

Taking Risks for God

Ezra 8:21-36

I'm thinking we wouldn't have made this trip exactly the way Ezra's group did. And at least in part this is because of our local history. Back in the days when this part of the country was first settled, most of our freight was shipped down the Mississippi River. In the days even before steamboats, merchants would build flatboats in Nashville and float them all the way to Natchez, carrying all sorts of supplies people might need – including the still popular Tennessee whiskey! Because it was too hard to push them back upstream, they would sell the boats as well as the merchandise, and lots of the older buildings in Natchez are made out of lumber from these boats.

So, with profits in hand and no other way to get home, they would set out on the Natchez Trace, walking back to Nashville to start the process all over again. The journey would take two or three weeks, depending on road conditions – but that's if they weren't stopped by highwaymen like Sam Mason and relieved of their riches. And of course, some of Mason's victims never made it home at all. No, we Mississippi folks have known for a long time it's not the safest thing to take a long walk with lots of money in your pockets.

So, why in the world did Ezra's group decide to do just that? And make no mistake, they were travelling about twice as far, and because of the number of people involved, it would take the better part of four months. And the cash donation they were carrying with them for the Temple, well, it wasn't a small amount of money. Let's count it up: one talent comes to about 1200 ounces, so, 650 talents of silver, plus another 100 talents of silver items, that amounts to 900,000 ounces, or about 15 million dollars in today's money. And what about the 100 talents of gold? That's 120,000 ounces, and at today's price that's another \$152 million. Sam Mason and Little Harpe killed a lot of people on the Natchez Trace for a whole lot less than that.

Oh, and it's not as if 5000 or so folks could sneak out of town without anyone noticing them – you can't keep that many kids quiet. And carrying 63,750 pounds of metal along with all their household goods would mean quite a few carts creaking and clanking down the street, not to mention the noise of all the livestock they drove along with them. And the fact that they had gone around asking all their friends for donations before they left would guarantee their departure was more than a little like a circus parade. In short, everyone knew where they were going and what they were taking with them.

So why wouldn't Ezra even ask the Persian king for some soldiers and horsemen to insure their safety? After all, a lot of that money had come from the king's treasury in the first place, so surely he would have agreed to guarantee its safe delivery. But even after careful thought and deliberation, even after much fasting and prayer, Ezra still decided not to make the request.

But why? Well, we need to begin by making this point – by refusing an armed guard, Ezra was not rejecting any sort of state support for the Church. After all, a good deal of the money he was carrying to Jerusalem was a gift from the Persian king. And the Bible isn't saying that military power is somehow illegitimate – when Nehemiah took a similar trip to Jerusalem a few years later, the Persian king sent soldiers and horsemen along with him, and Nehemiah didn't seem to object.

So, why did Ezra and the people with him make such a seemingly crazy decision? Well, what did they say in verse 22? They were ashamed to ask the king for protection because they had told him that

their God takes care of those who seek Him, and shows His anger to those who forsake Him. In other words, in the face of that pagan king, God's people were trying to bear witness to God's power, God's love and God's justice. And so in that particular situation, God's people came to the conclusion that the best way for them to maintain a consistent witness would be for them to rely solely on God to get them safely to Jerusalem. In short, they were willing to go out on a limb because they knew God would be with them there.

So, what about us? What risks are we willing to take to bear witness to God's power, His love, and His justice? Yes, I know we are all happy to give out of our abundance, to spare our money and time when we don't have to change our priorities. Sometimes, like during the capital campaign to restore the golden hand atop our steeple, we are willing to give to the point where we might have to give up something else that we want. Sometimes, like when a family member is sick, we are willing to put our plans on hold so that they might have the help they need.

But how many of us would do what Christian Cryder has done – moving all the way from Montana to Austin, Texas to try to start a business and a church at the same time, while having a daughter who needed to go to college? How many of us would do what Nick and Amanda have done – to give up their jobs, to take their two little girls into a foreign country to preach the gospel? How many of us would do what Elizabeth Gabbard has done – agreeing to become a foster mother while serving as the solo pastor of a small church, and while still being single? Sounds a little like walking down the street at night with a pocket full of money, doesn't it? It sounds a little – crazy?

Now, I'm not saying that we should take unreasonable risks just for the sake of giving God the opportunity to deliver us. That was one of the temptations Satan set before Jesus – to throw Himself down from the top of the Temple so that, when God kept Him from falling, everyone would realize He was the Messiah. Jesus responded that we should not put the Lord our God to the test – we shouldn't paint God into a corner, doing something reckless just so He will have to save us from our poor decisions.

