

## XV. Fasting into Feasting

March 15, 2020      Zechariah 8:14-23

**Theme:** The New Covenant in Jesus Christ turns fasting into feasting and mourning into gladness, as He gathers the elect from all nations to be part of His holy people.

**Aim:** To rejoice in the global expansion of the gospel and the church to all nations.

**Key Verses:** <sup>18</sup>And the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, <sup>19</sup>“Thus says the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace” (Zechariah 8:18-19).

### *Review*

When the delegation from Bethel asked what they must have thought was a fairly simple and straightforward question – “*Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?*” (7:3) – it is unlikely that they were expecting the answer that they received up to this point. So far, in chapter 7 and half of chapter 8, God has not addressed the subject of the query at all. Rather, like a radiologist, who uses x-rays or an MRI to look below the surface of the patient to make a diagnosis, God has analyzed the true nature of the spiritual condition of His people. While they have shown outward conformity to religious practices, they had a spiritual heart disease that needs remedy. In the “negative answer” of Zechariah 7:4-14, the LORD called out their selfish motives for fasting in the first place and challenged them to practice true religion, unlike their forebears, whose sin ultimately resulted in destruction and exile. *True religion does not merely consist of external conformance to religious rituals but rather of a transformed heart that loves both God and neighbor.*

In Zechariah 8:1-13, God presented the “positive answer” to His people. Despite their sins and failures, God continued to love them with a righteous zeal, a jealousy that brooks no rival. In an amazing display of grace, He renewed the covenant with them by stating three glorious covenant promises: 1) the promise of His presence in their midst; 2) the promise of peace & prosperity; and 3) the promise of a population expansion that is worldwide in scope. To assure them of His ability to keep those promises, God reminded them that: 1) He is the LORD of Hosts, the Almighty God whose power is sufficient to keep the promises; and 2) He is the faithful and righteous One who always is true to His Word.

Having promised covenant renewal and assured the Israelites of His ability to deliver those blessings, God then calls the post-exilic community to action: *Fear not, but let your hands be strong* (8:13). They were to respond to God’s gracious Word through obedience. This is the gospel message: grace then law; salvation then obedience; faith then works; justification then sanctification. *Because God is all powerful and faithful, He keeps the promises He has made to His covenant people; therefore, we must respond in obedience while looking forward in faith to their full consummation.*

### *Introduction*

Today, we will finish up this middle section of Zechariah’s prophecy regarding the question of fasting. Indeed, we will finally get a “direct” answer to the original question in 8:18-19. But

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first, in 8:14-17 we have a summary or recap of both the negative and positive answers. The third section of our passage today builds on the direct answer and prophesies a great expansion and growth of God's people. Of course, this is an obvious extension and consequence of the covenant blessings God has just promised in the previous verses of chapter 8. What Zechariah has done is to extend the scope of a simple question regarding local religious rituals into a grand prophecy concerning the growth of the church and the expansion of the kingdom of God. The main theme of today's passage is that *the New Covenant in Jesus Christ turns fasting into feasting and mourning into gladness, as He gathers the elect from all nations to be part of His holy people.*

### A. Covenant Recap (Zechariah 8:14-17)

Verses 14-17 of chapter 8 serve both to summarize all that God has said before in chapters 7&8 as well as to introduce the direct response of God in verses 18-19 to the actual question regarding fasting that precipitated this entire prophecy. In a miniature chiasmic fashion, verses 14-15, in describing God's covenant grace, echo the main themes of 8:1-13, while verses 16-17, on the covenant responsibility of God's people, summarize the call to action in 7:4-14.

#### 1. Covenant Grace (8:14-15)

<sup>14</sup>*For thus says the LORD of hosts: "As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts, <sup>15</sup>so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; fear not.*

Verse 14 is about God's past actions, while verse 15 is about His present and future intentions. The key word, in both verse 14 and 15, is "purposed," which is often translated as "determined." When God intends to follow a course of action, He is determined to enact it and see it through to completion:

"For this the earth shall mourn,  
and the heavens above be dark;  
for I have spoken; I have purposed;  
I have not relented, nor will I turn back" (Jeremiah 4:28; cp. 23:20; 30:24; 51:11-12).

