

June 23  
through  
June 29,  
2024

## 7 DAYS OF PRAYER AND FASTING



*We are so excited that you have chosen to participate with Agape by setting aside 7 days to pray, fast and draw near to God. Fasting is not just an exercise for super-spiritual people. It is actually supposed to be a part of every believer's spiritual life. We have found there is no better way to reset one's spiritual compass and bring about change and discipline in every area of life than through fasting.*

*As you go through your 7-day fast, we hope you will be encouraged and strengthened by the following detailed information on Ezra's Fast. The Ezra's Fast is a fast to Solve Problems. As this is a time of Prayer and Fasting, we invite you to join us each morning at 5:30am on the Prayer Call line at **716-427-1338 / PIN 476389#** as we start off each day with 30min. of powerful prayer. We pray that you will experience the presence and power of God in an extraordinary way as you commit yourself to Him over the next 7 days. May God continue to bless you and enlarge you as you seek Him first.*

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## The Ezra Fast

### *To Solve Problems*

My wife and I once found ourselves owning two houses. We had moved to Lynchburg, Virginia, because God led me to help found Liberty University there. We rented a house in Lynchburg, and put the sale of our previous house in God's hands. It didn't sell for two years; we had the financial burden of two payments each month. We fasted together to solve the problem. I never doubted the leadership of God, and I prayed daily for its sale. My wife and I agreed together (see Matt. 18:18) and fasted, but it still didn't sell. We didn't give up; consequently, after we had fasted for the third time, God sold our house.

"Life is like a football game," says Sam Rutigliano, former NFL coach of the Cleveland Browns. "And he who makes the fewest errors . . . wins." I don't think my wife and I made an error renting a house in Lynchburg; however, our decision did raise an unforeseen financial problem.

Everyone has problems and hard times. Job, in the oldest book of the Bible, said, "Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble" (Job 14:1). According to natural laws, everything that is made will break. Every person will eventually get old and feeble. Every business will collapse if not attended. Houses must be painted, cars must be tuned up, fields must be replanted every spring and everyone must face problems that need to be solved. Again, Job understood this: "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7 NIV).

Most people, however, are surprised when they have problems. Recently I was rushing home from church to be in time to receive an important telephone call. While driving rapidly up Thomas Road, my right front tire blew out. I exclaimed with a pound on my steering wheel what I always say when trouble comes.

#### **Towns's Frustration**

Why me?  
Why now?  
Why this?

I expect a perfect world, so I am surprised when I have problems. Yet, reading the Scriptures should convince me that there are problems—serious problems—life-threatening problems—problems that will be difficult to solve.

If you are like me, expectations of a perfect life result in three wrong attitudes toward problems. When problems come we think:

#### **Three Wrong Attitudes Toward Problems**

You are unusual.  
You are unspiritual.  
God has forsaken you.

A secretary in my office was complaining because a check bounced. She was absolutely sure that her husband had done it or that the bank had made an error. I heard her on the telephone with the bank, then a long silent pause . . .

"Oh . . . I forgot to record that check!"

We all make mistakes that cause us problems. We all forget about things, and our forgetfulness creates more stress. We are all human, and that means we can't think of everything.

Three attitudes will galvanize your thinking as you prepare to solve problems.

### **Three Problem-Solving Attitudes**

You cannot run from problems.

You cannot keep problems from happening.

You can solve your problems.

### **Ezra Faced a Problem**

The book of Ezra tells the story of the Jews traveling back from captivity in Persia. King Cyrus of Persia gave them permission to return in 538 BC to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. First, Zerubbabel led the people back to begin work on the Temple. The surrounding nations caused trouble, so the work went slowly, even stopping for several years. The Temple was finally finished in 515 BC.

Then Ezra, a priest, attempted to lead a second group of people back to Jerusalem. He gathered them on the banks of the Ahava River, but then realized he had a major problem.

### ***Put on the Spot***

Ezra needed protection as he led a multitude of defenseless people across the wilderness to return to the Promised Land. The "bad-lands" were inhabited with gangs of thieves who attacked caravans.

Ezra said, "I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road" (Ezra 8:22).

It was similar to the American homesteaders traveling West, who needed the U.S. Cavalry when they crossed Indian territory. Ezra's problem, however, was different. He found himself on the spot. "After all, we had told the king that our God takes care of everyone who truly worships him, but that he gets very angry and punishes anyone who refuses to obey" (v. 22 CEV).

