Fasting and Praying
Ezra 8:21-23, 31-32
SS Lesson for 07/21/2013

Devotional Scripture: Matt 17:19-21

OUTLINE

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Introduction

Overview and Approach to Lesson
The lesson examines how God's people Fasted and Prayed and how He answered them. The study's aim is to discover that an activity done on God's order and done His way will receive His support. The study's application is to experience that fasting and praying become a reality when they are genuinely expressed to God.

Key Verse: Ezra 8:23

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary
First, spiritual preparation was made for the journey. Ezra was concerned with matters pertaining to God’s people. So Ezra proclaimed a fast in preparation for the journey. He wanted the assembled group thereby to humble themselves before... God in order to ask Him for a safe journey for themselves, their children, and their possessions. Being humble before God shows one's spiritual dependence, his acknowledgment that God is in total control. Ezra did not want to ask for military protection (soldiers and horsemen) because he had already publicly announced that God would take care of the people as they returned. In contrast, Nehemiah readily accepted a military escort on his way back to the land (Neh. 2:9).

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary
Fasting is a serious companion of prayer, and it demonstrates a serious issue of need. One may fast with no intention of praying but because of a particular burden that takes away one's appetite. A person may not eat while he is mourning the death of a loved one. So fasting represents a condition of life in which one sees little joy or is overwhelmed by life's burdens. Ezra's faith was being put to the test because he was concerned about the safety of his journey and especially of all the treasures he would bring with him. It was common for robbers to lie in wait for unprotected travelers and to take not only their possessions but often their lives. While this exact situation may not occur in our lives, there are times when the prospect of a long journey gives us pause. Some seasons, for example, present the possibility of adverse weather, and there is always the possibility of the unexpected delay. The devil works well in situations such as these! If he can get God's people to doubt and worry, he can cause great harm in the lives of believers. Ezra knew what to do. This was a serious time that called not only for earnest prayer but also for fasting. Even David spoke about the condition of the heart when it came to prayer and fasting. He identified with the needs of another, took upon himself the personal burden, and besought the Lord with prayer and fasting. "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom" (Ps. 35:13). Ezra's faith was not in vain. God brought the travelers safely to their destination. "And he was entreated of us" (Ezra 8:23). Earnest prayer always finds God's heart and a favorable answer. Sometimes it may not be what we want, but it will always result in a blessing. Before we pray, we should be sure we are asking for that which is God honoring and not for selfish desires. "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (Jas. 4:3). If our hearts are not right with God, it is easy to confuse Satan's work with God's blessing. An addict spoke of waking one morning with no money and a serious physical craving for heroin. Walking with no particular direction, he spotted a ten-dollar bill on the ground—just enough to calm his need. His response was "God answered prayer." God does not bless the need for sin but seeks those who, with honest hearts, seek Him and His righteousness. "If... thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul" (Deut. 4:29). Ezra knew God and the power of prayer. He knew God would be with him to prevent harm from befalling the exiles. His faith was not in the soldiers of the king but in God alone. The formula for victory has never changed: God still stands by His Word. The problem is not with God but with man, because his faith often rests in the world's wisdom. Jesus said that it only takes faith as small as a mustard seed (cf. Matt. 17:20). Is that not easy?
Approach to the Major Outlines in Lesson

The outline of the lesson was adapted from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary and from the points revealed by the study of the Scriptural text.

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Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The lesson for today provides information about what is termed the second return from Babylon to Israel. This return was more than just one of physical relocation. It was also spiritual in nature. Prayer and fasting played a vital role in that regard before the group began to move toward its destination: Jerusalem. The previous lesson was about the completion of the new temple in Jerusalem, its dedication on March 12, 515 BC, observance of Passover on April 21, and celebration of the Festival of Unleavened Bread that immediately followed Passover. The first section of the book of Ezra comes to an end at this point. Ezra 7 begins the second section of the book, and the date is 458 BC (see comments on Ezra 7:7b in this lesson). Thus there is a gap of 57 years, or about two generations, between the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7. The Bible offers information in the account of Esther on some things that happened during that period of time. In January 478 BC, Esther became the queen for Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus), king of the Persian Empire (Esther 2:16). Prior to that, however, three famous battles occurred that the Bible does not discuss. These battles, involving the Persians, are considered very important in the history of western civilization. The first was the battle at Marathon, where the Athenians and their allies defeated the Persian army of Darius the Great in 490 BC. This is the same Darius who authorized the resumption of construction on the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 6). This battle demonstrated to the Greeks that the Persians were not invincible, especially if the Greek city-states would unite instead of fighting each other. The second was the battle at Thermopylae in 480 BC, where the Persians again confronted the Greeks. The six-month banquet of King Xerxes described in Esther 1 is often thought to be the planning of the military action against the Greeks that included this battle. The primary motivation for the Persian invasion may have been to avenge the defeat at Marathon suffered by Darius, father of Xerxes. During the ensuing campaign, 300 Spartans heroically defended the pass of Thermopylae for 7 days against a vastly superior Persian force. But through a betrayal, the Persians found the path around the pass and defeated the Spartans and their allies.

