

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.

June 22: Esther 1-3 and Acts 5:1-16

Esther is an interesting book in the fact that God is not mentioned in the narrative. Even though His name is not mentioned, we can see His hand in what happens in the story. To fully understand the purpose of this book, we have to look at the story as a whole.

Ahasuerus is king, ruling over 127 provinces from India to Cush. He was a mighty king. To show off his power, he invited all of his officials and staff, along with the officials from the provinces and the army of Persia and Media. He spared no expense. All of the best food was brought out. He ordered that his wine attendants give the guests as much as they wanted to drink. As the feast went on, Ahasuerus wanted to bring out his wife Queen Vashti to show her off to all of the guests. Vashti is holding a feast of her own and denies the request. This infuriates Ahasuerus and strikes fear in the other officials. If the queen is telling the king no, then what will prevent their wives from telling them no? As we read through Esther, it is important to remember that the social norms and mores were vastly different back then than they are today.

Since Vashti has done this, a decree goes out. The king will search for a new queen. Esther, whose Jewish name is Hadassah, is an orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. He has told her not to let anyone know of her Jewish heritage. Esther was taken into the harem and received oil treatments for six months and then was treated with perfumes and cosmetics for another six months. After a year of these treatments, she finds herself before Ahasuerus. He is taken by her beauty and makes her queen.

Mordecai discovers a plot by two eunuchs to kill the king. He takes this news to Esther. Esther is not only Mordecai's best point of contact to get news to the king, it will also endear her in the heart of the king. The line that it was "recorded in the Historical Record in the king's presence" is important part of the plot because it will later set up Ahasuerus' later discovery that he failed to honor Mordecai.

Haman, son of Hammedatha rises in the ranks. He becomes puffed up and full of himself. He orders that people bow before him and pay him homage. Mordecai does not yield. As a result, Haman will launch a plot to kill not only Mordecai, but all of the Jews.

In the New Testament reading, we read about the unfortunate case of Ananias and Sapphira. Just like Barnabas, they sold some of their property. Unlike Barnabas, they only gave a portion of the money to the mission. This would not have been that big of a deal. No one had said they had to sell their field and give all of the money to God. The reason it becomes a big deal is that they lie about it. They tell the people that they had sold this field for a set price and gave that. If they had said, "We sold this property and are giving 50 percent of it", then it would not have been an issue. They want to look good in front of the people, so they lie about it. They did not realize, they were not just lying to the people, they were lying to God. We cannot hide anything from Him. God knows all and sees all. Ananias and Sapphira both lose their lives because of their dishonesty.

June 23: Esther 4-6 and Acts 5:17-42

With the news that the Jews are to be annihilated, Mordecai mourns. He puts on sackcloth and ashes, went into the middle of the city, and cried loudly. He only went so far, though, because there was a strict order prohibiting people wearing sackcloth from entering the King's Gate. The other Jews mourn fiercely as well. Esther sends clothes to Mordecai, but he refuses them. Instead, he sends a message to Esther, asking her to approach the king on the behalf of their people.

Esther is understandably worried about approaching the king. After all, she became queen because Vashti had refused to dance for the king. Anyone that approaches the king in the inner court, including the queen, that has not been summoned will receive the death penalty. Their lives will only be spared if the king extends the gold scepter.

Mordecai sends word to her that her royal position will not save her in the long run. If she remains silent, then liberation and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place. He leaves her with the understanding that she has been called for such a time as this. After receiving

this message, Esther becomes emboldened and sends word to Mordecai. She asks that he and the rest of the Jews fast for three days for her. She will do the same. After the three days, she will approach the king and if she dies, she dies.

Esther approaches the king. He extends the gold scepter. She does not make a request just yet. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet. Haman is overjoyed at the fact that he has been invited to this little get together. Even in all this happiness, when he comes across Mordecai and receives no bowing or homage from him, rage burns within. He tells his wife about all of the good stuff coming his way, but he is not happy with any of it all because Mordecai will not bow to him. His wife suggests that he build a 75 foot gallows and ask the king to hang Mordecai from it.

That night, the king isn't able to sleep, so he has the Historical Records brought and read to him. The record recounts the instance of Mordecai saving the king's life. When the king asks what they did to honor the man, he learns they did nothing. Haman is the only person in the court at that time of day, so the king asks Haman what should be done to honor a man. Haman thinks the king is asking how he himself should be honored. It is not until he gives his ideas to the king that he learns the pomp and ceremony is intended for his enemy Mordecai. Even when he learns that Mordecai is now over him, Haman does not stop.

