

Lesson 11

Last week we started Chapter 7, and we saw where the nearby city of Bethel sent two men to ask the priests and the prophets a question: should they continue to fast during the fifth month of the year to commemorate the capture of Jerusalem 70 years ago, or should they quit doing that now that they have returned from that exile?

On the surface it seemed like a very reasonable question, but God through Zechariah turned the question back on the people. Were they fasting for God, or were they fasting for themselves? In short, was their worship in spirit and in truth or was their worship false?

When we ended, we were looking at verse 5, and our question there was why God had added the **seventh** month to their question about the **fifth** month. We know why the fifth month was special, but what was special about the seventh month?

The answer is that we don't know for sure, but the fast in the seventh month may have been intended to commemorate the assassination of Gedaliah, who was the governor of Judah appointed by Nebuchadnezzar and murdered by Ishmael. That event happened in the seventh month.

2 Kings 25:25 - 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.

This section of Zechariah about fasting and sincere worship reminds us of similar statements in Isaiah.

Isaiah 58:1-7 - (*verse 4*) Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. ... (*verse 6*) Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

To apply Isaiah's language to the question posed here, had their fasting allowed their "voice to be heard on high"? God's response through Zechariah suggests that the answer was a resounding no! It had not!

The charge here was a very serious one - false worship. That charge is serious at any time in history, but particularly here when the people had just returned from a long exile that had been brought upon

them because of their false worship. Was history about to repeat itself? When we look at the question from this perspective, we can suddenly understand why God responded as he did.

Verse 6 completes the thought from verses 4-5. "And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves?" Fasting for the wrong reason displeased God, but so did *feasting* for the wrong reason. Were they doing these things for God, or were they doing these things for themselves?

Zechariah 7:7

7 Should ye not hear the words which the LORD hath cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, and the cities thereof round about her, when men inhabited the south and the plain?

Zechariah was not proclaiming a new message. The "former prophets" had proclaimed the same message. What was missing here was not the truth; what was missing was the will to obey the truth.

Also, we should not miss a clear but subtle message from verse 7 - God expected his people to know what the former prophets had said.

There is no room here for any excuse in not knowing what God had said earlier through his prophets. And if God expected that of them - when written scrolls were few and far between - how much more must God expect of us who live in a country where God's entire word is freely and readily available at any time and in any place? Ignorance of God's word has never been a good excuse, but it has never been a worse excuse that it is today, at least in this country!

What if the people had heard and heeded those earlier prophets? How would things be different? In short, everything would be different. The exile would never have occurred, and the people would still be surrounded by prosperity rather than by desolation.

Why does verse 7 mention the **south**? Perhaps no part of the geography of Israel painted a more desolate picture of their plight than did the "Negev," the southernmost part of the nation. These "foot lands" lay between the Judean hills and the plains of Philistia, and they were once filled with orchards. But now they were a desolation, and it was all because the people had not listened to the prophets. Would they make that same mistake again?

Verse 7 is a bridge between verses 1-6 and the verses that follow. In verses 1-6, Zechariah declared that the people were guilty of failing to worship God with a sincere heart. Verse 7 ties that same sin to what the people had done before the exile. It points to the desolate countryside as evidence that those earlier prophets were true prophets. But verse 7 also points forward. If the people did again what they had done before, then God would do again what God had done before. The desolation would continue, and the exile would return.

What we are seeing here is a **theme** that is running throughout this book. That theme was clearly stated in the opening verses:

Zechariah 1:2-3 - The Lord hath been sore displeased with your fathers. Therefore say thou unto them, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; **Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the Lord of hosts.**

Verse 7 concludes the thoughts in verses 1-6, but it also introduces the remainder of this chapter, which will call upon the nation to turn and repent.

God had previously spoken to his people when they were prosperous, but they did not hear him.

Jeremiah 22:21 - I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, 'I will not listen.'

God was now speaking to them again, not in their prosperity, but in their desolation. Would he get a different response? Would they hear him now?

Zechariah 7:8-10

8 And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah, saying, 9 Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: 10 And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.

What we see in these verses are themes that run all throughout the Bible. We see these commands over and over again from the books of Moses to the sermon on the mount and all throughout the rest of the New Testament. God wants his people to live in a certain way, and no one can ever claim ignorance of those requirements. They are repeated over and over again in the Bible.

