

Obedience versus Fasting

Zechariah 7

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4/10/2022

**BIG BEND
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Zech 7:1-7 – Obedience Better than Fasting

Now in the fourth year of King Darius it came to pass that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, on the fourth day of the ninth month, Chislew, ² when the people sent Sherezer, with Regem-Melech and his men, to the house of God, to pray before the Lord, ³ and to ask the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and the prophets, saying, “Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?”

⁴ Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, ⁵ “Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me? ⁶ When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves? ⁷ Should you not have obeyed the words which the Lord proclaimed through the former prophets when Jerusalem and the cities around it were inhabited and prosperous, and the South and the Lowland were inhabited?’ ”

v1-3 – What does the time stamp here tell us?

This was about two years after Zechariah had the night visions. At this point, the temple was somewhere around halfway completed.

What was the question Zechariah’s countrymen asked him?

Essentially, now that the new temple was well on its way to completion, should we continue to weep and fast over the destruction of the temple as we have done while in exile?

- This was their tradition, certainly not something required by the Mosaic Law.

What did it reveal about these countrymen that they asked this question?

These additional fasts were not commanded by God, but instituted by man. Yet because they were traditionally practiced for so long (at least 70 years), they developed an authority of their own.

What is the value of tradition if it is not commanded by God?

Tradition can be helpful if we remember why we’re practicing it. But it doesn’t have the same authority as what has been commanded by God.

What is the danger in holding to traditions when the reason they were begun has been lost?

This is over what Jesus condemned the Pharisees:

Mark 7:13 – making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do

What was the significance of their weeping and mourning during the 5th month (Av)?

The 9th of Av, 586 BC was when the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians.

What does it tell us that the 2nd temple destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 also happened on the 9th of Av?

Coincidence? There are no coincidences with God. He is in control and it is clear that God allowed these temple destructions to happen on the same day to remind Israel that He is in total control and this was punishment for their unfaithfulness to Him.

Other tragedies for Israel that happened on 9th of Av:

- The spies returned from the Land of Israel with a bad report, 1313 BC
- The expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290
- The expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1490
- World War I began on August 1, 1914
- Treblinka death camp begins operating and start of deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto on July 23, 1942.

How long should we remember and mourn over our past? Should we do things to remember either our sin or the tragedies of the past?

God wants us to move on and provides guidelines for us about how to do that:

1 John 1:9 – If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness

If God forgave us, what purpose does it serve for us to continue in guilt? If we confess our sins to God, that means we repent of them and that includes taking action so that we don't repeat those sins...

John 8:11 – *go and sin no more*

Is 1 John 1:9 talking about how we are saved?

No, the reason we confess our sins is not to become Christians again. No one gets saved through 1st John 1:9, rather what 1st John 1:9 does, is it allows broken fellowship between us and God to be restored.

v4 – What does it mean that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah?

This indicates that an oracle from God was about to be relayed to us. God is answering the question asked by Zechariah's countrymen.

v5-6 – How did God answer Zechariah's countrymen?

He answers their question with a question...

Did you really fast for Me; for Me? God's word through Zechariah rebuked the people of God for what their fasting had become: indulgent pity-parties instead of a time to genuinely seek God.

- Their lives were not right when they did eat and drink which they did only for themselves. A few days of fasting every year could not make up for the rest of the year lived for yourselves.
- This also shows us that when we cling to the memory of sin or tragedy in the past, we often do it out of simple self-indulgence. We do it for our self, not for the LORD.

What was this mourning in the seventh month mentioned here?

This was when they remembered the assassination of Gedaliah and the massacre of 80 men that put down the last act of rebellion against the Babylonian governor of Judah (2 Kings 25:25).

v7 – What should the exiles in Babylon be doing instead of mourning the temple?

Should you not have obeyed the words which the LORD proclaimed: Because their hearts were not right with God, their rituals were not right before God. Everyday obedience would make their times of fasting meaningful, but their neglect of everyday obedience made their fasting hypocritical.

- God was condemning the empty ritualism of their mourning and the fact they were focused on the effect of the temple's destruction, not the cause (their sin).
- It's kind of like dealing with somebody who gets caught doing something wrong so they show all this

emotion and really what they are upset about is the fact that they got caught.

- Israel in exile was upset about doing the time but they're not upset about the crime leading to doing the time.

What is the problem of empty ritual?

It reveals a lack of relationship...

Isaiah 29:13 – *these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me*

The prophets before Zechariah warned about Israel's destruction and Zechariah was warning them that they were on the same path as their ancestors.

- God does not contradict Himself in His Word... the message was consistent among all the prophets.

What was the reference to the South and Lowland that was inhabited?

