

On the Road to Reformation

Ezra 8:21-23; Joel 2:12-14

September 1, 2013

Rev. Greg L. Price

It is the good and godly practice of many Christian families to gather the family together for prayer, seeking God's protection before embarking upon a distant destination or an extended journey. In fact, such a time of beseeching God for safety has biblical precedent from our text this Lord's Day, wherein we find God's people gathered together outside Babylon (near the River Ahava) to call upon the Lord by means of praying and fasting before they set out on the road to reformation in Israel. Likewise, dear ones, as we embark upon this road to reformation in our family, church, and state, we must not get the cart before the horse. We must not allow ourselves to think we can promote reformation without falling before the Lord in humble brokenness and contriteness, confessing our sin and our inability in the flesh to make and to complete this journey without consistent prayer and occasional times of fasting for God's protection, God's power, and God's perseverance.

In the previous sermon (from Ezra 8:1-20), we observed from the list of names recorded there, how few were the honored families represented in that list of names, who voluntarily offered themselves as freewill offerings in joining the ranks to return to Israel in order to advance a biblical reformation (how few when compared with the number of God's people who volunteered to advance reformation in Israel under Zerubbabel, some 80 years earlier, in Ezra 2). And even more shameful was the fact that no Levites and their families were willing to join Ezra in advancing the cause of a biblical reformation in Israel. The Levites and their families that eventually joined that honored list of reformers had to be commanded by Ezra to come—they did not come because they wanted to come or because they were zealous to embark on the hard, long road to a biblical reformation Road (from Babylon to Jerusalem). But why did so few of God's people in exile (and none of the tribe of Levite without an explicit command to do so) offer themselves as freewill offerings to promote a biblical reformation in Israel?

Most likely, it was because they were so comfortable where they were. They were settled in their families, homes, jobs, and positions. They were at ease, and as a result apathy toward a biblical reformation had taken root in their lives. Dear ones, apathy in religion is such a comfortable place to be—it makes little or no demand upon our desires, our time, our talents, our treasures, or our relationships. An apathetic religion is a religion in which we can be at ease, but listen to the Word of the Lord, "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1). When tyranny and apostasy are rampant in a nation and in the churches of that nation, and when families are divided with husbands and wives going in different directions, living separate lives (even though they share the same home), and yet those who profess Jesus Christ are at ease in that situation, they have become a part of the problem (not the solution).

Throughout the Book of Ezra, God reveals His will to take us (as Christians) out of our comfort zone and the ease we may feel in our present circumstances in order to promote a biblical reformation. This Lord's Day, we will be considering the following two main points: (1) On the Road to Reformation—Prayer and Fasting (Ezra 8:21,23); (2) On the Road to Reformation—God's Honor above All (Ezra 8:22).

I. On the Road to Reformation—Prayer and Fasting (Ezra 8:21,23).

A. Now that Ezra has his small band of reformers gathered together near the River Ahava (outside Babylon), before they set out on Reformation Road (from Babylon to Jerusalem), Ezra proclaims a fast. Let's

make sure that we understand what a biblical fast is before proceeding any further in our text.

1. A biblical fast is an act of worship before God in which one denies oneself the natural appetite of food for a time, from a true conviction of its warrant in Scripture, and with a view to one's glorifying God by the crucifixion of sin and by the enjoyment of God's mercy, on the ground of the merit of Jesus Christ alone. Let's break that definition down into bite size pieces.

a. **A biblical fast is an act of worship before God in which one denies oneself the natural appetite of food for a time.** Fasting is offered to God as worship (Ezra 8:21). *The Westminster Confession of Faith* includes "solemn fastings" among those acts of worship ordained by God upon special occasions (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 21:5). The Hebrew word used for "fast" in Ezra 8:21 (noun) and Ezra 8:23 (verb) means "to abstain from food" (*Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Brown, Driver, and Briggs, p.847). The length of time involved may vary depending upon the circumstances (whether the part of a day, a full day, or at times, longer than a day), as well it may be a partial fast in abstaining from certain foods, or a total fast in abstaining from all foods (Daniel 10:2-3).

