

Perhaps no other concept is more overused and misunderstood in our society today as that of faith. There are a lot of myths floating around about faith. One of them is that faith is opposed to reason. It's like Mark Twain said, "Faith is believing what you know ain't so." Closer to our own day, Richard Dawkins, the most famous atheist of our generation, said, "Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence."

Our culture provides terrible ideas like this about the nature of faith, and they get absorbed into our minds as followers of Jesus. But real faith isn't opposed to reason. Faith and reason are two ways of knowing something, and they're not incompatible. Read a book like Tim Keller's *The Reason for God*, and you'll see how faith is built on reason, and there's no conflict between the two.

Another myth is that faith is passive, nothing more than a frame of mind. It's just waiting around to see what God has in store for you. Someone might say, "I'll just wait to see what God is going to do and go with the flow." But that's not faith. Faith is active, not passive. Faith is an active trust in God. Devotional Streams in the Desert states, "Passive faith waits until the waters divide before stepping out; active faith steps into the waters while trusting God to divide them." Fundamentally, faith is our response to God's initiative. As believers, faith began when we responded to God's Spirit as he brought truth about Jesus home to our hearts. As we grow as believers, faith is our decision to respond to God's Word.

I was swimming with one of my grandsons this week. He's learning to swim. I was on one side of the pool, and he was on the other. I called to him and said, "Push off — swim to me. I'll be here for you." It took faith for him to do that. It didn't take a lot of faith, just enough to push off the side of the pool. I like how Martin Luther King Jr. put it, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

### **The Setting: A Journey of Faith**

In Ezra 8, the word faith isn't used, but the reality of active faith is seen throughout this chapter. Last week, we made a transition from chapter 6 to chapter 7 of Ezra, and in doing so, we jumped forward sixty years to 445 BC. We also changed locations. We moved from Jerusalem back to Babylon again, and we were introduced to Ezra himself. Ezra, the scribe, and Ezra, the priest. We saw something of what a great man he was, especially in his commitment to studying, practice, and teaching the Word of God. We saw his courage as he asked King Artaxerxes in Babylon for permission to make a journey back to Jerusalem. We saw how the king

was quite supportive of that endeavor and how Ezra gathered Israel's leaders to go with him.

Chapter 8 gives more detail about the journey to Jerusalem; it's a journey of faith, from one side of the pool to the other. This wasn't going to be an easy journey! They had to follow the Euphrates River, heading west from Babylon, and then turn south toward Jerusalem. We're talking about 900 miles. It's the middle of summer. You think it's hot here. It's a journey that will take four months. Men, women, and children traveled along in a giant caravan with mules, donkeys, camels, and horses. A couple of weeks ago, Lynn and I drove to Utah, which is about 900 miles. It's hot out there in the middle of Nevada! I tried to imagine walking to Utah. That's in essence what they set out to do.

### **The People of Faith**

And what we get in the first 14 verses are the names of the people willing to make this trek, at least the heads of the families. I'll call these the people of faith. Verse 1 says, "*These are the family heads and those registered with them who came up with me from Babylon during the reign of King Artaxerxes*" (Ezra 8:1). And then you get this long list names and how many from each family group. A total of almost 1,500 men were in the group. That means with women and children; there must have been well over 5,000 people.

Interestingly, in almost every case, these groups are joining their relatives who'd gone before them from Babylon 60 years earlier. All of the names but one of these twelve families mentioned here are also mentioned in the family names of those who'd gone decades before recorded in chapter 2. Back then, families had been divided, and there's no reason to assume that this wasn't the case here. Young families would be saying good-bye to elderly parents who couldn't make the journey. You can imagine the farewell scenes. It wasn't like they could visit for Christmas!

My great grandmother, Lucia Biagini, traveled to San Francisco from Lucca, Italy, when she was 17 years old. Her trip was paid for by a man living in San Francisco who was ten years older than her. She'd never met him, but he was also from Lucca, and there were family connections. She married him the day after she arrived. I don't know all that went into her decision to travel 6,000 miles all alone, but it had to be scary.