In the past, God *purposed to bring disaster* upon the children of Israel for their rebellion and sin. Having made that determination, He adds, *I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts.* The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the Babylonian captivity, and the scattering of His people were all ample proof that once God purposed to do something, it would come to pass. The remnant that had returned from exile, the original audience to whom the prophet Zechariah ministered, understood this clearly. God had delivered on His purposes to bring disaster upon His people.

But now, using the same language, God has reversed the direction of His intentions. *Again I have purposed in these days* declares that God has the same unrelenting determination to act for the post-exilic generation as for the pre-exilic generation. However, the direction of His purpose is in the complete opposite direction. Instead of *disaster*, God now intends *good* for Jerusalem and His people. That *good* has been enumerated in the covenant blessings of verses 1-8.

This promise is one of great comfort and assurance to the post-exilic generation. They had suffered through seventy years of exile and now twenty lean years back in the land, struggling to

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make ends meet while surrounded by enemies. But God had not forgotten them. Indeed, God had not forgotten His earlier promise to them of the same intent:

For thus says the Lord: Just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them (Jeremiah 32:42).

In light of God's promised blessings and gracious determination to do them good, once more the people of God are called upon to *fear not* (cp. 8:13). When God's grace shines upon His people, when His covenant presence is in their midst, when they trust and rely upon the LORD for their daily provision, then there is nothing to fear:

<sup>16</sup>On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

“Fear not, O Zion;

let not your hands grow weak.

<sup>17</sup>The Lord your God is in your midst,

a mighty one who will save;

he will rejoice over you with gladness;

he will quiet you by his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing (Zephaniah 3:16-17).

### 2. Covenant Responsibility (8:16-17)

*<sup>16</sup>These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; <sup>17</sup>do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD.”*

Although the covenant blessings are all of the LORD's grace, nonetheless, the people of God have their own covenant responsibility to live in the light of that grace. In language reminiscent of God's call to true religion in Zechariah 7:9-10, we have here another set of four ethical commands, requirements of those who are saved by grace unto good works. The structure of these injunctions – two positive commands followed by two negative commands – follows the outline of 7:9-10. Indeed, two of the directives here – rendering true judgments and the prohibition about evil thoughts – are essentially a repetition of the previous passage. “Chapter 7 defined true religion as justice, mercy, and compassion, and in 8:16-17 we find the same emphasis.... Once again, we find that true religion is found in godliness, with truth and love as the pattern for our lives” (Phillips, p. 175).

The first command is *speak the truth to one another*. “‘Truth’ forms one of the themes of this section (8:3, 8, 18). It is the characteristic that underpins the fabric of society, when an individual's word and undertaking may be relied on. In this way, stable relationships may be built up (Ps. 15:2; Zeph. 3:13; Eph. 4:25)” (Mackay, p. 166).

The second injunction continues the emphasis on truth: *render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace*. True and just judgments are foundational for an orderly society and reflect the nature and character of God. But notice that the command goes beyond truth to include peace (Heb. *shalom*). This is a sense of prosperity or well-being that is achieved when one is safe, secure, and loved. Our judgments should be anchored not only in truth and justice, but also in grace and mercy. “The prophet goes out of his way to express the need to follow not the letter but the spirit of the law, so that decisions reached commend themselves to all as just and right, and so make for peace and stability. This in turn leads to the prosperity God promises, which is part of the content of peace” (Baldwin, p. 154).

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On the negative side, we are commanded to *not devise evil in your hearts against one another*. True religion expresses itself in love and care for our neighbors, not resentment and hatred. Compassion, not condemnation, is to be our watchword. Finally, with the theme of truth now expressed in a negative prohibition, we are called to *love no false oath*. Those who pervert the truth or revel in falsehood have no place in the kingdom of God. The apostle John makes that clear in his vision of the New Jerusalem, the eternal, heavenly city of God:

But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:27).