In the New Testament reading, the believers are going in and out of jail. A well respected Pharisee by the name of Gamaliel gives them advice. He tells the Sanhedrin that they should leave the movement alone. If this is all being driven by man, then the plan is destined to fail. If the movement is being directed by God, then they will be working against Him.

Gamaliel had great advice, but the Sanhedrin will not listen to it. They are too full of themselves and puffed up with their own pride. The persecution will only get worse for the believers. Despite the opposition, the church will continue to grow. Gamaliel was correct, the movement is from God. If that were not the case, we would not be having this conversation thousands of years later!

June 24: Esther 7-10 and Acts 6

Ahasuerus and Haman go to the Esther's banquet. The king asks Esther what she would like. Whatever it is, he will give it to her. Esther then asks that her people be spared. The king asks who had devised the scheme against the Jews. Esther identifies Haman as the man. The king is so mad that he gets up and leaves. Haman is terrified and begins begging Esther that his life be spared. However, he gets a little too carried away and falls on the couch where she is reclining. The king enters again and interprets Haman's actions as violating the queen. Haman's head is covered and he is hung from the gallows he had built for Mordecai.

Mordecai becomes second only to the king. The Jews then launch military campaigns against their adversaries and take the plunder as spoils of war. In this campaign, all of Haman's sons are killed, ensuring that his blood line ended with them. The Jews are prosperous. Since Mordecai had done so much to preserve the people, he became famous. Even as he continued in his

leadership position, he always sought the good of the people and spoke for their welfare. Mordecai did not use his power to serve himself, he used it to serve others.

In the New Testament reading, an issue arises with the Hellenistic Jewish widows. They have not been receiving their bread like the Hebraic Jewish widows. There was language barrier between the two groups. They Hellenistic widows had not been overlooked on purpose. When the apostles learn about this, they decide to fix it. They tell the people to appoint seven men that are mature and faithful as overseers for the daily distribution. This pleases the people and they select the seven. Of the seven, Steven goes and preaches about Jesus near the Freedmen's Synagogue. These people do not appreciate his message at all. They try to argue his points, but find that they cannot match his wisdom. Rather than accept what Steven is saying, they accuse him of blasphemy.

June 25: Job 1-3 and Acts 7:1-19

Job is one of the oldest books in the Bible. It takes place in the time of the patriarchs. We know this because the measurement of wealth was livestock and servants, not silver or gold. Job is very wealthy. He has seven sons and three daughters.

We read about an assembly in heaven in which Satan is present. God boasts about Job and his faithfulness to Him. The adversary claims that Job is only that way because God has blessed him tremendously. God gives Satan the power over everything Job owns. Job loses everything. He loses his children, he loses his servants, and he loses his livestock. When all of this happens, Job mourns. Even in his mourning, he praises God, proclaiming that God gives and He takes away.

The assembly meets again. The adversary claims Job is only faithful because he has not suffered. So, God gives him the power to harm Job's body. Satan strikes Job with terrible boils. Job is miserable, having to scrape his sores with broken pot shards. His wife sees him in misery and tells him to "Curse God and die." She was not saying this to be insensitive, she legitimately wanted Job to be out of pain.

Job's response is one of faith. Should they only accept the good from God and not the bad? Three friends of Job come to visit him. They barely recognize him. The last little bit of chapter two gives the best example of Christian counseling out there. They come alongside Job and they weep with him. They tear their clothes and throw dust in the air. They do not say a word about what Job is going through. They give him the ministry of presence.

Job, still faithful to God, curses the day he was born. His suffering is that bad.

In the New Testament reading, Steven launches his defense against the charges of blasphemy. He starts at the beginning with Abraham being called to leave his father. He then moves on to Joseph, the brother that had been sold to slavery and became a high ranking official in Pharaoh's court. After Joseph died, a new Pharaoh came that did not know what Joseph had done, so he dealt deceitfully with the Israelites. This Pharaoh tried to kill off the Israelites by killing off the newborn babies.

June 26: Job 4-6 and Acts 7:20-43

Earlier we mentioned that Job's friends gave a great lesson on pastoral care during his time of anguish. They sit with him in the pile and are present with him without offering any words. Unfortunately, that silence and "ministry of presence" only lasted so long. We see that there is an awkward silence that drives Eliphaz to speak. He opens his mouth, but words of condolences or comfort do not come out. Instead, he tells Job that his hope is in his piety and in God's punishment.

Essentially, Eliphaz is stating that Job had clearly done something to earn God's wrath. He assumes that Job has lost everything because he had done something wrong. Job had been a very pious man. He was still pious. He has not cursed God or the situation he is in. However, his close friend now looks to him and makes the accusation of sin. That is the last thing that Job needed. He is already down and doesn't know why all of this is happening to him. Now one of his friends accuses him of being the root to his troubles.