### *The Risk of Theft*

Not only were the Jews returning home, but they were also bringing all of their household goods and treasures with them. Do not think of Israel as prisoners released from prison. They were not like Jewish escapees from the Holocaust during World War II. Many Jews had settled down in Babylon, built houses and established businesses. Archaeologists have discovered that the Jews—who previously were a nation of farmers—became a people who thrived as shopkeepers in Babylon.

Many Jews had grown wealthy in captivity. Those who remained in captivity sent treasures with Ezra to rebuild the Temple. These Jews did not want to settle in the primitive conditions of the Promised Land. They didn't want to suffer privations to rebuild their nation. They wanted to enjoy the luxury of Babylon. These Jews were required to send along gold and silver for rebuilding the Temple. Ezra was transporting their money and many of their possessions. "In all there were: 25 tons of silver; 100 silver articles weighing 150 pounds; 7,500 pounds of gold" (v. 26 CEV). Ezra was fearful that this treasure might be stolen.

### *Fasting about the Problem*

Faced with this significant problem, Ezra called a fast: "So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer" (v. 23).

Notice that the problem was more than a personal matter. It involved all of God's people who were traveling across the wilderness, plus all of the thousands remaining in Babylon who had given gold and other treasures to him. Ezra's problem was also their problem. This was a problem of national proportion. How could he get the people, gold and silver back to the Promised Land? He could call the people to what we are calling an Ezra Fast.

### Prescription for the Ezra Fast

A private problem requires a private fast. A group problem requires the group to fast with you. Even when the circle of concern becomes national, the circle of fasting should be as large as the circle of concern.

#### *Step 1: Choose Those to Be Involved*

My church faced a financial problem in the late '70s, so we called a fast for the entire church. We asked everyone to fast according to the formula given in Israel for the Day of Atonement: "Everyone must go without eating from the evening of the ninth to the evening of the tenth" (Lev. 23:32 CEV). The congregation was asked to fast for one day—from sundown to sundown.

My pastor asked everyone to prepare to fast from Sunday night until Monday night. When the congregation came to church on Sunday morning, they were reminded to fast beginning that evening. Because the fast was fresh in their minds, everyone could join as one. Also, they were instructed how to fast—eat a light snack before Sunday evening church, then after church they would only drink liquids until Monday evening. After sundown on Monday evening, they could break their fasts. Once the people were informed about the problem and acquainted with the reasons and the procedures for the fast, the pastor asked for a commitment.

"I want all those who will fast with us this evening to stand."

The entire church stood with the pastor. The congregation gathered that Sunday evening with a great spirit of anticipation.



We believed God was going to perform a great financial miracle for us. I asked the pastor's wife if her husband really believed that God was going to answer our prayer.

"He really believes God will do it" was her answer.

Obviously, we fasted for a specific answer, but the answer came from prayer as well. There were times of individual prayer, and people also assembled at the church for prayer. In separate groups, the women, the pastors and the youth gathered to pray.

The results? The people trusted God for more than a million dollars, and the work of God was accomplished.

### *Step 2: Share the Problem*

Not only must people be asked to fast, but they must also be involved in the problem. Ezra said, "I proclaimed a fast . . . that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us" (Ezra 8:21). The people following Ezra fasted because they were scared. They wanted safety for themselves and their children. The greater the problem, the more likely people will fast with intensity and pray with sincerity.

### *Step 3: Fast Seriously*

For a meaningful fast, people must not only withhold food, but they must also agonize in prayer. Fasting is more than diet adjustment; it involves spiritual agony and intercession. Ezra's fast was "that we might afflict ourselves before our God" (v. 21 kjv). Originally, when people faced a life-threatening situation, they were too frightened or distressed to eat. They adjusted their diets out of agony and deep struggle of soul.

The *cause* was the problem; the *effect* was diet adjustment. Eventually, people began to see that they needed this deep spiritual exercise to pray properly. Thus they reversed the effect—fasting, so everyone might enter into the cause—spiritual travail in intercession.

Fasting communicated to all people the seriousness of their journey. To get from Babylon back to the Promised Land, Ezra and his fellow Israelites had to cross a threatening terrain. So Ezra communicated the seriousness of the threat to their lives.

