

Fasting and Praying

Bible Background • EZRA 8:21–23

Printed Text • EZRA 8:21–23 | Devotional Reading • 2 CHRONICLES 7:12–18

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: KNOW that believers can fast and pray for God’s help in dire situations; DESIRE to fast and pray; and PLAN to fast and pray in times of need.

In Focus

Monique recently graduated from college with a degree in social work. She was given a full-time position as an intern. Part of her job was to travel to what she called “unsavory neighborhoods.” Some of Monique’s work surroundings made her uneasy, causing her to consider her own safety. She didn’t say anything, not wanting to cause alarm after just starting in the position. However, her appetite had been affected; she was so anxious she hadn’t been eating. She found herself seeking God for answers. She heard a message concerning the purpose of fasting and decided to turn her recent eating habits into a fasting sacrifice for guidance and protection.

In the weeks following Monique’s fasting, she became calm and confident of God’s protection. Monique continued to travel to her appointments faithfully. Her superiors acknowledged her dedication, and she was later reassigned to a paying position inside the main office. The clients now came to her; no more travel through “unsavory neighborhoods.” God made a way and showed favor to Monique where all outcomes could be seen because of her faith, fasting, and prayer.

Today’s lesson discusses how fasting and praying can move God to action in dire situations.

Keep In Mind

“So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us” (Ezra 8:23, KJV).

Words You Should Know

A. Fast (Ezra 8:21)—*tsuwm* (Heb.)—To abstain from food.

B. Intreated (v. 23)—*’athar* (Heb.)—Prayed, supplicated, pleaded.

Say It Correctly

Ahava. ah-HAY-vah, uh-HAY-vuh

Jehoshaphat. Juh-HOSH-us-fat, jih-HAH-suh-fat

Manasseh. muh-NA-suh

KJV

Ezra 8:21 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.

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.

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

NLT

Ezra 8:21 And there by the Ahava Canal, I gave orders for all of us to fast and humble ourselves before our God. We prayed that he would give us a safe journey and protect us, our children, and our goods as we traveled.

22 For I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to accompany us and protect us from enemies along the way. After all, we had told the king, “Our God’s hand of protection is on all who worship him, but his fierce anger rages against those who abandon him.”

23 So we fasted and earnestly prayed that our God would take care of us, and he heard our prayer.

The People, Places, and Times

Ezra. He was a scribe, well-versed in the Mosaic Law. He led a second group of exiles to Jerusalem from Babylon, where “some of the people of Israel, as well as some of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and Temple servants, traveled up to Jerusalem with him in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes’ reign” (Ezra 7:7, NLT). He found that they had rebuilt the Temple; however, the people’s lives were in shambles as they had intermarried with foreigners, something God forbade them to do.

Background

In today’s passage, Ezra moves from a prophetic role to a leadership role. After he bragged about having God’s protection, he led the people in prayer and fasting to ensure it in their return to their homeland. Typically, the Persians would have provided military escort for Ezra as they were carrying with them monetary contributions made by the Persians. Apparently, however, the Persian king had been convinced of God’s protection for the returning exiles.

At-A-Glance

1. Why Ezra Proclaimed a Fast (Ezra 8:21–22)
2. What Happened after the Fast (v. 23)

In Depth

1. Why Ezra Proclaimed a Fast (Ezra 8:21–22)

The Children of Israel were released from their captors and allowed to return to their homeland with all of their belongings and the articles belonging in the Temple. They would also carry funding from the king to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Ezra boasted to the king about the covering of the Lord to those who feared and obeyed Him (v. 22). Ezra’s statement made such an impact on the king that he did not send the normal emissary of protection with them. Much was at stake in this journey; there would be women and children, so around 2,000 people were traveling. The trip was approximately 720 miles.

Many in the surrounding lands may have been aware of the journey that the people were about to embark upon; many may have been their enemies. There were those in the Persian kingdom who were against the support that was given to Ezra for the rebuilding of the Temple. Understandably, the route had to be considered for the safety and welfare of all who would go with them. Ezra understood that many obstacles could arise and hinder them on their journey. He realized if they were to have safe passage, it would only happen with the help of God. He called upon the Children of Israel to fast with him to seek God.

2. What Happened after the Fast (v. 23)

As a result of the fast, the Lord heard their prayer and showed Ezra the plan for a safe journey. He divided up the precious cargo among 12 men into equal parts. The value of that was estimated at \$35 million (which is probably different today because of the changes in currency rates and the market). This is a lot to carry by caravan over 720 miles with 2,000 men, women, and children without guards as escorts. The amount itself is insignificant; what is amazing is that after their arrival in Jerusalem, they weighed and counted the precious articles and the gold and silver, and all were accounted for. Their path may not have been in a straight line or the most obvious way, but it was the way the Lord had ordained.

Search the Scriptures

1. What was the most important influence on the people's safe arrival after their 720-mile journey (v. 23)?
2. Who proclaimed (gave orders for) a fast (Ezra 8:21)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What types of fasts are acceptable by God?
2. Why is it important to pray during a fast?

