



ZECHARIAH, Being the People of God

A Godly Motivation for Worship

Lesson 7 Zechariah 7:1-14

As we have seen, chapters 1 through 6 form a single unit of thought within the book of Zechariah. Those chapters contained an introduction (1:1-6) where the prophet challenged the remnant not to repeat the sin of their forefathers. The introduction was followed by eight visions Zechariah received of God in a single evening that looked to their present situation and a future glory for Israel, while also providing fundamental principles for their daily lives as the children of God and as the remnant from whom God would reconstitute the nation (1:7-6:8). As you will recall, the first and last of these visions utilized similar imagery involving colored horses to express God's sovereignty over the entire world, and these similar visions were bookends or inclusios for the entire sequence of eight visions. These were followed in 6:9-15 with the crowning of Joshua, an episode that provided a divine object lesson looking forward to the crowning of The Branch, Jesus Christ, the only one ever qualified to serve as priest and king and to bring about the glorious future for Israel promised in both the night visions, the rest of Zechariah, and so many other places in Scripture. Chapters 7 and 8 form a hinge between the night visions and the very end-times (or eschatologically) focused chapters, 9 through 14. These two chapters address proper heart motivations in worship, true righteousness, and the blessings to be experienced in the future Millennial Kingdom, and in this way the practical principles of the first six chapters are connected to the remaining chapters that look especially to the future work of Jesus Christ.

7:1 “And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Darius, *that* the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah in the fourth *day* of the ninth month, *even* in Chisleu;”

Zechariah provides us a time marker for this prophecy. We are told that it is the fourth year of the reign of King Darius (known in history as King Darius the Great or Darius Hystaspes). It is the fourth day of the ninth month on the Jewish Calendar, or Chisleu. This is approximately December 7, 518 B.C. on our calendar. The eight night visions had occurred almost two years earlier on February 15, 519 B.C. More important than the date, this is the “*word of the LORD*” that Zechariah receives. The language here parallels the language in Zechariah 1:1 when he received his first prophecy from God.

7:2 “When they had sent unto the house of God Sherezer and Regemmelech, and their men, to pray before the LORD, **3** *And* to speak unto the priests which *were* in the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years?”

At this point, the Temple is not yet complete, but it is a construction project in progress. We are not told who “*they*” are, but apparently there is a larger group who send representatives to ask a religious question. These representatives come to the place where the Temple is under construction to pray and to present their question to the priests, which are at the Temple, and the prophets (probably Zechariah and Haggai and maybe others). This tells us that already, even before its completion, the Temple (as it was in Solomon's day) was taking a central role in Jewish religious practice. The question the men present is whether they should weep or mourn in the fifth month as they have been doing in the past. The fifth month does not correspond to any Biblical Jewish feast, but apparently a practice had evolved during the Babylonian captivity in which there were days of mourning and fasting. Specifically, this fast probably commemorated the burning of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

(Jeremiah 52:12-13), which included the destruction of the temple (2 Kings 25:9). We should note that modern Jews keep a special day called the Ninth of Ab (in July/August) to fast in relation to the destruction of both temples, and it is considered the saddest day on the Jewish calendar and the greatest fast other than Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

Since this text raises the issue of fasting, a brief note is in order. Fasting is an Old Testament and New Testament practice that most often is done in the following contexts: (1) seeking God's will in prayer (Judges 20:20-28); (2) petitioning God in a time of distress (2 Samuel 12:15-16; Nehemiah 1:2-4); (3) mourning (1 Samuel 31:11-13; Esther 4:1-3); (4) confession of sin and repentance (1 Samuel 7:1-6; Joel 2:9-13); (5) commissioning / sending a person for a task (Esther 4:15-17; Acts 13:1-3, 14:20-23). We should note that fasting is nearly always associated with sincere, deliberate prayer. Fasting outwardly demonstrates a heart that looks to God to sustain and not merely the physical things of the world. The Scripture warns against fake fasts, mere ritualistic fasts, and self-exalting fasts (see Matthew 6:16-20; Luke 18:12-14). In the new Testament, Jesus nullified ritualistic fasting. Christians should fast because of Jesus' absence and in anticipation of his return. (Luke 5:33-39). When Jesus returns, the fasting will be changed to feasting (Revelation 19:1-9), a point that will be picked up in Zechariah 8 as well.

Returning to the Text, these men are asking whether they should continue such a practice. Zechariah's night visions occurred almost two years before this event, and so we can assume that by this time the good and comfortable words God gave to Zechariah were public knowledge. Given God's good and comfortable words and the probable progress on the Temple construction, what reason would they have to mourn in the fifth month? Sometimes the liturgy becomes an end in itself so that people go through a ritual for the ritual's sake or for some other motive other than love of the Lord.

7:4 “Then came the word of the LORD of hosts unto me, saying, **5** Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, *even to me?* **6** And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves?”

God reads the heart and not just the words. On the surface, the question presented by this group of men might seem innocent, but it reflects a heart condition that existed, certainly not in everyone, but in some portion of the people. Instead of answering their question here (God answers it at the end of the next chapter), God sees and reveals the reality of their heart condition to Zechariah. God does not mince words, but cuts right to the heart of the matter. When certain people fasted during the seventy years of Babylonian captivity, they went through the motions, but it was not for God. They fasted unto themselves. This is reminiscent of Jesus' warnings in Matthew 6:5 and 23:14:

6:5 “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.”