It like that with the people making this journey. But they were motivated by the fact that Jerusalem was the city of God. God had said through the prophet, Jeremiah, "*When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to*

*this place*" (Jeremiah 29:10). This was the place where the Temple stood, and proper worship took place. They weren't doing this because it was comfortable or easy, or even to have a better life. Historians are clear that many Jewish people were quite prosperous in Babylon. But they were compelled to go because of their faith. There are times when God calls us to do hard things like that.

Driving to Utah reminded Lynn and me of another drive we took 36 years ago from the Bay Area to Denver, Colorado, with our 4-year-old daughter. I left a good job in Pleasanton to get a graduate degree in Church History. Honestly, it didn't make a ton of sense, but it was how we felt God was leading us. Sometimes God does that. It takes faith to make the journey.

But there were also those in Babylon who didn't want to go. These are people who should have been the first to volunteer, but they didn't. Look at verse 15. *"I assembled them at the canal that flowed toward Ahava, and we camped there three days. When I checked among the people and the priests, I found no Levites there."* Ezra gathers everyone at this place called Ahava and realizes there are no Levites among them. I mean, they needed Levites to work in the Temple.

Why no Levites? Remember, the Levites did all sorts of things, mostly menial work. They were essentially servants to the priests. They did the grunt work. And the priests had access to various parts of the Temple, which the Levites couldn't enter. You have to wonder if life in Babylon had allowed them to escape such servitude. Maybe they'd become used to the easy life in Babylon and wanted to avoid the rigors of Temple service that put them under the priests' authority. Whatever the reason was, they stayed back.

Look at what happened. Ezra says he found 11 men who are listed in verse, and then he says,

**And I ordered them to go to Iddo, the leader in Kasiphia. I told them what to say to Iddo and his fellow Levites, the temple servants in Kasiphia, so that they might bring attendants to us for the house of our God. Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Sherebiah's sons and brothers, 18 in all; and Hashabiah, together with Jeshaiiah from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 in all. They also brought 220 of the temple servants—a body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites. All were registered by name. vv. 17-20**

Ezra sends some of the leading men and two of what appear to be scribe-like persons—people who knew the law, people who could bring to bear upon the Levites the teaching of Scripture. They go to a guy named Iddo, in a place called Kasiphia. We don't know exactly why the Levites were there, but these leading men persuaded them and other Temple servants to join them and the journey to Jerusalem.

You see, sometimes, faith requires us to do uncomfortable things. These Levites should have been the first to raise their hands. They should have

been willing to give voluntary, heart-filled service. Psalm 84:10 says, *"Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked."* These Levites needed to be reminded of that. Jesus once said, *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few"* (Matt. 9:37). There's always a shortage of those who want to serve. We should all ask ourselves, "Am I willing to serve God in whatever way he calls me to? Even if it means doing grunt work?"

I spoke last week with a man who's devoted his life to translating the Bible into the language of a Tibetan group called the Jone people. They're a minority group within a minority group. They have no known believers in Jesus. His work is tedious and slow. He lives in the middle of nowhere. He could be arrested and detained at any time. We need people like that. God may say to you, "I want you to serve me in a way no one will see, and no one will even acknowledge what you do. But I want you to do it for Me." It takes faith to do that.

### **The Practice of Faith**

And once they get the right people together, they don't just set out on their journey. Look what Ezra did next,

**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. 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." So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. vv. 21-23**

Here we see something of what I'd call the practice of faith. To really appreciate this, you have to understand this 900-mile journey was full of danger. We saw last week, and you can see down in verse 24, how they brought all kinds of riches, silver, and gold with them. There was the constant threat of robbers and bandits along the way. And here we see Ezra would have had every right to ask the king for a military escort to provide protection. But he couldn't bring himself to do that. Why? He said he was ashamed to do that after telling the king how God protects those who trust him. It's like, how can I ask the king for protection when I've told him I'm trusting God as our Protector?

Now, this is fascinating because Ezra makes a decision that's quite different from one Nehemiah will make a few years later. Ezra refuses to ask for a military escort, but when Nehemiah returned, he asked for one and used it (Neh. 2:7-9). Ezra would have been entitled to one; he would be an emissary of King Artaxerxes in Jerusalem, which was part of the Persian Empire. It would have been within his rights to ask for help, but he doesn't. And yet, under similar circumstances, Nehemiah wants the king's help and gets it.

