

XIII. A Question on Fasting

March 1, 2020 Zechariah 7:1-14

Theme: True religion does not consist of conformance to outward rituals, but of a transformed heart that loves both God and neighbor.

Aim: To challenge our outward conformity to religious practice and to examine our hearts.

Key Verses: ⁴Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: ⁵“Say to all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? ⁶And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?’” (Zechariah 7:4-6).

Review

In the summer of 2018, I taught the Night Visions of Zechariah (chapters 1-6) in Sunday school. This was actually the second time I had taught that class, the first time being ten years before. At the time, it reminded me that I had previously taught Sunday school classes on all twelve of the Minor Prophets, except for the second half of the book of Zechariah. Having enjoyed my return to the first half of Zechariah, I determined to prepare and deliver this course in order to ameliorate that deficiency!

The history of the Old Testament nation of Israel is largely one of failure. Despite been chosen by God to have a covenant relationship with Him, all too often they fell away from the LORD and followed the idolatrous ways of the pagan nations around them. Although God had sent many prophets over the centuries to warn them to repent, in large part they did not listen. Therefore, the people of Judah were sent into captivity in Babylon for seventy years because of their sins of idolatry and apostasy. The Babylonian captivity cured God’s people of these sins, even though other sins would creep in and take their place.

In 538 BC, the Persian king Cyrus issued a proclamation that allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild the temple. A small remnant returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. Their work started well; they reestablished the worship of God and even began construction on the temple in 536 BC. However, fierce opposition arose, and soon the building project halted, destined to lay dormant for sixteen long years.

God was not pleased with His people for their laziness and surrender in the face of opposition, and so He sent leanness into their lives. They struggled to make ends meet – they were poor in number, poor in strength, and poor in material advantages. But then the LORD of hosts stirred up His people to action by sending them two messengers: Haggai and Zechariah.

These two prophets were raised up by God to exhort His people to complete their task of building God’s temple for His glory. Haggai came first, and his ministry got the people moving again. Only a few months later, Zechariah appeared on the scene, and his introductory message of repentance was soon followed by a series of Night Visions that promised the temple would be rebuilt. But Zechariah does not stop at merely the rebuilding of the physical temple; his visions

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look down the tunnel of time to the work of the greater temple Builder – the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

The book of Zechariah falls (more or less) into three main sections. The first section in chapters 1-6 comprises the Night Visions that Zechariah received over a single evening in the second year of king Darius (i.e., 520-519 BC).

The third section of the book in chapters 9-14 is a collection of undated oracles. These oracles are filled with prophecies of future history and promises of the longed-for Messiah. As such, they have a wealth of encouragement and exhortation not only for the post-exilic generation, but also for modern Christians as well.

The second section of the book, chapters 7 and 8, is essentially an interlude between these two larger divisions of Zechariah. This prophecy was given in response to a question some of the remnant had about occasions of fasting. Zechariah records this message in chapters 7 and 8. It is to these second and third sections of the book of Zechariah that we will turn our attention in this class.

As the Word of God, the book of Zechariah is a timeless reminder of God's sovereignty in the unfolding of redemptive history. Zechariah the prophet (and priest) was called by God to encourage his countrymen in their historical task of temple construction. He was also called to proclaim the glorious work of God's Servant, the Branch, who was the Messiah to come. Furthermore, Zechariah's message remains pertinent for us, as we build up God's temple – the church – for His glory, in the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ. Behold the Branch!

Introduction

In his epistle, James, the half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, challenged his readers to demonstrate true saving faith through their deeds. We are to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). He then went on to say: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). For James, true religion was not simply a matter of following religious rituals, but of fulfilling the royal law of loving your neighbor as yourself (cp. James 2:8). Sometimes, we get so wrapped up in our own affairs and inward-focused responsibilities that we forget this crucial outward-looking aspect of true religion.

There is a difference between being religious and having true religion. Paul noted the difference in his introductory comments at the Areopagus: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22). Observing their excessive idolatry, he went on to introduce them to the Lord God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Being religious is not the same as having true religion. There are many people who confuse the two, to their eternal regret.

