

Travel Tips for a Safe Trip

Ezra 8:21-23

I heard a great story the other day about a very popular city founder in an upper Midwestern city. The man was being honored at a banquet for his enormous success in civic and entrepreneurial endeavors.

Person after person after person paraded up to the microphone to express astonishment for the man's accomplishments.

Finally, the man humbly stood and described how he had shuffled into their fair city just twenty-five years before with the clothes on his back and a red, ragged bandanna carrying his life's possessions, tied on a stick over his shoulder.

Well, after the festivities were over, a little boy approached the man, pulled on his coat tail and earnestly asked, "Say, mister. What was it that you were carrying in that red bandanna?"

The man smiled and whispered, "\$1.2 million in cash!"

Well, that's one way to make it on this journey through life, and we all are trying to make it safely through this journey of life. You are on a journey, you realize? I am reminded at times that God is more interested in the journey than He is the destination. We as church are on a journey, a journey to our promised land. So, how do you make it safely on those journeys? How do you make it to your destination in one piece with and your sanity and spirits intact? Well, the answer to that question is found in the actions of the man Ezra. Take your Bibles and find **Ezra 8:21-23...prayer**

Ezra was a leader of the people of Israel as they returned from exile in Babylon. You should remember that in the OT, the people were punished by God for their unfaithfulness by being overrun by the nation of Babylon and hauled off into captivity. After 70 years of captivity and punishment, they were finally allowed to return to their homeland. Well, Ezra was the man who got the permission and the resources together to take the exiled Israelites back to Jerusalem. So, they all set out from Babylon. Today in this story of Ezra and his trip, I want to share what God wants to teach us about making a successful journey with Him. I will call them travel tips for a safe trip to your promised land, to the place of becoming all that God wants you to be.

1) Travel tip #1, **where we go, we must go together.**

When it comes to making it safely to your promised land, the first thing you need to learn is that where we go, we must go together. It says, *"I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days."* Who is "we" in this verse? Well, "we" are all of the Israelites listed at the beginning of chapter 8, it totaled 5,000 people who made this journey, and they made that journey together. It was an 850 mile journey on foot across rough and hostile territory. The fact is that had they not stuck together, they would never have made it. The key to understand here is that **when you walk a rough road, it is best to walk beside a friend.** Together is definitely better. I have learned that difficulty demands dependence upon others. So, when you walk a rough road, it is best to walk beside a friend. You will never reach your God-given destination; you will never become all that God wants you to be if you try to do it alone. Like most of you over the years I have watched a number of people come in and out of the doors of the church, and some have stuck, others have left. Have you noticed yet that those who don't stick, those who fall away, not just from this church but from the Lord, they are people who fail to develop significant ties and friendships with other people in the church. For whatever reason, they walk the journey alone and before long, they are not only out of the church, they are off the journey. Authentic Christianity knows no such thing as lone ranger believers. **You may not have to go to church to be a Christian, but you will need to go to church to remain a Christian.** Where you go, you must go together. Now, that's true for you as you seek to reach your destination of becoming all that God wants you to be; and that's true for our church as we seek to journey to your promised land and reach a lost world. Where we go, we must go together. You will not rise up and possess your mountain if you are not together on this. Division always spells disaster.

And I firmly believe that God is looking for unity in our ranks before he starts us on this new journey. He's looking at us and he is asking, "Are you with the group?" Are you supporting the vision? Are you supporting it with your belief in this calling, and in your positive support with what you say? Or do you simply say, "Well, I'm going to just wait and see?" Are you supporting it with your prayers, really? Are you supporting the efforts of our church with your resources, really? Where we go, as believers and as a church, we must go together, because when you walk a rough road, it is best to walk with a friend.

God is looking at all of us today, and he is hoping to find a believer who is committed to other believers and to making this journey together. I read a really striking report the other day about wild horses and wild donkeys. It seems that these animals that roam the wide spans of the Northwest are constantly under attack from wolves and other predators. And an interesting thing happens when they are attacked. The thoroughbred horses, when they are attacked, they form a circle facing each other and kick outwards towards the enemy. When the donkeys are attacked, however, they form a circle, facing outward and kick each other. It's sad to say, but all too often the church is filled with more donkeys than thoroughbreds, but you can't afford to kick each other and fight each other if you are going to make it safely on your journey with God. Instead you have to learn that where you go, you must go together.

2) Travel tip #2 is where we go; we must go by the power of prayer.