Why is obedience to God's law important? Because God hates sin. If we have been saved by grace, if our hearts have been renewed in righteousness and truth, if our desire is to do His desire, then our lives should reflect our inner transformation. Orthodoxy (right living) inevitably lead to orthopraxy (right practice). Mackay rightly comments:

This is the basis of Biblical ethics. It is not motivated by conformity to an abstract standard of what is right and proper. It is motivated by relationship to a person, and to the likes and dislikes of God. He is the one whose preferences dictate what is right and proper, and obedience is motivated by a desire to please and honor Him.... The enjoyment of God's covenant blessing is never independent of faith and obedience on the part of the recipient. There is a divinely decreed link of blessing with obedience, and suffering with disobedience (Mackay, pp. 166-167).

### B. Question Response (Zechariah 8:18-19)

<sup>18</sup>*And the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying,* <sup>19</sup>*“Thus says the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace.*

#### 1. Answer

It is only after summarizing the positive and negative answers already given in chapters 7&8 that we come at long last to the “direct” answer of the original question on fasting from the delegation of Bethel: *Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?* (Zech. 7:3).

Although the question from Bethel highlighted only the fast of the fifth month which commemorated the burning of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem (cp. 2 Ki. 25:8-10; Jer. 52:12-14), the Lord's answer also referenced the three other days of Jewish 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 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 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).

The LORD says that all four of these fasts that mourned the outpouring of God's wrath on their forebears were to be transformed into *cheerful feasts of joy and gladness*. The time for

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mourning the past was over. God has stated His intention to renew His covenant blessings on His people, and that calls for rejoicing, not lamentation. “The delegation had raised a question which enabled the prophet to convey to exiles and repatriates alike that a new day had dawned. It was time to begin again, with new attitudes and new hopes” (Baldwin, p. 154).

In this proclamation, Zechariah was echoing the prophecy of an earlier prophet:

- <sup>10</sup>“Hear the word of the Lord, O nations,  
and declare it in the coastlands far away;  
say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him,  
and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’  
<sup>11</sup>For the Lord has ransomed Jacob  
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.  
<sup>12</sup>They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall be like a watered garden,  
and they shall languish no more.  
<sup>13</sup>Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,  
and the young men and the old shall be merry.  
I will turn their mourning into joy;  
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.  
<sup>14</sup>I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance,  
and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness,  
declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 31:10-14).

In God’s grace, this answer was greater than the original supplicants could have dared to hope. In asking the question regarding the fast of the fifth month, they likely were hoping that with the completion of the Second Temple in sight, that specific fast observing the destruction of the First Temple might cease. But how much greater and loving and kind to us is our Savior! The LORD extends His gracious answer not to just one fast, but to all four fasts related to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. And not only does He abrogate those fasts, but He also replaces them with days of celebration. Fasting has been turned into feasting, and mourning has been transformed into joy and gladness!

### 2. Application

How has this answer been fulfilled? Well, it does seem as if the four fast days related to the destruction of the temple in 586 BC did lapse after the completion of the Second Temple in 516 BC. However, after the destruction of that temple by the Romans in 70 AD, the Jews reinstated all four of those fast days. Up to this very day, “the fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months are still observed in Judaism” (Boice, p. 187).

A more satisfactory and compelling fulfillment lies in our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the LORD speaks of turning the fasts of mourning into the feasts of rejoicing, He is describing the transformational character of the gospel. The gospel is nothing less than the conversion of a soul from the mournful condition of sin and death into the joy of new life

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through salvation in Christ. Indeed, Jesus alludes to His salvific ministry in this very sense of feasting rather than fasting:

<sup>18</sup>Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" <sup>19</sup>And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. <sup>20</sup>The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day" (Mark 2:18-20).

