

June 14: Ezra 3-5 and John 20

The Israelites restore animal sacrifice. They begin working on the temple. When the foundation is laid, there is an interesting event. There are shouts of joy, but there are also shouts of mourning. The older Israelites that had seen God's temple in its original glory, see that this new temple is not nearly as ornate as the first. They mourn for the past. The younger Israelites, that had never seen the original temple are shouting for joy. They are looking to the future and are happy to see that God has blessed them in allowing them to come back. The shouting of both parties was so great that it could be heard from far away.

There is nothing wrong with looking at the past, as the older Israelites did. However, we cannot live in the past. If we stay in the past, then we cannot move forward.

Some enemies come and ask to help build the temple with the Israelites. The Israelites deny their request. Rather than take the "no" this group then begins antagonizing them and opposing the building efforts. Artaxerxes sends a formal letter stating that they must stop rebuilding the temple.

The rebuilding effort begins again in the second year of King Darius's rule. When Tattenai, the governor sees they are rebuilding, he sends a letter to Darius asking him to launch a formal investigation to see if Cyrus had in fact ordered the Israelites to rebuild the temple.

In the New Testament reading, the women go to Christ's tomb to finish anointing His body. When they get there, they find that He is no longer in the tomb. They rush to tell the disciples. John and Peter run to the tomb. We know that John made it to the tomb faster than Peter did because he records that he made it to the tomb before Peter did.

At one point, Christ appears to the majority of the disciples. He shows them His hands and His side. They rejoice when they see Him. Thomas was not there when Christ met with them. He says that he will not believe unless he sees the mark and puts his finger into the mark of the nails and hand in his side, he won't believe. This one moment in Thomas's life forever earned him the title of the "Doubting Thomas".

June 15: Ezra 6-8 and John 21

King Darius goes on a fact finding mission and discovers the decree of Cyrus. He issues another decree telling the governor of the region and the others interfering with the rebuilding to stop. He also decrees that the rebuilding effort will be funded through royal revenues of taxes collected in the area. Further, if anyone is to interfere with the rebuilding, a beam will be taken from the man's house and he will be impaled upon it. I am certain that this is the exact opposite of what the governor wanted.

Chapter seven begins with Ezra returning Israel from Babylon. He brings along a letter from Artaxerxes. He funds Ezra's return and sacrificial animals with the royal treasury and gifts gathered from the Jewish exiles in Babylon. God sent the Israelites out of their homeland by pagan rulers and now He returns them by pagan rulers.

In the New Testament reading, we finish up John. Jesus appears to the disciples after a long night of fishing. They had caught nothing. Jesus tells them to put their net on the other side of the boat. When they do, they receive a huge haul of fish. Peter realizes that it is Jesus speaking to them from the shore, so he jumps out of the boat and rushes to greet Him. Jesus tells the men to bring some fish and they prepare breakfast. The fact that Jesus is able to eat a meal with His disciples shows that He had resurrected in physical form. It was not His ghost walking among them, He wasn't a hologram, He was the fully physical resurrected Messiah.

Jesus questions Peter three times. In my Bible, it refers to this as Peter being restored. I disagree with that assessment. Jesus first asks Peter if he agape (loves) Him. Peter responds that he phileo (loves) Him. Agape love is a perfect and sacrificial love. It is the kind of love that God has for us. As believers, we are supposed to have that kind of love for Him and one another. Jesus asks a second time if Peter agapes Him. Peter responds that he phileos Jesus. Finally, Jesus asks Peter if he phileos Him. Peter responds that he does. Phileo love is a kind of family love. It is a brotherly love. That love is important and deep, but it is not like agape. That is why I think it was not so much Peter being restored since he had denied Christ three times. Peter loves Jesus like a brother, but he is not quite to that point where he has that sacrificial love for Him. Peter will eventually die for his faith and love for Jesus. Jesus even foreshadows Peter's eventual crucifixion as a martyr. As we get into Acts we will see Peter's leadership and faith grow stronger.

The Christian life is a life of growth. We are not called to be stagnant. Instead, we can seek to grow in Him every day.

June 16: Ezra 9-10 and Acts 1

Things are looking up, the temple is being rebuilt, the Passover is being celebrated again, and the people are trying to get back on track with God's Law. Now they run into a problem. Some of the Israelite men did not follow The LORD's guidance and married women from the pagan nations. Ezra responds by praying to God. He is ashamed and embarrassed of this sin. Ezra was not guilty of marrying a woman outside of the Israelites, but he still feels the weight of the sin. Ezra does not feign innocence in his prayer to God. The problem of marrying foreign wives was so prevalent, even some of the Levite men had married women from pagan nations.