Here, the South refers to the Negev, the desolate desert near the Dead Sea. This area wasn't always desolate; before Israel's disobedience, it too was prosperous and inhabited.

Zech 7:8-14 – Disobedience Resulted in Captivity

⁸ *Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying,* ⁹ *“Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. ¹⁰ Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart Against his brother.’*

¹¹ *“But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. ¹² Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. ¹³ Therefore it happened, that just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen,” says the Lord of hosts. ¹⁴ “But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned; for they made the pleasant land desolate.”*

v8 – What does this indicate that the Word of the Lord come to Zechariah again?

This was the beginning of another oracle from God where He describes in detail the root cause resulting in the loss of their temple.

v9-10 – What did Israel need to do to avoid stirring God’s anger again?

Execute true justice, show mercy and compassion: God through Zechariah rebuked the people of Israel and their ancestors for a basic neglect of obedience.

- Now Zechariah describes the kind of obedience God wanted, beginning with decent and loving treatment of their neighbors (those in need in their midst... Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan).

Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother: Some among the people of God found it easier to fast a few days a year instead of truly treating others in a godly way.

- Their bad relationship with others demonstrated a fundamentally bad relationship with the LORD.

Who was their brothers, just fellow Jews?

Certainly, fellow Jews but in a broader sense, we are all brothers and sisters to one another because we are all descended from Adam and Eve. And we all ultimately have God as our Father.

Malachi 2:10 – *Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?*

Why is showing others mercy or loving kindness so important?

Kindness is next to agape love; it is what spiritual growth looks like:

1 Peter 1:5-7 – *add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love*

How is compassion related to not oppressing the widow, orphans, aliens or poor?

These are the most vulnerable who would be the easiest to oppress... instead of oppression, we should show them the opposite which would be compassion.

James 1:27 – *Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

How do people misapply this verse 10 to justify a policy of open borders?

The original Hebrew word translated alien or strangers here is “gare” which refers to a resident alien who followed legal procedures to be there, thus they were legal immigrants. There are other Hebrew words that could have been used such as “nekar” or “zar” that could have been used usually translated as “foreigner” that doesn’t apply to legal immigrants.

What is the problem with planning evil in the heart?

You are what you think...

Prov 23:7 – *For as he thinks in his heart, so is he* Jesus equated anger with murder and lust with adultery (Matthew 5:21-28).

Thomas Jefferson: “Jesus is the only one among human philosophers that pushed his scrutinies into the heart of man, erected His tribunal in the region of his thoughts and purified the waters at the fountain head.”

How is true justice distinguished from what is commonly considered justice today?

In an age where social justice is advocated, treating people equally has given way to equity... treating people differently based on race or some other distinction.

- Today’s social justice movement is putting lipstick on the pig of racism, not God’s justice.
- The ultimate goal: socialism (communism) is not God’s view of justice.
- Oppression (v10) is viewed by God as being unjust.

v11-12 – How did Israel rebel against God’s Word?

Refused to heed ... shrugged their shoulders ... stopped their ears ... made their hearts like flint: Zechariah vividly describes a progression of rejection. It begins with simply refusing to heed God, then a self-justifying shrugging of their shoulders, then stopping their ears. It all ends with hearts as hard as flint.

How does a person make their heart as hard as flint?

When a person with a heart like flint, you know they did not become that way overnight. There was a gradual progression to their present condition of hardness.

How is it Israel refused to hear God’s prophets?

In their hardened state, they just didn’t want to hear God’s word. When we lose our hunger for God’s word it is sobering evidence of the progression of rejection and hardness of heart.

- They weren’t necessarily actively opposing the prophets; they were just not paying attention to them. They were ignoring the prophets which is what led to the destruction of the temple.

There is a sect of hyper-election Christians called neo-Calvinists that use verses like this to support their idea that people are unable to respond to God’s Word because they do not have spiritual ears to hear it. They ignore the first part of the verse that says they cannot hear because they hardened their hearts.

- The TULIP of Calvinism stands for Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints

- There are no problems with these terms; the problem is in how the neo-Calvinists define them...

For example, what should the human condition of total depravity mean?

Romans 3:10-11 – *None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.*

The natural human state is one of not being able to being seen as righteous before God on our own; we all need a Savior.

Will there be people in hell that had no choice in the matter?

This is the predestination view of neo-Calvinism; that is their soteriology:

- The issue is over the fancy Latin term “Ordo Salutis” which means order of salvation.
- The neo-Calvinists say the Ordo Salutis is: Gift of faith to some then regeneration to those who receive the gift of faith.
- The proper biblical Ordo Salutis is: conviction, faith, regeneration.

