

# 10

## Empty Rituals, True Religion

Zechariah 7—8

### **a** The Question of Fasting (7:1-3)

The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melek, together with their men, to entreat the LORD by asking the priests of the house of the LORD Almighty and the prophets, “Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?”

—Zechariah 7:2, 3

Almost two years after he received the night visions, Zechariah was called upon again by God to prophesy. In this passage, as he did in the beginning of the book, the prophet emphasized the spiritual renewal of the people. This time he did so in response to a question posed by representatives from the town of Bethel (vss. 1, 2).

Former residents of Bethel were among the first captives to return from Babylon (see Ezra 2:28). Bethel, a town twelve miles to the north of Jerusalem, formerly served as a center of worship for the northern kingdom. Apparently this remnant

### **Fasting to Remember**

Jewish tradition identifies the days of fasting in Zechariah with events related to the Babylonian captivity. The fasts of each month were matched with events in the following ways.

- The fast of the fourth month fell on the ninth of Tammuz, the day when the city walls were toppled (II Kings 25:3, 4; Jer. 39:2).
- The fast of the fifth month was on the seventh of Ab, when the house of God was burned to the ground (II Kings 25:8-10).
- The fast of the seventh month was on the third of Tishri, the anniversary of Gedaliah’s assassination (II Kings 25:25; Jer. 41:1, 2).
- The fast of the tenth month fell on the tenth of Tebeth, which was the day when Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem (II Kings 25:1; Ezek. 24:1, 2).

quickly rebuilt the city and were eager to obey the Lord.

The men named in Zechariah 7:2 came to inquire of the Lord regarding the fasts that had begun during the captivity in Babylon (vs. 3). While in captivity, the Jews instituted days of fasting and mourning to beseech the Lord concerning their condition. The delegation mentioned only the fast of the fifth month; there were three other days in which the Jews fasted because of their captivity (see 8:19).

The men from Bethel asked if it was appropriate to still observe these days of fasting. Now that the temple was being rebuilt and Jerusalem was inhabited once again, was it necessary to continue these rituals of mourning? Although not commanded in Scripture, the observance of these days had become sacred to the Jews and they did not want to discontinue them without direction from the Lord.

The pattern of examining the purposes behind our habits and bringing questions regarding these customs before the Lord is a good example to follow. Every once in awhile it is good to examine the reasons behind our behaviors to see if they are still valid. The Lord may want to lead us in another direction or He may have a lesson to teach us about the level of our commitment to Him, as in the case of the men from Bethel.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How has God taken me in directions I did not expect or plan for?*

## **b** Fasting for the Wrong Reasons (7:4-7)

The word of the LORD Almighty came to me: "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?'"

—Zechariah 7:4, 5

The Lord responded to the inquiry of the men from Bethel with questions meant for all the people and priests (vss. 4, 5). The problem raised by the small group was probably on the minds of all the people. The tone of God's rebuke, however, was not what they expected.

The purpose of the fasting was behind the Lord's first objection, "Was it really for me that you fasted?" The Jews had turned the fasting into a time of self-pity. Instead of feeling sorrow for their sins, they had mourned for themselves and their miserable circumstances. They had focused solely on their problems rather than on God and His righteousness.

God's second question brought out the self-interest behind the fasts. "And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?" (vs. 6). Just as they feasted to satisfy their appetites, they used fasting to indulge their desire for sympathy and comfort.

# Old-Time Religion

Zechariah emphasized the similarity of His preaching with that of former prophets. The following chart shows the similarities.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Zechariah</b>	<b>Former Prophets</b>
<b>Self-centered Worship</b>	“Was it really for me that you fasted?” (Zech. 7:5).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” (Isa. 1:11).</li> <li>•“I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me” (Amos 5:21).</li> </ul>
<b>True Fasting</b>	“Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another” (Zech. 7:9).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice . . . ?” (Isa. 58:6).</li> <li>•“And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy . . .” (Mic. 6:8).</li> </ul>

The fasts had become times of sorrow for themselves, not of remorse for how they had sinned against the Lord.

Any religious practice can become devoid of meaning if we lose the proper purpose and motivation for it. Even Scripture reading and prayer can become outward rituals rather than times of genuinely desiring our Lord. Any time our worship loses its focus on Christ and simply becomes an end in itself, it ceases to please our heavenly Father.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Why did I worship this week?*

The problem of meaningless religious exercise was not unique to Zechariah’s generation of Jews. Verse 7 indicates that the earlier prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, proclaimed the same message that Zechariah was now delivering. If the Jews living during the time of those prophets had heeded their

words, the captivity and subsequent need for fasting could have been avoided.

