

Zechariah 7

Littlebourne - 3rd November 2024 - Zechariah 7

In recent weeks we've covered the first six chapters of Zechariah. The recent chapters, all the visions, have been in the second year of King Darius - about 520 BC. This chapter begins with a note that it's two years later than the visions we saw in Zechariah's first 6 chapters, as it's now the fourth year of King Darius. The temple will be completed in the sixth year of Darius, as we see in Ezra 6:15, so we're making progress on the temple, but not done yet.

v1-3

In 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. 2 Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men to entreat the favor of the Lord, 3 saying to the priests of the house of the Lord of hosts and the prophets, "Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"

These people come from Bethel, which at that time was a city north of Jerusalem - first mentioned in Genesis as the place where Abram pitched his tent, then as the location of Jacob's ladder vision. This place is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament, the name meaning the 'House of God'.

We have two names for the people that come - Sherezer and Regem Melech. It could be one person - Regem Melech literally means friend of the King, and could be a title for Mr Sharezer, though it's unclear. In any case, whoever came must have been men of some status, as they bring their men with them, a whole delegation to seek counsel.

This delegation is sent to inquire as to whether they should continue to fast and mourn in the fifth month - the month coming.

2 Kings 25 tells us of the time of the destruction of the first temple:

8 In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. 9 And he burned the house of the Lord and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. 10 And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. 11 And the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile. 12 But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen.

The likely reason there was mourning and fasting in the fifth month was because this was a mourning for the loss of the temple and the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

Later we see mention of fasting in the fifth month and also the seventh - the fasting in the seventh is probably a related fast, to do with when Gedaliah was assassinated, as outlined later in 2 Kings 25:

22 And over the people who remained in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left, he appointed Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, governor. 23 Now when all the captains and their men heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah governor, they came with their men to Gedaliah at Mizpah, namely, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, and Johanan the son of Kareah, and Seraiah the son of Tanhumeth the Netophathite, and Jaazaniah the son of the Maacathite. 24 And Gedaliah swore to them and their men, saying, “Do not be afraid because of the Chaldean officials. Live in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be well with you.” 25 But in the seventh month, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishama, of the royal family, came with ten men and struck down Gedaliah and put him to death along with the Jews and the Chaldeans who were with him at Mizpah. 26 Then all the people, both small and great, and the captains of the forces arose and went to Egypt, for they were afraid of the Chaldeans.

Chapter 8 tells us about these two fasts and two more - the fourth month and the tenth month too.

These fasts are because of the events of around 70 years before - this chapter of Zechariah dates to 518 BC, the events of the seige and fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians was around 587 BC. Maybe they thought of these things in a similiar way to how we think of World War II - it's on the edge of living memory, and our world is shaped by it. In the same way that in our world we compare all evil to naziism and hitler, those in Jerusalem might have compared all that's bad to Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar.

They have been mourning for years, but now that work on the temple is happening, the exile is over, should they continue to mourn? They want to ask God whether they should continue in what has become a tradition - or is this tradition no longer to be done, now that the new temple is being built?

They go to the priesthood and the prophets to find out what God thinks - to entreat his favour. 'Should we continue doing this?'

Zechariah gets a word from God:

v4-6

4 Then 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? 6 And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?'

Zechariah receives word from God - and not just a word for Sharezer and Regem Melech, but for all the people of the land, and the priests. The word applies to everyone, not just those few that sought it out.

God's rhetorical question for them is effectively 'why are you doing this'? Are they doing it for God or for themselves? Are they motivated by self-interest alone, or because they think this will please God?

Their fasting likely had all the outward things correct - they abstained from the right things, said the right words, put on the correct glum expression, but God asks if their heart attitude is correct. The fasting is dead - no life or spirit really in it. The Lord of Hosts repeats Himself to make the point - it's no good having the form of holiness, but the wrong motivations.

The sorts of things like fasting and mourning can be a cloak for sin - they are obviously outwardly 'holy' things to do, which can hide sinful motives beneath. In 1 Kings 21, we see two fastings - one set up by Jezebel, with all the wrong motives, and one in true repentance by Ahab, who really humbles himself before God. The same outward action, but God treats both very differently.