You see, sometimes godly men and women can immerse themselves in the Scriptures, be prayerful, and seek the mind of God for direction, and still come down in opposite places about what to do. We're not talking

about moral or doctrinal issues that are clear in Scripture; we're talking about matters of personal conscience, and that's what this was for Ezra.

The apostle Paul talked about these issues in Romans 14.

**Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. vv. 1-4**

They judged each other about what kind of foods they should eat, which is a secondary issue. Paul says, "Stop judging one another about these things because we all answer to God." I mean, I could see Ezra judging Nehemiah about this, can't you? "Where's your faith, Nehemiah? Why accept help from a pagan king when you have God?" But what was wrong for Ezra was right for Nehemiah. We need to be careful about judging one another on matters of personal conscience. There's a kind of freedom in the practice of our faith that allows different people to have different convictions about things, and that shouldn't hinder our unity. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is how we choose to vote in November. Two sincere believers might come down in very different places on how to vote in this election, and we have to be okay with that.

Having said that, in a life of faith, there are times we have to put our money where our mouth is; times God calls us to make decisions like the one Ezra made, a decision where he put it all on the line in trusting God.

Maybe you've seen the movie, Harriet, about the life of Harriet Tubman. She's a great example of this kind of risky faith. She was born a slave but later escaped. As part of the famous Underground Railroad, she led about a dozen rescue missions that freed about 70 slaves. She never lost a person escaping with her and won the nickname, Moses, for leading so many people to "the promised land," or freedom.

The film makes it clear she was a woman of faith, even with doubts and fears. In one scene, when Harriet leads her brother Robert and others to freedom, she has a vision of how to protect her party from harm. She tells her refugees they can't cross the bridge and have to go a different way because she knows that danger is near. They come to the river, and she starts wading, not knowing how deep the river is. Her brother and the others are afraid, but she keeps praying, believing, "God will see us through." She makes it to the other side, and the refugees follow her.

Sometimes we have to put it all on the line, wade out into the water, trusting God to see us through. Let me ask you, is there anything you're doing that if God doesn't show up, you're in a heap of trouble? Is your faith that real? The other side of the pool looks a long way away, and I've never swum that far. Can I really trust he'll be there for me?

Now there's one more thing to see here about the practice of faith in these verses. Notice before Ezra takes a single step, he calls for a time of

fasting and prayer. He leads the people in humbling themselves before God and petitioning him for protection. They don't just pray; they also fast. Today, especially here in the Bay Area, we're quite fixated on what we eat. We live in the land of ketogenic diets, detox cleanses, and kale smoothies, but biblical fasting seems a long way away. If you look at God's people throughout Scripture, they fasted in times of war, or the threat of war. They fasted when someone was sick or died. They fasted when they were seeking forgiveness. They fasted when they faced danger. That's what we see here. This was a crucial moment. You see the same thing in Acts 13. The church in Antioch is about to send out missionaries in the first missionary journey. What did the church do? It says,

**While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Acts 13:2-3**

Now we must be careful because Jesus warned us about becoming legalistic like the Pharisees. He said, "Don't go looking all tired and hungry and telling people you're on a three day fast." But don't throw the baby out with the bathwater either. I can tell you that I don't fast enough. If I have to make a huge decision, why not fast? If I'm setting out to do something that's testing my faith, why not fast? It's something we should all consider. Sometimes we do this privately; sometimes, we do it as a church. If the elders decide there's a big issue at stake in the life of our church, maybe we should fast. Fasting puts an edge on prayer. And, if nothing else, fasting and prayer will strengthen our faith. That's what happened with Ezra and these people. It was a preparation for the journey. They prayed and fasted.

So we've seen the people of faith and the practice of faith. This led to what we might call the victory of faith.

### **The Victory of Faith**

You probably noticed at the end of verse 23, Ezra says God "answered our prayer." He expands on that in verses 31-32.

**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. So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested three days. vv. 31-32**

God answered their prayer and protected them on their journey. You get the feeling there were enemies and bandits along the way, but God protected them. Maybe they had some close calls, but they made it. It kind of feels like a classic understatement, doesn't it? "*God answered our prayer and we arrived in Jerusalem...*" I mean, I'd have said more than that! I'd have told a few stories about the journey, but that's not the point. The point is God answered their prayer, he protected them, and they got to Jerusalem.

