

Pentwater Bible Church

Zechariah

Message 14 The Question of the Fast

August 4, 2013



'Queen Esther Before Ahasuerus' , Francesco Caucig, 1815

Daniel E. Woodhead – Pastor Teacher

Pentwater Bible Church

The Book of Zechariah
Message Fourteen
The Question of Fasting
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Painting by Sharlene Lindskog-Osorio

THE QUESTION OF FASTING

Zechariah 7:1-7

¹ And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Darius, that the word of Jehovah came unto Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month, even in Chislev. ² Now they of Beth-el had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech, and their men, to entreat the favor of Jehovah, ³ and to speak unto the priests of the house of Jehovah of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years? ⁴ Then came the word of Jehovah 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 in the seventh month, even these seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me,

and drink for yourselves? ⁷Should ye not hear the words, which Jehovah cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, and the cities thereof round about her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited? (ASV 1901)

THE TIMING

Zechariah 7:1

¹ And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Darius, that the word of Jehovah came unto Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month, even in Chislev (ASV 1901).

With respect to the previous eight visions this revelation came two years later in 518 B.C. to Zechariah. The day, the month, and the year of this divine oracle are clearly given—it was “*in the fourth day of the ninth month, even in Chislev*” (this is December 518 B.C. in the Gregorian calendar), “*in the fourth year of King Darius.*”

Those visions described the whole future of the nation Israel including their subjugation of her enemies, her regathering to Eretz Yisrael, her godly cleansing and finally the establishment of the Millennial Theocracy. In the previous visions some people did return which approached 50,000 by most conservative verifiable estimates. The Jews exiled had been primarily professionals and those of more prosperous economic status. Nebuchadnezzar left the poor and indigent in Jerusalem.

These did pay attention to both Zechariah’s and Haggai’s prophesies and began to rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Most of the exiles however chose to stay in Babylon. After all it had been at least seventy years since they were captured and exiled by Nebuchadnezzar’s armies. Some were taken nine years earlier than the final deportation of 586 B.C. and were in Babylon for at least seventy-nine years. They had families and had adjusted over several generations to life in Babylon with the now tolerable suzerainty of the succeeding reign of the Medes. The Temple in Jerusalem was nearing completion, private residences were being built and some of them were fine residences at that (Haggai 1:4). Jerusalem seemed to be on its way back.

While they had been in captivity they had begun to observe some days of national sorrow in commemoration of the destruction of the Temple and the desolation of the land of Israel. This issue of these commemorations being established in Israel was raised and sent to the priests and prophets asking for direction. They wanted to know if the practices they had begun in Babylon should be continued. Jehovah’s response came to Zechariah and is given in the seventh chapter of his book. It does not directly answer their questions.

THE DELEGATION OF INQUIRERS

Zechariah 7:2

²*Now they of Beth-el had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech, and their men, to entreat the favor of Jehovah (ASV 1901).*

The people of the city of Bethel about twelve miles north of Jerusalem sent a delegation of men led by *Sharezer and Regem-melech* from there to Jerusalem in order to make the inquiry of the Lord at His Temple. Some Bible versions have mistranslated Bethel as the Temple, which was under construction since Bethel does mean the house of God. There is no other Old Testament reference of this to corroborate the Temple rendering. The city of Bethel is the correct translation. This delegation that came to Jerusalem were moved to ask whether Israel should continue to fast as they had in Babylon. The delegates were Jewish men (even though they had Babylonian names which were commonly applied to the Jews by the Babylonians cf. Daniel 1:7) who came from Bethel (cf. Ezra 2:28). Bethel had been the center of apostate worship for the Northern 10 tribes of Israel (cf. 1 Kings 12:28–29; 13:1; Amos 7:13) when Jeroboam I took the land of the north and established a center of false worship there after Solomon’s death (cir. 931 B.C.). He set up a pagan worship of golden calves among other heinous practices leading the Israelites into sin (cf. II Kings 10:29; II Chronicles 13:8). These men who led the delegation were important leaders because they had a following that accompanied them on this mission. Bethel was no longer a religious community after the captivity and many of its inhabitants had returned from the captivity with those from Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 2:28; Nehemiah 7:32; 11:31).

