

BOOK OF ZECHARIAH
RITUALISM OR REALITY?
ZECHARIAH 7:1-7

Introduction

The seventh and eighth chapters are the third distinct division of the prophecy.

The first portion was a call to national repentance and turning to the Lord for His Covenant blessings.

After a national turning to God Zechariah was granted eight remarkable night visions which we looked at that culminated in the prophecy related to the future earthly reign of the Messiah on this earth.

Here in Chapter 7, almost two years have passed since those eight visions describing the future of Israel had been given. It is now 518 BC. The Temple has been steadily rising before the people's eyes because the obstacles for the completion of the Temple were removed with the decree of Darius which confirmed the original decree of Cyrus (Ezra 6:1-14).

The Nation's situation now looked promising. Although the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins and parts of the town were in desolation, the city and the surrounding country side were beginning to take shape again.

The question naturally came to the minds of the people that since signs of apparent prosperity were beginning to abound, should they continue to observe the days of national sorrow and fasting, which had been instituted in memory of the destruction of the Temple while they were captive in Babylon.

At this time, the Lord again speaks through Zechariah and grants an answer of far more than what was expected.

God desire in this message to His people was to curb the Jews trend toward formalism in religion and for them to move to something more real. What God wanted from His people was true justice in their dealings combined with mercy and compassion for the weak.

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He wanted them to obey the moral precepts and principles of His Word which is way more important than ceremonies and man-made traditions [like abstinence from food and drink enacted while the people were in Babylon].

I. THEIR QUESTION OF THE FAST. (Vs 1-3)

A new Word of the LORD comes to Zechariah in **verse 1**.

As in the case of Zechariah's opening sermon a date is given according to the Babylonian calender. The fact that it was in the fourth year of Darius that this prophecy came is important. For by this time the decree of Darius given in Ezra 6:1-11 is being fulfilled and the harassment of those rebuilding the temple had been ordered to cease.

The Temple is now about halfway completed and sacrifices have begun (Ezra 3:3). After a lapse of nearly two years, with the resistance to rebuilding the temple ended, Zechariah is again called to prophesy.

The occasion for the oracle is given in **verse 2 and 3a**

The purpose of this mission was two-fold:

- 1) To pray before the LORD (lit. - to make sweet, pleasant, or stroke the face of the Lord).
- 2) To speak unto the priests which were in the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets.

They had a question that was troubling them, so they came to those whom the LORD had appointed for such circumstances. (Deuteronomy 17:9-11; Ezekiel 44:23-24)

Malachi 2:7—“For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

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The delegation's question is found in **verse 3b**.

They inquire of the priests and prophets as to whether they should continue the self-imposed tradition of mourning and fasting or not. The idea here is that they wanted to be free of this custom they had kept during their captivity.

The **fifth month** was the month the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple as recorded in both 2 Kings 25:9, Jeremiah 52:13. *2 Kings 25:9—“And he burnt the house of the LORD, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire.”*

When the children of Israel went into captivity they established **this time of mourning and fasting to commemorate this national calamity**. (So they had been having this event for nearly 70 years).

Now, the **fifth month fast was only one of five fasts (7:5, 8:19) that were presently held concerning the fall of Jerusalem**.

[**The first fast** was for when the siege began, **the second fast** was for the capture of city, **the third fast** commemorated the burning of City and Temple, then **the fourth fast** held in the seventh month was in memory of the assassinations and massacre that took place.]

The O.T. required only one fast - the one known as *Yom Kipper*.

We also know that at times, when God's people backslid from Him and He sent chastisement, God had been known to issue a call for a period of national fasting (**Joel 1:13-14**). But these calls to repentance were never intended to become an annual mechanical season of wailing and fasting.

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The Jews naturally assumed that since this commemoration had started with the destruction of the Temple and the land that it should end with the completion of the Temple and up-building of the land.

From Ezra 6:15 we know the Temple was within two years of completion (520-516 BC).

From the words '*these so many years*' we can note a sense of distaste and impatience. These folks had lost the sense of voluntary dedication to the Lord in this tradition of wailing and fasting instituted to keep alive the memory of the tragic consequences of turning their backs on the Lord.

So their legalistic observance of these extra fasts were devoid of any glory to God or spiritual benefit to themselves. They had been doing it because they thought it was something expected of them and to please men.

[*weep: means to mourn by crying or bewailing, showing emotion of grief or humiliation.*]

So the question was one concerning this religious externalism or ceremony which had become merely a human tradition. They had become weary of this meaningless ritualism that was so void of spiritual reality in their lives.

