

Read Through the Bible

Week 25: June 21st – 26th

Readings: Nehemiah 9-13; Esther 1-10; Job 1-5; Acts 4-7:43

Presented by Dee Isham

When I first saw that my assignment was going to be covering 4 different books of the Bible, I figured that it would be disjointed. After reading about the main characters in each of the four books, however, I found a couple of common threads linking them all together. The three words that kept coming to mind over and over were courage, perseverance and prayer. This reminded me of one of my favorite sayings: “Courage is fear that has said its prayers.” ...and that is precisely what these people did.

Nehemiah - was a Jewish leader who undertook the daunting task of rebuilding the Jerusalem wall that had been destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians. **Zerubable** - led the rebuilding of the temple project and the priest, **Ezra** - led the spiritual renewal of the Jewish people. Thus the Jews re-established their homeland after 70 years of exile. None of this could have been accomplished if the Jewish people under these men’s leading hadn’t fasted, prayed for lengthy periods of times and confessed their sins to God.

Queen Esther - fasted and prayed with her fellow Jews for 3 days and nights. Then she had the courage to break the law by going into King Xerxes presence without being summoned to plead her case. In doing so she took the chance of being put to death. Esther did it any way in order to save her people from total annihilation by yet another unjust law and evil plot to destroy God’s children. Est. 4:14 (NIV) Esther said, “If I perish, I perish”

Job - was tested by Satan. God allowed Satan to do with this righteous man as he wished as long as he did not kill him. Satan did his best to provoke Job into blaming God for all the horrible things that happened to him and his family. Even his wife and friends chastised Job. Instead, Job cried out to God in prayer and was given the courage to suffer through all of the trials Satan had used to destroy him. Job 1:22 (NIV) “In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrong doing.”

Peter, John and Stephen - were willing to be persecuted in order to continue to proclaim the Good News of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter and John

had the courage to say this in front of the Jewish priests Annas and Caiaphas (the very ones who had been instrumental in Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion). Even after being beaten and imprisoned, they continued to boldly confess Jesus as Lord as Savior. Stephen would gave up his life for the privilege of proclaiming the Good News.

Acts 4:25-26 “...Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain? The Kings of the earth take their stand and rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.” *Note: This is the prayer of confidence all believers in Christ have in times of trial.*

Introduction excerpts are from The Message// Remix translation by Eugene Peterson

“It seems odd that the awareness of God, or even of the people of God., brings out the worst in some people. God, the source of all goodness and blessing and joy, at times becomes the occasion for nearly unimaginable acts of cruelty, atrocity, and evil.”

“There is a long history of killing men and women simply because they are perceived as reminders or representatives of the living God, as if killing people who worship God gets rid of God himself. We’ve recently completed a century marked by an extraordinary frenzy of “god” killings. To no one’s surprise, God is still alive and present.”

“The book of Esther opens a window on this world of violence directed, whether openly or covertly, against God and God’s people.” ...”No matter how many of them (*us*) you kill, you can’t get rid of the communities of God-honoring, God-serving, God-worshiping people scattered all over the earth. This is still the final and definitive word.”

For me, this whole issue hits very close to home. I was born in 1944 and contracted Polio in 1946. If I had been born a couple of years earlier and in Germany rather than America, I would probably not be alive to write this. Praise be to God, I am.

As I read the story in the book of Nehemiah I was reminded of God’s persistent and never ending love

and mercy on his “stiff-necked” people no matter how often we turn our back on Him. The stories about Esther, Job, Peter, John and Stephen are all ones that present us with this complicated question: If God is good and all powerful, then why does He allow such evil in the world? I found what was for me two satisfactory answers in The Apologetics Study Bible - edited by Ted Cabal:

“First, we can figure out reasons that God might have for many (perhaps most) of the evils in the world. For example, both human freedom and a stable, cause-effect universe are necessary for any meaningful action. Meaningful action, then, may be a reason that God allows various kinds of evil. Second, it is reasonable to think that God will have reasons that we cannot grasp for allowing evils in our lives. In fact, to think that we should be able to figure out God’s reasons for allowing every case of evil implies that we think God is not much smarter than we are. If God is the almighty creator of the universe, there will be evil the reason for which we cannot discern.”

Introduction to Esther **By Eugene Peterson**

It seems odd that the awareness of God, or even of the people of God, brings out the worst in some people. God, the source of all goodness and blessing and joy, at times becomes the occasion for nearly unimaginable acts of cruelty, atrocity, and evil.

There is a long history of killing men and women simply because they are perceived as reminders or representatives of the living God, as if killing people who worship God gets rid of God himself. We’ve recently completed a century marked by an extraordinary frenzy of such “god” killings. To no one’s surprise, God is still alive and present.