As a society, we do not like silence. It seems that there is always something filling the void. Sometimes, it is better for us to remain silent when confronted about things or when we are trying to help people out. Words might fill the void, but if they are the wrong kind, then they will work against us. It is better to remain quiet than say the wrong thing. Two things that don't come back to us are the stones we throw and the words once they are out of our lips.

Job responds that his hope is neither in his piety or God's punishment. Instead, his hope is in the day he dies. He feels so bad that he is ready for it all to end.

In the New Testament reading, Stephen continues his defense against the blasphemy charge. He now reminds the people of Moses and how he left Egypt after killing an Egyptian and being confronted about the murder by an Israelite. Stephen recounts when Moses was sent by God to free the Israelites. He also reminds them of how the Israelites completely abandoned Yahweh and chased after false gods after they were freed.

June 27 Job 7-9 and Acts 7: 44-60

Job continues his defense against Eliphaz. However, we see that Job begins asking God why all of this tragedy has come down on him. One thing I love about the book of Job is how Job asks these questions of The LORD. He maintains his faith, but he questions why. He wants to know what sin it was that he committed that caused him to fall out of favor. This shows us the relationship Job had with God. He had no problem going and griping about the situation. In life, sometimes we are going to get knocked down. Sometimes things are going to hurt and it just won't make sense. It is okay to question why. We will not always get an answer right away. Sometimes we will never get the answer.

Now Bildad speaks up. He contends that Job had to have done something. Bildad argues that God killed Job's kids because they had sinned against Him during their last gathering. Bildad is asking Job to confess his sin so that he can be restored. He explains what it is like to be an unbeliever. This person leans on his own understanding. The unrighteous person does well and

thrives when things are good. However, if they are plunged into bad times, they quickly become miserable.

Job responds that Bildad is correct, but he has a problem. Job cannot take God to court. It would be impossible to stand justified before Him! That's the awesome thing about knowing Christ. He makes us so that we are justified before The LORD. We cannot do it ourselves, we are completely reliant on Him.

In Acts, Stephen finishes up his defense. He talks about the temple that David dreamed up and Solomon completed. The temple was vitally important to the Israelites. However, God was not contained to the temple. He was not limited to that man made building. Instead, He goes well beyond the temple. Heaven is His throne, the earth is His footstool. Stephen gives them one of the harshest insults a person could receive back then. He calls them all stiff necked and uncircumcised. At this, the men rage against Stephen. They stone the man. Even in his execution, Stephen remains filled with the Holy Spirit. He looks to the heavens and sees Christ at the right hand of the Father. The people scream, trying to drown out Stephen's voice. Even as the rocks continued raining down on him, Stephen asks that God forgive them for what they are doing. Stephen dies well for The LORD.

June 28: Job 10–12 and Acts 8: 1-25

Job continues speaking in his anguish. He cries of the bitterness in his soul. He boldly proclaims that he will ask God why he is being prosecuted and why it is good for God to oppress him. Job continues on with his pity party, expressing his desire to have never been born. He is struggling with this affliction, trying to make it make sense.

Zophar, another friend, speaks up and asks how long Job is going to speak foolishly. He asks if Job can fathom the depths of God or His limits. God is God and He can do what He wants to do. If He wants to throw someone in prison and lift someone else up, then that is His prerogative.

Job responds to Zophar's speech with hostility. He explains that he is not inferior to Zophar. Everyone knows what Zophar is talking about. Of course, God can do what He wants to do. The life of everything is in His hand. Job goes on to explain that wisdom is found with the elderly and understanding comes with long life.

I do not enjoy getting older. The only thing I enjoy about getting older is that I can look back on my life and see where God's hand was in it. There have been times that it seemed like God was taking me down a path toward one thing. In one particular instance, the path I thought we were on took a vastly different route. As I look back on that tumultuous time, I thank God that He brought me where He did rather than sending me where I thought I wanted to go. It's a wonderful thing to look back on my life and see how all the detours brought me to where I am today. The challenge is to look for His hand in everything we are going through, in good times or in bad.

In Acts, Saul is now identified as the lead persecutor. He becomes feared within Judea and the believers scatter. The Word starts to spread. There was a man in Samaria named Simon that had

done magic tricks for the Samaritans. Philip comes to Samaria and does even greater things than Simon. Simon wants to have the same power as Philip, so he goes and asks how much he needs to pay them to give him the Holy Spirit. Peter confronts Simon for his sin. Simon's sin was not that he wanted the Holy Spirit. Instead, the sinfulness was in his motive. He wanted the Holy Spirit to give himself clout. He was not interested in serving God. Instead, he wanted to use God for his own gain.