**Fasting Produces**  
Spiritual introspection  
Spiritual examination  
Spiritual confession  
Spiritual intercession

#### *Step 4: Fast Before Attempting a Solution*

We often approach a problem with the traditional problem-solving strategy. We brainstorm all possible solutions, choosing a solution out of our own human wisdom. But Ezra did something before even discussing the problem with his elders: "I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days" (v. 15 KJV). During that time he waited for the Levites to join them (see vv. 15–20).

Notice the timing of the fast:

He did not fast as he traveled.  
He did not fast before they all gathered.  
He did not try to solve the problem before fasting.

It is important that you recognize the spiritual nature of the problem before you try to solve it. Actually, we should live in the attitude of fasting because we should live with an attitude of dependence upon God. When facing a money problem, we usually try to cut financial corners, borrow money, arrange payments with our debtors; and when everything else fails, we may pray and even fast. Ezra, however, gathered the people and fasted first. The timing of the fast is just as important as its mechanics.

#### *Step 5: Fast on Site with Insight*

A movement called prayerwalking has swept America.<sup>1</sup> It's nothing more than following the Old Testament injunction where God



told Abraham to walk throughout the land He was going to give him (see Gen. 13:17). Also, God instructed Joshua to walk around Jericho before the battle (see Josh. 6:3–5). As Joshua was going to conquer the Promised Land, God told him to walk by faith throughout the land he would conquer (see 1:3–9). Prayerwalking is “praying on site with insight.” When we stand at the place of need, we pray with more heed.

Ezra implemented old-fashioned prayerwalking by bringing the people face to face with their problem—he brought them to the banks of the river before launching out into the wilderness. “Beside the Ahava River, I asked the people to go without eating and to pray” (Ezra 8:21 CEV).

### *Step 6: Fast for Step-by-Step Guidance*

During the fast, not before, we seek solutions to our problems. Too often large problems frighten us, and we can’t think accurately or productively about the problems. We need to break down large problems into increments. If we can solve the smaller problems one by one, we can solve the larger problems. We need to fast and pray not only for the final solutions but also for step-by-step solutions to the problems.

There was more than one road for Ezra and the people to travel to Jerusalem, and more than one solution to their problem. The question was “Which is the right road?” Apparently, some roads had more travelers than others. Many of these travelers were soldiers traveling on diplomatic and governmental business. As a result, people felt protected by their presence. Also, some roads were so well traveled that bands of robbers found alternate routes.

Ezra called a fast “to seek of [God] a right way” (v. 21 KJV). The Bible tells us that God sovereignly directs our steps, but we should use common sense along the way. “We draw our maps to the destination, but God directs each step on the road” (Prov. 16:9 ELT). A modern version says, “We make our own plans, but the Lord decides where we will go” (CEV).

*Use your own ingenuity.* Ezra fasted to solve his problem, but he did more than fast—he used his ingenuity. When you face a problem, don't limit yourself to prayer. Prayer is wonderful, but when you only pray, you haven't done enough. The Bible reaches both "faith and works." On our knees we pray as if everything depends on God, but we get up and work as if everything depends on us. Our work involves sweat work, planned work, intricate work, determined work and smart work.

So Ezra began, "We went without food and asked God himself to protect us" (Ezra 8:23 CEV). Then Ezra devised a plan for the tremendous amount of money that had been given to him. He realized that part of his caravan might be lost if they were attacked by a large band of thieves, so he divided up the treasure and distributed it among the 12 priests, so some of it might get through even though some might be lost (vv. 24–25).

By dividing the money, Ezra did more than protect it from thieves without. He also made each priest accountable for an exact amount of the treasure. Because the human heart is sinful, it might have been easy for one of the priests to keep a portion of the treasures entrusted to him. After all, if a family had a ton of silver, it might be tempting to keep a few earrings. So Ezra took specific measures to prevent this from happening.

Just because Ezra was a spiritual man didn't mean he was naïve or stupid. He understood human nature. Everyone in business knows that people are more likely to be honest when they are made accountable.

### Principles to Consider

The problem-solving Ezra Fast is not an attempt to escape problems, but to enlist the Holy Spirit's aid in tackling them. As previously noted, we will never escape problems. This does not mean we fast for every problem. Fasting is a serious endeavor, so we fast primarily for serious problems.