Ezra has a meeting. One man by the name of Shecaniah comes up with a relatively extreme solution. They will gather all of the foreign wives and their offspring and send them away. The men decided that this was a good solution and they carry it out. I think we can all agree that this decision was extreme. However, the leaders were so worried that they would be deported again for not following God's Law, they were willing to go to extreme measures. I personally think it would have been a better solution for them to have taught their wives and children the way of Yahweh, but I was not there and no one asked my opinion. Ezra and the other leaders made this decision and they stood by it.

We begin Acts. Acts was written by Luke. The disciples are in a bit of a holding pattern. They have been spending time with the resurrected Jesus, but they have not really been out fishing for

men or building God's kingdom. Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the gift that His Father has promised them. They have to wait for the Holy Spirit to be with them. If not, they will fail at their task. That is not to say that they would not have had some success in their mission, but it would not have been anywhere near as effective.

Since they know the Holy Spirit will be coming to them soon, the disciples ask if God is going to restore His kingdom. This might seem like a random question for us today. However, throughout the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit was associated with God restoring the kingdom. They did not receive the answer they were wanting. Jesus responds that it is not for Him or the angels in heaven to know that time. Instead, it is the Father in heaven that knows.

I am not a huge fan of looking at the Revelation and trying to come up with a timeline on when God is going to restore His kingdom based on what Jesus tells His disciples there. If it is not for us to know, then it is not for us to know.

June 17: Nehemiah 1-3 and Acts 2:1-13

Nehemiah has the opportunity to ask about the remnant of Israelites that remained during the exile. He learns that they are in great trouble and disgrace. Nehemiah prays, confessing his sins to God and asking to be returned to Jerusalem.

God answers Nehemiah's prayer. Nehemiah was the cupbearer. One night he is pouring the wine for the king. The king is upset that Nehemiah looks sad even when he is not sick. Nehemiah responds that he cannot be happy when his brothers in Jerusalem are suffering the way they are. He asks that the king send him to Judah to rebuild it. His request is granted.

After three days in Jerusalem, Nehemiah gathers a small group of men and inspects the gates and walls of the city. After his inspection, Nehemiah proposes that they rebuild Jerusalem. The leaders agree and they quickly set to repairing the city walls and gates.

In Acts, the believers are all gathered in one place at Pentecost. A sound like a violent rushing wind comes from heaven. Tongues like flames appeared and rested on each of them. The Holy Spirit that God had promised them had arrived. They began speaking in different languages, but they could all understand what was being said.

There was a large crowd of Jews that were understandably confused by what was happening. Some of them are astounded and perplexed by it. Others simply accuse the believers of being drunk.

June 18: Nehemiah 4-6 and Acts 2: 14-47

Despite the fact that the rebuilding of the temple was endorsed by King Artaxerxes, there were still some in the land that tried to suppress the effort. Sanballat hears they are rebuilding the wall and he begins to make fun of the people, saying that a simple fox could knock the wall down. They continue to build. These folks are so dedicated to rebuilding, they are not going to let anyone slow them down.

The opposition to rebuilding grows stronger. So, they work in shifts. One group builds, while the other stands watch, ensuring that no one can come in and maim them while they are building.

There was an outcry from the poorer folks in Jerusalem. They were having a hard time paying the tax and paying back what they had borrowed. Nehemiah assembles the nobles and accuses them of charging interest to their fellow Israelites. According to the Levitical Law, charging interest to another Israelite was forbidden.

Throughout the rebuilding effort, we see that there is opposition. That does not stop them. They get the walls completed in 52 days. I have seen pothole filling projects take longer than that! These folks are motivated to get the temple finished! Do we let opposition and discouragement slow us down from doing God's will in our lives? Do we rise above the nay-saying and continue to do His will regardless of what those around us think?

In the New Testament reading, Peter offers his defense against the accusation they were drunk. Of course they cannot be drunk, it's only 10 in the morning! From there, Peter delivers a fiery sermon telling them about Christ and what He had done for them. He draws the Old Testament example of David trying to show them that Jesus was in fact the long awaited Messiah. Due to his fantastic defense of the faith, there were many that came to know Christ as Savior after Peter's sermon. The church begins growing rapidly. They all pool their resources together ensuring that needs are met and the mission continues.

June 19: Nehemiah 7-8 and Acts 3

When the wall had been rebuilt and the doors were installed, officials were appointed. At that point, the exiles begin returning. We are given an extensive list of the Israelite descendants that return. The text recounts the very low number of Levites returning to Jerusalem.

