the question of evil, no quick answer will suffice (CCC 309). Any Catholic answer that begins by minimizing the wound has already failed.

Now press the hidden assumption: the skeptic's verdict requires the whole story, and he is reading page one of it. To declare the sparrows meaningless, you would need to stand at the end and see every consequence, which is precisely the seat no creature occupies. The objection borrows God's vantage point to prosecute God. And the text is about to dramatize exactly this: in the next scene the reader is taken behind the curtain and shown what heaven is already doing, while Tobit and Anna remain in the dark for chapters. The gap between what the characters can see and what is actually true is not a plot device; it is the book's doctrine of providence, and it is our situation

described from the outside.

Then give the positive Catholic answer at its true size: God does not offer an explanation of suffering; he offers a history. Creation, covenant, cross, and resurrection are the answer (CCC 309), and the pattern inside that history is Joseph's sentence, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20; CCC 312), a sentence Joseph could only say at the end, never in the pit. Christianity's final word here is not a theory but a fact: God's own Son obeyed perfectly, suffered absurdly, and was vindicated on the third day. The cross means God has not exempted himself from the arrangement, and Easter means the sparrows do not get the last word. That is not coping after the fact; it is the claim that the story has an author, and tonight we are deliberately still in its dark middle.

Send · Taking It Out the Door (12 minutes)

S1. Anna's question, where are your charities and your righteous deeds, is a question suffering will eventually put to every one of us. When it comes to you, what do you want already built into your soul so that the question does not take your faith with it?

S2. Tobit's prayer teaches that you can say true things about God and be in real anguish in the same breath. What would it look like for you to pray one completely honest prayer this week, no polishing, aimed directly at God?

Live It This Week

1. Pray one Tobit prayer: out loud or on paper, tell God the truest thing about your current struggle, and end it, as Tobit does, by saying one true thing about who God is.
2. Identify one place where your own pain is making you suspicious or unfair to someone close to you, as Tobit was to Anna, and make one concrete repair: an apology, a question asked instead of an accusation, a benefit of the doubt extended.
3. Read Tobit 3:7-17 before next session. Pay attention to where the scene changes, and to what the narrator lets you see that no character can.

Closing Prayer

Righteous are you, O Lord, and all your ways are mercy and truth. We bring you tonight our unexplained sufferings, our Anna questions, and the prayers we have prayed from the bottom. Keep us from the cheap answers you have condemned, and keep us from despair, and hold us in the dark middle of the story until your works are revealed. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory · Tobit 3:2 (RSV2CE)

"Righteous art thou, O Lord; all thy deeds and all thy ways are mercy and truth, and thou dost render true and righteous judgment for ever."

Leader Reference Card

Every passage in order of use

Q1 Tobit 2:1-7 · the feast interrupted, the burial

Q1 live discovery Luke 14:12-14 · invite the poor to your feast

Q2 Tobit 2:8 · the neighbors' mockery

Q3 Tobit 2:9-10 · blindness; Ahikar's two years of care

Q4 Tobit 2:11-14a · the goat and the accusation

Q5 Tobit 2:14b · Anna's question

Q5 live discovery Job 2:9-10 · Job's wife

Q6 Tobit 3:1-6 · the prayer from the bottom

Q6 parallels Daniel 9:4-6 · Ezra 9:6 · corporate confession

Dig Deeper Numbers 11:15 · 1 Kings 19:4 · Jonah 4:3 · Job 6:8-9

Steelman chain Genesis 50:20 · Joseph's sentence

Memory Tobit 3:2

Catechism CCC 164 · CCC 309 · CCC 312 · CCC 1500-1501