The question that had been posed by Bethel dealt with an **outward** show of religion - fasting. God is telling the people to instead focus on what is **inward**. Having done that, what is outward will take care of itself.

Verse 9 has two positive commands, and verse 10 has two negative commands. Let's look at each of them.

The first positive command is to "execute true judgment" or "administer true justice." This theme runs all throughout the prophets.

Amos 5:21-24 - I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. **But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.**

Jeremiah 7:5-7 - For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; **if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour**; If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

The word "true" in verse 9 carries with it the idea of reliability, permanence, and faithfulness. This justice is the kind of justice on which people can rely. It will not change based on the person involved, with perhaps the rich living under a different set of rules than the poor. In our own society, true justice is denoted by the idea that justice is blind, or at least should be.

We should follow our perfect example. Acts 10:34 tells us that God is no respecter of persons; that is, we are all living under the same set of rules, and we will all be judged by the same standard. If that were not the case, then how could we rely on or trust in the promises of God?

The second positive command in verse 9 is to "show mercy and compassion."

One commentator described the Hebrew word translated "mercy" as "notoriously difficult to translate, no English translation can capture the breadth of the word's connotations and denotations."

Some say that the meaning is close to that of the Greek word translated "grace" in the New

Testament. It denotes the blessings that flow to God's people from God's faithfulness. Those blessings include "mercy," but they also include forgiveness, protection, and much more. God gives these blessings to us, and we in turn are to give them to others.

Along with "mercy," verse 9 also uses the word "compassion." The Hebrew word for compassion is related to the word for "womb." It conveys the gentle tender love that a mother has for her children.

And, again, how God treats us should be the basis for how we treat other people. Zechariah was not the only prophet to proclaim this word from God.

Micah 6:8 - He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

Hosea 12:6 - Therefore turn thou to thy God: keep mercy and judgment, and wait on thy God continually.

Verse 10 mirrors the two positive commands in verse 9 with two negative commands.

The first negative command is to not oppress widows, orphans, strangers, or the poor. Those were not secondary concerns then, and they are not secondary concerns today. Caring for the oppressed is a central concern of a religious life. It is part of the definition!

James 1:27 - **Pure religion** and undefiled before God and the Father is this, **To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction**, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

Widows, orphans, strangers, and the poor - what do they all have in common? They are all easy to oppress. They have no one to defend them. They are the most vulnerable in any society - both in Zechariah's society and in our own society, 2500 years later.

But widows, orphans, strangers, and the poor do have a defender - God. And if God's people are living as God has commanded them to live, then the widows, the orphans, the strangers, and the poor will have God's people as their defender.

"The true measure of any society is determined by how that society treats those that are the most vulnerable."

God leaves no room for any doubt about how his people should treat those who are most vulnerable.

Exodus 22:21-23 - Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry.

Deuteronomy 10:19 - Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15 - Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren, or of thy strangers that are in thy land within thy gates: At his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it: lest he cry against thee unto the LORD, and it be sin unto thee.

Isaiah 1:17 - Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Matthew 25:42-43 - For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

Verse 10 concludes with a final negative command: "let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart."

Whatever we do, we must be motivated by a desire to seek the highest good for all men. And, yes, sometimes that will require that we offend that person. Why? Because a person's highest good is that person's eternal home with God, and that must be our goal for everyone. That is what it means to love our enemies - not to agree with them, but to seek their highest good.

God does not desire that any should perish - can we say the same thing? If not, then we have a problem with the command in verse 10.

How did God's people react to these commandments? Let's keep reading.

Zechariah 7:11-12

11 But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. 12 Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should

hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the LORD of hosts.

The past tense in these verses, along with the "great wrath" in verse 12, lets us know that this reaction was the reaction of those who lived **prior** to the exile. It was this reaction to God's commands that led to the exile. The warning is clear - the people of Zechariah's day must not react as their ancestors had reacted or they will suffer the same fate their ancestors had suffered.

So how did their ancestors respond to these commands from God? Verses 11-12 use three metaphors to answer that question: they pulled away the shoulder, they stopped their ears, and they made their hearts as an adamant stone.

The first figure of speech - "they pulled away the shoulder" - also appears in Nehemiah 9:29, which says they "withdrew the shoulder, and hardened their neck, and would not hear." Literally that phrase means "they presented a stubborn shoulder." It refers to a stubborn ox that refuses to submit to the yoke. As used here it means the people were resisting the purpose for which they had been created.