THE NATURE OF THE MISSION

Zechariah 7:3

³*and to speak unto the priests of the house of Jehovah of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years (ASV 1901)?*

The people from Bethel now clearly acknowledged Jerusalem as the proper capital of all ecclesiastical Jewish activity and not Bethel as it had been in apostate northern Israel under Jeroboam and the subsequent eighteen kings, all of whom were evil. So they were sent to the Temple with a specific request for instruction. They asked the priests and the prophets if they should *weep in the fifth month, separating myself*, (הִנָּזֵר—*hinnazer*—like the Nazirite who ‘separated himself,’ or abstained from strong drink and other bodily indulgences); *as I have done these so many years?* The pronoun (*I*) is used to refer to all of Bethel as a personification of the city. The prophets are generally not given easily to godly rebuke unless it is clear and warranted. They realize that that rebuke and correction must be administered with God’s Word alone and not of personal preference. This certainly requires a thorough knowledge of God’s Word in order to carry out this responsibility properly. This reveals the essence of the issue that they were faced with. That is, what is a symptom of the Jewish practices and found in the Church as well. Do we

continue to practice self developed rituals or do we discontinue them? It is important to realize that the Bible does not command the practice of fasting. This request was in itself sinful because it revealed an attitude regarding the fast that was not done for God's glory and purely motivated for self-indulgence.

The fast of the fifth month which is called Ab (August in the Gregorian calendar) is a holiday that is still observed by Jewish custom because of many calamities, which the Nation Israel had experienced on that day. Two of those prior to Zechariah's time are:

1. On that day the decree went forth from God in the wilderness that the people should not enter the land because of their unbelief after hearing the report of the twelve spies Moses sent to Canaan returned from their mission (Cir 1400 B.C.)
2. The destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians (586 B.C.)
3. The murder of Gedaliah who was the first postexilic governor of Jerusalem appointed by Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem. The death of Gedaliah was a traumatic event for the Jews who were already crushed almost to annihilation by the destruction of the Temple, the ruin of the Jerusalem, and the deportation of most of its leaders (Fast of the seventh month) (581 B.C.)

Over time the mourning and fasting they practiced for these actual Biblical events was increased to cover any event they considered a persecution. Some of those are:

1. The Romans destroyed the Second Temple. (70 AD)
2. On that day, after the rising under Bar Cochba, the city of Bethar was taken, "in which were thousands and myriads of Israel. (134 AD)
3. Following the Bar Cochba revolt, Roman commander Turnus Rufus plowed the site of the Temple and the surrounding area. (135 AD)
4. The First Crusade in which a total of 1.2 million Jews were slaughtered. (1096 AD)
5. The Jews were expelled from England. (1290)
6. The Jews were expelled from France. (1306)
7. The Jews were expelled from Spain (1492)
8. Germany started WW I which led to the Holocaust (1914)
9. Heinrich Himmler approved the Final Solution (1941)
10. German began a mass deportation of Jews to death camps (1942)

What needs to be pointed out here is that these *perpetual* mourning practices are nowhere *commanded* in the Bible. There is only one *implied* continual fast commanded in the Bible for the Jews. It is on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippor (Leviticus 6:29). And there the text says to *afflict your souls*. Other one time special fasts are commanded such as in Joel 1:13-14 but not *continual* fasts. In fact while God does not condemn them he wants obedience to Him and His Word far more than He wants adherence to a ritual even if He has ordained it.

Isaiah 1:1-10

¹⁰Hear the word of Jehovah, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. ¹¹What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices? saith Jehovah: I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats. ¹²When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts? ¹³Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; new moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies,-- I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting. ¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood (ASV 1901).

Similar practices are inherent in many churches as well. Legalism, which is the imposition of unbiblical practices tied to one's salvation or sanctification, is outside of the Word of God, His Bible. Some examples of those are:

1. Keeping the Sabbath
2. Infrequent communion
3. Penance
4. Requiring Sunday meeting
5. Transubstantiation
6. Purgatory
7. Expanding the Bible to include non canonical writings as Scripture
8. Reducing the Bible by not teaching all of it as authoritative

Israel and the Church need to let God be in charge instead of each forcing his own agenda and not paying careful attention to the Bible.

