

Text: Ezra 8:21-23,31-32 (Pew Bible, pg.468)

Title: “On Our Knees”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – A few years ago Nan and I were driving through the mountains of Colorado when we began to see flashing signs along the interstate that there had been a rockslide across the highway at a certain point and that we should expect long delays. Fortunately we had rented a car that had OnStar, the navigation and communication system installed in many cars where you can get all kinds of directions and assistance. I thought, “Well I’ll just push this little button on the rearview mirror and instantly I will have a friendly attendant on the line who will skillfully guide me on an alternate route so I won’t have to stay stopped in traffic for hours. We’ll be on our way in no time.” Well, I pushed the OnStar button and immediately there was the voice of a friendly lady on the speaker. I explained our situation (she already knew our location) and asked if she could give us an alternate route to get to where we were going. There was a pause, and then she said, “I’m sorry sir. I’m afraid you’re stuck. There’s nowhere for you to get off that highway and there’s no place to turn around. You have no option but to sit and wait for the road to clear.” I paused and then asked, “Well, do you deliver pizza?” And you know the answer to that!

Life is a long, difficult, dangerous journey. We were not created to travel that road on our own. God sent His Son Jesus Christ to redeem us and to rescue us from our sin. He set us on the road to heaven. And from the moment we are saved we have an onboard communication system with God known as prayer. And through prayer we access everything God intends for us to have in this life ... pardon for our sins, power for our weaknesses, protection from harm, provision for our needs, and peace in times of trouble.

Let’s open our Bibles to Ezra 8:21. Last week we saw that Ezra was a man who set his heart on learning, living and sharing the Word of God. And today we’re going to see that he is a man who trusts God in prayer. Ezra 7 tells us that Ezra came to Jerusalem. Ezra 8 is a flashback to Ezra’s actual journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. Something happened as he set off on the journey that reveals something about Ezra’s confidence in God and in prayer. Ezra is leading a large group of people (a second wave of exiles) to Jerusalem. In addition to that Ezra has been entrusted with treasures that are to be used for the rebuilding in Jerusalem. So they all gather at a rendezvous point before they began the 900-mile journey. Notice what happens here. Read Ezra 8:21-23, 31-32.

The things that need to be rebuilt in our broken lives, our broken homes, and our broken world can only be effectively changed by God. And God, in His providence, has determined that He will do that in answer to the prayers of His people.

In Ezra 8 we get this snap shot of an incident in Ezra’s life that some might think is very insignificant. Later we’re going to see Ezra leading the people of God in a time of great renewal that started with prayer. But is he a man of prayer when he faces the everyday challenges of life? It’s one thing to pray in public, it’s another thing for our family to know we do it in private. It’s one thing for us to appear spiritual at church. But what about the way people know we are at work? Do the people closest to us see us as devoted to God in our private life as we are in our church life?

To our deacons who are being set apart today: Men of God are men of faith, and men of faith are men of prayer. When the apostles in the book of Acts faced a challenge in the ministry of the church in Jerusalem, they needed help. So they instructed...

Acts 6:3 - Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them

I have a feeling that if Ezra had been interviewed by a news reporter the reporter might have asked him how he managed to lead this group across a vast, treacherous land: “Mr. Ezra, would you explain to us the secret of your success on this journey?” We have every reason to believe that Ezra would have humbly said, “The only thing that can explain it is that the gracious hand of God was upon us.” In fact, over and over in Ezra 7-8 we see the phrase repeated, “The hand of the Lord his God was on him.”

Life is a long, difficult, dangerous journey. If we are going to be successful in the work that God has given each one of us to do in rebuilding our broken world, we’ll make this journey on our knees in prayer. The first thing I want you to notice is...

1. THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER (Ezra 8:21)

ILLUSTRATION – Just think of the last western movie you watched. There was a long wagon train going across Indian Territory. They would have a troop of Army cavalry along to protect them. Well Ezra and his group of about 1500 people stand there on the banks of the Ahava River with a 900-mile trip ahead of them. These are not just able-bodied men, but also their wives and their children. And then there was the treasure that they are carrying. The only difference for Ezra is that they had no military escort. This would be a difficult and a dangerous journey. Robbers would be licking their chops for an opportunity like this to attack a caravan with no military support.

So what do they do? Ezra tells us.

Ezra 8:21 - There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.

So before they start the long, difficult, dangerous journey, they know they need to pray. It’s necessary if they are to be successful. They are doing God’s work, and they will need God’s provision and protection. So they pray.

Notice that Ezra pushes the pause button. And we need to do that. How often do we charge into our endeavors without praying? And how often have we found ourselves regretting that we didn’t ask God before we ran ahead of Him?

They’re asking God for “a safe journey.” Literally they are asking for “a straight way.” This is the same Hebrew word that is used in...

Proverbs 3:5-6 - Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

We need to pray because what we need to happen in our broken world only God can do.

2. THE HUMILITY OF PRAYER (Ezra 8:21)

Ezra 8:21b - I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God...

Now to fast simply means to abstain from food or something else for a period of time for the purpose of demonstrating humility before the Lord. For example, if you decide you will fast from one meal a week in order to spend that time in prayer, it is your way of saying, “God I need you more than I need food. I’m skipping this meal or this day of eating, or whatever it is, because I’m desperate for You to move in my situation.”

Being humble before God shows our spiritual dependence and our conviction that God is in total control.

Fasting can be an individual thing, or it can be a group thing. Ezra proclaimed a fast, meaning that he was asking for everyone on the journey to humble themselves to fast and pray. All through the Bible we see that the people of God fasted and prayed on many occasions.

- They fasted at prescribed times, such as on special holy days according to the Law of Moses. Now the Jews in Jesus’ day still did this and Jesus taught them that they needed to be careful that it wasn’t done in a self-righteous, hypocritical way. We know that the early church typically fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. It was just common for them to do that.
- They fasted in perilous times. When David’s child became sick, the Bible says that David fasted and prayed. When Israel was under attack the king often called them to fast and pray.
- And they prayed at pivotal times. There were times when important decisions were being made, or important efforts were being made. Esther called on the Jews throughout Persia to fast and pray for her as she went to speak to the king. Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness before He embarked upon His public ministry.

ILLUSTRATION – Landry Jones was the quarterback for the Oklahoma Sooners from 2008 to 2012. He’s now playing for the NFL’s Pittsburgh Steelers. He’s an outstanding athlete, but an even more outstanding follower of Jesus. Landry’s parents and grandparents have been longtime friends of our family, going back to our days in Artesia, New Mexico. A few years ago, the Sooners were playing a game here in the Metroplex and so I called Landry’s dad, Kevin, to see if we might meet up for lunch or dinner while they were in town. Kevin told me that they would love to see us, but they would not be able to eat a meal with us. Without being self-righteous or boasting he simply explained that all the way back when Landry was in middle school his parents began fasting and praying for Landry for the 24 hours before each game. You might expect that parents might do that to ask God to keep their child safe on the field. But that wasn’t Landry’s parents’ main motivation in fasting and prayer. They wanted God to be glorified through their son’s every action on and off the field. And the way they felt they could demonstrate their urgency before God was to fast.

I have an idea that many of us have not used all the spiritual resources that we have at our disposal through Christ. We have been trying to rebuild the broken parts of our world in our own power and wisdom. Have you tried humbling yourself by setting aside an extended period of time to pray and fast for God's intervention? There are plenty of things that should cause us to be urgent about this: Thousands of babies being aborted here in our city every year ... our young people being assaulted by evil ... marriages being ripped apart by unfaithfulness ... people lost in the grip of sin and headed for an eternity in hell. Our situation is urgent; are we urgent?

