

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Ezra 8:21-23, 31-32

Lesson Title: Fasting and Praying

Introduction

Twenty-three years after the first group of exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity, the temple was completed and dedicated to the Lord. The first Passover since King Josiah's reign was observed, after more than a hundred years without celebrating that great event. The long road home was not an easy road to travel. It was only by God's grace that the exiles made it back safely and once again lived and worshipped in their homeland.

In Ezra 7, Artaxerxes is king. The year is 458 B.C., some eighty years after the first group of exiles returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple. The smaller group of exiles led by Ezra returned home later. We are told three times in Ezra 7 that *"the hand of the LORD his God"* was upon him (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28). God had equipped Ezra with everything he needed to lead God's people. Ezra's *"had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments"* (Ezra 7:10). Since Ezra was *"a ready scribe"* (Ezra 7:6) it would have been possible for him to copy the Scriptures, be exposed to them every day, and thereby apply them to his life. Ezra wasn't satisfied with just being around the truth he wanted the truth to affect him and those he led. He wanted those who returned to Jerusalem to do more than just return home. He wanted them to return spiritually to the Lord.

Ezra 8 opens with a list of those who returned to Jerusalem with Ezra (Ezra 8:1-14). This list consists of the major heads of the families, *"chief of their fathers"* (Ezra 8:1) as well as the numbers of those who returned with them. Most of the people who returned with Ezra were relatives of the families who had previously returned with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2). The chapter also records the details of the exiles journey back to Jerusalem and their arrival in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:15-36).

Our lesson text focuses on Ezra's character as a leader and how he wanted to make sure the return home was safe and successful. Ezra tells us, *"I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi"* (Ezra 8:1). Ezra, like the people, must have been eager to return to Jerusalem

but he was very careful to make all the necessary preparations. Preparation time is not wasted time! The "*three days*" (Ezra 8:1) they camped near the river was time well spent in organization and planning.

Fasting and Praying, Preparation at the Start of the Journey (Ezra 8:21-23)

Ezra was about to lead a group of nearly 2,000 people across 900 miles of desert for approximately four months. He not only had the responsibility of the people but he was also carrying an enormous treasure of "*...six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents; Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold*" (Ezra 8:26-27). Although Ezra and his group were not large in number, they were large enough and carrying enough treasure to draw the attention of thieves and robbers. The dangers of the journey were just as great for a few thousand as they were if they had been millions in number.

Maybe you are of the opinion that you are just one Christian in the midst of this vast world and that you are not so important as to draw the attention of the enemy. Maybe you think your small church or your little Sunday school class is not that valuable and that the enemy wouldn't waste his time to attack you. And maybe you think your marriage and your little home is so small and insignificant that you are not vulnerable or susceptible to the dangers larger or more prominent families face. No matter how small or insignificant you may appear to be you are valuable and precious to the Lord and the kingdom work of Christ. You are carrying an enormous treasure that must be protected and presented at the end of life's journey. All of us need to "seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance."

Verse 21

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance."

Because Ezra recognized the importance and seriousness of what he was about to do, he "proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava." Why did Ezra "fast?" "Fasting" is self-denial. When someone "fasts" they do without food, water, or some other necessity of life to express their dependence upon the Lord. "Fasting" is biblical and is still beneficial today. Sometimes the child of God should intentionally do without certain things in order to spend time with God. You can do without food or water which is the usually form of fasting found in the Bible.