If we are going to make it safely on this journey to our promised land, if we are going to make it safely on our journey to becoming all God wants us to be, then we are all going to have to learn that where we go, we must go by the power of prayer. The word says, *"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."* It struck me the other day that you can tell others that you believe in God, and that God is good and taking care of you, but the proof of that belief is found in your prayers. I have found that **the proof of our faith and belief in God is found in our prayers**. If you want to know what someone really believes about God, listen to their prayers. Prayer is where the rubber hits the road of true faith.

Ezra knew that. He knew that if he was going to make that 850 mile trip safely, he was going to have to have God's help. And so, he said to all of the people, "It's time to pray." And I don't mean those simple bless my frosted flakes kinds of prayers that most believers pray. And I don't mean those pillow prayers that you pray as you drift off to sleep. It's time to pray. It's time to get on our knees and prevail upon God until we prevail on our journey with God. It's time to pray. You can see how serious Ezra was about all of this when you notice that not only did he call for prayer, he also called for a fast. How many of you know what fasting is for a believer? Fasting has gone out of style in the church today, and that is sad, because fasting; denying yourself a meal and spending that time in prayer, is the best way for a believer to get serious with God. Ezra knew that. He knew that the people had better get serious with God if they ever hoped to make it to Jerusalem, and so, he said it's time to cry out to God. It's time to pray and fast. I have found that **prayer is the pavement on the path that leads to the promises of God**. In South Georgia one of the things that caused all sorts of problems building in South Georgia was the soil. Does anyone here know what the soil in Georgia is like? Primarily it is red clay. And when it rained that clay became the messiest most difficult thing you ever had to work with. And just trying to get from the road to the house became a nightmare. I have seen guys sink their trucks up the axels in that mud. It was a mess. Until, that is, they pour the driveways for the houses. Then there was no more swimming around in the mud. It was easy rolling on the pavement.

Prayer is like that: It is the pavement on the path to the promises of God. And it makes the trip so much easier. You want to become all God wants you to be? Great! Then get serious about prayer, because you will not become all God wants you to be until you learn how to pray. A nod in God's direction before you scarf down your spaghetti or a wink in God's direction before you fall asleep is not going to hack it. You won't get anywhere down the road with those kinds of prayers. But serious prayer, intense prayer, heart-motivated, gut wrenching prayer before God is what puts pavement on the path that enables you to cruise down that road to God's promises. And we need to pray for our church, that we reach our promised land.

Let me tell you something very personal. God reminded me of this as I sat alone in my office one afternoon. I was all alone with God and my bible in the office. I was reading through the book of Ezra. I don't know why I was there but I was. So, I was cruising along through the book of Ezra when I got to this passage here in chapter. 8. And let me tell you, God got my attention right then and there. What he had to say hit me like a ton of church hymnals.

Now he didn't speak to me in an audible voice, but I knew in my heart what he was saying. And He said, "Stacy, because that's what He calls me, Stacy, Ezra and his people made it safely to their promised land because they prayed. They fasted and they prayed and they poured out their hearts before me. And then he said, "Stacy, LifeStream hasn't made it to its promised land yet - because they haven't prayed yet. And they will never rise up and possess that Promised Land that I gave to them until they do. Because where we go, we will go only by the power of prayer."

And I want you to know folks, I cried before God. I mean I sobbed. I sobbed in prayer, I sobbed in repentance for myself and for you. Sure I've been praying about LifeStream, and I believe you have been praying for LifeStream too. But let's get honest: we've not been prevailing in prayer over it. Instead we have been trying to reach the promised land over the rough and rocky terrain of a prayer less journey, because we have failed to pave the path to the promised land through prayer. Where we go, we must go by the power of prayer. Are you willing to join with the church staff and each other in paving that path with prayer? Are you?

3) Travel tip #3 is **where we go; we must go by humble dependence upon God.**

Again back to our scripture, *"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."* Ezra knew that if they were going to make it from Babylonia to Jerusalem, they were going to have to depend on God. Not only was it a long hard road, but it was also a hostile road and they had good reason to fear robbers and raiders. If you read down in vs. 26 of chapter 8 sometime you will find a list of the goods that Ezra and the people took with them to finance the rebuilding of the temple when they got to Jerusalem. They took 650 talents of silver, that's about 25 tons, then another 3 to 4 tons of silver articles, and then 3 to 4 tons of Gold. I added all of that up and in today's market, all of that would have been worth over \$20 million. Think of all the ministry that you could do with that kind of bank account! I'd say that was a good reason to be concerned about making that trip safely. Ezra knew that it was going to be dangerous and tough. That's why they went together. That's why they prayed. And that's why they had to humbly depend upon God.