But Jesus did take a risk – the biggest risk of all, didn't He? He knew what going to the cross would mean – not just the physical pain and even death, but the separation from His Father, Who would have to forsake Him, turning His back on the Son Who would take on Himself the punishment that all our sins deserve. And yet, while in such tremendous agony that He sweated drops of blood, Jesus still trusted God enough to say, "Not my will, but thine be done."

So, is there something God is calling you to do, something that you think might be too great a risk? It doesn't have to be starting a ministry in another town. Maybe it's trying to help someone you know, someone that will probably need more time and money than you are comfortable spending. Perhaps it's reaching out to someone you hurt, or someone that hurt you. Perhaps it's giving financial support to the church or to a ministry, or to a missionary, at a level which will require you to make meaningful changes in your lifestyle. But whatever it is, it will require you to trust God at a deeper level, relying on Him more completely.

So, how did that kind of radical trust turn out for Ezra's little group? They fasted and they prayed, and they sought God's face before deciding to turn down a military escort that any reasonable person said they would need. And as Ezra said in verse 23, God heard their prayers. Verse 31 summarizes their trip by simply saying that the hand of their God was upon them, and that He delivered

them from any of the dangers that might have been lurking along their way. And it was at least in part because of their gratitude for God's travelling mercies that they made the offerings listed in verse 35.

Now, before we move on, we need to make this point. We've already seen we need to be willing to take risks for God. We've already seen that we need to trust in God, no matter what. But here we also find that it is a good thing to give God thanks and praise, not only for the good things that happen to us, but also for the bad things that don't happen. I just completed a journey of around 1300 miles, including driving through downtown Atlanta, and even stopping near Georgia Tech for gas. Some people would say that's a miracle. But all of us have traveled from our homes to church this morning, and we all made it here safely. So, shouldn't we pause to give God thanks for His grace, each and every day, for protecting us from all the things that didn't happen to us?

And if we don't, what does that tell us about the way we look at God and His gifts? If we take all these daily blessings for granted, could it be that we are presuming upon God's grace? In fact, could it be that the same reason we aren't thankful for what we have is the same reason that we are unwilling to risk it – because we somehow think that we deserve the blessings that God is constantly giving us all the time?

Now, Ezra's group knew good and well they were doing God's will, but before they set out, and before they took a big risk for God, they still humbled themselves before Him in fasting and prayer. Does that kind of humility, does that kind of total surrender to God mark our everyday lives?

Maybe it would if we really thought about ourselves the way Ezra saw his little group. Now, we know that Ezra understood the great value of all those donations that had been given for the work of the Temple. We know he carefully counted them and weighed them before delivering them to the 12 priests who would carry them on the long journey, and we know he was satisfied that all of them were eventually delivered to the Temple, down to the last penny.

But did you notice what he said in verse 28 about the people to whom all this wealth was entrusted? It wasn't just the gifts that were holy, set apart for the Lord's use – no, Ezra said that all of them were holy to the Lord as well.

And this holiness didn't just apply to the priests. For did you notice how all the people celebrated their arrival in Jerusalem, their deliverance from all of the problems that could have happened on their journey but didn't? It wasn't just the priests that offered up sacrifices to God – those offerings were made on behalf of all the people of Israel. As all the people burned up those animals in fire on the altar, as the smoke ascended into the sky, it was their way of saying that all they were and all they had belonged to God, that they were holy, they were set apart for Him.

Now, I'm sure we can all understand the people's amazement that God delivered all that money safely to the Temple, without needing a single soldier to protect it. But what amazed them even more is the same thing that should amaze us – that God had delivered all of them as well. Yes, they also brought sin offerings to the Temple, admitting that they were not the people God wanted them to be. But they still rejoiced that God had chosen them, that God had set them apart for His own service, that God had made them His own people.

And, standing on this side of the cross, we know so much more about God's deliverance, don't we? We know that God has saved us, not just from bandits like Sam Mason, but from sin and death

itself. We know that God Himself has paid the penalty that all our sins deserve, offering up His own Son as a perfect sacrifice for all His people.

So, doesn't a God like that deserve our trust? Shouldn't we be willing to take some risks for His glory? Shouldn't we thank Him every day for delivering us and for making us His own? And shouldn't we be willing to devote ourselves, all we are and all we have, completely to Him?