This is not a new phenomenon in the church. It exists in our day, it was present in James' day, and it was also evident in the post-exilic church to which Zechariah ministered. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the LORD's response to a simple question posed by some religious people of Zechariah's day. On the surface, the question seemed rather straightforward: “Now that the temple is almost rebuilt, should we continue fasting to commemorate its destruction?” However, the LORD's answer to this question digs much deeper to turf up the real orientation of their hearts and to challenge their (mis)-conceptions about the nature of true religion. Thus, as we study Zechariah chapter 7 today, we should be aware that *true religion does not consist of conformance to outward rituals, but of a transformed heart that loves both God and neighbor.*

A. The Question (Zechariah 7:1-3)

1. Date (7:1)

¹In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev.

The ministry of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah are intertwined. The LORD raised both of them up in the second year of king Darius of Medo-Persia (i.e., 520-519 BC) to encourage and exhort post-exilic Israel to restart the temple reconstruction project that had laid dormant for sixteen years. Haggai appeared on the scene first. His four oracles are precisely dated during the second year of king Darius: the first day of the sixth month (Hag. 1:1); the twenty-first day of the seventh month (Hag. 2:1); and 2 messages on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (Hag. 2:10, 20).

God first spoke to Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo in the second year of King Darius in the eighth month (Zech. 1:1), that is, after the second of Haggai's prophecies. Not long thereafter, God presented the Night Visions to Zechariah on the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month (Zech. 1:7), which would have been in February, 519 BC. As a result of the encouragement of both Haggai and Zechariah in that pivotal year, the temple construction was restarted. It would take another four years of hard work for the temple work to be completed (cp. Ezra 6:15).

Halfway through this construction project, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah again, "*in the fourth year of king Darius ... on the fourth day of the ninth month.*" This date corresponds to December 7, 518 BC. The challenging times of the past two decades had been put behind the Israelites. The work on the temple was proceeding well; the difficulties that had delayed the construction previously had been overcome. "Everything seemed to be proceeding smoothly for the inhabitants of Judah, and they were anticipating a more peaceful life. Since they had resumed work on the temple their enemies appear to have left them alone and the problems of the poor harvests (Haggai 1:6) seem to have diminished. Religion was getting back to normal as well" (Bentley, p. 156). It was a time of optimism and looking forward to happier days.

2. Delegation (7:2-3a)

²Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men to entreat the favor of the LORD, ³saying to the priests of the house of the LORD of hosts and the prophets...

It was in this era of renewed hopes for a brighter future that a delegation of men from the town of Bethel was sent to Jerusalem to enquire of the LORD. The town of Bethel, located about 12 miles north of Jerusalem, had a long history in the Old Testament. Although Abraham had sojourned in and around Bethel (see Gen. 12:8; 13:3), it was the patriarch Jacob, after seeing the vision of the angels descending from and ascending to heaven, who first renamed the ancient city of Luz as Beth-el, "the house of God" (Gen. 28:19). It was at this location that Jeroboam, after the death of Solomon, set up a golden calf as an alternate center of worship to rival Jerusalem (1 Kgs. 7:28-29). Until the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, Bethel had thus been a place of idolatrous and syncretistic worship. However, godly men had returned to Bethel after the exile (cp. Ezra 2:28), and from the context of verses 2-3 it seems that they were interested in the exercise of true religion, at least on the surface.

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The delegation was headed by two men, *Sharezer* and *Regem-melech*, who, interestingly, had Assyrian or Babylonian names. In and of itself, this does not indicate anything about the spiritual condition of these men. After all, which names are more familiar to the modern Bible reader: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (cp. Dan. 1:7)? Most of us know these pious youths, the three friends of Daniel who did not bow down to the king's image and were delivered in the fiery furnace, by their Babylonian names rather than their Hebrew ones. What these foreign names do suggest, however, is that these were men of relative importance in the wider Medo-Persian kingdom.