From the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

Suppose you faced vast new opportunities that could change the direction of your life. Vistas opened before you that could bring additional influence, income, educational advancement, or opportunities for service. But along with the opportunities came challenges—overseas travel, language and cultural barriers, physical danger, or financial risk. How would you prepare? People have many ways of preparing for the opportunities and challenges they face. They acquaint themselves with the field they are entering. They make key contacts. They arm themselves with legal credentials and medical inoculations. They study the necessary languages and cultures. And they accumulate or arrange for the financial resources they need. For God's people, an additional preparation must be seeking the will of God and committing all their plans to Him. All else may superficially seem to be favorable, but without God's blessing, the best-laid plans come to nothing. Our passage recounts an incident in the history of Israel. We can expect to find spiritual principles at work that will be helpful and
instructive to us, not as an everyday activity but at certain times. We are not the children of Israel, and we have not been told to return to the Promised Land from which we have been exiled. But we sometimes have decisions to make that will have far-reaching implications. We may have to take a stand on some of the issues of our day that involves our stating what God's Word says or what God will do about some subject. Fasting and praying is a subject on which people differ. Fasting is a physical activity that, it is hoped, will have a spiritual result. It is always dangerous for us to assume that God can be persuaded to act by some action on our part. Certainly He is aware of our actions, our thoughts, and our prayers. He can and does show us His will in many ways. As we examine this bit of Israel's history, let us remember that God does some things once and will never do them again (for example, Christ's death on the cross). However, He does do some things over and over again, such as respond to a sinner's prayer for mercy and forgiveness. We must be careful not to presume and jump to the wrong conclusions. Let us instead pray for holy discernment.

**Major Theme Analysis**

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

**Seeking God's Hand of Protection (Ezra 8:21-23)**

21 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions.
22 For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "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."
23 So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.

**Humbling of self (21)**

*Humility of spirit (Prov 16:18-19)*

18 Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. 19 Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.

*Humility means not being wise in our own eyes (Prov 26:12)*

12 Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

*Humility is good according to God (Mic 6:8)*

8 He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

*Humility like that of an innocent child (Matt 18:2-4)*

2 He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

*Humility that recognizes that all we have we have received from someone else (1 Cor 4:7)*

7 For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

*Humility means knowing who we are and what we're not (Gal 6:3)*

3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.
Humility reduces humiliation from demotion (Prov 25:6-7)
6 Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; 7 it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman. What you have seen with your eyes

Humility keeps man content with what he has (Prov 12:9)
9 Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food.

Humility is like being a child in God's eyes (Luke 9:48)
48 Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all — he is the greatest."

Humility leads to God lifting us up (James 4:10)
10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Seeking God's Hand (22)

God's Hand of provision (Ezra 7:6)
6 this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.

God's Hand of power (Josh 4:24)
24 He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God."

God's Hand of wrath (Judg 2:15)
15 Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

God's Hand of unity (2 Chron 30:12)
12 Also in Judah the hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the Lord.

God's Hand controls all things (Isa 41:19-20)
19 I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, 20 so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it.

God's Hand provides guidance (Ezek 3:22)
22 The hand of the Lord was upon me there, and he said to me, "Get up and go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you."

God's Right Hand of authority (Mark 16:19)
19 After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.
Seeking God's Answer (23)

*God's answers can come before the request (Isa 65:24)*

> 24 Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.

*God's answers considers man's heart (Rom 8:26-27)*

> 26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

*God's answers can bring wisdom that others cannot contradict (Luke 21:15)*

> 15 For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

*God's answers prove that He blesses in abundance (Mal 3:10)*

> 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

*God's answers prove His grace (2 Cor 9:8)*

> 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

*God's answers prove His faithfulness (Deut 28:9-13)*

> 9 The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. 10 Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you. 11 The Lord will grant you abundant prosperity — in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground — in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you. 12 The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. 13 The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom.

*God sometimes delays His answers because His timing is not man's timing (Isa 55:8-9)*

> 8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. 9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

*God sometimes delays His answers to display His faithfulness (Heb 10:23)*

> 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

*God sometimes delays His answers because He is patient (Ps 86:15)*

> 15 But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

**Experiencing God's Hand of Deliverance (Ezra 8:31-32)**

31 Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road.
32 So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days.