But there is another reason why I think Ezra knew they had to depend upon God if they were ever going to make it. And let me explain that to you today. It says there in chapter 8 that the people gathered at the Ahava canal. Do you remember your US history and the western expansion? People desiring to head west and stake a claim would gather at one of the port cities to the west. They would stake their claim at the government office there. They would join a covered wagon train, and then they would embark on their trip. Well, in much the same way, the Israelites had gathered at the Ahava canal. They gathered from all over Babylonia. They had packed up their goods, closed shop, held that final, "We're moving" garage-sale; given their 2 weeks' notice at work; and said good-bye to all of their neighbors, and they were on their way. And it was exciting! I mean it was really exciting. They were pumped. Everything was new and everything was exciting. But Ezra understood something very important about people. He understood that **excitement always gives way to reality**. Ezra knew that their emotional excitement could only take them so far on this journey, and then reality would set in. And the only thing that would carry them on to their promised land would be their humble dependence upon God.

Now, let me bring that down to where we live. In a little less than 5 months we are going to be looking at the possibility of having a new lead pastor. There is this great sense of joy, and possibly even this overwhelming rush of emotions. But we need to understand something together: **Everything new is exciting**. But you will find out, all of you, that the excitement of the newness always gives way to the reality of the everyday. And that's why it is the responsibility of the leaders and teachers and mature believers of LifeStream to teach to humbly depend on God. Because emotional excitement will only carry us so far, and the only thing that will take us on to our promised land is humble dependence on God.

I firmly believe that **dependence on man's might is a one way street to defeat, as where dependence on God's grace is a super highway to victory.** If you are ever going to rise up and become all that God wants you to be, then you are going to have to learn humble dependence upon God. Because dependence on your own might is a one way street to defeat, as where dependence on God's grace is a super highway to victory. Muhammad Ali was in his prime, and he was about to take off on an airplane flight and the stewardess reminded him to fasten his seat belt. He came back brashly, "Superman don't need no seat belt." The Stewardess quickly came back, "Superman don't need no airplane, either." Ali fastened his belt.

Dependence on our own strength and abilities and excitement will always lead to defeat. It is humble dependence on God that will carry us onto your promised land. Ezra teaches us a couple of steps to humbly depend on God. The first is that we have to **know human limitation.** Ezra knew that they could only make it so far on the excitement of moving back to Jerusalem. He knew that their strength and abilities could only take them so far and only protect them so much. He recognized their human limitation, do you?

Ezra also **refused personal manipulation.** Vs. 22 says that Ezra refused to go back to the King and ask of a detachment of soldiers. He had told the king that God was able to deliver them. Now his integrity was on the line. Would he and the Israelites walk the walk of which they talked? Or would they try to manipulate others into getting what they needed.

Ezra also knew that it was going to take **requesting Divine intervention.** Vs. 23 says that Ezra and the people prayed and asked God to intervene and give them the victory. Ezra knew that their excitement and emotionalism and personal resources and strength would only take them so far. If they were going to make it to their promised land, they were going to have to depend on God. They were going to have to request divine intervention.

Our excitement can only take us so far; and now if we are ever going to make it to our promised land, we are going to have to humbly depend on God. That's what Ezra did and he and the people made it safely to their promised land. As vs. 23 says, God answered their prayer. Where we go, we must go by humble dependence upon God; where we go, we must go by the power of prayer; where we go, we must go together. Tell me something this morning: Can we count on each other? The Lord has said to LifeStream that no matter how bad our battle in life, you can always count on me to be there for you.

Travel Tips for a Safe Trip

Ezra 8:21-23

1) Where we go, we must go _____!

I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days. (vs. 15)

When you walk a rough _____, it is best to walk beside a _____.

2) Where we go, we must go by the power of _____!

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...So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. (vs. 21 & 23)

Prayer is the _____ on the path that leads to the _____ of God.

3) Where we go, we must go by humble _____ on God!

So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. (vs. 23)

Dependence on man's might is a one way street to _____, as where dependence on God's grace is a super highway to _____.

Humble dependence on God:

Recognize human _____.

Refuse personal _____.

Request Divine _____.

Can we count on each other?