So there is the necessity of prayer and the humility of prayer, but also we see...

3. THE SIMPLICITY OF PRAYER (Ezra 8:21)

In v.21 Ezra said, "We asked God for a safe journey." "We simply asked God for it."

Ezra 8:23 - So we fasted and petitioned our God about this...

"Petitioned" is the same word for "ask" in v.21.

We're not talking rocket science here. It's second nature for a little child to ask their parents for what they need. It should be simply second-nature for us to ask God for what we need. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had such childlike dependence on God that our first instinct in every matter was not to worry, fear, drink, eat, borrow money, or anything else? What if our first instinct was to ask God? They needed a safe journey and they asked God.

So Ezra's prayer is specific. It covers the important matters in prayer: "A safe journey ... for us ... and our children ... all our possessions." It's one thing to pray; it's another thing to pray specifically. When we pray specifically, God answers specifically.

James instructs us to simply ask God when we need wisdom. But he reminds us of the importance of faith in our praying.

James 1:6 - But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

James 1:7 - That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord;

That's the simplicity of prayer. Next there's...

4. THE TESTIMONY OF PRAYER (Ezra 8:22)

There's something more at stake here than just the safety and provision of these travelers. The God's reputation (His glory) is at stake.

Ezra 8:22 - I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, “The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.”

It seems that Ezra had debated as to whether or not to ask King Artaxerxes for a military escort. But then he began to think, “The king has heard us talking about how faithful God has been to us all along the way in this matter. What will the king think if we come to him for protection? Will he think that we don’t trust God? Or worse, will he think that our God really can’t be trusted for things like this?”

So Ezra decides to take a risk and to simply to trust God for the protection. Then the king will know that God is powerful and that God is faithful.

Ezra 8:23 - So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

When the world sees God’s people praying they see God’s people confident in God. What a testimony it is to our children and our grandchildren when they see us trusting God. What a testimony! “These people have a great God. They trust Him for everything and He comes through for them. I want to know that God.”

God is pleased to support those who trust in Him and who “look” to Him. But He is angry with the sin in us that causes us to fail to look to God, but to forsake Him for our idols and the other things we depend on to sustain us.

Now does this mean that we should never seek help from other people? In fact, in Nehemiah we’re told that Nehemiah faces a similar dilemma. He needed resources and protection from the king to return to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the walls of the city. And Nehemiah prays that God will grant him favor with the king as Nehemiah approaches him for help.

God leads His people in different ways at different times. Certainly we are never to ask God for anything that is contrary to His revealed will in the Word of God. We know that for sure. But at other times we don’t know exactly what to ask God to do. At times like that I have learned to just ask God, “Lord, how do you want me to pray? How do you want me to trust You?” God is faithful. He will show you. Maybe it will come as you are reading the Bible and you come across a promise that God leads you to claim. Maybe it will come by a “sanctified impression” that you should ask God for something specifically.

Well in this case, God led Ezra to not ask the king for help so that God’s great name would be glorified to the maximum. And God answered their prayer. And that leads me to the last thing:

5. THE CERTAINTY OF PRAYER (Ezra 8:23, 31-32)

Our certainty is not in prayer. Our certainty is in God.

Ezra 8:22b - “The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.”

Ezra 8:23 - So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

And look how God answered:

Ezra 8:31 - On the twelfth day of the first month we set out from the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way.

We have no details of the journey. Apparently it was uneventful. God made their path straight.

Ezra 8:32 - So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested three days.

You can launch out on the adventure of rebuilding your broken world with the certainty that God's gracious hand is on everyone who looks to Him in prayer. God moves mountains.

CONCLUSION

Life is a long, dangerous journey, just like Ezra's journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. It involves us, our children and our belongings. Will we trust God, hour by hour, day by day, year by year until we arrive safely to our heavenly home? Will you trust Him for every decision you have to make, every journey you have to take, every trial you have to face?