The name "Sharezer" appears elsewhere in Scripture as one of the sons who assassinated his father, the Assyrian king Sennacherib (2 Kgs. 19:37; Is. 37:38). A form of this same name is found in one of the Babylonian princes responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem, Nergal-sar-ezer (Jer. 39:3, 13). This latter name "means 'May Nergal protect the king.' Here Nergal, the name of the Assyrian false god is dropped, but the prayer, originally idolatrous, is retained. *Regem* is found as a proper name in 1 Chr. 2:47.... Regem-melech [signifies] 'friend of the king.' ... The reason why their Babylonian or Assyrian names are given here is probably to mark them out as men of importance, who very likely held positions of office in the court of Assyria or Babylon" (Baron, pp. 212-213).

Despite their non-Hebrew names, these men definitely had a Jewish orientation. The very fact that they lived in Bethel, rather than in a foreign capital of the wider empire, suggests that these important men identified themselves with God's covenant people. Furthermore, the subject matter of their request as well as the audience they addressed it to are clear indicators that they had a real concern for what they perceived to be religious matters regarding the worship of the LORD.

The delegation was sent "to the priests of the house of the LORD of Hosts and to the prophets" in order "to entreat a favor of the LORD." The word "entreat" is used "of approaching God for mercy (Ps. 119:58) or for help in time of trouble ("intercede," 1 Kgs. 13:6; 2 Kgs. 13:4; Jer. 26:19). Here, it indicates seeking divine assistance with the question that is troubling them" (Mackay, p. 144). The men of Bethel had an urgent question that needed to be answered, and so they looked, quite appropriately, to the right source of spiritual guidance – the priests and prophets of God associated with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

3. Duty (7:3b)

... "Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"

The question of the delegation concerned their religious duty: "should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?" Although God had only mandated one day of fasting per year (the Day of Atonement, see Lev. 23:26-32), during their seventy years of exile and beyond, the Jews had established four additional days of fasting and mourning to memorialize key events from the tragic year 586 BC. The first fast day was on the ninth day of the fourth month to mourn the walls of Jerusalem being breached by the armies of Babylon (cp. 2 Kgs. 25:3-4; Jer. 39:2; 52:13-14). The fast day of the fifth month, referenced here, remembered the burning of the temple and the destruction of the city (cp. 2 Ki. 25:8-10; Jer. 52:12-14). The third fast day, in the seventh month of the year, was the anniversary of the assassination of Gedeliah, the governor of Judah (cp. 2 Kgs. 25:25; Jer. 41:1-3). The final fast day, on the tenth

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day of the tenth month, recalled the date that Nebuchadnezzar first besieged the city of Jerusalem (cp. 2 Kg. 25:1-2; Jer. 39:1; 52:4; Ez. 24:1-2).

Although only one of these fast days is mentioned here in this question, it is apparent that all four were within the purview of the delegation's concern. Indeed, all four fast days are later referred to by the LORD in His extended answer to the men of Bethel (Zech. 8:19). It is likely that the impending completion of the temple reconstruction prompted the focus on the fast of the fifth month, which mourned the destruction of the very temple that would soon be returned to service.

Taken at face value, the delegation's question seems a reasonable one. The four fast days had been established by the Israelites in Babylon to recollect the catastrophic judgment of God upon them for their wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Remembrance of those events was very important to the exilic and post-exilic community of God (cp. Ps. 137:1). But now, it appeared as if God's favor had been restored to them: they were back in the land, they were prospering, and the temple was nearing completion. "Now that a new temple is going to be finished, should we continue to mourn the old one?" The question called into doubt the whole calendar of fasting, along with the whole attitude of mourning that dominated the exile period. The question seems to indicate an eagerness to put all this behind" (Phillips, p. 156).

