

## **Earnestly Seeking God for Restoration through Prayer and Fasting**

### *Ezra 8*

In his book, *The Sacred Way*, a book on spiritual disciplines, Tony Jones says this about fasting.

I hate fasting. No, seriously, I *hate* it, and I avoid it at all costs. It is my least favorite of the disciplines in this book. In fact, I wish I didn't have to write about it. I wish it weren't so deeply rooted in the history of God's people. Then I could ignore it. But I can't ignore it. It's too prevalent, and honestly, too important (*The Sacred Way*, 159).

Fasting is indeed is "rooted in the history of God's" people. Though it never shows up as a direct command in the New Testament, it's a practice that is affirmed and established in the pages of Scripture and in as well as in the experience of believers throughout history who have sought God. It is too prevalent; it is too important, that we, like Tony Jones, probably shouldn't ignore it either.

As we continue our study in Ezra this morning, in Ezra 8 we will see one of the many examples in Scripture of God's people fasting. Ezra 8 records the preparations for and ultimately the completion of a safe journey of another group of exiles back to Jerusalem. This is Ezra's group. As we saw last week, Ezra's presence in Judah would be a significant part of the Jews' restoration because he was one who could faithfully and effectively teach God's word and God's word is central to restoration. He had also been provided with critical resources that would enable proper worship of God to take place in the temple.

This morning I want to give an overview the whole chapter, but then particularly focus our attention on how Ezra and the people seek God for the help that they need for this trip through prayer and fasting. And then I want to spend some time thinking about what role fasting might play for each of us as we continue to trust God for restoration.

In Ezra 8, we see Ezra's leadership in a lot of ways, but one of the ways we see it is that . . .

### **I. Ezra leads the people to earnestly seek God through prayer and fasting**

The first 14 verses of chapter 8 lists the people who went with Ezra on this journey. The list includes about 1500 men and so many estimate that with women and children this was a group of approximately 5000 people who made this journey. I want to begin reading then starting in verse 15:

<sup>15</sup> *Now I assembled them at the river that runs to Ahava, where we camped for three days; and when I observed the people and the priests, I did not find any Levites there.*

As they assemble in preparation for the trip, Ezra observes the people and priests, but no Levites. Not one! Obviously, there were other Levites who had already gone back to the Land in some of the earlier groups who had returned. And so Ezra's concern here is probably not mainly about the need for the Levites once they are back in the Land, but rather for the trip.

God's word gave instructions for how the furnishings for the temple were to be transported. As one who had set his heart to know and to do God's word, this mattered to Ezra. It mattered that they did this according to God's word. And so Levites were necessary for the trip. And so we are told in 16-17 that Ezra sends some of the men to a place called *Casiphia*, which was likely a place where there was some kind of Jewish sanctuary. It was a place where Ezra knew there would likely be Levites. And so Ezra tells these men to go and request Levites.

Verse 18:

*<sup>18</sup> According to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men; <sup>19</sup> and Hashabiah and Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari, with his brothers and their sons, 20 men; <sup>20</sup> and 220 of the temple servants, whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites, all of them designated by name.*

Once again Ezra makes the statement that something happens *according to the good hand of our God*. We saw this expression several times in chapter 7. The *good hand of our God* means God's favor. Ezra sees God's favor in the response of these Levites coming AND in their coming so quickly. We know based on Ezra 7:9 that the people began to gather for this trip on the first of the first month. And then later in the chapter (v. 31) we are told that they finally set off for the journey on the 12<sup>th</sup> day. And so within less than 12 days, God raises up 38 Levites as well as 220 temple servants to go with Ezra and the people back to Judah.

Back in the mid-90s Cindy and I spent a year in Hungary with Cru doing campus ministry in the town of Debrecen. In the fall, we had an out of town retreat to which we took a bunch of our students. Right as the bus was getting ready to pull out of town, an American whom some of the guys on our team had befriended was walking by. This guy was part of a group of medical students from New York City who were studying in Debrecen. One of the guys on our team said, "Come on. Go with us." And next thing you know, this guy jumps on the bus to go with us. All he had for the weekend were the clothes on his back. It was a total spur of the moment thing.