The second metaphor, "they stopped their ears," is easy to understand. Stopping your ears was a common reaction to the word of God then, and it remains so today. And for those that take that path, God often punishes them by giving them even more of what they want.

Isaiah 6:10 - Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.

God's people must be the opposite of those who stop their ears - they are instead to have the law of God written on their hearts.

Jeremiah 31:33 - But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

The final metaphor is that "they made their hearts as an adamant stone" or flint. Again, that figure of speech is easy to understand - they were so hardened in their sin that they were almost unreachable. Ezekiel explains the change that needed to occur in their lives.

Ezekiel 36:26 - A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will

take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

What is the outcome of pulling away your shoulder, stopping your ears, and making your heart as an adamant stone? Verse 12 answers that question: "therefore came a great wrath from the LORD of hosts."

Let's pause and ask a question: How did we get here?

This chapter began with a question that seemed innocent on the surface - a question about fasting. But that question was not innocent; it ignored something that should have been front and center to these people.

They were standing in the rubble of their ruined city - not because they had continued or discontinued some annual fast - but because their ancestors had rejected the law of God and had turned their backs on the prophets who were proclaiming the word of God to them! And these people of Zechariah's day were close to going down the same path! They should have been focused on things much more weighty than what they had asked about at the beginning of this chapter!

God is very angry at the end of verse 12 - so what happens next?

Zechariah 7:13-14

13 Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the LORD of hosts: 14 But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate.

In Chapter 1, verse 3, God said, "turn ye unto me, and I will turn unto you." Here, in verse 13, God says, "they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear." In the face of such a wonderful promise in Chapter 1, God is reminding them here of the bad choice that their fathers had made.

There is a textual question about verse 13. While the first part of the verse speaks of God in the third person ("that as **he** cried, and they would not hear"), the second part of the verse speaks of God in the first person ("so they cried, and **I** would not hear").

From the context it seems that God is using both the third person and the first person in reference to

himself. Why? We don't know for sure, but one commentary offered this explanation: "Through this subtle shift, Zechariah's audience is transported back into the audience of the earlier prophets, making vivid this divine disciplinary statement."

Another writes: "The change in person from 'He' to 'I' is not uncommon in the prophets and reflects the vividness of the message in the mind of Zechariah." But, although I am sure it was vivid in Zechariah's mind, these words did not originate in Zechariah's mind, so I don't much favor that explanation. Of course if you are unfortunate enough to be using the NIV you won't even know there is a problem here - that version simply changes "he called" to "I called" in verse 13! (And now you know why NIV stands for the Nearly Inspired Version!)

Verse 14 says that God scattered the Jews to nations they knew not - Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and Persia. God had told them earlier that such would happen if they rejected his covenant.

Deuteronomy 28:49 - The Lord shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand.

God had brought them out of Egypt to "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:17), but now, as we have already seen, that pleasant land was desolate. The milk and the honey were long gone!

Chapter 7 ends far from where it began. The people came seeking clarification on a relatively minor religious matter. But to their surprise, they did not receive an answer to that question (and they won't get an answer until near the end of the next chapter). Instead, they were partly accused of and partly warned about having the same sort of sinful attitudes that had caused the exile in the first place. And they were told that if they did have such attitudes as their fathers, they should not be surprised when they met the same fate as their fathers.

In Zechariah 1-6, God has offered repeated promises of blessings (both present and future), and he has encouraged the people as they struggled to rebuild the temple. But they needed to know that whether or not they would enjoy those blessings rested on whether or not they were obedient to God.

The themes of Zechariah 7 are true worship and the consequences of disobedience. Those are vital themes both to them and to us.

God wants neither superficial worship nor superficial obedience. Instead, God wants his people to love him with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their mind - and when we do, neither

our worship nor our obedience will ever be superficial.

Chapter 8

The love of God for his people is on full display in Chapters 7 and 8. It was because of his love for them that God gave the people the stern message of Chapter 7 after they asked their superficial question about fasting. And it is because of his love for them that God in this chapter will reassure them of their position and of their present and future blessings.

If the people had heard only Chapter 7, they would have left discouraged. If they had heard only Chapter 8, they would have left over-confident. Together these two chapters provide the perfect balance of what the people needed to hear.