And when they arrived there, they rested for three days. Perhaps they arrived before the Sabbath began on Friday evening. And in the Jewish way of counting, Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday morning would amount to three days. And then they did two things. First, in verses

33 and 34, they weighed out the silver, gold, and sacred articles they'd brought with them. *"Everything was accounted for by number and weight, and the entire weight was recorded at that time" (v. 34).*

Those in Jerusalem expected a proper accounting for what was sent from Babylon. This would prove the integrity of the men in the expedition. In Babylonian tradition, all transactions had to be recorded in writing. Ezra probably had to send back a signed certification of the delivery of the treasures. The second thing they did was celebrate by worshipping and offering sacrifices to God.

**Then the exiles who had returned from captivity sacrificed burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven male lambs and, as a sin offering, twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the Lord. v. 35**

Notice the number twelve is mentioned twice. That number represents Israel. The people have come back to the Promised Land as the true Israel of God, just as the twelve tribes had returned to the Promised Land after the Exodus. And they came back to worship, just as Moses said to Pharaoh years earlier, *"Let my people go, so that they may worship me..." (Ex. 7:16).*

So they're celebrating this victory God had given them. They're worshipping and making sacrifices to God. Burnt offerings had several meanings. One of them was to atone for sins, but another was to show total consecration. The Hebrew word for burnt offering is *olah*, which means to go up. And the sense of a burnt offering was not just to atone for sins, but it was an act of consecration, or what we call dedication. They were dedicating themselves to the Lord in a fresh new way. They'd come back for one purpose: to serve the Lord with all their hearts. And this celebration of the victory God had given them was an expression of that. Remember, they've never seen Jerusalem. They've never offered burnt offerings before in the Temple. This was a first! They were filled with joy and gratitude. And they give themselves wholly to the Lord...at least for now. Next week, we'll see how they slipped back into sin pretty quickly, as they often do, but for now, they're sincere in their worship.

Have you ever had one of those times when, in a fresh new way, you want to offer all that you are up to God; your whole life, your heart, your affections, your career, your family, your future — you want to give it all over to the Lord? Have you ever felt that? I think that's what these people were doing when they came back to Jerusalem. There are times like that in the life of faith. Times when we've seen God work in such a way that our faith is strengthened, and we want to give more of ourselves, even all of ourselves, to God.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

Let me go back to where I started. What is faith? Faith is an active response to God's initiative. We see that throughout this story. But this is true in each of our individual stories as well. God always takes the initiative, and we choose to respond in faith or not.

The greatest example of that is how God sent his Son, Jesus, to this planet. The Bible says, *"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..." (John 3:16).* Jesus said his whole mission was to *"seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).* That is you and me. That is every person on this planet. We're all lost. We've all turned our backs on God. But God still loved us. The Bible says, *"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).* He sent his Son, and he made the greatest possible sacrifice to ensure our forgiveness and acceptance. Our journey of faith begins with simply saying, "Yes" to this offer. It's not something we earn, but it's an active response to God's promise. It's about faith. The Bible says, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).*

I wonder if anyone is reading this who's not taken this first step of faith, simply responding to God's initiative in sending his Son. Saying, "Yes, I want to receive this gift." I want to give you an opportunity to begin your journey of faith right now. I'm going to ask you to bow your head and pray this simple prayer of faith:

**Father in heaven, I believe that out of your great love, you have created me. In a thousand ways I have shunned your love. I repent of my sins. Please forgive me. Thank you for sending your Son to die for me, to save me from eternal death. I choose this day to put my faith in you and to place Jesus at the center of my heart. I surrender to Him as Lord over my whole life. I ask you now to enter my life so that my life may be transformed. Give me the grace and courage to live as a follower of yours for the rest of my days. In Jesus' name, I pray, Amen.**

If you prayed that prayer, will you do me a favor and text the word FOLLOW to 650-460-1144 and click on the link to fill out the form so we can send you a Bible. Also, one of our pastors will follow up with you.

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