Phillips explains:

John the Baptist represents the old covenant at its best, and his was a ministry of fasting—of repentance, mourning for sin, and longing for the Savior. The Bible commends fasting as a means of spiritual preparation for the blessings we anticipate from God... True fasting is meant not only for our own benefit but for God's, as an expression of a broken heart for sin or of mourning for the sorrow and suffering in this world. This is what dominates John the Baptist's ministry: mourning for sin and sin's misery out of devotion to God. Jesus brings in the new covenant situation, one of feasting and not fasting, of comfort for those who mourn, and of gladness for those who were sad. There is still mourning in the new covenant era, but mourning's answer is ready at hand. There is sickness over sin, but there are deliverance and redemption and forgiveness as near as the gospel message (cp. Mt. 9:15) (Phillips, pp. 181-182).

Yes, there will still be times in our Christian experience when we mourn our sin and grieve the consequences and impact of sin in our lives. But in the gospel of Jesus Christ, there is always hope for the mournful: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt. 5:4). "But even our fasting is performed with the certainty that *joy and gladness and cheerful feasts* have been prepared for us by God. True spiritual joy stokes the fires of a new zeal to live for God. "Therefore," says the prophet, "*love truth and peace.*" In the same way that confidence of victory gives soldiers bravery in battle, the joy of salvation is the tonic God employs to strengthen our hearts and hands for His work" (Phillips, p. 185).

### C. Kingdom Growth (Zechariah 8:20-23)

The middle portion of Zechariah's prophecy closes with two short sayings (*Thus says the LORD of hosts*) that describe the future growth of the heavenly kingdom by incorporating people from many cities and nations into the people of God.

#### 1. The Nations Will Come (8:20-22)

<sup>20</sup>"Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. <sup>21</sup>The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going.' <sup>22</sup>Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD.

While Zechariah's earlier Night Visions had originally pronounced condemnation on the nations for their part in the destruction of Jerusalem (Zech. 1:15; 2:8-9), they also had announced the incorporation of the nations into the church:

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And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you (Zechariah 2:11).

Israel was always intended to be a light to the Gentiles. Indeed, their founder, Abraham, had been told by God that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Moses told the children of Israel that as they kept the law of God, other nations around them would be drawn to the LORD:

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’ (Deuteronomy 4:6).

This is exactly the picture that Zechariah paints for us here in verses 20-22 of chapter 8. The nations have heard of God’s blessings and seen the prosperity of His people. But Zechariah is not the first prophet to have foretold the ingathering of the nations:

<sup>2</sup>It shall come to pass in the latter days  
that the mountain of the house of the Lord  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be lifted up above the hills;  
and all the nations shall flow to it,  
<sup>3</sup>and many peoples shall come, and say:  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.”  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
<sup>4</sup>He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore (Isaiah 2:2-4; cp. Micah 4:1-3).

Isaiah, Micah, and Zechariah all see a day in their future when the nations will stream into the church of Jesus Christ, for these prophecies find their fulfillment not simply in Old Testament Israel, but in the church of the New Covenant. As Phillips points out, the church will have a tremendous impact on the entire world, as it preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Zechariah prophesies a time when the nations will come to God because of His people. Furthermore, this will not be a military conquest or the result of legislation, but a spiritual movement as peoples from all the nations and tongues are drawn to God.... Prophets like Isaiah and Micah made it clear that this ingathering would be fulfilled in the age to come, that is, in the New Covenant in Christ. This is precisely what we do find in the New Testament, as graphically demonstrated on the day of Pentecost, when men from all nations spoke as one when the Holy Spirit descended on that first Christian gathering (Phillips, pp. 185-186).

**2. The Church Must Lead (8:23)**

<sup>23</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'”

If the nations are to come in, then the church must lead. That is the picture of verse 23, where *ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew*. Gentiles from all over the world will be added to the church:

For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory (Isaiah 66:18).

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands (Revelation 7:9; cp. 5:9).