The Book of Esther opens a window on this world of violence directed, whether openly or covertly, against God and God’s people. The perspective it provides transcends the occasion that provoked it, a nasty scheme to massacre all the exiled Jews who lived in the vast expanse of fifth-century b.c. Persia.

Three characters shape the plot. Mordecai, identified simply as “the Jew,” anchors the story. He is solid, faithful, sane, godly. His goodness is more than matched by the evil and arrogant vanity of Haman, who masterminds the planned massacre. Mordecai’s young, orphaned, and ravishing cousin, Esther, whom he has

Questions to ponder:

Like Job, do you feel you have ever been tested through suffering?

Would you be willing to proclaim the Gospel message even if persecuted?

Do you think we are in any danger today of being persecuted for our faith?

Has God ever asked you to do something outside your comfort zone?

Have you ever asked God for the courage to do something that would glorify him?

(I confess it takes a bit of courage for me just to be able to invite someone to church.)

Prayer = Holy Spirit driven power = Courage

raised, emerges from the shadows of the royal harem to take on the title role.

It turns out that no God-representing men and women get killed in this story—in a dramatic turnaround, the plot fails. But millions before and after Esther have been and, no doubt, will continue to be killed. There is hardly a culture or century that doesn’t eventually find a Haman determined to rid the world of evidence and reminders of God. Meanwhile, Esther continues to speak the final and definitive word: You can’t eliminate God’s people. No matter how many of them you kill, you can’t get rid of the communities of God-honoring, God-serving, God-worshiping people scattered all over the earth. This is still the final and definitive word.

Introduction to Job **By Eugene Peterson**

Job suffered. His name is synonymous with suffering. He asked, “Why?” He asked, “Why me?” And he put his questions to God. He asked his questions persistently, passionately, and eloquently. He refused to take silence for an answer. He refused to take clichés for an answer. He refused to let God off the hook. Job did not take his sufferings quietly or piously. He disdained going for a second opinion to outside

physicians or philosophers. Job took his stance before God, and there he protested his suffering, protested mightily.

It is not only because Job suffered that he is important to us. It is because he suffered in the same ways that we suffer—in the vital areas of family, personal health, and material things. Job is also important to us because he searchingly questioned and boldly protested his suffering. Indeed, he went "to the top" with his questions.

It is not suffering as such that troubles us. It is undeserved suffering.

Almost all of us in our years of growing up have the experience of disobeying our parents and getting punished for it. When that discipline was connected with wrongdoing, it had a certain sense of justice to it: When we do wrong, we get punished.

One of the surprises as we get older, however, is that we come to see that there is no real correlation between the amount of wrong we commit and the amount of pain we experience. An even larger surprise is that very often there is something quite the opposite: We do right and get knocked down. We do the best we are capable of doing, and just as we are reaching out to receive our reward we are hit from the blind side and sent reeling.

This is the suffering that first bewilders and then outrages us. This is the kind of suffering that bewildered and outraged Job, for Job was doing everything right when suddenly everything went wrong. And it is this kind of suffering to which Job gives voice when he protests to God.

Job gives voice to his sufferings so well, so accurately and honestly, that anyone who has ever suffered—which includes every last one of us—can recognize his or her personal pain in the voice of Job. Job says boldly what some of us are too timid to say. He makes poetry out of what in many of us is only a tangle of confused whimpers. He shouts out to God what a lot of us mutter behind our sleeves. He refuses to accept the role of a defeated victim. It is also important to note what Job does not do, lest we expect something from him that he does not intend. Job does not curse God as his wife suggests he should do, getting rid of the problem by getting rid of God. But neither does Job explain suffering. He does not instruct us in how to live so that we can avoid suffering. Suffering is a mystery, and Job comes to respect the mystery.

In the course of facing, questioning, and respecting suffering, Job finds himself in an even larger mystery—

the mystery of God. Perhaps the greatest mystery in suffering is how it can bring a person into the presence of God in a state of worship, full of wonder, love, and praise. Suffering does not inevitably do that, but it does it far more often than we would expect. It certainly did that for Job. Even in his answer to his wife he speaks the language of an uncharted irony, a dark and difficult kind of truth: "We take the good days from God—why not also the bad days?"

But there is more to the book of Job than Job. There are Job's friends. The moment we find ourselves in trouble of any kind—sick in the hospital, bereaved by a friend's death, dismissed from a job or relationship, depressed or bewildered—people start showing up telling us exactly what is wrong with us and what we must do to get better. Sufferers attract fixers the way roadkills attract vultures. At first we are impressed that they bother with us and amazed at their facility with answers. They know so much! How did they get to be such experts in living?