When the words of the former prophets were given, Jerusalem and Judah were settled and prosperous. If such disastrous consequences could come upon this earlier generation for their disobedience, they could certainly happen again to the current inhabitants of the land, who were experiencing far less favorable circumstances.

Because superficial worship would take the Jews further away from the Lord, it had to be stopped. That is why God so sharply rebuked the hollowness of the fasts. The people needed to remain firm in their commitment to rebuilding the temple and obeying God.

As believers we should often examine our commitment when it comes to worship and service. If there are any empty rituals in our lives, we should stop them.

## **C** Justice, Mercy, and Compassion (7:8-14)

This is what the LORD Almighty said: “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.”

—Zechariah 7:9, 10

In contrast to the shallowness of attitude shown in the fasting, Zechariah proclaimed the essence of God’s former message to His people. With four commands he summed up the teaching of the former prophets.

The instruction to “administer true justice” involved more than just rendering fair sentences in a judicial court (vs. 9). It also meant protecting all individuals in a society from inequities and partiality. Related to that, the prophet told the people to show tender love and loyalty in their relationships with each other.

Oppression was frequently denounced by the earlier prophets. In verse 10, Zechariah selected some of the common victims of persecution to illustrate his point. The widow, fatherless, strangers, and poor were all in a position where they could easily be wronged.

God, however, made it clear that any infringements upon their rights would bring His wrath.

Not only did the prophets command the people not to oppress each other, but they also told them to not even contemplate the idea of harming someone else. True fasting could not take place if the Jews were treating others unjustly, failing to show love to each other, oppressing the weak, or even just considering an action that would harm someone else.

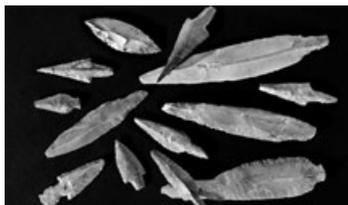
On the night before He was crucified, Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). The message of showing our faith through how we treat others did not change in the New Testament. Just as in Zechariah, Jesus’ desire was for love to characterize the community of believers.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How would my non-Christian neighbors describe me?*

Although the Lord commanded these things repeatedly through His prophets, the pre-exilic Israelites refused to take God’s message seriously (Zech. 7:11). Zechariah’s message to the people was clear: Do not imitate the behavior of your obstinate and disobedient ancestors, or you may suffer a similar fate.

The prophet accused the former generations of hardening themselves

*Arrowheads made of flint.  
Zechariah described the  
hearts of the Jews’ ancestors  
as hard as flint.*



Flints from Askelon © Yaelis

against the Lord and refusing to listen to Him (vs. 12). Despite God's effort in speaking directly through His prophets to the people, their hearts were as hard as a rock, and so God's Word did not penetrate their souls.

As a result, the Lord was angry at them. Because they refused His repeated calls for repentance, He would not listen to them when they cried for help in the midst of their distress (vs. 13). Jeremiah warned the people of this dire consequence of their disobedience (see Jer. 11:11-14).

The Lord's anger resulted in their exile "among all the nations" (Zech. 7:14). This was one of the curses for breaking God's covenant with them (see Deut. 28:64-68). The unbelief and sin of the pre-exilic Israelites brought captivity for Judah while the land was left desolate behind them.

His desire to bless Jerusalem. He described Himself as "burning with jealousy for her" (vs. 2). This jealousy was not one of selfish envy, but rather a desire to see His people vindicated and in a place where He could bless them and enjoy their fellowship.

The Lord promised to return to Jerusalem and dwell there (vs. 3). This and the following verses indicate that this coming would bring about many positive changes for the city as well as for the people. Jerusalem would be known as the "Faithful City" because of the Lord's presence in its midst.

The presence of old men and women and children at play in the streets signifies God's tremendous favor upon His people (vss. 4, 5). These verses picture the most defenseless of the population dwelling securely within the city. Some commentators believe this represents the peace and stability of God's kingdom after Christ returns.

To the remnant of Jews living in Jerusalem during Zechariah's day, such a depiction of life was difficult to believe (vs. 6). Who could imagine such relaxed and secure times? In response to their amazement the Lord suggested that such a task was not too difficult for Him to accomplish.

Verses 7 and 8 refer to God's gathering His people back from captivity to live in Jerusalem. The reference to east and west indicates a wide dispersion. Those living far away would be brought back to live as God's people in Jerusalem, the city

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## **d** Promises of Blessing (8:1-17)

**This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me," says the LORD Almighty, "so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid."**  
—Zechariah 8:14, 15

After the threatening tone of the warnings in response to the self-serving fasts, God also expressed

of the Lord's special dwelling place during this time.

The purpose of describing Israel's future glory was to motivate the people for the work on the temple (vs. 9). In light of what was ahead, they were encouraged to be strong in their commitment to obey God and continue to rebuild the temple. The prospect of a brighter tomorrow was meant to help them persevere in their current demanding task.