Ezra reads the Law at the Water Gate instead of the temple. There is speculation that tension existed between Nehemiah and the priests, leading Ezra to meet with Nehemiah away from the temple. Everyone who is able to understand listen intently to the Law. As Ezra reads, the people realize that they have failed in keeping the Festival of Booths. They decide to observe this festival. Their intention is to get right with God. What we are seeing here is a group of people that had been displaced because of their unfaithfulness toward God. They are given the chance to get on the right course and they are doing what they can to live according to God's Law. I like to keep this in mind when reading about the interactions Jesus had during His earthly ministry. I think that might be one of the reasons they approached things with such a legalistic mindset. They were worried they would be displaced again and were doing what they could to prevent it from happening.

In Acts, Peter and John go to the temple to pray at three in the afternoon. This shows us that the disciples continued with the Jewish prayer times and other Jewish customs even though they were followers of Jesus. It is not until later that there is a distinct line drawn between the Jew that believes in Jesus and those that do not believe in Him.

As they are walking, they come across a beggar that is unable to walk. Peter says that he does not have any money to give him. However, he gives him something better. The man is healed and begins praising God. The people in attendance are amazed. Peter then asks why they would be so amazed at what happened. He uses this opportunity to point out Jesus as the Messiah. Peter takes them all the way back to Moses' statement that a prophet like him would come from among their brothers (Deut 18:15-19). All signs point to Jesus as the Messiah. The people here at Solomon's Colonnade should be able to see that.

June 20: Nehemiah 9-11 and Acts 4: 1-22

The people assemble and there is a widespread confession of sin. Notice that they do not just confess their sins, but they confess the sins of their fathers as well. Rather than blame their parents for leading them to sin, they take ownership of what they have done and what their parents had done. They choose to own the problem, rather than placing the problem on someone or something else. Often it is a lot easier to blame our indiscretions on outside forces instead of placing it where it belongs.

The Levites give a run down of the Israelite history. They repeat the account of being freed from Pharaoh. They talk about all of the wonderful things God had done for them in the wilderness. They remind the people that there were some on the exodus that wished to be back in Egypt under oppression. They recount when the Israelites made a false god to worship. Even in their rebellion, God did not abandon them.

The people make a vow to God. They promise that they will not marry women from the surrounding pagan nations. They will not buy or sell on the Sabbath or on any holy days. They will bring the first fruits of their harvest to God every year. Essentially, the people are promising that they will be faithful to God. They will return to the ordinances God gave Moses and the freed Israelites.

In Acts, John and Peter are arrested because of their proclamation of resurrection from the dead and using Christ as an example. They are brought before the Jewish leadership and are questioned. Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and gives an eloquent defense of Christ as the cornerstone and salvation only coming from Him. The leaders realize that both Peter and John were uneducated and untrained, but they gave a great defense. They cannot say anything to retort what Peter is saying. Rather than give any credence to Peter's message, they take the easy way out and decide that they will just forbid people to speak the name of Jesus.

Peter and John will not yield. "Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." Peter and John have the greatest message for the people of Israel, they won't be stopped by the law of men.

June 21: Nehemiah 12- 13 and Acts 4: 23-37

Nehemiah 12 starts with a list of temple personnel. These lists represent the generation after Zerubbabel and Jeshua. When it is time for the wall to be dedicated, they sent for the Levites wherever they lived and brought them to Jerusalem. The singers were gathered. One procession of thanksgiving went to the Dung Gate. The other thanksgiving procession goes past the Tower of the Ovens, above the Gate of Ephraim, by the Old Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, the Tower of the Hundred, the Sheep Gate and stops at the Gate of the Guard.

When the walls had been dedicated, the book of Moses is read publicly. Everyone in Jerusalem is given instruction on what God expects of them. Nehemiah begins to make reforms. Since the Ammonites and Moabites worked against them, they are not allowed to enter the temple.

We read about Eliashib's evil act. He prepared a large room for Tobias where they had previously stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, and the tenths of grain, new wine, and oil. All of these offerings were taken. Nehemiah is quick to point out that this happened while he was gone. He had returned to Artaxerxes when Eliashib did this. Upon his return, Nehemiah rebukes the officials and appoints treasurers over the storehouses to prevent such thievery from happening again. Nehemiah, though he has explained he was not there at the time, still takes some blame for Eliashib's act. He asks that God not erase the deeds that he had done for the temple.

In the New Testament reading, Peter and John are released. They return to the other believers and give the grave news that they are no longer allowed to preach in Jesus' name. Rather than wring their hands and clutch their pearls, they all go to prayer. They pray that God give them boldness in the face of this new opposition.

All of the believers hold everything in common. No one has any want or any need. Barnabas, the son of encouragement, goes so far as to sell a field of his. He takes the proceeds and lays them at the apostles' feet. This money will be used to help the believers meet their mission.