However, by the lengthy negative answer which follows, it is clear that there was more to this question than meets the eye. While there was nothing "wrong" with the Israelites adding the fast days into their religious calendar to remember God's past dealings with them, their traditions had become so engrained into their practice that the true significance had been forgotten. Boice suggests that the celebration of these fast days "had been perverted into what was by this time merely an empty and superstitious formalism, just as had happened earlier in Israel's history and has happened since in many religious communities" (Boice, p. 183). Moore goes even further:

The whole doctrine of fasting had become overlaid with an incrustation of formalism and superstition, that needed to be broken up. Fasting had become not a means but an end, a mere form, as it is in Mohammedan and Papal countries at this day, and had attached to it an *opus operatum* efficacy that wholly destroyed its real value. They thought that God must bless them, indeed was bound to bless them, if they rigidly observed these outward rites, whatever was their inward character. Thus formalism in religion acted in the time of the restoration, precisely as it acted in every subsequent period in the history of the Church, leading men to be scrupulous about the mint, anise, and cumin, the postures, costumes, and rubrics of religion, whilst the weightier matters of justice toward man, and piety toward God, were neglected or forgotten. Hence, before a mere question of ritual observance could be settled, it was important that their minds should be set right on the deeper questions of their spiritual relations to God (Moore, pp. 186-187).

God, knowing the hearts of these men, doesn't simply answer "yes" or "no" to the delegation's question. Rather, He goes below the surface to expose their heart attitudes and address the real question: what is true religion?

B. The Negative Answer (Zechariah 7:4-14)

God's response to this question on fasting falls in two parts. The first part, contained in the rest of Zechariah chapter 7, is the "negative answer." The more positive response is given in Zechariah chapter 8.

1. The First Word of the LORD (7:4-7)

a) *Fasting for the Wrong Reason (7:4-6)*

⁴Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: ⁵“Say to all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?’ ⁶And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?”

Instead of answering the question on fasting directly, God through Zechariah replied by asking a series of rhetorical questions to the people of Israel. Notice that the word of the LORD is not directed back toward the men of Bethel who asked the question; rather, it is addressed to “*all the people of the land*” as well as “*the priests.*” Clearly, this rebuke is not limited to the representatives of the delegations. In that sense, the question (and the underlying attitudes) from Bethel represented the general religious status of the entire people of God. All the people, including the priests, who were supposed to be “closest” to God through their continual on-going ministry, needed to hear God’s reproof of their religious practices.

In verses 4-7, two aspects of their faulty religion are highlighted. First, in verse 5-6, God illustrates the emptiness of their religious rituals and observances: they were *fasting for the wrong reasons*. Their fast days were not times of solemn reflection on their past sins and God’s righteous judgment of them, with an eye towards repentance and right living before the LORD. Rather, they fasted to mourn their poor and lowly position, regretting the loss of the privileges of past generations. Their motives for ritual fasting were basically no different than their motives for ritual feasting – it made them feel better about themselves. But in doing so, their basic religious orientation had turned manward instead of Godward. “True spirituality must be directed toward God.... Their fasting was not for the Lord at all, but for themselves. They were fasting as an end in itself, as a religious exercise; at best their fasting was driven by self-pity for the sorrows they had endured” (Phillips, p. 157).

While fasting is a spiritual discipline commended in Scripture, it is to be entered into for specific reasons. “Fasting was engaged in at times of sorrow and crisis (2 Sam. 12:16; Mt. 9:15), particularly national crisis (2 Chr. 20:3; Jer. 36:9). As a spiritual exercise, it was accompanied by confession of sin (1 Sam. 7:6), by repentance and a recognition of an individual’s true standing before God (Joel 2:12; Ez. 8:21).... This note of contrition and self-humiliation seems to have been absent in the practice of the exiles. They were sorrowing for what they had lost, but in an exercise of self-pity, rather than with due recognition of the righteousness of God’s judgment against them in their nation” (Mackay, pp. 146-147).

The rhetorical nature of the questions asked by the LORD demand a negative answer. “*When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?*” (v. 5b). God was saying, “Did you grieve the sin that had brought about My just condemnation upon your nation, or did you only mourn because of the suffering that it produced?” The answer is clear: when they fasted, they fasted unto themselves, not unto God. While outwardly religious, the inner orientation of their hearts was not focused on honoring God, pleasing God, or worshiping God. The core of their religion had become self-centered and self-gratifying. Denying themselves on these fast days made them feel better about themselves, not contrite and submissive to God.