Liberating Lesson

As we go through life, we learn that we will face things where a solution is not readily apparent. There may not be a perfect example in the Bible for us to follow for our particular situations. Often, these answers are obtained through fasting and prayer. In these instances, God affords us the opportunity to still have access to Him to help lead us through those areas in life. Once God begins to work in our lives, it's important that we share with others His many miracles and blessings. We should understand that others will gain faith in what God can do by our testimonies.

We may have a path imagined for our lives, but only God knows what lies ahead and can direct us safely through. He awaits the call and plea of His children, wanting His guidance to be yet another demonstration of His mighty effect on their lives.

Application For Activation

Set aside a few days for fasting and prayer over a situation in your own life that you know only God can deliver or supply the need. If you do not have a need at this time, consider a family member, friend, coworker, etc., for whom your testimony about God's guidance will provide support during their time of questioning or need.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ezra 8:21–23

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.

The priest Ezra had assembled the people of Israel before continuing on their long journey. Being extremely familiar with God and His Word, Ezra knew the people needed to get their hearts right with Yahweh. Ezra declared a national “fast” (Heb. tsumm, tsoom) for all of Israel to participate. This spiritual fast was to restrict and deny some of the most basic human needs for the purpose of conditioning oneself to depend totally on Yahweh, speaking to Him through prayer and waiting for a response. This submission carves a path and hones a person’s humility.

The purpose of the people’s fast was to seek God for protection on their journey. This divine protection would blanket all who traveled. Young, old, male, and female, all would be secure within the authority of Yahweh. “The little ones” (Heb. taph, taf) literally means “the weak” or “small children,” and more. It also refers to all the vulnerable returnees, like women, children, and the elderly. Ezra’s intent on the national prayer and fast wasn’t solely for protection from harm, but for protection from thievery as well.

This was not the first time the people of Yahweh were assembled in order to seek His protection as a unified nation. In 2 Chronicles 20:1–4, we read of a powerful army coming together from the people of Moab, Ammon, and others. Their goal was to wage war against Judah and overtake the land. King Jehoshaphat gathered the people of Judah from all the cities of the land. This was so that they could fast together as one nation, seeking the protection of Yahweh from their enemies.

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.

Ezra was forced to put his faith to the test after proclaiming the power of Yahweh before the king. He felt “ashamed” (Heb. buwsh, boosh) to ask for military security for their dangerous journey, and rightfully so. To ask for protection would have brought the appearance of hypocrisy upon Ezra and the people of God. This also would not have provided an avenue where their faith in God and His divine authority could be witnessed. People would have perceived Yahweh as a weak God with cowardly followers.

For the most part, what Ezra said was completely correct, and could have very well been led by the Spirit of God in proclaiming those statements. There are many occasions in our lives where the Spirit will lead us into physical situations where our faith will be tested. Whether Ezra was aware or not, he provided a powerful witness for all to follow. Sincere dedication to prayer and fasting will allow those participants to have direct communication with God. When one submits in humility to the Lord, seeking forgiveness and guidance, God tells us, “My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to the

prayer offered" (2 Chronicles 7:15, NASB), and He will answer "their prayers because they trusted in Him" (1 Chronicles 5:20, NASB).

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

The Lord waits for opportunities such as these. This is not so that He can simply flaunt His power among those on the earth. On the contrary, when individuals and communities seek Him and trust in Him, they gain the opportunity to benefit from these situations. He desires the hearts and minds of humans submitted in humility and relying totally on His loving protection of them. We see another example of this with Manasseh. After rebuking him and his people, the Lord sent the Assyrian Empire to overtake him. Once he was captured and humiliated after his defeat, Manasseh turned his heart toward the Lord. The Scriptures read, "When he prayed to Him (Yahweh), He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD alone is God" (2 Chronicles 33:13, NASB). God hears and attends to those that seek Him with a sincere heart and mind. Ezra was aware of this and knew that fasting and prayer would entice the attention of the Lord because He desires this. Ezra 8:23 contains two key words related to this idea. "Besought" (Heb. baqash, baw-KASH), means "requested" or "desired," and "intreated" (Heb. `athar, aw-THAR), means "entreated, prayed, pleaded, made supplication." How many of us, after prayer and fasting, come to the conclusion that God has sincerely listened to us? How many of us have sought His attention and help, with a sincere and humble heart?

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Humbly Calling on God
(2 Chronicles 7:12–18)

TUESDAY

Beseeking God's Answer to Prayer
(Psalm 69:9–18)

WEDNESDAY

Humble and Contrite in Spirit
(Isaiah 66:1–4)

THURSDAY

Fasting Directed to God
(Matthew 6:16–18)

FRIDAY

Studying and Keeping the Law
(Ezra 7:1–10)

SATURDAY

Securing Servants for the Temple
(Ezra 8:15–20)

SUNDAY

Praying for God's Protection
(Ezra 8:21–23)