

Prayer and Fasting

Ezra 8:1-23

I hope you come this afternoon with the expectation of something helpful and encouraging from God's word, despite the awareness that we are in the midst of the book of Ezra, studying a chapter which begins with a genealogy of those exiles who returned with Ezra to the land of Israel in order to rebuild the nation. There is far more for us here than merely a list of very hard-to-pronounce Hebrew names with very specific numbers for each family. Rest assured, I don't expect you to remember how many people came back from which tribe. There has to be more for us today than that raw data.

But if I were going to give you a test on what you remembered, this would be the main question on that test. Why did these people return to Israel? Why did God go to such great lengths to tell us who they are and how many there were of them? And the answer is this. They came back to Israel to build God's house. And,

I. THE WORK OF GOD'S HOUSE IS ALL-IMPORTANT.

The tribes were all represented. The people were all numbered. They were God's people, coming back to build God's house. And they walked by faith. They trusted God. They depended upon God. And all the while, they knew and understood the chief priority. God's house.

Now, to put it in that context makes it so easily applicable to our own circumstances, and that emphasis is particularly appropriate for us, for the work of God's house today remains all important. Consider what Paul writes to the Gentile believers in Ephesus regarding joining with the household of God's people known as Israel in the Old Covenant.

Eph. 2:19 "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

God's house, the temple, is the church. God's dwelling place now is the church. And the temple of God is now called the body of Christ. And we all are members of that body. So this list of families, this list of tribes, is the membership roll of the Old Covenant church. But Ezra noticed a glaring deficiency.

v.15

There were no sons of Levi. No temple workers, none from the priestly tribe. None. That is astounding.

A. The lack of temple workers was a glaring deficiency among those who left Babylon.

Ezra set out to do something about it.

v.16-17

Send us ministers! Servants, as that word is often translated. Ezra couldn't go back to Israel without enough ministers in the house of God. He wouldn't go back without enough workers for the temple, for the restoration of the worship of God in the temple of God was the first and most important priority.

Not enough workers in the church! Have you ever heard of that before? Surely that problem still plagues the church of our day, and Ezra's dilemma is a very contemporary one. Typically, the people who produce statistical evaluations of churches will generally say that in any given church 20% of the people do 80%

of the work. And since, in the New Covenant, we are all priests, that reflects upon the whole church. 20% of the people do 80% of the work.

But that's not how God has designed his church to operate. Paul defines my job as one of equipping the saints for works of service. In the words of Ephesians 4, the pastor/teacher is,

Eph. 4:12 "...for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting."

Similarly,

1 Cor. 12:4 "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all."

So we as a church don't really need any more consumers! We don't need to market the church to attract consumers who want to purchase their favorite product at the best bargain. Rather, we need to recruit workers. We need to be in the recruiting business, recruiting those who will join the labor force.

With one other related thought. It is easy to get deceived into forgetting that our most important work that we do is the work of offering our sacrifices of worship. Too often, I think people get caught up trying to identify their "ministry" in the church, when your most important "ministry" is right here, right now, together. So you are all ministers, you are all doing ministry, when you

gather together with the body as we, together, offer our sacrifices to God. Please don't overlook or diminish the importance of that ministry, that corporate ministry we perform as a body. That is the priority for God's people, in the day of Ezra and in this present day.

But let's not stop there in Ezra. Look at,
v.18-20

Again, to state the obvious in very general terms that apply to us as well,

B. God's good hand of providence will provide workers for his house.

Ezra knew the reality of the situation. God's good hand was upon them. God's good hand provided them temple servants. And we can see that same blessing within our own congregation. We can see the abundance of evidence of God's good hand in providing workers in the church. Just in the past four months, family after family have joined our fellowship. We see that hand of God so clearly in our congregation, God's good hand of providence. God's good hand.

In churches, new people should be viewed as evidence of God's good hand. But sometimes they are seen and perceived as a threat, after all, new people always bring with them the threat of change. New people always bring with them new ideas, perhaps different ways of doing things, and in some churches, at some times, that is not welcomed. There is a fear all those new people will take over. As a result, sometimes new people are not made to feel welcome at all. Sometimes they are shunned. Sometimes despised. Or bullied into conformity to the status quo.

With what I believe is a very objective honesty, I don't believe

that is a typical problem in this church, and I'm thankful for that. Generally, I don't think new people can immediately identify those who have been here for years and years distinct from those who might have been here only a few months. That is good, an indication of health and vitality within any church. But please don't take that for granted. God's good hand of providence will provide workers for this house, and rejoice when he does. And pray that he will!

In fact, to follow Ezra's example, not only pray for God's blessing upon the church, but exercise that spiritual discipline we call fasting. Ezra shows to us,

II. THE VALUE OF FASTING.

v.21

Then, v.23

Fasting means going without food. But why? And what is the spiritual benefit? What is the reason why fasting is included in the disciplines of the Christian life? It was practiced here in the Old Covenant, and Jesus would later teach his disciples about fasting with presumption that they would practice it.

Mat. 6:16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

"When you fast..." Those words are clear, aren't they? Not "if..." No sense of an optional activity or even something extremely rare or unusual, but something of the ordinary expression of the Christian life. "When you fast..."

Jesus, of course, had to correct the negative practices of the Pharisees, who were showing off. Trying to prove how spiritual they were. And his words are plain. But what is the positive function and purpose of fasting? Ezra teaches us something rather clearly.