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Likewise, in their celebrations of the various feast days required by the Mosaic Law, they had missed the spiritual significance of those events. The Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles celebrated God's great redemption and salvation of the nation of Israel, a people set apart from the rest of the world by their covenant relationship to the LORD of hosts. They were special times of joy and remembrance, of worship and praise to God. And yet, the LORD asks, "*And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?*" (v. 6). Sadly, "not only in their fasts but also in their feasts there was the same concentration on self and regardlessness of God" (Baron, p. 217).

The principle highlighted here is that true religion means more than just outward conformance to external, religious rituals. God is primarily interested in the motivation of our hearts, not simply the movement of our members: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22b); "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Ps. 51:17); "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hos. 6:6). Phillips applies this principle to us:

This means that any religious expression or act we may offer, whether it is coming to church, giving money, or doing good deeds, reading the Bible, or praying—even fasting and mourning—means nothing to God unless it is done for His pleasure, His glory, His service, and His love. Unless our worship is offered in sincerity, God rejects it (Amos 5:21)... This condemns all hypocritical religion, of course, but it also ennobles everything we do that is truly for God. Certainly it means that God is pleased if we worship out of a desire for him, to hear His Word and offer Him the praise of our hearts.... "Whatever you do," Paul wrote "work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men" (Col. 3:23). Whenever and wherever God can say, "It was for Me," this is the true religion He desires (Phillips, p. 158).

b) Forgetting the Past (7:7)

⁷Were not these the words that the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited?'"

The second rebuke from the LORD, contained in verse 7, concerned their *failure to learn from the past*. The LORD had sent Israel and Judah many prophets over hundreds of years to declare to them the tenets of true religion and warn them of the consequences of idolatry or other man-man expressions of false religion. Because of their failure to listen to the prophets, God sent the calamity of destruction upon His people, and Jerusalem lay uninhabited for 70 years. "There are many Scriptures in the former prophets which bear witness to the truth of what Zechariah here affirms, namely, God's repudiation of mere outward acts of religious observances, and particularly of *fasting* as being in any way pleasing to him [e.g., Is. 58:3-5; 1 Sam. 15:22-23; Dt. 10:12-13]" (Baron, p. 218).

Forgetting the past is a failure to seek out God's will and submit oneself to the holy Scriptures. The Word of God is our only rule in faith and practice; it contains everything necessary for our worship and obedience. If the men of Bethel had been sincere in their desire to please God through their practice of fasting, they should have consulted His Word for instructions on how to do so. For example, they could have turned to the prophet Isaiah, through whom God had already addressed exactly the same issue, only two hundred years earlier:

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³Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.
⁴Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
⁵Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD? (Isaiah 58:3-5;).

The question on the mind of Jews in Isaiah's day was, "What good is fasting if God won't give us what we want? Why have we even bothered at all?" (see Is. 58:3a). From their self-centered question, you can see that their fasting was as vain and empty as the post-exilic fasting in Zechariah's day. And God's disdain of that fasting was the same as well: "Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?" (Is. 58:5c). Obviously, the answer is "No!"

This is what we always find with false spirituality. People are looking for some new angle, seeking a new program or experience or high, when God's Word presents us with clear instruction as to our duty to Him. So what is true religion? What does real spirituality look like? First, it is a desire for God Himself, for His pleasure and His glory; second, it is concerned with the inner realities of sin and righteousness and only then with consequences and external blessings; third, true spirituality is that which draws from God's Word, hearing and believing and doing according to what God has spoken in the Bible. As such, God's reply through Zechariah warns us against formalistic, self-centered, and man-invented worship (Phillips, p. 159).

2. The Second Word of the LORD (7:8-14)

a) Focus on Righteous Living (7:8-10)

⁸And the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying, ⁹"Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, ¹⁰do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

Like Isaiah and Micah before him and James after him, the prophet Zechariah declares that what the LORD desires, far above external form and empty ritual, is a focus on righteous living. Compare Zechariah 7:8-10 with the following verses:

⁶"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry

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and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6-7).

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27).

True religion does not merely consist of external conformance to religious rituals, but of a transformed heart that loves both God and neighbor. Our first and highest duty is to love and serve the LORD our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might (Dt. 6:5; cp. Mt. 22:37-38). This duty has already been implied by the series of rhetorical questions in verses 5 and 6, as well as the repeated emphasis on “the Word of the LORD” and “the LORD of hosts.” God is worthy of our love, our worship, and our obedience. It is the foundation upon which all our other duties stem. And those duties are summarized in the second great commandment, or as James calls it, “the royal law”: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; cp. Mt. 22:39; James 2:8).