They wanted to be free from this load without offending those that were responsible for carrying on the traditions.

II. THEIR SELFISHNESS EXPOSED. (Vs 4-7)

Instead of letting the priests and prophets answer the question, in **verse 4** the Lord begins His response.

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Zechariah apparently was one of the prophets present when they posed this question. From the word order we know the question was primarily addressed to the priests but the Lord responded through His prophet Zechariah.

When this delegation came with this question they must have expected a simple yes or no response, but God uses this question and its historical circumstances as a back drop for far-reaching prophecies dealing with the nation and its future (chs. 7 & 8).

Now I want you to note that when we offer up our requests to God, it must be with a readiness to receive instructions from Him, for if we turn away from hearing Him, we cannot expect that our prayers should be acceptable to Him.

In **verse 5** God challenges the whole community to change its attitude.

The sinful attitude revealed in the question of the self-imposed fast is that it was not observed for God's glory and so the Word of the Lord would be revealed.

This word of the Lord was not just for these folks, but for all the people of the land, including the priests!

This delegations question is not answered directly for it was inconsequential whether they kept the wailing and fasting.

The important issue was the problem of observing man-made rules as if it is worship to God when it carries no heartfelt desire. The attitude of this question is symptomatic of the deep evil that was infesting the nation and we will see how it will receive exhaustive treatment over the next two chapters.

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God's question does not focus on the facts or origins of their fasts, but on the religious motivation behind them. Pointedly God asks in so many words, "*Was it really for Me that you fasted?*"

God admitted they had performed the external act of complete absence of food and drink along with the public mourning that was being done, and being done for seventy years.

Yet God viewed these acts with indifference because while they were done, the people were centered on themselves. So God begins by overthrowing the false notion that fasting (or any other act) is in itself a meritorious act.

Fasting was something to be engaged in at times of sorrow and crisis, particularly national crisis.

As a spiritual exercise, it was to be accompanied by confession of sin, by repentance and by a recognition of an individual's true standing before God.

Joel 2:12—“Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:”

But, these fasts and mournings were not the outward sign of a heart of remorse and repentance, but rather they were out of sorrow over their external calamities. They were not for their sin itself but for the consequences of their sin!

Their self denial was for self-interest, not over their sin against God! They wanted the effects of their sin removed, not that their sin would be removed from them! They regarded their fasts not only as meritorious, but also as an end in themselves, rather than as a turning away from self and a turning to God.

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It COULD HAVE and probably SHOULD HAVE been a healthy reminder of the deserved affliction suffered at the Lord's hand AND done as an offering of genuine repentance in light of God's chastisement.

Verse 6 addresses their normal lives [or the eating and drinking included in their other religious celebrations or festivals].

Not only were their special fasts not done for God's glory but neither were their daily lives, represented by the normal routine of eating and drinking.

Their daily life was not lived for God's greater glory. They were living for themselves. They did not live for God's glory, but to fill their bellies out of a natural craving to satisfy their self serving appetites.

The very life they lived was mechanical, formalistic and an external piece of empty ritual. Instead of their living being motivated by a higher plane of action, they did what they did for self-motivated reasons!

How much better it is to live daily for God than to ease the convictions of conscience through a formal religious observance.

Apart from the application of these words to the Jewish people at that time there is also a solemn lesson for us that we should lay to heart.

Do we think that mere external religious observance no matter how regular and how long done acquires any merit with God? Or do we come and worship and perform its many facets to give God honor and glory, to draw near to Him? Do we live out our daily lives as a selfish routine or do we live to bring glory and honor to God through the routine of our daily lives?

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The Apostle Paul exhorted us to live this way, which is the opposite of the way they were living. *1 Corinthians 10:31*—“*Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*”

Verse 7 indicates their present attitude is the same one that God had dealt with in their ancestors.

To obey the moral precepts and principles of the word is infinitely more important than ceremonies and abstinence from food and drink.

Conclusion

If the people's concern was over dead ritual rather than spiritual reality then once again Israel had not yet learned their lesson.

And the economic and political prosperity they were experiencing would soon disappear regardless of whether they had their empty ritual of national wailing and fasting or not.

When you come to church, pray, or fellowship with other believers, is there a desire to give God glory? Is your attitude to get or to give? Is your worship and religious practice about YOU or about THE LORD?

God wants to bless His people but He can only bless His people if they live a life intended to bring Him honor and glory. And God's desire is for His people to worship Him in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24), not in ritual and formality.