The delegation from Bethel was eager to know if they should continue to keep the memorial fasts they started while in Babylon. The question will not be answered directly in either chapter seven or eight. This is the way God responds to these types of questions. He will relate a far more important matter to Him and here that is obedience to His Word and a faithful relationship with Him. Jesus practiced this technique frequently. He would respond to a question with an answer that did not directly respond to the specific question asked. One example is when Nicodemus came to Him by night recognizing His coming from God because of the miracles He was doing. Jesus directed the conversation immediately to the most important aspect of the encounter, Nicodemus' salvation. This is the same situation we see here.

SELFISHNESS AND LEGALISM EXPOSED IN THE JEWS FASTING

Zechariah 7:4-6

⁴Then came the word of Jehovah of hosts unto me, saying, ⁵Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and in the seventh month, even these seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me? ⁶And when ye eat, and when ye drink, do not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves (ASV 1901)?

Chapters seven and eight are a prophecy separate and complete in itself, it will be found on close examination to go over the same line of thought as unfolded in the series of visions in the first six chapters. The outstanding feature of this prophecy, even as it was of the visions, is that they are *devharim tovhim, devharim nichummim* (“good words, even comforting words,” as in chapter 1:13). In both chapter one and seven there are the consolatory announcements that “Jehovah is jealous for Zion with great jealousy,” and will “return to Jerusalem with mercies”; and that not only would the people be restored and the land be rebuilt, but that He Himself would dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, which should be known henceforth as “The city of truth” and “The holy mountain”—the center to which the Gentile nations shall come to seek Jehovah to be taught in His way (Isaiah 2:2; 5:26; 60:3 etc.). But nevertheless His everlasting love for His children does not mean He is endorsing or permitting sin.

The messages in the visions are introduced by a call to repentance, and the reminder that all their sorrows and troubles were brought on by their disobedience to the Words which Jehovah had spoken to them through the former prophets (cf. chapter 1:1-6), so also the beautiful comforting prophecy of the future blessing of Israel and the future glory of Jerusalem in chapter eight is preceded by what is practically also a call to repentance in chapter 7:4-14, and the exhortation to pay attention finally to the words of the same “former prophets.” Those are Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Jehovah God is saying to the Jews through Zechariah, “All these fasts you held these seventy plus years were not to me!” They were all self-serving. They did it as some sort of outward manifestation of the distress they experienced. They were sorrowful that they were experiencing difficulty. They did not fast in obedience to God and He knows it. He therefore did not take any of these so-called fasts into account as any atonement for their sins. Their fasts were basically a penance of sort. They were expressing a “woe is me” attitude regarding their state and not looking to God for both the reasons why the calamities came upon them or exhibiting true repentance and asking God for forgiveness for what they had done to deserve their punishment.

GOD'S REMINDER TO PAY ATTENTION TO HIS WORD

Zechariah 7:7

⁷Should ye not hear the words, which Jehovah cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, and the cities thereof round about her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited? (ASV 1901)

Zechariah is imploring the Jews to pay attention to the former prophets when God spoke through them and forget about the fasting. These false fasts were nothing more than hypocrisy. In other words their religious activity was self-centered and self-fulfilling. It failed to satisfy the demands of a holy and loving God. This is a strong condemnation in the form of a rebuke in a typical prophetic sense. Zechariah is saying, "you knew better yet you didn't listen to God before and preferred your own self-serving obedience." The prophet does not come alongside the sinner and commiserate with them. He tells them they brought it on themselves.

The message Zechariah is proclaiming, here is not a new message. It is an old one that led to their persecution by the Babylonians and the Assyrians, Philistines and others before this time. It has been the reason they have been persecuted throughout their history as a nation. They don't obey or recognize God.

The Negev was the desert area in the south of Judah. Its towns were historically in constant danger from the Philistines and other marauders who could easily penetrate their defenses. Only when Israel and Judah were strong could the conditions Zechariah describes prevail. His point is this: If mighty and prosperous Jerusalem and Judah were overthrown because of their disobedience to the words of the earlier prophets, how much more important was it for this group to pay attention to those words when their community, a fledgling one, was trying to restore as a nation. They must not engage in hypocritical self-indulgence.

NEXT WEEK: THE WARNING FROM THE PAST

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