More often than not, these people use the Word of God frequently and loosely. They are full of spiritual diagnosis and prescription. It all sounds so hopeful. But then we begin to wonder, "Why is it that for all their apparent compassion we feel worse instead of better after they've said their piece?"

The book of Job is not only a witness to the dignity of suffering and God's presence in our suffering but is also our primary biblical protest against religion that has been reduced to explanations or "answers." Many of the answers that Job's so-called friends give him are technically true. But it is the "technical" part that ruins them. They are answers without personal relationship, intellect without intimacy. The answers are slapped onto Job's ravaged life like labels on a specimen bottle. Job rages against this secularized wisdom that has lost touch with the living realities of God.

In every generation there are men and women who pretend to be able to instruct us in a way of life that guarantees that we will be "healthy, wealthy, and wise." According to the propaganda of these people, anyone who lives intelligently and morally is exempt from suffering. From their point of view, it is lucky for us that they are now at hand to provide the intelligent and moral answers we need.

On behalf of all of us who have been misled by the platitudes of the nice people who show up to tell us everything is going to be just all right if we simply think such-and-such and do such-and-such, Job issues

an anguished rejoinder. He rejects the kind of advice and teaching that has God all figured out, that provides glib explanations for every circumstance. Job's honest defiance continues to be the best defense against the clichés of positive thinkers and the prattle of religious small talk.

The honest, innocent Job is placed in a setting of immense suffering and then surrounded by the conventional religious wisdom of the day in the form of speeches by Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. The contrast is unforgettable. The counselors methodically and pedantically recite their bookish precepts to Job. At first Job rages in pain and roars out his protests, but then he becomes silent in awestruck faith before God, who speaks from out of a storm—a "whirlwind" of Deity. Real faith cannot be reduced to spiritual bromides and merchandised in success stories. It is refined in the fires and the storms of pain.

The book of Job does not reject answers as such. There is content to biblical religion. It is the secularization of answers that is rejected—answers severed from their Source, the living God, the Word that both batters us and heals us. We cannot have truth about God divorced from the mind and heart of God.

In our compassion, we don't like to see people suffer. And so our instincts are aimed at preventing and alleviating suffering. No doubt that is a good impulse. But if we really want to reach out to others who are suffering, we should be careful not to be like Job's friends, not to do our "helping" with the presumption that we can fix things, get rid of them, or make them "better." We may look at our suffering friends and imagine how they could have better marriages, better-behaved children, better mental and emotional health. But when we rush in to fix suffering, we need to keep in mind several things.

First, no matter how insightful we may be, we don't really understand the full nature of our friends' problems. Second, our friends may not want our advice. Third, the ironic fact of the matter is that more often than not, people do not suffer less when they are committed to following God, but more. When these people go through suffering, their lives are often transformed, deepened, marked with beauty and holiness, in remarkable ways that could never have been anticipated before the suffering.

So, instead of continuing to focus on preventing suffering—which we simply won't be very successful at anyway—perhaps we should begin entering the suffering, participating insofar as we are able—entering the mystery and looking around for God. In other words, we need to quit feeling sorry for people who suffer and instead look up to them, learn from them, and—if they will let us—join them in protest and prayer. Pity can be nearsighted and condescending; shared suffering can be dignifying and life-changing. As we look at Job's suffering and praying and worshiping, we see that he has already blazed a trail of courage and integrity for us to follow.

But sometimes it's hard to know just how to follow Job's lead when we feel so alone in our suffering, unsure of what God wants us to do. What we must realize during those times of darkness is that the God who appeared to Job in the whirlwind is calling out to all of us. Although God may not appear to us in a vision, he makes himself known to us in all the many ways that he describes to Job—from the macro to the micro, from the wonders of the galaxies to the little things we take for granted. He is the Creator of the unfathomable universe all around us—and he is also the Creator of the universe inside of us. And so we gain hope—not from the darkness of our suffering, not from pat answers in books, but from the God who sees our suffering and shares our pain.

Reading Job prayerfully and meditatively leads us to face the questions that arise when our lives don't turn out the way we expect them to. First we hear all the stock answers. Then we ask the questions again, with variations—and hear the answers again, with variations. Over and over and over. Every time we let Job give voice to our own questions, our suffering gains in dignity and we are brought a step closer to the threshold of the voice and mystery of God. Every time we persist with Job in rejecting the quick-fix counsel of people who see us and hear us but do not understand us, we deepen our availability and openness to the revelation that comes only out of the tempest. The mystery of God eclipses the darkness and the struggle. We realize that suffering calls our lives into question, not God's. The tables are turned: God-Alive is present to us. God is speaking to us. And so Job's experience is confirmed and repeated once again in our suffering and our vulnerable humanity.