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**SERMON TITLE: Where Fair-Weather Christianity Stops**

**SCRIPTURE: Ezra 8:21-25**

**DATE: September 9, 2018**

Check out the service at [www.fpcd.org](http://www.fpcd.org).

*Why Pray?* Series. Read also Ephesians 6:10-13, 18

*Do* you know who Ezra is? He was a priest. He lived in Persia around the mid-5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., and he and Nehemiah were leaders in the return from exile. King Cyrus had defeated Babylon and put out a decree allowing the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their ruined temple. Israel had been in exile seventy years.

How could this happen? The worst (exile) became the best (go home and rebuild). Here's the decree:

*In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the LORD fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom: "This is what King Cyrus says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem to rebuild this Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you!" [He encouraged Jewish neighbors to contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem.] Then God stirred the hearts of the priests and Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the LORD. (Ez 1:1-5)*

Nehemiah was the great city leader who led all the people in rebuilding the wall. He was a practical man who mobilized the people. Ezra was in charge of rebuilding the temple. A priest, he was an idealist. He wanted the people to take their faith and discipleship seriously.

King Cyrus sent Ezra with this charge: to build the temple, teach the people, and appoint good judges. This understanding by a foreign king was amazing. He gave back to Ezra all the valuable articles of silver and gold King Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from the Lord's Temple—5,400 items. God's people so wanted their temple rebuilt that they also began giving large sums of money to the project.

The plans to rebuild the temple and the worship articles from the former temple reconnected the people with their historical roots. This was not a new venture—it was God's redemptive activity. God's promises to them had not been abandoned. God still had plans for them, just like God does not abandon us when we fail.

Then the king opened the coffers of the royal treasury and gave an abundant supply of gold and silver, wheat, wine, olive oil, and an abundant supply of salt. Life was good! But this was God's doing. God, in His providence, made the way to fulfill God's plan and promises—even through foreign kings.

The people surely thought this was the greatest jackpot imaginable. They likely thought they had died and gone to heaven. They were given back their nation, their land, and unlimited resources to get started. But they would have to buy in. They would have to invest themselves. They would have to travel 800 miles on dangerous, bandit-infested roads and reclaim their city which had been demolished and left standing in ruins for seventy years. It would not be an easy task. So after bragging about how God would take care of those who worshiped Him, Ezra decided he better call the people to fast and pray. Hear the story. READ Ezra 8:21-25

Have you ever wanted to accomplish something that took great focus and determination? Have you ever cared about something so deeply that you have fasted and prayed? Many in the course of our history have done exactly that.

In 1814, the British determined to fight America for the Louisiana territory and so they mobilized vast troops and moved through the south to capture New Orleans. The British wanted to prevent any further expansion by the States. The Americans had no such army—only a country lawyer named Andrew Jackson who had gathered a rag-tag bunch of volunteers, men from Tennessee, Kentucky, Louisiana, Creoles, Indians, blacks, both freedmen and slaves, and the Lafitte Family who were pirates. Their weapons included their own rifles, their grit, a deep desire to save their country, and willingness to fight together.

They also had one other significant weapon: the Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans.

The troops lined up for battle on plantation fields along the Mississippi River south of New Orleans. The Americans had less than 4,000 men up against over 14,000 well-trained soldiers on land and water. But Jackson found that the Creoles, blacks, Indians, and Lafitte pirates knew how to navigate the swampy terrain well and he relied on them. Everyone had sacrificed to come help. These underdogs had a much greater stake in the battle than did the world-conquering British. But the war began with bad losses for the Americans.

Yet after several battles, the British had been surprisingly knocked back by Jackson's motley crew. Later the Brits would say Jackson's army could "hit the eye of a squirrel as far away as they could see it."

Nevertheless, the enemy bore down on New Orleans confident of victory. But the Americans feverishly worked building defenses to save their land. It was January 7, 1815. With the word that the British were within five miles of the city, the Sisters of the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans held an all-night prayer vigil. Joined by huge numbers of women from the city, they prayed for an American victory. The entire city had been praying since December 18, 1914 because their bishop, Father DuBourg, had issued a mandate for public prayers.

The Convent's annals read: "The community together with all of the city was in grand consternation over the subject of the attack of the English and while all of the inhabitants went to the battlefield, all of the pious women and good black women went to the chapel for prayer. ... [The priest], celebrated Mass to pray to God of the Army . . . to deliver the city from the evil by which it was threatened. At the moment of Holy Communion, a messenger arrived in the church and announced in a loud voice the defeat of the English. After the battle, the sick and wounded soldiers were received in the house . . . and nursed by the religious for three months. . . . The Ursulines became nurses."<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Jackson credited the brilliant victory of all time to "the blessing of heaven." The entire city celebrated the victory as a miracle.

Americans leaned on God in prayer to fight the battle. That's the powerful benefit we have through prayer. This ancient hymn testifies about this very thing:

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing...  
Did we in our own strength confide,  
Our striving would be losing,  
Were not the right man on our side,  
The man of God's own choosing . . .  
He must win the battle! ("A Mighty Fortress is Our God")*

Ezra knew that in the great opportunity the people were given, they would also have great opposition. The road would be long and hard and they were vulnerable to attack along the way. But they believed, "Our God's hand of protection is on all who worship him, but his fierce anger rages against those who abandon him" (v. 22). Thus, fasting and earnest prayer was absolutely necessary. This was not fair-weather, easy faith.

Today's church in America is vulnerable to attack. Are we praying? "For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen

world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Do we want to carry our troubles alone? That's fair-weather Christianity. No, we have a weapon—the weapon of active prayer and fasting.

Have you ever fasted and prayed about something, even for one meal? The way you do this is simply skip the meal and go kneel instead. Pray during the time you would prepare the meal (or go through a drive through!). God says the gates of hell will not prevail when you actively live into your faith and do not abandon God.

Today the Lutheran Church of Buda Castle in Budapest is a beautiful, vibrant church. My husband and I walked past it one evening while on vacation. A service was going on. I peered through the door. It was a Sunday night prayer meeting. The testimony of the church was written out for visitors.

The church was founded in 1846, but the local government took its property and it was forced to move in 1895. But they rebuilt and added a school. Fifty years later, in 1944, Budapest became under siege during the war.

The school and the church were bombed. The school collapsed. The pastors, religion teachers, the sexton and his family all became victims. The bomb that hit the church exploded in front of the altar and destroyed it. The ceiling fell in, the side galleries crashed down, the pulpit, the pews, and the organ annihilated. The walls and roof of the tower buckled and imploded—only the cross survived almost undamaged, and shone on the top of the rubble.

After three years the people began to rebuild. But it wasn't just the church members who rebuilt. Many contributed and it reopened on Palm Sunday, 1948. The pastor who was killed had during WWII had saved the lives of 1,600 persecuted Jewish children and 400 adults. One of his saved pupils contributed the mosaic that hangs in the front depicting a dove alighting between the Alpha and Omega signs with the caption "Pax" (peace), the name of the school. Finnish donations paid for the organ. The church was rebuilt by people whose lives were touched by believers who, no matter how great the battle, even at the loss of life, to this day still gather and pray.

Do you want to be a praying Christian? A praying church?

*And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us;  
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.*

That word is prayer.

No matter what your battle, there's no room for "fair-weather Christianity." What are you willing to fast and pray for? AMEN

<sup>1</sup> See <https://clarionherald.org/2018/02/01/the-battle-of-new-orleans-the-power-of-prayer/>, accessed September 6, 2018.