

### 3. The Second Oracle – Yahweh’s Review of Israel’s Hypocrisy

The starting point for interacting with the Lord’s second oracular message is recalling that His four “words” formed a compound oracle that spoke to the question of continuing the fifth-month fast. Three fundamental observations follow from this:

- 1) First, this second “word” (7:8-14) presupposes and builds upon its predecessor. This means that it must be read and interpreted in terms of the first message.
- 2) At the same time, this second part of the oracle provides its own contribution to the Lord’s four-fold reply to the exiles’ question. That is, this second “word” works together with its three counterparts to form Yahweh’s answer to the question of Israel’s mourning and fasting.
- 3) Finally, each of the four “words” functions as a part of the overall oracle, but in a specific way and with a specific relationship to the other three. The four-part oracle isn’t the sum of four “words” thrown together like stones in a bucket; the Lord gave them in a particular order that reflects their individual contribution to the whole. Each “word” thus looks backward and forward: It stands upon and enlarges its predecessors and, together with them, anticipates and builds the case for its successors and, ultimately, the oracular message as a whole.

This second “word of the Lord” to Zechariah is comprised of three sections. Each section consists of two verses with the sections arranged in logical as well as chronological (historical) order. The first sets forth a charge from the Lord to His covenant people (vv. 9-10), while the second summarizes their response to His charge (vv. 11-12). The final section, then, states the outcome of this situation (vv. 13-14).

- a. The first section articulates a broad ethical prescription to which the Lord obligated the children of Israel. Three things about this are important to note:

The first is that this prescription pertained to Israel’s *horizontal* life rather than its *vertical* one. That is to say, it spoke to the nation’s community life rather than its worship practices (its relationship with Yahweh). Its concern was the way the Israelites ordered their relationship with one another and, in all of its particulars, it prohibited every element of self-interest and self-seeking (cf. vv. 5-6).

The second thing to note is that this charge was Yahweh’s elaboration on His statement in 7:7. In that verse, the Lord noted that He’d proclaimed a message through His prophets to the children of Israel during the time preceding the Babylonian captivity; in verses 9-10, then, He proceeded to summarize what the message embodied. (Note the preface in verse 9: “*Thus the Lord of Hosts spoke saying...*” along with verse 12.) And that summary shows why the Lord felt an explanation was needed; the “word through the prophets” He was referring to was something very different from what the Jews’ would have surmised based on the issue at hand, namely their question regarding continuing their mourning.

Lastly, the ethical responsibilities the Lord here enumerated amounted to a representative synopsis of Israel's covenant obligation to one another under the Mosaic Law. There were two dimensions to Israel's practical conformity to its identity as Yahweh's covenant "son": The one was the people's relationship to God as their covenant *Father*; the second was their relationship to one another as covenant *brethren*. The Lord brought practical definition to both relationships and the latter was characteristically defined in terms of the sorts of specifics listed here (ref. esp. Exodus 22:21-27 and 23:1-9 in which Yahweh spoke to Israel's interpersonal obligation under the covenant; cf. also Leviticus 19:9-17; Deuteronomy 14:27-29, 24:17-21, 27:19; Psalm 82:1-4; Ezekiel 18:5-9, 22:1-7; Hosea 12:6; Micah 6:8). By ordering their lives together in this way, the children of Israel would demonstrate their *sonship* – their being sons of their covenant Father – to one another and, more importantly, to the nations around them (cf. Deuteronomy 10:12-19; Psalm 68:4-5, 146:9; Hosea 14:1-3; etc.).

- b. The Lord's second oracular utterance began with Him rehearsing in summary fashion the message He'd continually set before the people of Israel from Sinai forward. That "word" was the covenant prescription by which the covenant household was to order its community life. Yahweh gave Israel that prescription at Sinai and then spent the following centuries reminding them of it, but all to no avail. From beginning to end, Israel had proven to be an unfaithful son to its covenant Father and, as such, unfaithful to one another as covenant brethren. And so, as the Lord's opening statement summarized Israel's obligation under the covenant, His second one summarized their failure to comply with it (7:11-12).

The Lord described Israel's obligation in characteristic language and He followed that same pattern in describing their failure: From Sinai forward they had refused to be attentive to Him, even turning their backs to Him in stubborn rebellion and making their ears dull so as to not have to listen to Him. In a word, the covenant sons set their hearts as flint against their Lord's covenant prescription and instruction and so also against the prophets He sent to them to rebuke and correct them (cf. Psalm 78; Nehemiah 9:16ff; Jeremiah 5:23; Ezekiel 3:1-9; Daniel 9:3ff).