We see similar things elsewhere in scripture. For example Isaiah 58:3-4:

*3 'Why 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.
4 Behold, 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.*

Fasting in order to twist God's arm doesn't work - are they fasting to please God or to coerce Him?

God's answer continues - he says in effect that they should know better.

v7

7 Were 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 former prophets have said all that was required already, as we'll see. They said these things even in times of prosperity - Jerusalem, as well as the cities around and further afield when the south and lowlands were inhabited.

Jerusalem was destroyed, its inhabitants scattered or taken away, it's being rebuilt, and the same story in the surrounding area.

The south, the lowlands, the desert region southwest of the Dead Sea known as the Negev is an area of about 4,500 square miles, with rainfall too low to grow very much at all, so the time when this area was inhabited would have been a time of great prosperity. Even today, this area is largely empty.

The people have forgotten what God taught them in the good times. They mourn and fast, but haven't spent the time to investigate what God was really after - what went wrong with their fathers to lead to such a situation.

God fills them in:

v8-10

8 And 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, 10 do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

We have a short overview of some of God's law - in short, love your neighbour. The call is to do what their fathers did not - to render true judgements, to apply God's law to every situation, and to every person. And it all springs from the heart - devising evil against each other in their hearts is the root of the problem of mistreating others.

All the fasting and mourning is worthless if they are not able to keep to God's law - they have the outward signs of holiness, but not the inward substance.

v11-14

11 But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. 12 They 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. 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."

Generations before the men from Bethel enquiring about fasting, the Israelites did not pay attention to the words that God gave them, the commands they received directly from Him. They instead hardened their hearts, stopped their ears, so that they could not receive the words of the prophets.

They would not hear, so God would not hear - they reaped what they sowed, and God's judgement on the people was in proportion to the disobedience they showed. They were scattered, as if in a whirlwind, the land left desolate.

The emphasis here is that if things keep going the way they are, if the people think they can just go through the motions with the fasts and all will be well, God will continue to judge them.

The prophets repeatedly emphasise that formal acts of worship, outward acts of religion, are nullified by disobedience. Samuel tells Saul, after he disobeyed God (1 Samuel 15:22):

*“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams.
23 For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
he has also rejected you from being king.”*

Similarly, Isaiah relays the Lord's words to us in his first chapter (Isaiah 1:13-17):

*13 Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.
14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;*

your hands are full of blood.

*16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,*

*17 learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.*

If Sharezer and Regem Melech thought that fasting in the abstract could get them favour with God, they were mistaken. Likewise, if those in Jerusalem thought that the temple alone could bring back God's favour on Judah, they were mistaken. God's requirements are far more than formal worship, far more than what we do on a Sunday.

Conclusion

There are times in the Bible where mourning is commended, and places where God explicitly says don't mourn. Matthew 5:4:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

But when God consumed Nadab and Abihu in fire, He commanded Israel not to mourn their deaths.

When we mourn, are we always actually mourning, or are we wallowing in misery - using it as an excuse, sinfully? Putting on a show of piety maybe?

The principle here is that the outward forms are less important than the inward reality. When Samuel was seeking out the next King of Israel, which was David, God told him (1 Samuel 16:7):

For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.

We often can't tell when people do things for the wrong reasons, when they put on a performance of holiness. But the Lord sees the heart - He sees the motives and desires of people.

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Proverbs 21:2 tells similarly:

*Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
but the Lord weighs the heart.*

We all have the tendency to think we're doing right, to judge by our own standards - but God sees what our motives really are, and judges by the right standard.

True religion requires a change of heart. Today's chapter tells us that the people had hardened hearts - hearts not receptive to God's word, that would not hear. We need soft hearts that hear God's truth.

But we can't just change our hearts. We can't just modify our own natures, it's not something within our power, or indeed sinful man's desire. We need God to change us, the Holy Spirit to renew us, raise us to spiritual life. True good works, rightly motivated and rightly conducted, are only possible with the help of God, transforming us.

1 Corinthians 10:31:

31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.