The ratio of 10:1 is not some sort of quota or allotment system. God is not saying that every Christian must continue witnessing until ten conversions are obtained or is limited to only ten conversions of others. Rather, the number “ten” in Scripture is a number that signifies perfection or completion. For example, the Ten Commandments are a perfect and complete expression of God’s holy law and character. So, the ratio of 10:1 suggests a complete ingathering of the nations, that the fullness of the Gentiles will be brought into the people of God through the ongoing ministry and witness of the church.

The imagery of taking *hold of the robe of a Jew* is significant. “The spread *robe* was a symbol of the protection of marriage (Ruth 3:9; Ez. 16:8), while to clutch the robe of Samuel was for Saul a bid for reconciliation (1 Sam. 15:27)” (Baldwin, p. 156). Where are the pagan nations to go for protection against the wrath of God or reconciliation with their Creator, with whom they are at enmity? They need to reach out and hold on to the source of gospel truth, which is found only in the church. This is beautifully portrayed by clutching onto the robe of one of God’s own. “To seize the hem of the garment is a gesture of earnestness, importunity, and perseverance” (Moore, p. 204) .

The mandate of the church is to proclaim the gospel to all nations and to disciple them in the Word of God, per the Great Commission of Jesus Christ:

<sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

Zechariah is predicting the success of this mission as the church is faithful to obey her Master. The nations will come, but the church must lead. The kingdom of God will grow as believers are added daily to its number. What is required of us is a true, winsome witness that consistently models the hope of salvation that is found in Christ alone.

***Conclusion and Application***

The genius of Zechariah’s prophecies is that they are multi-layered; that is, they speak not only to his immediate audience, but also down the timeline of history to future generations. Chapters 7&8 of this book record a question regarding fasting and its response. On the surface, a simple



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question in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC about an obscure middle eastern religious practice would seem to have little relevance to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. And yet, even as the answer met the needs of the original audience, it still speaks to every subsequent generation as well. Undoubtedly, the men of Bethel were heartened to hear that their fasts of mourning would be transformed into feasts of rejoicing. They would have been further encouraged by the great and grand covenant promises of the LORD, including His presence, His peace & prosperity, and the numerical growth and expansion of the people of God.

However, Zechariah is not just for post-exilic Jews; it is for His people of every age. So, when we look at the answer to the delegation of Bethel, we cannot help but see its fulfillment in the church, as the people of God have grown to encompass every nation, tribe, people, and language. Indeed, Christians today are part of the answer to the delegation of Bethel. Our inclusion into the covenant people is proof that God has transformed fasting into feasting!

The essential teaching of this passage is that *the New Covenant in Jesus Christ turns fasting into feasting and mourning into gladness, as He gathers the elect from all nations to be part of His holy people*. But we cannot overlook the Messianic aspect of Zechariah's vision as well. And in the final verse of chapter 8, we have a picture not only of the ingathering of the church, but particularly of the one who enables and empowers that growth. As Boice puts it, "We are all clinging to the seamless robe of that *one* Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who because of His work on the cross is the only basis on which anyone may approach God and entreat Him for spiritual blessings" (Boice, p. 188).

Jesus Christ is the only Jew, the only man, who can stand between God and humankind and reconcile the one to the other:

<sup>5</sup>For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

Phillips explains the significance of this application:

Jesus is not just *a* Jew but *the* Jew through whom all may come to seek and find the Lord. What does it mean to trust in Jesus, but to lay hold of His coat, that is, His righteousness, rejecting our own as filthy rags, and to seek His achievement in the place of our failure, finding shelter in His status as beloved Son, to seek His merits for access into the love of the Father. It is in this sense that this prophecy is ultimately fulfilled.... If you will not lay hold of His hem, if you will not come to God through Him, then according to the Bible you may not come at all. If you have not come to God through Christ, these words are for you. And if you will come, this description of a man holding to the coat of another will depict your salvation (Phillips, p. 190).

Are you holding on to Jesus Christ for your salvation? If so, He is holding on to you. He is holding on to everyone who puts their faith in Him. Therefore, let us rejoice in the global expansion of the gospel and the church to all nations through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

For next time: Read Zechariah 9:1-8.