- c. Since the days in which He delivered them from Egypt and gathered them to Himself in covenant union at Sinai, Israel – the chosen son – had remained a wayward and disobedient people, ever wandering away from the Lord who loved them and giving themselves to the gods of their own desires and selfish concern. Whether in open rebellion and apostasy or devout acts of piety and worship, the covenant sons had been driven by the same ultimate and controlling motivation: *their unwavering allegiance to self-interest* (ref. 7:5-6; cf. Hosea 11:1-2; Ezekiel 20:1-32; Isaiah 1:1-14; Amos 5:21-26; cf. also Exodus 16:1-3, 17:1-3; Numbers 11:1-10, 12:1-10, 13:1-14:10). Even while adamantly voicing their commitment to fidelity (Exodus 19:7-8, 24:3-8), the sons of Israel continued to turn a deaf ear to Yahweh; finally He determined to give them over to themselves; He would no longer hear their cries and deliver them; rather, He was going to deliver them *over* (7:13-14; cf. Isaiah 66:1-4; Hosea 2:1-13; Amos 4:1-5:27; Lamentations 2:1-17).

These are the three components of the second “word” and their meaning is clear: *The destruction and desolation of the kingdom of Israel was not the Lord’s doing; the sons of the kingdom had brought this upon themselves as surely as if their own hands had wielded the swords, set the fires and held the chains that dragged them to Babylon* (7:14; cf. Ezekiel 18:1-32, 24:1-23; cf. also Isaiah 1:1-9, 5:1-7, 30:1-17, 57:1-13; Jeremiah 2).

The Judeans to whom Zechariah was to deliver this oracle would not have quibbled with a single word of it: Yahweh had indeed given them and their forefathers His covenant prescription and set before them blessing and cursing; He had remained faithful and tenacious in His integrity and commitment to His covenant while His people had been just as resolute in breaking the covenant and wandering from Him. He’d persisted for many centuries in pleading with them and arising on their behalf, but they refused His overtures and dismissed His threats (Jeremiah 7:21-26). And so, when at last the day of destruction, exile and captivity overcame them, they had no one to blame but themselves.

This much was clear in the Lord’s words and Zechariah’s hearers could neither have missed it nor disagreed with it. What they might have failed to see, however, is how this second part of the oracle fit together with the preceding part. The obvious connection is that the second “word” summarized the Lord’s message through His former prophets – the message He referred to in His first “word” (cf. again 7:12 with 7:7). But there’s a greater, more profound connection that is critical to see. *And this is the relationship between Israel’s life as a community and its worship and devotion to its God.*

As noted, Israel’s faithful conformity to its sonship involved the people’s relationship with one another as much as their relationship with God. Moreover, these two dimensions of their faithfulness were not independent: Israel’s devotion to its covenant Father expressed itself in the way they lived with one another as a community; conversely, it was precisely in their interpersonal relationships as Yahweh’s covenant people that they demonstrated the authenticity and sincerity of their worship and devotion to Him.

The implication ought to be obvious: One can *feign* (and even convince himself of) love for the Lord by personal and ceremonial acts of worship and devotion (as in the case of the exiles’ ritual mourning and fasting); a person can “worship” and “serve” God while his heart is far from Him (cf. Isaiah 1:10-15 with 29:13-14). But no one can authentically and sincerely love the Father without loving His children (1 John 4:19-5:2). *This dynamic, however, is a matter of necessity and not propriety or verification:* Love for the Lord’s people is not “doing one’s duty” or an avenue to prove one’s love for Him; such “love” has oneself as its object. Love is first of all *who a person is* and only then what he does; *God is love* and thus He *loves*. So it is with men: If a person loves, he loves as God loves – as a way of being and relating; he will be defined by love and so will love people as well as God since love cannot be compartmentalized or parceled out.

Thus Yahweh perceived Israel’s lovelessness toward one another as their lack of love for Him. In the language of the oracle, the devoted self-concern that marked their daily lives as a community (7:6, 9-12) substantiated the Lord’s claim that their *worship of Him* was all about them (7:5). Their seeming self-denial was just another form of self-devotion.