b. A biblical fast is an act of worship before God in which one denies oneself the natural appetite of food for a time **from a true conviction of its warrant in Scripture**. If it is to be a biblical fast, one must proceed knowing that it is ordained of God in Scripture—it has scriptural warrant (Ezra 8:21; Joel 2:12; Matthew 6:16—"whenever you fast", etc.). A biblical fast is not observed simply because there have been many Christians from the past who have fasted. Nor is it to be performed out of an implicit faith, simply because one in authority has commanded it. Nor is it a legalistic act of external righteousness so as to be seen by men (Matthew 6:1,16-18). Nor is it to promote some view of asceticism (namely, that the body is evil and therefore must be punished). Biblical fasting (first and foremost) is to be rendered as an act of worship to God, out of a sincere conviction that God calls us in His Word to fast on certain occasions.

c. A biblical fast is an act of worship before God in which one denies oneself the natural appetite of food for a time, from a true conviction of its warrant in Scripture, **and with a view to one's glorifying God**. The chief and primary end of fasting as in all things is God's glory, not man's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). Thus, a biblical fast is not with a view to lose weight or to cleanse the body of toxins. I think a fast for health reasons can certainly benefit the body, but a biblical/religious fast is not for man's glory, but is an act of worship for God's glory.

d. A biblical fast is an act of worship before God in which one denies oneself the natural appetite of food for a time, from a true conviction of its warrant in Scripture, and with a view to one's glorifying God **by the crucifixion of sin and by the enjoyment of God's mercy**. As we have noted above, the chief and primary end of a biblical fast is God's glory, but in this brief definition there are two means to that chief end: (1) the crucifixion of sin; and (2) enjoyment of God's mercy.

(1) Note what is said in Ezra 8:21 concerning the crucifixion of sin in a fast: "that we might afflict ourselves before our God." The Hebrew word used here for "to afflict" is also translated "to humble", or "to bow down". Thus, we see that though this affliction has an outward manifestation (namely, denying oneself food), the real affliction in view is an affliction of the soul, wherein one pours out his/her heart to the Lord, confessing his/her sin, mourning and grieving over his/her sin, humbling himself/herself before the Lord, and resolving before God to turn from his/her sin. It is our desperate need of Christ and the inward hungering we have for Christ to which the outward hungering is to point us (Joel 2:12-13a).

(2) In a biblical fast, God's people are crying out to God to supply a need that they have (whether a material need like protection, work, housing; or whether a spiritual need like wisdom in making an important decision, mortification of a besetting sin); and they are pleading for God to show them His mercy in supplying that need (Ezra 8:21). Note what is said in Ezra 8:23 concerning the mercy of God in that was abundantly bestowed upon God's people by means of this fast: "And we fasted and besought our God for this [namely, safety—GLP]: and he was intreated [or supplicated—GLP] of us." In other words, we

fasted and sought the Lord in prayer, and He mercifully heard and answered our supplication for Divine protection as we took our four-month dangerous journey down Reformation Road from Babylon to Jerusalem. The enjoyment of God's mercy in supplying a real need that we have is always one of the means by which we glorify God in fasting. Never forget that biblical fasting has in view the mercy of God for a particular need.

e. A biblical fast is an act of worship before God in which one denies oneself the natural appetite of food for a time, from a true conviction of its warrant in Scripture, and with a view to one's glorifying God by the crucifixion of sin and by the enjoyment of God's mercy, **on the ground of the merit of Jesus Christ alone.**

(1) Without this last statement in our definition of a biblical fast, there would be no spiritual benefit or profit to anyone. For, dear ones, the ground and basis of all spiritual blessings that God graciously bestows upon us is only and always the person and work of Jesus Christ. There is no merit in our works of righteousness. If we believe that fasting is a way to earn or pay for God's mercy, then we have adopted the heretical view of indulgences taught by Papal Antichrist and his Harlot Church of Rome. Rome teaches that by performing certain acts of obedience (whether monetary offerings, whether saying so many Hail Mary's and Our Father's, whether some other act of obedience authorized by the Priesthood of the Church) one can buy the righteousness of the saints that is stored in God's treasury in heaven for one's own need or the needs of others (whether dead or alive).