However, in such a busy culture as ours, "fasting," or "intentionally doing without" normal daily routines that take up so much of our time is a form of "fasting" as well. Instead of spending an hour a day on Facebook you could "fast" the first fifteen minutes of that time and spend it with the Lord. Do without your favorite food or certain habit or routine and devote that time to prayer and reading God's Word. God honors true sincere "fasting" (Exodus 34:28; 1 Samuel 7:6; Psalm 35:13; 69:10; Isaiah 58:3; Jeremiah 14:12; Daniel 10:3; Zechariah 7:5; Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 4:1-2; Acts 9:9; Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

Knowing the seriousness of the journey that lay ahead for Ezra and the people, he "proclaimed" or called for a refrain from the normal activities of life in order to focus on calling upon the Lord for safety. This "fast" took place "at the river of Ahava" which is a location in the vicinity of Babylon. While they were camped there, Ezra "proclaimed" this fast. As one of the spiritual leaders of the people he had the right to call upon the people to refrain from eating "that we might afflict ourselves before our God." "Afflict" means "to be busy with or to be occupied with." It was Ezra's conviction that the people needed a time of deliberate self-denial and a giving of themselves to nothing but prayer and seeking God's direction and guidance.

Note: It should be remembered that unlike Moses, Ezra had no pillar of cloud by day or fire by night to lead him. But he could fast and pray!

"To seek of him a right way for us" is a reference to "a direct road" or, "a prosperous and unimpeded journey." It is clear Ezra looked to Jehovah and not the earthly kings to guide them safely home. Ezra wanted to get to Jerusalem safely for many reason but mainly because he had "little ones" and "substance." The children and the treasure were very important and only God could be trusted with both.

It is very tempting to trust our own wisdom and travel through life without stopping and seeking God's guidance. Maybe you are confident that you can make it in life without stopping and seeking God's help. Think about your "little ones" and your "substance." Think about the dangers and the difficulties that life can bring. Is it asking too much for you to follow Ezra's example and renounce your dependence upon anyone and anything but God? Do you think you can get your little family safely to the end of life without "fasting" and "prayer?" Is it more helpful to read self-help books or spend time with the Lord? Which is more valuable, listening to people or listening to the Lord?

Verse 22

"For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him."

By not asking King Artaxerxes for a military escort, Ezra was demonstrating great trust and dependence upon the Lord. When Nehemiah led his group home he accepted the king's offer for a military escort. Perhaps since Nehemiah was formally the king's cup bearer he wouldn't take no for an answer (Nehemiah 2:9). But with Ezra, he "was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way." Ezra had such confidence in the Lord to protect and provide that he would have personally been embarrassed to have asked the king for protection. He states such "because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him."

We should admire Ezra for testifying and showing his faith and confidence in God. Often we do not give God a chance to show His power. The Apostle Paul said, *"And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me"* (2 Corinthians 12:9). Truly Ezra and his group were weak and vulnerable to "the enemy in the way." That "enemy" may have been some of the Arab tribes, who owed no allegiance to anyone. They probably just lived off of traveling caravans and anyone who came across their paths.

Ezra's words to the king should not be taken as bragging or boasting in his faith. He simply stated to the king what he believed God was able to do and then confident enough to prove it. He also wanted the king to know that God's "power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him." These words are a powerful reminder that it is always dangerous to interfere or work against the will of God. History has proven Ezra was right!

Verse 23

"So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us."

"So we fasted" means Ezra and God's people literally did without food and spent the time they would normally have spent eating talking and praying to the Lord. As Ezra penned these words years later, his heart must have been overwhelmed as he thought about those days of seeking God's face. He no doubt remembered his

stomach growling when it was time to eat but instead he slipped away somewhere and begin to pray.

"Besought" means "to seek, desire, request." "For this" is two simple and seemingly insignificant words, yet, they represent the very heart of the life of Ezra and God's people. Think about these two words, "for this." They prayed "for this." Ezra was not the first to use these two precious words in prayer and he would not be the last. Hannah testified, *"For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him"* (1 Samuel 1:27). Hannah's "for this" was a male son named Samuel. God granted her request and gave her a son and Israel a prophet. The Apostle Paul testified, *"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me"* (2 Corinthians 12:8). Paul's "for this" was a thorn in the flesh which God never removed but give grace to Paul to live with it.

Ezra's "for this" was protection and a safe journey home. Ezra's testimony was, "he was intreated of us." Ezra simply said, "God heard and He listened."