In doing so, as Step 6 indicates, practical steps as well as fasting and prayer are required. In turn, the following are some practical principles for problem solving.

### *Three Causes of Problems*

You can deal with your problem better when you understand its cause. There are three primary causes of problems.

*Change causes problems.* The Duke of Canterbury once said what many think: "Any change for any reason for any purpose should be deplored."

No one likes to change. Changes in the church's program especially invites problems. Therefore, when facing major changes such as a change of location, changing the doctrinal statement or even changing personnel, call those who are affected to a fast.

#### **Three Causes of Problems**

Change  
Differences  
Circumstances

The church in Acts fasted when facing a major change in strategy—they planned to send a missionary team to evangelize the lost. Before they sent out Barnabas and Paul on the first missionary journey, the Bible mentions twice that they fasted.

"As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2).

This church's new strategy was the outcome of fasting, but referring to this once was not enough. Notice the second time the word is used: "Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away" (v. 3).

In the physical world, all motion causes friction. The friction from motion in human relationships leads to breakdown and more problems. When you go through major changes in life, whether marriage, a new job or the threat of losing your present job, friction and stress occur. Therefore, use the Ezra Fast.

*Differences cause problems.* When people from different ethnic, doctrinal or family backgrounds come into a church, they often

want changes. The solution is to put all people on the same starting line with the Ezra Fast. Fast before any major change. Just as Ezra gathered the people at the river to look into the threatening wilderness, unite all church people in a fast so together they can see their problem, and together they can pray for an answer.

The question is not whether differences among people will cause problems in your church, but rather what you will do and how you will respond to problems that *will* arise because of people's differences. Although we do not call for the Ezra Fast to give the church a sense of unity, a sense of unified action is surely one of the byproducts of fasting.

*Circumstances cause problems.* Whether we are talking about your personal circumstances or those in your group, circumstances cause problems. These problems are not interpersonal or spiritual in nature. The church may want to buy land, relocate, face city zoning or institute a new program that is radically different from the existing program. A bank or business may fail with your money. When you face a problem you did nothing to initiate, call for an Ezra Fast.

When your community faces an extended union strike or a large layoff in an industry that affects your church, call for an Ezra Fast.

When your church doesn't have enough space for the people who want to worship, or the facilities are old or you face a money problem, call for an Ezra Fast.

### *Three Questions to Ask*

When you enter the Ezra Fast, do more than just ask God to solve the problem. Begin applying problem-solving strategy to the issue at hand. In attempting to solve your problem, you must first assess it. It is helpful to ask three questions to determine the size of your crisis.

#### **Three Questions to Ask**

How big is the problem?

Who is involved in the problem?

What does the larger group think about the problem?

*How big is the problem?* Problems often seem much larger than they actually are. During the Ezra Fast, take time to think through the problem and its ramifications. Sometimes in the Ezra Fast the problem will shrink because you realize it is not as large as it appears. You gradually see it objectively. At other times in the Ezra Fast, a problem will loom larger than you thought because you understand its magnitude.

When you are fasting, determine the basic issues involved in the problem. Write these issues down. As you pray through the problem, you must first define it. Remember: A well-defined problem is a half-solved problem.

*Who is involved in the problem?* When you define the problem, ask who has explained the problem to you or to the group. In any church, certain people always seem to alert the pastor to minor problems. The way these people describe the problem suggests that it is much larger than it actually is. Make sure that you see the problem through objective eyes, through God's eyes and then through your church's eyes. Never limit yourself to the eyes of the person who brings the problem to you.

Pray through motives. During the Ezra Fast, you need to ask *why* this is a problem. Sometimes the problem is rooted in the motives of the people involved. Sometimes it stems from motives of people outside the church. Most problems are really a conflict of attitudes between people rather than a conflict of circumstances or schedules. When people get their attitudes right, most problems will solve themselves.

As you pray during the Ezra Fast, determine the best time to address the problem. Many problems will solve themselves without your involvement, if given time. Even as you are fasting, therefore, you may be giving your problem time to solve itself. The Ezra Fast may be the moratorium that is needed to solve the problem. Also, time allows emotions to cool and issues to come into focus.

*What does the larger group think about the problem?* When you get everyone in the church involved in the Ezra Fast, you focus the attention of everyone in the church on the problem.