**Walking by faith (31)**

*Walking by faith is faith expressed through love (Gal 5:6)*

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

*Walking by faith is being certain of things not seen (Heb 11:1)*

11 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

*Walking by faith is accompanied by deeds (James 2:17)*

17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

*Walking by faith is to consistently believe in Jesus (John 6:28-29)*

28 Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" 29 Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

*Walking by faith results in being credited as righteousness (Rom 4:4-5)*

4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. 5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

*Walking by faith is keeping the faith to the finish (2 Tim 4:7)*

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

*Walking by faith is faith and actions working together to make us complete (James 2:22)*

22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

*Walking by faith is confirming and proving God's trust (1 Cor 4:2)*

2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

*Walking by faith is proving faith to be genuine (1 Peter 1:7)*

7 These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

*Walking by faith is growing in the Divine grace and gifts that God provides (2 Peter 1:3-8)*

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Realization of God’s Hand upon us (31)

*God’s hand upon His people as a refuge (Ps 91:9-14)*

9 If you make the Most High your dwelling — even the Lord, who is my refuge — 10 then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. 11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; 12 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. 13 You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. 14 "Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.

*God’s hand upon His people to strengthen them (Isa 41:10)*

10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

*God’s hand upon His people to help them (Acts 26:22)*

22 But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—

*God’s hand upon His people to watch over them (Ps 121:8)*

8 the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

*God’s hand upon His people to show Himself to them (Isa 66:12-14)*

12 For this is what the Lord says: "I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. 13 As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem." 14 When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass; the hand of the Lord will be made known to his servants, but his fury will be shown to his foes.

Realization of God’s deliverance (32)

*Deliverance from fear into sonship (Rom 8:15)*

15 For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

*Deliverance from sin (John 8:31-36)*

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" 34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

*Deliverance that is continual and proven (2 Cor 1:10)*

10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,

*Deliverance from all troubles (Ps 34:19)*

19 A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all;
Deliverance from trials (2 Peter 2:9)

9 if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

Deliverance that is part of the new covenant (Heb 9:15)

15 For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance — now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

Deliverance from temptations (1 Cor 10:13)

13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Deliverance from evil attacks (2 Tim 4:18)

18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Deliverance through redemption (Rom 8:23)

23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Deliverance through transformation (Phil 3:20-21)

20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from Steven Cole

Our text does not reveal what must have been quite interesting, namely, the details of how and when Ezra told the returning exiles that there would not be any armed guards accompanying them on the return trip! It is amazing that there is no indication that people began bailing out when they heard the news. It is equally amazing that there was not a group of dissidents crying out, “This is insane! It’s suicide to venture out into that hostile, robber infested desert, loaded with gold and silver, with no military protection!” But apparently, none protested. Ezra reports, “I proclaimed a fast … that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions” (8:21). He then explains that this was necessary because he had told the king, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him” (8:22). Because of this, Ezra was ashamed to ask for a military escort. “So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty” (8:23). “The hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes along the way” (8:31). Thus the group safely arrived in Jerusalem. I think that the normal pattern is to trust God while thankfully using the means that He provides. You pray for protection on the highways, but you fasten your seat belt and drive carefully. You pray for healing, but you go to the doctor and take the prescribed medicine. You pray for a job, but you prepare a resume, dress appropriately, and go for job interviews. God normally expects us to use the means He provides, along with faith in Him. But sometimes using human means will lead us away from trust in the Lord, or it would be a poor witness to unbelievers. Often, this is an individual matter before the Lord. Our text shows that as God’s people seeking to do God’s work, we need to recognize that there are enemies and ambushes along the way (8:31), and thus we desperately need “God’s hand over us” to protect us. The enemy is seeking to destroy us and our little ones (8:21) by tearing apart families and by bringing down church leaders. I know of
many men, formerly in the ministry, who have brought dishonor to God and His church through divorce or moral failure. Satan is especially targeting leaders. Knowing that there are enemies and ambushes along the way, we must humble ourselves and seek God’s protection through prayer, and in special times of need, through fasting.

*(Adapted from Sermon notes by Pastor Steven J. Cole, Flagstaff Christian Fellowship www.fcfonline.org)*

**Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

During the wilderness wanderings, Moses offered a special prayer each time the ark was moved (“Rise up, Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you”; Numbers 10:35) and when it came to rest (“Return, Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel”; 10:36). Ezra’s spiritual actions at the beginning of his journey were similar. Many Christian leaders pray before beginning each task. Those who preach have the responsibility of ministering to hundreds or even thousands who have come for spiritual bread. The person who teaches lessons such as this one may begin the preparation with prayer. These facts lead us to a final thought regarding another direction for prayer: Did the Israelites pray for Ezra? Do your students pray for you, the teacher?

**Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator**

1. For the believer, fasting should be a sign of inward humility (Ezra 8:21)
2. When in need of something, we should always start by asking God
3. Be sure that your actions before men do not negate your witness for God (vs. 22)
4. God always hears and answers the prayers of His people, but not always as they might expect (vs. 23)
5. The almighty hand of God guides and guards His obedient children (vs. 31)
6. When God starts a plan, He always finishes it (vs. 32)