

## **“PRAYING AT AHAVA”**

**Text:** Ezra 8:15, 21-31

**Subject:** How fasting and prayer give calmness to your inner man and opportunity for God to intervene for you.

**Question:** How many of you want the peace of God that Jesus paid for?

**Question:** How many of you want God’s perspective at every crossroads you encounter?

**Question:** How many of you want your challenges to mature you in spirit (instead of affecting you in a negative way?)

**Question:** How many of you want to see God’s hand in the way you handle your problems?

### **(Our text – Ezra 8 has a remarkable setting)**

Ezra, who was a priest, comes along at a critical time.

- In 606 BC, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and deported many Jews.
- They destroyed the city, then the temple in 587 BC
- In 538 BC, King Cyrus of Persia granted permission for the Jews to return to that land.
- Nearly 50,000 Jews returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6) to rebuild their temple.
- There was opposition and the project was stopped in Ezra 4 (an interruption for a brief season).
- In Ezra 5&6, the rebuilding resumed under the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah (prophets of encouragement).
- In Ezra 7&8, Ezra will go to Jerusalem in 458 BC with about 2,000 Jews to serve in the temple ministry.
- He will lead this second group of exiles back to Jerusalem.

### **(But there is just one problem.)**

In chapter 8:15, he gathers the people on the banks of the Ahava River.

### **(And then it hits him.)**

- “How will we ever make the long journey from Babylon to Jerusalem?”
- “How will we ever get through the country that is infested with thieves and robbers?”
- “How will we ever get the wives, children and sacred vessels back to the temple?”
- “How will we ever see the return, the reunion and the restoration of God’s glory?”
- “How will we ever see a solution to this mountain size problem in front of us?”

### **(Question)**

- How many of you know that problems come to everybody?
- How many of you know that no one escapes trouble?
- How many of you want God’s power and God’s perspective concerning all of your problems?

In Job 5:7, “Yet *man is born unto trouble as sparks of a fire fly upward.*”

In Job 14:1, “*Man that is born of a woman is a few days and full of trouble.*”

- Pastor, what did Ezra do in the face of the impossible trouble?
- Pastor, how did the people respond in the midst of their predicament?
- Pastor, what happened this day on the edge of the Ahava River?
- And Pastor, what difference does it make in my life?

**“Voices from the Ahava River”  
River secrets that speak to us all**

**I. The River Speaks of “Failure” (v. 15)**

*“And I gathered them together to the river that runs to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days; and I viewed the people and the priests and found there (notice) **none of the sons of Levi.**”*

1. There was the gathering (at the river).
2. There was the rest (for three days).
3. There was the viewing (of the people).
4. There was the deficiency (notice v. 15).

*“I viewed the people and the priests and found there (how many?) none of the sons of Levi.”*

**(In other words)**

- There were no Levites except those who were priests.
- Of the Levites proper, members of the other families of the tribe of Levi, those who ministered under the priests, Ezra found none.

**(In other words)**

1. The very ones who should have been most eager to return to Jerusalem were missing.
2. The very ones who should be eager to return to the sacred service in the temple were missing.
3. The very ones who were privileged to participate in worship and service were missing.
4. The very ones who were expected to run to Jerusalem to see God’s glory restored were missing.

**Question:** Pastor, why were they missing?

**Answer:** Because they failed where many fail:

- They found a more comfortable way of life in Babylon while in captivity “on hold”.
- Many of the Jews had become wealthy in captivity.
- Archaeologists have discovered that the Jews (formerly a nation of farmers) had become a nation of shopkeepers (business people) while in Babylon.
- These Levites would trade the comfort and riches in Babylon for the rebuilding process back in the Promised Land.

**(Why such a failure?)**

**Because:**

1. Back in Jerusalem was the priesthood, the altar, the temple and the manifest presence of God.
2. These Jews had received permission to depart, to be free to go out of captivity in Babylon and return home.
  - They were emancipated from the captivity of evil but refused to leave. **And what's worse:**
  - These same Levites who refused to gather at Ahava and make the pilgrim journey sent treasures with Ezra to rebuild the temple. **In other words,**

“You can have my money Lord, but not my heart, I’m staying put and refuse to go.”

**(What a failure here:)**

1. To be among the missing when God says it’s time to come home to Jerusalem.
2. To refuse to take advantage of the window of opportunity, to be a part of a spiritual awakening.

**II. The River Speaks Of “Faith” (v. 22)**

(I love what Ezra says in v. 22)

*“I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way.”*

**Question:** Why did Ezra feel ashamed to ask the king for an escort of soldiers and horsemen through troubled land?

**Answer:** Because Ezra had gone out on a limb and said in v. 22:

*“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.”*

**(In other words)**

- Ezra puts himself on the spot where he has to live up to his own testimony.
- He had told the king “We belong to the Lord and he will protect us and supply for us all our needs.”
- The king would have granted Ezra’s request, but Ezra wanted to prove the Lord.
- Ezra felt ashamed to petition the king, when he already had said that “God will do it.”
- Ezra needed all the help he could get, but his focus was “upward” not “outward”.