A. Fasting is an outward effort to express humble dependence upon the Lord.

Just look at the words,

v.21

Fasting is an acting of humbling yourself before God. That's obvious, isn't it? For a period of time, maybe a full day, maybe a full 40 days, but for a defined period of time, you don't depend upon food for the sustenance of your life. You depend upon God.

Obviously, that is temporary. Food is necessary. And eating is good, with all your food to be received with thanksgiving as a gift of God. But fasting cuts into that normal, ordinary existence. Fasting is a way to live out what it means to humble yourself before God in order to depend upon him. The theory is well described by the words of,

Deut. 8:2 "And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD."

Fasting is an opportunity to live out that reality. "Man shall not live by bread alone." Or as Jesus puts it,

Mat. 6:25 "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life,

what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?...31 “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

That’s what fasting does. That’s what fasting is. A tangible occasion to seek first the kingdom of God. Literally, externally. For a defined period of time, you will so depend upon God that you will not even eat. And, secondly, along with that,

B. Fasting is an outward effort to intensify our attempt to seek God’s guidance.

So fasting never happens alone, by itself. In the New Testament especially, it is always “prayer and fasting.” As it was for Ezra,
v.21b

When they needed a greater emphasis upon prayer, they called for a fast. You and I can do the same thing today. And so can we together, as a church. It might be a time of a significant decision that you face. It might be a time of particular struggle or spiritual battle. It might be an occasion of a noteworthy turning point in your life. Those are all very appropriate times to fast.

And I would urge you to do so. This ought to be something of a normal experience for the Christian. Not “twice a week,” like the Pharisees. I don’t even think any regular schedule is helpful,

such as the Lenten season practiced by some churches prior to Easter. Unfortunately, the Lenten season tends to stimulate two particularly obnoxious forms of sinful behavior. One is the self-righteousness of trying to make yourself look good and more spiritual in the eyes of others. And the second is the spirit of Mardi Gras. If you are going to fast, then party it up the night before! If you are going to enter a time of fasting, gorge yourself on the feast right up to the last minute. How wicked is that! How despicable, to pervert something as good and profitable as fasting.

But do it sincerely. Do it earnestly. Do it with this understanding, that you are utterly dependent upon God and that you earnestly seek his guidance and blessing. With this encouragement,

v.23

It is a helpful testimony regarding,

III. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRAYER.

What a wonderful expression. “He answered our prayer.” “He listened to our entreaty.” Notice the context for Ezra,
v.22

They were on a spiritual mission. They were on a mission to reestablish the nation of God’s people. And Ezra sort of backed himself into a corner, didn’t he? He was ashamed to ask the king for help since he had already told the king that God would be his help. It was even a warning to the king, a warning of the wrath of God against those who would forsake God.

So Ezra had only one choice. He had told the king that God would help, so all he could do was pray. All he could do! That’s not a very good way to put it, is it? He could pray. He would pray.

And God would listen. And where does that sort of confidence come from? It comes from those who pray! It's not magical. It's not a formula. Rather, when you pray, again, WHEN you pray not "if you pray," that...

A. Prayer gives us the reassurance of the goodness of God's omnipotence.

Prayer puts everything in your life back into the proper perspective. God is in control. God is God. God sits on the throne of heaven. And when you pray, and when you pray earnestly, you are able to gain that sense of his goodness.

Note again Ezra's words in verse 22, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him..."

In the New Testament, those words come out this way,

Rom. 8:28 "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

We know...We know it for sure. And such knowledge comes only to those who pray. Without a commitment to prayer that verse becomes a simplistic answer that offers little encouragement to people in need. Really nothing more than, "Oh, I know everything will turn out alright."

The practice of prayer lets those words come to mean so much more. As you express your love to God in your dependence upon him, by prayer, as you express your love to God through your prayer, you then come to know, with Ezra, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him..."

Along with his power. Goodness without power is quite worthless, isn't it? Good will or good intention, without the ability to bring to pass what you intend, is empty and meaningless. And,

of course, power without goodness is dangerous. But God has both.

v.22 "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him."

And with all of that,

B. Prayer gives us the confidence to confront danger without fear.

Ezra was afraid. He needed protection against the enemy. He was in danger, and the people of Israel were embarking upon a dangerous journey. That's easy to identify with, isn't it?

Think about what causes you to fear? What are your fears? What are your insecurities? When are you afraid? What situations bring out that fear? What circumstances stimulate your fear? What are the dangers that you face in your own life? Those are all good questions to consider. In this context, a call to prayer. Even, prayer and fasting.

Fear is so often such a negative emotion, a paralyzing emotion. Fear, in the sense of a horrible apprehension of what might happen or what could happen, is not a good thing. Typically, you ought not to act out of fear, being afraid. You ought not make decisions based upon fear, nor be paralyzed or overwhelmed by the presence of danger. Instead, you ought to pray, to intreat the Lord, and learn in that experience that he listens to your entreaty.

There are a lot of things that might legitimately cause you to fear, but the writer of Hebrew perhaps says it best,

Heb. 13:5 "For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" 6 So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my

helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?.”

The Psalmist David says it this way,

Ps. 27:1 “The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? 2 When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh, My enemies and foes, They stumbled and fell. 3 Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, In this I will be confident.”

The promise come to us through Joshua,

Josh. 1:9 “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

The experience of that blessing comes to those who pray. So when you pray, and even more so, when we are gathered together as the house of God’s people, we have the promise of this strength. “The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him.” In that context, may we never observe what Ezra observed, an absence of temple servants. Prayer really is the work God calls you to do. Prayer really is the ministry to which God has called every one of us. So pray, even, at times with fasting. For the temple of God, the church of Jesus Christ, is to be a house of prayer.