In verses 9 and 10, Zechariah gives us, in summary form, four attributes of God that we are to emulate in our dealings with others. First, we are to “*render true judgments.*” This positive exhortation not only applies to fairness in judicial proceedings, but in administering truth and justice in all our interpersonal interactions. We are not to show favoritism or partiality to one group over another, especially to further our own selfish desires. All too often, the history of God’s people, not to mention general human society, is full of examples that contradict this basic attribute of God’s character. Martin Luther King Jr. is famous for writing the sentence, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, but most people don’t realize that he was actually quoting the prophet Amos: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

Secondly, Zechariah calls us to “*show kindness and mercy to one another.*” The key Hebrew word in this command is *hesed*, translated as “kindness” (also in Micah 6:8). But *hesed* is more than mere human kindness; it is the covenant love and loyalty that God displays to us in His mercy and grace. “It is conditioned on, and patterned after, the covenant love of the LORD Himself” (Mackay, p. 149). Thus, in our human relationships, we are to imitate our God and Savior in being kind and merciful to others.

The third characteristic of God that demonstrates true religion is *protection of the weak*. Widows and orphans were the most vulnerable members of ancient society, because they had no one to take care of them or protect them. Along with the poor, they were often taken advantage of by unscrupulous people who had no concern for justice, kindness, or mercy. The “sojourner” or “stranger” was a foreigner in the land of Israel who was often regarded suspiciously and excluded from the civil community, if only for the crime of being “different” or “other.” God’s care and concern for people especially includes these disenfranchised groups (e.g., see Ex. 22:21-22), and it should be a characteristic of the covenant community as well to “care for orphans and widows” (and others) “in their distress” (James 1:27).

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The final attribute of God that Zechariah commends is *compassion for others*, expressed in a negative fashion: “*let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.*” Not only are we commanded positively to act in a manner that demonstrates love to our neighbors, but we are also forbidden to harbor hatred, resentment, or evil thoughts against others in our hearts. True religion is manifested, not in religious acts such as fasting (or feasting), but in internalizing the Word of God and having it result in acts of charity, compassion, and love. All of this can be summarized in a single word: godliness. Phillips comments: “When the prophet speaks of true spirituality, he points to things that are found in God Himself. True religion, therefore, is a matter of *godliness*.... If we love God we will become more like Him, for love always emulates its object” (Phillips, p. 161).

b) Fate of Their Predecessors (7:11-14)

Having rebuked Israel for their empty rituals in verses 4-7 and reminded Israel of the obligations of true religion in verses 8-10, Zechariah now issues a warning to his listeners in verses 11-14. This warning against hardheartedness and unbelief comes in two parts; a summary of Israel’s past failure is followed by the resultant follow through of God’s justice.

(1) Israel’s Failure (7:11-12a)

¹¹But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. ¹²They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets.

Throughout the exodus story, Pharaoh is portrayed as a man who is progressively hardening his heart against the word of the LORD through Moses. After each plague, when it seems that he might relent and submit to the will of God, he hardens his heart further (cp. Ex. 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:34) and resists. Indeed, the Scripture indicates that God also hardened Pharaoh’s heart (cp. Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4), thus confirming the judgment and destruction that would fall upon him for his rebellion and sin.

Like the Pharaoh of Exodus, we have here in verses 11-12 a description of the progressive hardening of the hearts of Israel, a calcification that ultimately led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and to the Babylonian captivity. Notice how unbelief is confirmed and the heart becomes increasingly more and more resistant to the word and will of God.

First, “*they refused to pay attention.*” This is an entry-level strategy of rebellion that even young children employ. If a child doesn’t want to obey their parents, they simply continue in their own course as if they had not heard the command. “If I don’t pay attention to something I don’t like,” we often rationalize, “maybe it will just go away.” That strategy rarely works, whether it is a warning alarm on the car dashboard, a bodily pain, or the will of God. God had sent His servants, the prophets, to warn Israel and urge them to repent lest they suffer the consequences of their rebellion and sin. But Israel ignored them to their peril.