Sometimes you need to consult people individually to gather data. At other times, a pastor will gather information from the board, a fact-finding committee or even the whole congregation. Sometimes you must interview many people, but do so individually to determine facts, discover attitudes and gain insight into the nature and/or timing of the problem. When you consult those most directly involved in the problem and encourage their input, you strengthen your ability to lead people to resolution.

Calling for an Ezra Fast accomplishes two purposes. You are inviting God into the problem and asking for His solution, and you are inviting everyone involved to be a part of the solution.

A problem may affect only one segment of people directly, but its implications may touch other people. This is true in a family, a congregation or a work setting. Therefore, seek to involve the larger group in the Ezra Fast because the larger group should take responsibility for the problem, develop a solution and solve the problem.

People ask advice from those they respect. When you invite people to the Ezra Fast, you show them respect and appreciation for their contributions; hence, you will gain their support. You not only gain their wisdom to solve the problem but you also gain their respect. They will look up to your spiritual leadership.

### *Three Attitudes Toward Problems*

A Christian usually adopts three attitudes when approaching a problem. I first heard this formula from a southern preacher who was describing how the church should react to a threat.

#### **Three Attitudes Toward Problems**

*Fuss*—preach against a sin.

*Fight*—organize the church to resist the sin

*Die*—fight sin to the death.

Although these three common attitudes toward problems are broad-based, ultimately it is best to apply a strategy to solve your

problem. The Ezra Fast may not result in a total solution to your problem, but by fasting you may learn the seriousness of the problem, and thus discover a strategy for dealing with it.

Good leaders pick their own battles. Be careful not to let someone else choose your battle for you. There will always be a cause that will motivate Christians or your church to action (e.g., abortion, civil rights violations, the sale of alcohol or pornography, etc.). But you cannot spend all of your life fighting battles. Although the Christian life is both battling and building, the majority of your life should be spent building up the Church, building up the saints and building up yourself. Those who fight every alleged dragon eventually lose their credibility. Dr. Adrian Rogers, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, advised, "Some hills are not worth fighting for."

### *Three Problem-Solving Eyes*

The greatest benefit of the Ezra Fast is that God gives you "eyes" to see the problem. As you fast to God, you see the problem through His eyes. But you must also see the problem through the eyes of your family/congregation. It is important to see the problem through the eyes of those who created the problem, such as your opponent.

*Eyes to see the positive.* When you call for the Ezra Fast, you should first pray for victory. Know what you want the outcome

to be, and ask God to give it to you. Don't enter the fast "problem centered," because this will make you a pessimist and render you unable to pray in faith. Pray as the disciples did, who asked the Lord to "increase our faith" (Luke 17:5). Keep looking to God, and He will make you positive.

"We must get rid of everything that slows us down, especially the sin that just won't let go. And we must be determined to run the race that is ahead of us. We must keep our eyes on Jesus" (Heb. 12:1-2 CEV).

#### **Three Problem-Solving Eyes**

Eyes to see the positive  
Eyes to see the people  
Eyes to see the facts



When we are mentally, emotionally or spiritually blinded, we don't see properly.

The Ezra Fast produces a new vision of what God can do. Blinded eyes surrender their values, but the Ezra Fast helps re-focus your priorities in the Word of God. Blinded eyes blame other people, but during the Ezra Fast you see the cause of the problem. Blinded eyes make us guilty, but during the Ezra Fast we confess our sins and stand forgiven in Christ.

#### Blind Eyes

Emotional eyes are  
blinded with tears.  
Fearful eyes are  
blinded with terror.

Problems grow when you lose perspective. The Ezra Fast can build up a positive perspective both toward the problem and toward God's plan for your life. Do not give in to your problem, nor to the people around you. Above all, do not give up your values.

*Eyes to see the people.* During the Ezra Fast, focus not only on the problem but also on those who are fasting with you. Those who are wholeheartedly with you are usually not the problem. Those who criticize the fast, resist it or do something to undermine it may be part of the problem—although they are probably not its instigators.

The Ezra Fast may give you an opportunity to pray with others. "If two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 18:19 NIV). During the Ezra Fast, therefore, gather people together for corporate prayer meetings. Ask for (1) requests from the group, (2) testimonies from the group and (3) prayer by members of the group.