23:14 “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.”

God is not saying, “don't fast.” But He is saying that your motivation in worship matters (see especially Isaiah 1:11-17 and 58:3-6). Then God goes an additional step and moves outside the context of fasting. God's questions in these verses are rhetorical and they are asked to make an accusation. Certain people were not worshiping God in “spirit and truth” (see John 4:24) when they fasted, which done properly is perhaps one of the most serious and contrite forms of worship, nor were they worshiping God in “spirit and truth” in their daily lives (“*when ye did eat, and when ye did drink*”). Paul wrote in Romans 14:23 that “*for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.*”

QUESTIONS

1. What conduct is being condemned by God in verses 4-6 and what would this type of conduct look like in modern Christianity?
 2. Is it legitimate to compartmentalize your faith as something you practice at set times and places? When and where should we honor God in our thoughts, words, and actions?
 3. Put into your own words the principle taught in verses 4-6.
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7:7 “Should ye not hear the words which the LORD hath cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, and the cities thereof round about her, when men inhabited the south and the plain?”

This verse is reminiscent of the preamble (1:1-6) of the book. Everything the former prophets said was God’s Word, and as such, came to pass regardless of how it was received by the people. God’s standards have not changed simply because there is now a remnant returned to Jerusalem. In the verses that follow, God addresses a present audience by reminding them of their past. We are not told who the “former prophets” were, but as we will see, it is the nation’s conduct just prior to the Babylonian captivity that is in view. Thus, the former prophets would have included such men as Habakkuk and Jeremiah, whom they would not listen to (see, e.g., Jeremiah 22:21). The nation of Judah at the present time should look at their conduct in view of what had occurred in the past when these former prophets spoke against the same sort of conduct. They should seek to live truly righteous lives grounded in proper motives.

7:8 “And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah, saying, 9 Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: 10 And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.”

James wrote in his epistle, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” (James 1:27). You cannot fast on Monday and refuse mercy and compassion to your brother on Tuesday and claim to be godly. Nor can you claim to be godly simply because you attend church on Sunday if you are oppressive and uncompassionate on Monday. The two claims are wholly inconsistent. The apostle John wrote,

“If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” - 1 John 4:20

And again, James wrote, “And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?” - James 2:16

Prior to the Babylonian captivity, people had not ceased from their religious practices, but there was no genuine godly living to match the outward rituals. The prophets had warned against it. Now, Zechariah tells them to execute “true judgment,” that is, justice should be faithfully administered. They are to be compassionate and merciful like God, especially as to those in their society who were the most vulnerable.

QUESTION

4. What is the best indicator that a person's external "Christian" conduct is real?

7:11 "But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. 12 Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the LORD of hosts."

Prior to the captivity, the people refused to obey the Word of the Lord given through the prophets. Like a child with a bad attitude, they "*pulled away the shoulder.*" Calvinists teach that God makes it so that certain people can only respond positively to God (the elect) while others were "passed over in sorrow" by God so that they are incapable of responding positively (the reprobate). They often quote verses (out of context) that speak of God's hardening a person's heart and say that means God made them incapable of responding. This concept of God hardening people so they cannot respond is both internally inconsistent with the Calvinist teaching that God did the picking of who would be saved before the foundation of the world, but also inconsistent with the meaning of hardening in the Scripture, which is fundamentally the idea of stubbornness and not an incapacity to comprehend or respond to the Word of God. What we see taught in these verses in Zechariah is that people refuse to hearken to God's Word, choose to pull away the shoulder and stop up their ears. This is a picture of stubbornness, not incapacity, and it is a matter of choice because people do not like the message. God convicts the rebellion of the people and the blame is placed squarely on their shoulders, "*Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words...*" When people hear an uncomfortable message, they can respond by repenting and turning to God (this requires humility) or hardening their hearts (stubbornness and pride). When the forefathers were warned by the prophets, they choose of their own accord to refuse God's plea and, ultimately, faced the wrath of God and specifically the 70 years of Babylonian captivity.

7:13 "Therefore it is come to pass, *that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the LORD of hosts: 14 But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate.*"

God sent prophets to present His Word to the people, but they would not listen. Eventually, God temporally punished them with judgment, and in this specific context, it was the Babylonian captivity and the attacks by Nebuchadnezzar that preceded the captivity. We know from history that Nebuchadnezzar assaulted Jerusalem in 605 B.C., later in 597 B.C., and then destroyed the city in 586 B.C. The people cried out to God (presumably for deliverance), but just as they had refused His pleas, He refused theirs. God scattered them among the Gentile nations and the land (i.e. Israel) was made desolate. This was a result of the attacks as well as the abandonment of the cities. The land that flowed with milk and honey ("*the pleasant land*") had become a "ghost town" that no one traveled through. This principle of prayer holds today—we should not expect to live however we please, in open rebellion to God, but expect our prayers to be answered affirmatively.

QUESTION

5. Does God make people incapable of responding to His Word? If not, then why do they refuse to respond properly to His Word?