(2) Dear ones, there is no saving mercy outside of Christ. The mercy we need is not for sale, it is freely offered to sinners (like you and me, who deserve God's judgment), and that mercy we all need from God is received by faith alone as we trust in Christ and His mercy alone (Titus 3:5). Dear ones, fasting is in vain apart from the righteousness of Christ, apart from the sacrifice of Christ, and apart from the intercession of Christ for us in heaven. Fasting, prayer, and the preaching of God's Word are all ineffectual to our soul if we do not believe we are helpless and hopeless apart from Christ, and that it is only Christ's righteousness, His once-offered sacrifice in payment of our sin, and His continual intercession and ministry on our behalf that supplies the mercy we need.

(3) Beloved, fasting and denying ourselves food means, without Christ, I can do nothing (John 15:5). I am starving and will die of starvation without Christ. But in fasting we look to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, believing that with Christ, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13). In fasting, we cry out to God, "Without Christ I am helpless, hopeless, and starving, but with Christ, I have everything that I need in this life and in the life to come."

(4) Let me close this section out by saying that we must avoid all abuses of fasting. Some may think, "If a one day fast is effective in securing the mercy of God, how much more effective would be a forty day fast (like that of Christ or Moses)." Dear ones, beware of such extremes—Christ and Moses were divinely and supernaturally supported. I think the words of Samuel Miller (distinguished Presbyterian Minister and Professor at Princeton Seminary) stated the following in his very helpful little book on fasting (*Fasting*, Samuel Miller, Presbyterian Heritage Publications, p.16):

Fasting, like the Sabbath, was made for man, and not man for fasting. No one, therefore, ought to carry abstinence to such an extreme as to impair or endanger his bodily health.

2. Thus, dear ones, this was the nature of the fast that Ezra proclaimed near the River Ahava (not far from Babylon) before this small band of reformers set out on the dangerous road to a biblical reformation from Babylon to Jerusalem.

B. Reformation, covenanting, and fasting are found connected together in the next stage of reformation in Israel, when Nehemiah led the third group of God's people from Babylon to Jerusalem in 444 b.c. (just 14 years after Ezra) in Nehemiah 9:1,38. The union of fasting and covenanting had been the practice

of the Church of Scotland in its purest times and the practice of the faithful posterity of the Covenanters as well.

1. We read this entry from the diary of Sir Archibald Johnston (the primary architect and writer of the *National Covenant* of Scotland), who stated what happened on that day (February 28, 1638) when the National Covenant of Scotland was signed in the Church of Scotland:

After sermon, being a solemne fast day apoynted for subscription of the Covenant, he read it al over again as he had doone the Sunday of befoir; he syne [then] explained to the people al the pairts of it (*Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston, Lord Wariston 1637-1639*, ed. G. M. Paul, Scottish History Society, 1911. <http://digital.nls.uk/scotlandspages/timeline/1638.html>).

2. This was likewise the case with the taking of the *Solemn League and Covenant*.

An order was issued by the Parliament, in February 1644, commanding the Covenant to be taken throughout the kingdom of England by all persons above the age of eighteen years; which order was accompanied by an exhortation prepared by the Assembly of Divines. This was to be done, upon every day of fasting and public humiliation, publicly read in every church and congregation within the kingdom (*The History of the English Puritans*, Vol. 2, Daniel Neal, p. 225).

3. One last piece of historical testimony of the relationship that our covenanted forefathers saw between reformation, covenanting, and fasting is when these solemn covenants were renewed by hundreds of Covenanters at Auchensaugh, Scotland in 1712, the following account is given:

Upon Wednesday, July 23d, those who had the work in design being met together, the minister began the day's work with prayer for special assistance to attain due preparation, and a suitable frame, throughout the whole solemnity: and thereafter had a prefatory discourse to the people, showing the nature of the work in general, its lawfulness, expediency, and necessity, from scripture precedents and approved examples of the people of God, adducing the 9th chapter of Ezra, Neh. Ezek. Dan. and Neh. x. 28, 29, for proof thereof; and of the day in particular, that it was a day of fasting and supplication, with preaching of the word, in order to preparation for the solemnities intended, both of renewing the covenants and celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (*The Auchensaugh Renovation*, p.15, The Reformed Presbytery, 1880)

II. On the Road to Reformation—God's Honor above All (Ezra 8:22).

A. Moving now from the fast that Ezra proclaimed before setting out on the road to reformation from Babylon to Jerusalem, let us note briefly the circumstances leading up to this fast, which are stated in Ezra 8:22.