When you think about the Levites who responded, it wasn't too different. In their case they were not just leaving for a weekend trip. They were uprooting and leaving all that was familiar to them. They were leaving for good. They were leaving what might have been a fairly comfortable life in Babylon. They were leaving with their families to head out on a dangerous four-month trip to go to Judah a place that to them was unfamiliar.

But they come; and they come quickly. And Ezra understands that this is one more demonstration of God's favor.

And so the group is gathered. Approximately 5000 men, women and children looking west to a 900-mile journey over treacherous desert lands filled with potential threats. This isn't just hoping on a bus for a weekend retreat. And so in verse 21, Ezra says:

*<sup>21</sup> Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.*

This might be the first recorded prayer for travel mercies. They felt vulnerable. They were traveling with *little ones*. And they were traveling with the provisions for the temple, which were of great value. If the word was out regarding what they were carrying, they could be targeted. And so Ezra *proclaims a fast* for the purpose, he says, that *we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey*.

Isaiah 66:2 says this:

*"But to this one I will look,  
To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.*

God pays attention to the humble. Ezra and the people humble themselves before God through prayer and fasting so that they might seek from God a safe journey. You can imagine the intensity of all of this, right? There is a lot at stake. There is danger. They need God's help. And so they don't just offer a quick prayer as they pull out the driveway. They come before God with real seriousness and intensity. They seek God through a fast.

Now, in verse 22 Ezra explains why they desperately needed God's help. They would be traveling without an armed escort.

*<sup>22</sup> For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him."*

At some point, Ezra had apparently made a statement to the king about God's hand being *favorably disposed* to all who seek Him and against all who forsake Him. In other words, "We don't need armed protection, because God will protect us."

But when it says, *I was ashamed*, it seems to indicate that when it got right down to it, he might have preferred to have that armed escort after all. Several years later when Nehemiah goes up to Judah, the king provides him with such protection (Neh. 2:9). There was nothing wrong with an armed escort. But he doesn't want to do anything that would dishonor God. And because he has affirmed that God will protect them, he

doesn't now want to suggest that God is not able by asking for the king's protection. And so he doesn't. And so, they are in a position where they are desperate for God and His protection.

Verse 23:

<sup>23</sup> *So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.*

From a post-trip vantage point of Ezra is able to affirm that God *listened to our entreaty*. In other words, He protected them. "We fasted. We sought God for protection and He protected us."

Most of the rest of the chapter records how Ezra organizes how the provisions for the temple will be transported and then how they are taken care of once they get to Jerusalem. But in the middle of that, in verse 31, he gives this synopsis of the journey:

<sup>31</sup> *Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way.*

<sup>32</sup> *Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days.*

Ezra leads the people to earnestly seek God through prayer and fasting and then they journeyed. And, God delivers them *from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes*. Now, it is not exactly clear if this means that God protected them so that no attacks came at all, or if when they did come, God protected them. Either way, the point is that God protected them and they arrived safely in Jerusalem. And restoration moves forward.

One interpretive principle that we need to observe when we study the historical books of the Bible is that they often record what happened without any statement as to whether the thing that happened was right or wrong. It is left to the reader to determine from context and from what we understand about God and the rest of the Bible to determine if the behavior we see recorded is behavior that we should seek to emulate or not. And when we do that with what we see here, it is clear that this is an example to follow.

**Scripture affirms the principle that fasting is a way to earnestly seek God for what we need.**

Let me just mention a few of the examples of fasting in the Bible. Daniel fasted to seek God (Dan. 9:2). In 2 Chronicles 20, King Jehoshaphat turned his attention to seek the Lord through fasting when an enemy army threatened (20:3-4). In Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah fasts before he goes to the king to ask permission to go to Jerusalem. In Acts 13, the church leaders were fasting and while they did so God led them to send out Paul and Barnabas for missionary work (13:2). In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas after appointing elders in the church *prayed for them with fasting* (14:23).

Maybe one of the most important passages on fasting is found in Matthew 6:16 where Jesus spends some time teaching about fasting. He says:

*<sup>16</sup> "And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.*

Jesus assumed his disciples would fast.

And so though fasting is never commanded in the New Testament, it is clearly modeled and affirmed. And so when we look at this example from Ezra it is clear that Ezra 8 affirms that **fasting is a way to earnestly seek God for what we need**. And since this is true, I want to suggest that fasting may be something that you want to consider as you seek God for what you need on your journey to restoration.