There are times when we also grow tired and wonder if it is worthwhile to remain faithful to God's calling for our lives. Will there be a reward for all our hard work? The answer of Scripture is a resounding "YES!" The glory ahead for believers is far beyond our comprehension. Surely the Lord will reward those who remain faithful to Him.

**Ask Yourself** . . . *What keeps me going when I feel like quitting?*

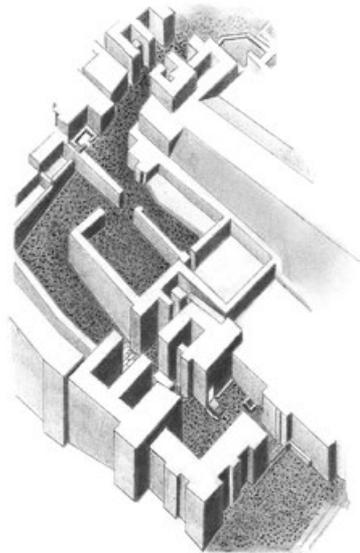
To show that the benefits were not all in the distant future, God reminded the people of their desperate condition before they began their current project on the temple (vs. 10). Food was in short supply and they were continually harassed by enemies (see also Hag. 1:6-11). There had already been improvements in these circumstances since the work had begun on the temple two years earlier.

The beginning of work on the temple marked a turning point in the Lord's treatment of the Jewish remnant (Zech. 8:11). In response to their new devotion, He began to bless them rather than judge them.

As is also indicated in Haggai 2:19, the turnaround in God's attitude would be noticed immediately in bountiful harvests. Poor yields were now a thing of the past (Zech. 8:12).

While Judah and Israel had formerly been a "curse among the nations," in the future they would be a "blessing" (vs. 13). Once the nations had shown disdain for the people of God; now this same people would be a blessing to other countries. Judah and Israel would once again represent God as a single people.

This turnabout would happen because of God's determination to do good to His people. He would use the same resolve in blessing His people as He had used in bringing His judgments upon the previous sinful generation (vss. 14, 15). Since God was so determined to shower them with good fortune, they had



no reason to be afraid.

Zechariah closed this section of Scripture by again reminding the people of the need for truthfulness and justice (vs. 16). These things were expected of the people in light of His firm and unshakable pledge to bless them. God was particularly concerned here that the decisions handed down in their courts be fair and just.

While God loves truth and justice, He hates a false witness and the planning of harm against a neighbor, even an enemy (vs. 17). The people were to avoid these things because of the Lord's hostile attitude toward these things.

The process of becoming Christ-like means that we also must learn to love what He loves and hate what He hates.

## Justice at the City Gate

**God told the people of Israel, through Zechariah, to pursue true justice "in their courts" (Zech. 8:16). The Hebrew word for "courts" in this passage can also be translated "gates." In Old Testament cities, the law courts were held on open squares by the city gates.**

**Sometimes the gates had built-in benches where the people could meet socially, transact business, or decide legal matters.**

## e A Time to Rejoice (8:18-23)

**Many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat Him. —Zechariah 8:22**

After turning the focus of the people toward having a proper attitude regarding God, Zechariah finally answered the initial question regarding the fasting (7:3). Through the prophet God told them that the fasts would eventually become "glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah" (8:18, 19). These days of fasting would end because tremendous joy and celebration would return to Israel.

The Lord then commanded the people to "love truth and peace" (vs. 19). The order of these God-pleasing qualities is significant. The truth of God's Word must be honored before there can be real peace for His people. Jesus said that His followers "must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Obedience to God's revealed Word is the key to all other blessings in the Christian life.

*Ask Yourself . . . How does the quality of my relationship with God affect my other relationships? my vocation? my ability to worship God?*

The time would come when Gentiles from many cities throughout the world would come to Jerusalem to seek truth from the Lord (Zech. 8:20-22).

People from other nations would beseech the Jews to go with them on their journey to Jerusalem (vs. 23). The grabbing of the hem of the robe indicates the eagerness and intensity

of desire on the part of the Gentiles to know God and to experience His blessings. Fortunately, this type of enthusiasm for the things of God marks many Christians today.

## **Fast Endings**

Commentators differ in their opinion as to whether the fasts Zechariah described ended immediately or continued in anticipation of the future blessings promised in the passage. Some believe that they were discontinued but begun again after the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70.

Others, however, maintain that the people did not abolish the fasts right away but let them continue, although not as strictly observed as before. According to this perspective, the promise of uninterrupted joy prophesied by Zechariah (8:19) was meant to be fulfilled when the people finally lived in truth and peace, perhaps not until the end of the age (1:5-7).