Question: Do you have a "for this" in your life? Maybe the "for this" is the need for answers to some of life most difficult questions. Maybe "for this" is the need of a pastor. Maybe "for this" is like Ezra, the need for direction, protection and guidance. Whatever the "for this" may be in your life, God will be "intreated" of you. He will hear. Keep praying "for this."

Fasting and Praying, Presentation at the End of the Journey (Ezra 8:31-32)

Ezra 8:24-30 records the heart of this story as Ezra is given the enormous treasure to take back to Jerusalem. The returning exiles were not poor. God had blessed His people even in their captivity. Add to that the offering of the Persians (Ezra 7:15-17) and you can safely say the exiles were returning home with a great treasure.

As Ezra leaves he weighs out of the treasury the exact amount or value of what he is carrying home (Ezra 8:23-29). When he arrives in Jerusalem at the end of his journey he must weigh in the treasure again (Ezra 8:33-36). God expects us to show up at the end with what we had at the beginning. That will never happen without fasting and prayer.

Verse 31

"Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way."

Ezra and his group "departed" or left Babylon *"upon the first day of the first month"* (Ezra 7:9) and they "departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month" or the same month. Since they were camped at the "river of Ahava...three days" (Ezra 8:15), they were about nine days' travel from Babylon, perhaps 100-130 miles away.

"The hand of our God was upon us" indicates that Ezra and the people sensed God's protection and guidance throughout their journey (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22). Ezra does not record the details of the journey as one might expect. He just states, "The hand of our God was upon us." It reminds us of one line of Fanny Crosby's great hymn, "All the Way My Savior Leads Me" when she wrote, "This my song through endless ages, Jesus led me all the way." What more needs to be said?

"He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way" is another simple declaration of God's protection. This statement confirms that "The hand of our God was upon us." Again, Ezra doesn't give details of enemies they might have seen or dangers they barely avoided. He just states the facts.

Think about all the enemies and dangers that "lay in wait by the way" over a 900 miles journey. And yet, Ezra doesn't name a single event. He just magnifies the fact that "The hand of our God was upon us." That's trust! That's faith! That's confidence in Almighty God!

Verse 32

"And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days."

After the long hard journey a "three day" rest was welcomed when Ezra and the people "came to Jerusalem." The dates given for their departure and arrival based on our calendar today meant they left in April and arrived in August. They certainly needed the "three days" of rest. On the *"fourth day"* (Ezra 8:33), Ezra weighed the treasures in at the house of God and took care of the business at hand (Ezra 8:34-36).

"We came to Jerusalem" are not just words of destination reached. "We came" reminds us that without God's providence, provision, and protection, they would have never been given the freedom to come. "We came" reminds us that this was God's plan and purpose for His children to return to their homeland (Ezra 1:3).

"To Jerusalem" means they were home. The word "Jerusalem" is used 48 times in the book of Ezra and is a special word for a special people in a special place. Since God's call of Abraham in the book of Genesis, the Jews have been and remain a special people. Jerusalem is also a special place in the past, present, and in the future. To read the word "Jerusalem" is to think of a reunited people together at home. It was fasting and prayer that made it possible for Ezra and God's people to "come to Jerusalem." They were now back home where they belonged.

Conclusion

After seventy years of captivity and months of preparation and travel, Ezra and the exiles finally arrived at home. It is both encouraging and challenging to see the way Ezra prepared himself and God's people for the journey back to Jerusalem. We can only guess at the dangers and difficulties involved in the four-month, nine hundred-mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.

If Ezra had written a detailed diary or travel journal we might have been fascinated with his description of sand storms, winds, Arab bandits on the horizon, or the looks of fear in the eyes of the children. That would have made for interesting reading and no doubt some powerful sermons and Sunday school lessons. But in God's plan He told Ezra to write, "I proclaimed a fast...to seek of him a right way" and "So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us." He also told Ezra to write, "The hand of our God was upon us" and "We came to Jerusalem."

Ezra wrote simple words and omitted a lot of details about the journey. But he wrote exactly the information you and I need to make it home!

Don't forget to fast and pray.

Amen.