**Question:** What gave Ezra faith and what gives you faith in very real predicaments?

1. We discover that God is interested in us. (v. 22)  
*“...The hand of God is upon all.”* (Which means)  
 ♦ God is interested in what touches your life.
2. We discover that God is good (all the time). (v. 22)  
*“...The hand of God is upon all them for good.”* (Which means)  
 ♦ The Lord will guide you, guard you, keep you and work all things together for good.
3. We discover that God will honor your faith. (v. 22)  
*“...To help us against the enemy in the way.”* (Means)  
 ♦ If we are willing to ditch the non-essentials in Babylon, gather together at the river,

head full speed ahead for God's glory in Jerusalem; God will honor you and we will reap what we sow.

### III. The River Speaks Of "Fasting" (v. 21)

*"Then I proclaimed a fast at the river of Ahava to afflict (or humble) ourselves before God, to seek of Him a right way for us, for our families and for our substance."*

(v. 23) *"So we fasted and besought our God for this; and he was entreated of us."*

**Fact:** Ezra is about to return to Jerusalem.

**Fact:** It's a dangerous trip with trouble on every hand.

**Fact:** Ezra is ashamed to rely on the earthy king.

**Fact:** Ezra has no idea of the trouble in the journey.

**Fact:** He believes in the power of fasting and prayer to deliver from enemy traps and enemy snares along the way.

**Question:** Pastor, how do we fast and pray to see results?

**Answer:** We pray the Ezra way in Scripture:

1. We pray and fast with humility (v. 21)

*"...That we might afflict ourselves before God. (Means)*

- That we humble ourselves by acknowledging total dependence upon God and,
- Fasting and prayer is approved by God to express complete dependence on divine intervention.

2. We pray and fast with confidence (v. 21)

*"To seek of God a right way for us." (Means)*

- Ezra prayed for a prosperous journey.
- Ezra prayed for protection from fiery darts.
- Ezra prayed for deliverance from the powers against him. He was confident in prayer that God would hear and answer.

3. We pray and fast with earnestness (v. 23)

*"So we fasted and besought our God for this." ("Besought God for this" means)*

- "We're doing battle here over enemy power God's way."
- "We're going to see victory on our knees (privately) before we see it in the field (publicly)."
- "We're going to prostrate ourselves before God so we'll never be prostrated before the enemy."
- "We're going to beseech, tarry, travail, petition, make supplication be desperate in fasting and prayer."

### IV. The River Speaks Of "Favor" (vs. 31, 32)

**Question:** Pastor, what happens when a congregation at the river Ahava (\_\_\_\_\_) prays and fasts this way? (River in your city)

**Answer:** Confidence in God is vindicated:

(v. 31) *"Then we departed from the river 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 of such as lay in wait by the way."*

(V. 32) *“And we came to Jerusalem.”* (They made it through every danger, toil and snare).

**Question:** How did they make it home?

**Answer:** Because the favor of God was upon them.

**Question:** Why was the favor of God upon them?

**Answer:** Because in verses 21 & 23, God’s people fasted and prayed and brought God into the equation.

**Question:** What’s the lesson in our generation?

**Answer:** That your battles along the way are won with spiritual weapons!

- Not by flesh and not by man
- Not by slander and not by attack
- Not by scheming and not by carnality

**(How are they won?)**

It’s as we fast and pray that the hand of God rests upon those for good that seek Him!

**(What’s the lesson?)**

Like Ezra many years ago did!

1. Run to the Lord instead of running to man.
2. Get alone in secret before you gather in public.
3. Focus on how big God is, more than how big your trouble is.
4. Believe (as you seek the Lord) that the hand of God will be upon you for good.

## **V. The River Speaks Of “Forgiveness” (v. 35)**

**Question:** What did the people do when they reached their intended destination?

**Answer:** (v. 35) *“They offered bullocks, rams, lambs and goats for a sin offering unto the Lord.”*

**Question:** Why did they worship this way?

**Answer:** In the sacrifices, Israel was saying:

1. We acknowledge our sin before God and,
2. We acknowledge the atonement that comes from God (to cover our sin).

**Question:** Where does all this take place?

**Answer:** (v. 33) *“The silver, the gold and the vessels were offered in the house of God.”*

- It was the place of worship, in public.
- It was the place of surrender, in public.
- It was the place of forgiveness, in public.

**Fact:** Offering up the animal sacrifices (the lambs) was a type, or foreshadow of the lamb of God to come.

**(It means today)**

That Jesus has become your sin offering and forgiveness flows from His heart.

- “But pastor, I don’t deserve God to hear me when I fast and pray.”

- “I don’t deserve the favor of God in this earthly journey.”

**(Join the crowd)**

- Nobody earns God’s favor and grace!
- Forgiveness is a gift of God!
- It’s not of your works lest you would boast!
- It’s the voice of Jesus calling from the river Ahava.

“Leave the captivity and come follow me.”

“I have freed you from the bondage of sin.” “Don’t linger and be found missing at inspection time!”

Amen  
Bill Kirk