The second strategy of rebellion is that they “*turned a stubborn shoulder.*” The image here is of a beast of burden, such as an ox, refusing to take upon itself the yoke. The picture is repeated in the book of Nehemiah:

And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules,

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which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey (Nehemiah 9:29; cp. Amos 4:16).

This is a deliberate and willful resistance to the declared word of God. God repeatedly called Israel a “stubborn people” (Dt. 9:6, 13, 27; cp. Jer. 5:23 or “a stiff-necked people” (Ex. 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; cp. 2 Chr. 30:8; Acts 7:51) for refusing to obey His commandments. Jesus commands us to take His yoke upon us, “for My yoke is easy, and My burden is light” (Mt. 11:30). We are called to submit to God’s Word, not to turn a stubborn shoulder.

Third, they “*stopped their ears that they might not hear.*” Literally, this phrase says they made their ears heavy, using language similar to Isaiah:

Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed (Isaiah 6:10).

This is a dangerous step along the path to a hard and flinty heart. The first step was to hear the word but to ignore it. The second step was to hear the word and resist it. But now, they have stopped their ears so they can no longer even hear the word. What hope is there at this point? “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). For the one who deliberately cuts himself off from the true Word, ordinarily there can be no hope of salvation.

Finally, “*they made their hearts diamond-hard.*” The Hebrew word here is literally “adamant stone,” which is also translated as “diamond” in Jeremiah:

The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars (Jeremiah 17:1).

The diamond is the hardest naturally occurring substance on earth. And the unrepentant heart, progressively hardened by sin and evil, is likewise stiff and unresponsive to the Word of God. This is the natural condition of all mankind. We all have hard and stony hearts. We all reject the Word of God. That is why we need to have our hearts of stone replaced by hearts of flesh (Ez. 11:19; 36:26), hearts upon which the Holy Spirit can write His law so that we might embrace it and serve our Lord and Savior.

(2) God’s Follow Through (7:12b-14)

Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts. ¹³“As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,” says the LORD of hosts, ¹⁴“and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate.”

Why is Zechariah rehearsing the past failures of Israel? Because post-exilic Israel must learn the lessons that pre-exilic Israel did not. Israel ignored God’s word, resisted it, blocked it out, and refused to have it penetrate into their cold and stony hearts. But just as an unattended plugged artery will inevitably lead to a heart attack, so Israel’s failure to heed the word of God ultimately resulted in the LORD’s righteous anger and just action. God is long-suffering, which means that

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He does not immediately act, but instead gives His people time to repent of their sins. This attribute of God is so incredibly vital to us; if God responded immediately to any and every sinful act, we would never have existed, because He would have blotted out the human race in the Garden of Eden!

However, we mustn't take God's patience with us for granted; at the right time, when the cup of His wrath is full, He will act to administer justice if mercy be forfeited. God's righteous anger and hatred of sin must be satisfied. That is the message of verses 13 and 14. Israel sowed the wind, and they reaped the whirlwind (cp. Hos. 8:7). The covenant curses promised by God in the Mosaic covenant came due, and God fulfilled every one, scattering His people amongst the nations and leaving the Promised Land desolate. This was a consequence that was near and dear to everyone in Zechariah's original audience. They were all the heirs of those who had received this covenant punishment. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the resultant exile was no accident of history. It was the direct, outworking of a righteous and holy God, who in His providence used Babylon to execute His justice upon a hardhearted and rebellious people. Phillips summarizes:

It was because of sin that God turned away from His people. It was for sin that the Almighty scattered Israel among the nations. It was sin that made desolate the pleasant land, as Zechariah 7:14 puts it, leaving it scarred and empty after war and destruction. This is the message: Let us hate sin. Sin destroys us, consumes our years, corrupts our hearts, and if not atoned for by the blood of Christ, it condemns our souls. Let us hate sin because of its consequences, yes; but even more, let us hate sin because it is evil, because it is hateful to God, because His wrath abides on sin, and because sin is opposed to the will of our loving Lord (Phillips, p. 165).