*Eyes to see the facts.* When you enter into the Ezra Fast, you may be embarking on a strategy to handle or solve your problems. Begin by looking for scriptural solutions to the problem. Take time to write out the scriptural principles involved in the problem. Ask, "How have people in the Bible solved a problem similar to this?" Ask, "How have others in the Church solved a problem similar to this?" Answering these questions will compel you to read the Bible, and to understand passages that speak to the problem. All

the while, you are attempting to discover biblical solutions that may be applicable to your situation.

Throughout the Ezra Fast, strive to keep a balance between "head knowledge" of the Word and the "heart expression" of the Spirit as you address your problem. Too much Spirit without the Word will lead you to an emotional *blowup*. Too much Word without the Spirit will cause you to *dry up*. The right balance between the Word and the Spirit will lead you to *grow up*.

### *Step-by-Step Problem Solving*

When people participate in the Ezra Fast, they need to make sure they have a step-by-step strategy for problem solving. Some people think that during the Ezra Fast they should only meditate

and pray. They expect God to give them answers out of a vacuum. Although God may speak in the dark of the night, He usually does not. Actually, following a step-by-step strategy to solve a problem could be successfully used by those outside of Christ. Because it involves truth, and all truth comes from God, the same strategy could be used by those who are in Christ. Problem solving is not a key that is hidden in the Bible for only the redeemed.

Everyone faces problems, and God has given to all people a sound mind. He therefore expects all of us to use our total resources to solve our problems. A step-by-step approach to problems is available to all.

*Step 1: Get the facts.* You need more than a Bible and a concordance as you approach the Ezra Fast. Although these are essential, you must also include all the facts and information you can gather. This involves files, records, charts, lists and any other pertinent information.

If you are planning the Ezra Fast while away from home, begin packing for the trip a few days in advance. Make sure that all

#### **Problem Solving**

Get the facts  
Establish biblical  
principles  
Evaluate the facts.  
Determine the  
various solutions.  
Choose a solution

file folders, records and books are in a briefcase/box. Once you get to the place for the Ezra Fast, you will want to review all the facts before formulating an opinion. Sorting through all the reports, minutes and files will refresh your mind by bringing the information into your awareness. You are already beginning to move toward an understanding of the problem.

Write out your problem, then write down any sub-points it may have. This may involve listing the primary and secondary people involved, as well as all the events involved in the consequences. Sometimes writing out the problem involves listing times of events related to the problem, money, assets and/or issues.

As you begin to write out the problem, don't be satisfied with a single declaration. A reexamination of the files may give you a different perspective. Then you will need to rewrite the problem. You need as much information as possible to make a good decision and determine your plan of action.

*Step 2: Establish biblical principles.* After you have clearly defined the problem, search the Word of God to determine biblical principles for the solution to the problem. The Bible speaks to all issues without naming every issue. Just as a new car has an operator's manual, so God has given us the Bible as our operator's manual containing principles for all of life. Although every issue is not discussed in the Bible, the basic principles of life still apply to every issue. If at all possible, have available Christian and secular books dealing with the topic. (Consult your local Christian bookstores for books about the topic.) Also, find information by consulting concordances, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, commentaries and topical handbooks.

*Step 3: Evaluate the facts.* During the Ezra Fast, you will have time to think through your problem. First, write out the problem from the top of your head. Then as you pray, attempt to rewrite the

#### The Towns Rules for Problem Solving

You make good decisions  
on good information.  
You make bad decisions  
on bad information.  
Without any information,  
you make lucky  
decisions.

problem from the bottom of your heart. There can be a difference between the top of your head and the bottom of your heart, just as there is a difference between your objective analysis and your emotional commitment. Your problem and its stifling influences may exist somewhere between the two.

During the Ezra Fast, spend time in prayer, and when God reveals new insight, redefine the problem. Each time you spend extended time in the presence of God, come back to your pencil and paper

to define the problem again. It is said that the steps to solving a problem are taken in the steps to defining the problem.

#### Steps to Solving a Problem

Find the problem.  
Define the problem.  
Refine the problem.  
Redefine the problem.

*Step 4: Determine the various solutions to the problem.* Too often Christians expect an answer in an environment of sublime contentment. They think problem solving occurs without effort. They expect God to speak out of a vacuum, and that is not His

usual way. God speaks through information found in the Word and from other sources. You may go into a quiet place for prayer; however, there are more steps to solving a problem than just prayer and contemplation.