Is fasting one of the ways that God might want YOU to seek Him right now? For some of you the answer will probably be yes and so in the remainder of our time I want to talk very practically about fasting.

## **II. Practical Suggestions Regarding Fasting**

First, **who** should fast? And maybe a better way to say it is who should not fast. Obviously, there are some people for whom fasting would be unwise because of a medical condition like diabetes. For nursing or pregnant moms fasting might not be wise. If you have any questions about whether it is medically safe for you, you should talk to a doctor before you start a fast.

If you do have a medical condition that would prevent you from fasting from food, there are other ways to fast. Fasting is about seeking God and so there might be other things that you can give up for a time to seek God - TV, shopping, FB, video games, sports (yikes!), etc. There are all kinds of things that we can do without that might help us seek God.

Second, **when** should you fast? For some of you, you may sense that occasionally you need to fast, but not regularly. For others you may decide that fasting is going to become part of the regular and consistent way that you are seeking God for restoration. You might decide that you are going to fast once a week. If so, you might want to start by just missing lunch on your fast day or maybe it will be breakfast and lunch. Most typically, I do a 24-hour fast and so I start after dinner and then don't eat again until dinner the next evening.

It is possible that God may lead you to do a longer fast - a 36 hour fast where you miss all 3 meals in a day; or maybe even a three day fast. In my experience, the benefit of longer fasts is that you can get past the hunger pangs (they do pass) and then move to a place of greater spiritual focus and intensity in seeking God.

Now, here are some thoughts on **how** to fast. First, prepare spiritually for your fast. One way to prepare spiritually is to be clear about why you are fasting. The heart of fasting is always about seeking God. It's not about earning brownie points from God. It's not about twisting His arm by showing Him how serious you are. It's not about impressing others. It is about seeking God. Make sure you are clear about that. If you are not doing it for that reason, it would probably be better to not fast.

To prepare physically as well, if you drink a lot of coffee or tea you might want to wean yourself off of it a week or so before the fast otherwise you might feel so miserable with a headache that you find it hard to even pray. I always think it is helpful to pay attention to what I eat the day before I fast. I try to eat healthy – more fruits and veggies – and I try to stay away from junk food. During your fast make sure you drink a lot of water so you don't get dehydrated. The water will help some with hunger pangs as well.

As you go through your day you will most likely still be doing all of your normal stuff, but try to use the time that you would typically spend eating for prayer. As well, let the hunger pangs be used to prompt you to turn to God repeatedly throughout the day.

If you find it incredibly hard to actually get started, let me encourage you to try fasting in community. That's what they did in Ezra 8, right? Maybe you and a friend want to agree that you will both fast on a certain day. Sometimes I've needed that accountability and encouragement to do something that my spirit wants to do, but my flesh hates to do.

There is so much more that could be said about the "how's" and "what's" of fasting that we don't have time for today. If you are going to try some kind of longer fast, I would highly recommend getting a little more input before you do. For instance, grab one of the books in the library about spiritual disciplines and read the chapters on fasting. Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, would be a good one.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I don't want you to get the idea that fasting is something that is a big part of my life. At different times in my life it has been a bigger part of how I seek God, but over the past several years, it really hasn't been. But for some time, even before Ezra 8 was in front of me, I've had the thought in the back of my mind that I should consider fasting for the restoration that I've been seeking from God.

A couple of weeks ago I decided that I would take a day to fast and pray. I chose to not have breakfast or lunch that day and instead, I used the extra time to seek God and to pray about this area of restoration. Fasting helped move this issue from just something I talked to God about during my morning devotions and it become something I talked with Him about all day long. When I felt hunger, I was reminded to pray. There was also something about fasting that day that helped me acknowledge to God that the thing I want Him to do really is out of my control. Fasting made me more aware of my weakness and how much I need God and His intervention in this situation. And that is a very good thing.

I do think that God may want fasting to become a more regular part of how I seek Him at this time of my life. I'm praying about it at least. How about you? Let me encourage you to pray and see how God might lead you in this. Maybe prayer and fasting is part of how God wants you to seek Him for your restoration.

Amen.