Both Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 are intended to get the people to live righteous lives, but they provide different motivations for doing so. In Chapter 7, God's people were to repent and live righteously to avoid a repeat of the punishment that caused their captivity. In Chapter 8, God's people are to repent and live righteously because of the promise of their future restoration and blessings.

One of the most notable features of Chapter 8 is the phrase "the Lord of hosts," which occurs seventeen times in this chapter. That designation is intended to convey the might and authority of God on earth. God is the Creator of everything, God is King over everything, and everything belongs to God.

If the people had any doubts about whether God could deliver on his promises, those doubts were completely baseless and unfounded. God is the Lord of Hosts! If God says it will happen, it will happen. No one can possibly prevent God from doing what he has promised to do. That key fact is a central theme of Chapter 8.

Zechariah 8:1-2

1 Again the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, 2 Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I was jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I was jealous for her with great fury.

The message in verse 2 is not new. We saw the same message all the way back in Chapter 1.

Zechariah 1:14 - Thus saith the Lord of hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a

great jealousy.

And, of course, the description of God as a jealous God goes back further than that.

Exodus 20:4-5 - Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God.

Jealousy is a particularly strong emotion. What does it mean that God is jealous?

The key to understanding the jealousy of God is to see God's jealousy in terms of the **covenant** that God has with his people and in terms of the **love** that God has for his people. God will not tolerate any rivals, and that intolerance operates in two directions - within and without. First, God will not tolerate rivals from within in the form of false gods and false worship. But, second, God will not tolerate rivals from without in the form of foreign nations that threaten his people.

God's jealousy is like the jealousy of a husband for a wife, which is displayed when either the wife looks to someone else or when someone from outside the marriage comes in and seeks to harm the wife or persuade her to leave. It is in that second sense that we see the jealousy of God in verses such as:

Isaiah 42:13 - The Lord shall go forth as a mighty man, he shall stir up **jealousy** like a man of war: he shall cry, yea, roar; he shall prevail against his enemies.

Do we always think of God as an *emotional* God? Or do we sometimes picture God as just a giant computer of some sort who knows everything and keeps track of everything?

A clear message of the Bible is that God has very strong emotions. We see God loving, we see God hating, and here we see God being jealous. Those are perhaps the three strongest emotions.

And, of course, we see the emotions of Jesus in the New Testament. We see his love, his anger, his compassion, and his tears. Have you ever thought about how much we can learn about God from the shortest verse in the Bible? "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

And when we see God the Son, we are seeing God the Father. In God there is no un-Christlikeness! "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Yes, God is an emotional God - one who can burn with love, with anger, and with jealousy. And although some may have trouble thinking about God in such terms, that is how God describes himself in his word.

And we should be thankful that God is emotional. Why? Because it is only because of God's great love for us that we have the hope of eternal salvation. An unemotional God would have been just fine with mankind forever remaining hopeless and hell-bound - but our loving heavenly Father was not.

Why do we see this description of the jealousy of God here in the opening verses of Chapter 8?

Again, we need to put ourselves in the place of those former exiles living in the ruin of their city and building a temple that seemed just a faint shadow of the former temple that had been destroyed. They must have wondered if God still loved them as much as he had loved their ancestors. So much had changed for God's people - had God's love for them changed as well? Had God turned his love and his attention to some other nation? Was God looking around?

Chapter 8 opens with a resounding "no" to that question. God still loved his people just as he always had - and God was still jealous for them just as he always had been.

A later prophet would remind these same people that God does not change. "For I am the Lord, I change not" (Malachi 3:6). And they should have been very thankful for that fact! Why? Because if God had been the sort to change, then they would likely have been destroyed long ago. That's what the entire verse from Malachi 3 says.

Malachi 3:6 - For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

God has a burning love for his people. And nowhere was that burning love more on display than when it came to the wonderful blessings that God had in store for his people - blessings that God is telling them about all throughout this book of Zechariah. God's burning love for his people is what caused God to send Jesus into this world to establish his eternal kingdom.

You mean the church is related to the jealousy of God? Absolutely! Listen to the word:

Deuteronomy 4:2 - For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.

Where else have we seen that phrase? "A consuming fire"?

Hebrews 12:28-29 - Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: **For our God is a consuming fire.**

Notice the word "for" in that last verse. The reason we received the church is because of the burning love that God has for his people - because God is a jealous God. Let's be thankful for the jealousy of God!

#Zechariah