Follow the problem-solving steps to find a solution. As you enter into the Ezra Fast, every time a solution to your problem comes to mind, write it down. Obviously, not all of the ideas that come into your head will be good ones. Even so, write them down. Through the discipline of writing down even a ridiculous solution, the correct solution may pop into your mind. One solution may trigger another. Therefore, do not attempt to solve your problem until you have exhausted your list of solutions.

Even then, your exhaustive list of solutions may not be *the* exhaustive list. Share your list with others, especially those who are on the Ezra Fast with you. Maybe they have a thought or idea you have missed, and vice versa.

On rare occasions, you may want to ask everyone participating in the Ezra Fast for solutions. About 150 years ago, the

Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah, Georgia, was contemplating building a new sanctuary. The building was to be set toward the rear of the property, resulting in a large front yard. Everyone voted unanimously for the project except one lady, who withheld her vote. It is said that she prayed (we do not know if she fasted), then went to the chairman of the session and shared her idea.

She suggested building the new sanctuary toward the front of the property, to allow room for a garden between the sanctuary and an educational building toward the rear. The garden could be used for weddings and social gatherings. It would be a garden where the beautiful camellias and azaleas of the area could grow.

Furthermore, beautiful windows on either side of the pulpit could face the lovely garden. Because there were no electric lights in those days, the windows would shed light on the pulpit. When brought to vote by the congregation, again there was a unanimous vote—this time to move the sanctuary forward and allow for the garden. It is possible for one small voice in a congregation to offer a solution to a problem that no one else has seen.

*Step 5: Choose the best solution.* As long as we live in this life, nothing is perfect except the Son of God and the Word of God. No human is perfect, nor is anything perfect that is done by humans. Therefore, we will never have a “perfect” solution to a problem. We can only have a “best” solution.

And what is a best solution to a problem? One that is agreed on by everyone who has participated in the Ezra Fast. It is the best solution when it brings about the resolution of the problem and resolves tensions. It is the best solution when God is honored and Christians grow in grace.

Finally, yield your problem to God. In His sovereignty, God may have given you the problem to draw you closer to Himself. Usually people want to be free of problems. The problem you long to be free from, however, may actually be the circumstance that allows you to become what you long to be.

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Preparing for the Ezra Fast

*Aim:* Solving a problem through the Ezra Fast.

*Vow:* I will examine all facts to understand the problem and will ask God to give me insight into its causes and solution. After I have followed all the principles God has shown me, and have done everything I can do to solve the problem, I will accept the results within the providence of God (see Rom. 8:28).

*Fast:* Foods from which I shall abstain \_\_\_\_\_

*Beginning:* Date and time I will start \_\_\_\_\_

*End:* Date and time I will stop \_\_\_\_\_

*Purpose:* I am fasting to \_\_\_\_\_

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Problem Solving Strategy

*Statement of the Problem:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Bible Basis:* To fast and petition our God about the problem, asking Him to answer our prayer (see Ezra 8:23).

*Resources Needed:* \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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Discussion Questions

1. What are three wrong attitudes we can have toward problems? When you face a problem, with which of these attitudes do you struggle most?
2. What was Ezra's problem in 8:21-23, and how did he solve it?
3. What are six steps in the process of solving problems through use of the Ezra Fast?
4. Identify a problem and explore how you can apply these six steps.
5. What are three possible causes of problems? Which may be the cause of the problem you've identified?

6. What are the five steps in the problem-solving strategy that need to be a part of the Ezra Fast?
7. Work through these five steps with the problem about which you are most concerned.
8. Complete the "Preparing for the Ezra Fast" section at the end of this chapter.

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### Prayer

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Heavenly Father, the problem of \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ has become an increasing source of concern to me. I am not certain how to best resolve this problem. But I know You have the insight I need in this matter and are willing to share that insight with me as I wait on You. Lord, as I follow Your leading in my life and observe the Ezra Fast, guide me through the process of problem solving to come up with a creative solution to this baffling situation. Give me the courage to carry out Your desires regarding the solution to this problem. Begin working in the lives of others so that a good solution may be implemented in a way in which You will be most honored. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.