1. Ezra proclaimed the fast in this particular instance in order to plead for God's mercy in protecting them, their little ones, and the possessions that they were taking with them because he (Ezra) was ashamed to request from King Artaxerxes a royal escort of soldiers to accompany them from Babylon to Jerusalem, so as to protect them from marauding tribes of thieves and bandits along the way. Ashamed? Why would Ezra be ashamed to make such a request from King Artaxerxes when the King had voluntarily offered such help already in advancing reformation in Israel?

2. Ezra gives us the reason in the latter half of Ezra 8:22: "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 says in effect that the reason he was ashamed to ask the King for protection is because he had stood before the King and had rightly testified to the King of God’s gracious and sovereign care and protection of His people who seek the Lord as their refuge and strength, as their shield and bulwark, as their fortress and high tower into which they can run and are safe. But on the other hand, Ezra powerfully testified before the King that those who forsake the Lord have no reason to believe that God’s protection will be afforded them at all.

3. Do you begin to see why Ezra was ashamed to request protection from the King? He did not want to taint the honor of God, the power of God, the mercy of God, the faithfulness of God, or the protection of God in the least. Here Ezra had boldly and correctly proclaimed before the King God’s glorious goodness to preserve and protect those who trust in Him, and now that Ezra and the people were in need of protection, what a mockery it would make of God if they merely fell upon the protection of the King. Would not the honor and glory of the one true living God be blemished in the eyes of the King? Could not the King be led to think he was more powerful than God in the eyes of God’s people if it was to him they appealed for protection rather than to their God?

4. Rather than allowing the possibility of his God receiving such a black eye in the thoughts of the King (or anyone else), Ezra would not request from the King a royal escort, but would request an angelic escort from the King of kings and Lord of lords.

5. Dear ones, do we have a right and godly shame at all how our words and deeds might bring dishonor upon the name of our glorious God in whom we profess to trust? People all around us (at home, at work, at school, on Facebook or Twitter, at the store, on the road in our cars, people are drawing conclusions about our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, based upon what we say or do. Are they drawing from what they observe in us and in our family the conclusion that the God whom we serve must be a merciful, loving, patient, forgiving, holy, righteous, almighty, and faithful God? Or are they drawing from what they observe in us and in our family the conclusion that the God whom we serve must be foul-mouthed, bitter, resentful, impatient, unloving, unforgiving, lying, or wicked God? Ezra was such a man of God that he would rather bear shame, than lead others by his life to reproach his glorious God.

B. Dear ones, what will you do with the words you have heard read and preached from God’s Word with regard to the steps you can take in advancing and promoting reformation in your own lives and in the life of your family? I suggested last Lord’s Day that we husbands and fathers might call our family together for a Reformation Conference to discuss among the family members what can be done to promote a biblical reformation in our own hearts and in our own families. And now I would like to add to that suggestion, that as we address the matter of a biblical reformation in our own lives and families that we also consider the place that occasional fasting might have in pleading for the mercy of God to bring a biblical reformation. I conclude by turning to the gracious invitation of the Lord in Joel 2:12-14. God is calling His people to a biblical fast. We will not heed this invitation, if we are complacent, apathetic, and at ease in Zion. But if we are being moved by the gracious Spirit of God to seek His mercy in advancing a biblical reformation (in our own lives, in our family, in the church, and in the nation), we will not reject this invitation of the Lord, we will not procrastinate, we will not ignore it, rather we will fall upon our faces before the Lord with fasting, weeping, and mourning out of a sense of urgency pleading for His power to advance a biblical reformation and pleading for His protection from all adversaries that would stand in our way (including the adversaries of pride, sinful anger, fear, discontentment, a critical spirit and a host of many other internal adversaries). Let us as God’s covenanted people embrace that invitation now.

Copyright 2013 Greg L. Price.