What a tragic outcome that could have been entirely avoided had the people of God remained faithful! Notice the chiasmic nature (*I, they, they, I*) of the justice described here in verse 13 (per Baldwin, p. 148): "*As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,*" says the LORD of hosts. When it was too late, when the time for mercy was over, when the judgment was right upon them, the besieged people of Jerusalem desperately cried out to God to save them. But their pleas went unheard, just as God's prophets were ignored and resisted and blocked out and refused for hundreds of years. It was too late; the verdict had already been handed down and the penalty for covenant breaking was enacted.

This is why it is so important to hear the gospel and repent today, while there is still time. Someone might say, "I'm young, I've got a lot of years left to sow my wild oats and enjoy life. I don't need God now, but when I am old, then I guess a little religion would be okay." But we don't know how much time we have. That is why the psalmist says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Ps. 95:7b-8a; cp. Heb. 3:7, 15; 4:7).

This is the warning for the men of Bethel, for the people and priests of the land, and for the church today. Today is the day of salvation, the day of repentance, the day of restoration, the day of putting aside empty and vain external rituals and embracing true religion. *True religion does not consist of conformance to outward rituals, but of a transformed heart that loves both God and neighbor.*

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Conclusion and Application

My aim in this lesson has been to challenge our outward conformity to religious practice and to examine our hearts. While the question from the men of Bethel sounded religious, the negative answer of God that followed clearly indicated that there were serious deficiencies in their inward piety and conformance to true religion. They had mastered the external trappings of their religion, but their practice of these rituals fell short of true worship, because it was centered on themselves rather than on God. They needed to beware, because as previous Israelite history had all too clearly shown, hardening one's heart against the Word of God is a slippery slope to disaster. Regarding Zechariah chapter 7, Phillips insightfully writes:

God condemned the fasting of these Jews because it was all about themselves: it was directed to their own emotional needs and spiritual experiences. Even worse was the idea that fasting was a way to manipulate God to regain their former blessings. Now that things were looking up again they wanted to stop fasting.... This kind of self-centered spirituality abounds in our time. People think they could use a little religion. It will shore up their image, maybe even do them so good to go to church, read the Bible, engage in this ceremony or that good deed. But it has little to do with God Himself! People ask me why they should attend church, and the first answer I give them is that God is worthy of their praise. He deserves and demands our worship! But often that is the farthest thing from the minds of people in our age of self-service, self-love, and self-worship (Phillips, p. 157).

When we love someone we are eager to give to him or her. Yet we ask, "What can I give to the God who needs nothing? How can I show love to God?" The answer is by giving and showing love to our neighbor. God does not need justice or mercy or compassion from us, but our neighbor does. Because we love God, we will protect the weak and undertake the cause of the poor, all in His name (see Zech. 7:9-10). What we find with this delegation from Bethel is the exact opposite of love for God. Their thoughts were on themselves. Things were looking good again, so they wanted to feast instead of fast. But God wanted them to show concern for the true matters of religion.... The same is true today. We may wear Christian symbols as jewelry and erect Christian symbols on our buildings, but any true Christian and church must walk in the world with truth and love if they wish to bear the true signs of Christ (Phillips, pp. 161-162).

The main thesis of the epistle of James is that true religion is recognized by a faith that works, by a heart that is converted by God's grace and transformed to follow the royal law of loving one's neighbor as himself. James is no religious maverick, no theological innovator; instead, he stands firmly in line with the prophets of old, including Zechariah, who in this passage teaches us *true religion does not consist of conformance to outward rituals, but of a transformed heart that loves both God and neighbor.*

So, here is the challenge from Zechariah chapter 7. We need to look at our own hearts and ask ourselves: Is my Christian experience mere outward conformity to religious forms, or does it spring from a soft heart that seeks to please God? Do I desire first to honor God, or only satisfy myself? Am I a hearer of the Word only, or also a doer of the Word? In other words, am I practicing true religion as it is consistent described in the Scriptures?

For next time: Read Zechariah 8:1-13.