God is not going to give you the gift of faith and regenerate you, you have to believe. Believing is our response to the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

- It’s up to your volition to believe, and once you place your faith in Christ, then you’re regenerated.
- God is not going to override the volition of a human being because if He did, He would not be respecting how He has made us in His image.

How then are we to view predestination passages?

Romans 8:29-30 – *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

The Bible says that we have the choice—all who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved (John 3:16; Romans 10:9-10). The Bible never describes God rejecting anyone who believes in Him or turning away anyone who is seeking Him (Deuteronomy 4:29).

Matthew 22:14 – *For many are called, but few are chosen*

God is omniscient and knows who will respond to His call and all who respond are chosen.

- Somehow, in the mystery of God, predestination works hand-in-hand with a person being drawn by God (John 6:44) and believing unto salvation (Romans 1:16). God predestines who will be saved, and we must choose Christ in order to be saved. Both facts are equally true.
- I heard David Jeremiah explain it this way... it is like a billboard in heaven that says: “whoever will may

come” and once we are in heaven and look at the other side of the billboard it says, “predestined before the foundation of the world.”

What is the problem with the neo-Calvinist essentially equating depravity with inability?

In Exodus, it says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart but this was only after six times that it says Pharaoh hardened his own heart. God gave Pharaoh over to what he wanted. When Pharaoh finds himself in hell, he’s not going to be able to point his finger at God and say, you never give me the opportunity.

- People in the Lake of Fire can’t blame God for situation, because God provided His son and then the convicting ministry of the Spirit to bring people to their senses in spite of their depravity.
- If you think the only ones saved are those God predestined to save, what value is the Great Commission and personal evangelism?

v12 – What does it tell us that God’s Word was sent by His Spirit through the former prophets?

Zechariah didn’t doubt that the Spirit of God genuinely inspired his words and the words of other prophets.

2 Timothy 3:16 – *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness*

This remarkable doctrine of the Holy Spirit as mediator of God’s word to the prophets, has no parallels in the prophetic books...Zechariah is the first to record this doctrine of the Spirit.

- Israel was not really rejecting Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, they were rejecting the Holy Spirit that’s guiding these prophets

v13-14 – What was God’s judgment on Israel’s disobedience?

Just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen: Since God’s people refused to listen to God, God would refuse to listen to them and answer their prayers.

- This is just another good reason to obey God’s Word - so that our prayers will be answered.

What was the problem with Israel not hearing the prophets?

If you don’t wise up and repent it’s going to get a lot worse because you’re going to be kicked out of your land. How did the children of Israel treat all of those prophets? Just stick your fingers in your ears, pretend like they are not talking, change the channel, censor them from Facebook, cancel them from YouTube...

- That’s today’s cancel culture... anybody speaking the truth, you just ignore him or get rid of them.

Why should what the prophets were telling Israel not been a surprise to them?

Notice at the end of verse 12... great wrath came from the LORD of hosts... Why would it say that? Because that's how the Mosaic Covenant was set up.

It's what's called, I've used this expression before, a Suzerain Vassal Treaty where the suzerain or the superior comes alongside the vassal, the inferior, and says, if you obey the covenant text, I'll bless you if you disobey the covenant text, I'll curse you.

There was a well-known bilateral treaty in the Ancient Near East at that time called the Suzerain Vassal Treaty where the suzerain or the superior comes alongside the vassal, the inferior, and says, if you obey the covenant, I'll bless you and if you disobey it, I'll curse you.

- The book of Deuteronomy is laid out like a Suzerain Vassal Treaty with a preamble, a prologue tracing the historical interaction between the parties, the covenant obligations, what the vassal is supposed to obey to be blessed by the suzerain and then there's storage and reading instructions where the covenant is to be reviewed regularly by the vassal, the witnesses involved and then the blessings and curses are described.

Where is the sarcasm in God not hearing Israel when they called out to Him?

He is saying that they wouldn't listen to Him through the prophets so He wouldn't listen to them as they suffered the consequences of breaking their treaty with Him.

- God often uses sarcasm... all the Egyptians plagues mocked an Egyptian deity. Oh, you want to worship the Nile, God turns the whole thing to blood red. Oh, you want to worship frogs, I'll multiply them all over Egypt. They started to worship their own first born, so the tenth plague killed all of the first-born all-over Egypt, where's your deity now?

v14 – When would Israel be scattered with a whirlwind among all the nations?

This has to be a reference to what would happen to Israel in AD 70 when God used the Romans as He used the Babylonians before them.

- There is a bit of sarcasm here... Do you like being like the rest of the nations? Well you can join them.
- Israel's motivation to be like the other nations was why they insisted on having a king (1 Sam 8:5) and they didn't even wait for God to provide them with a king from the tribe of Judah, they settled for Saul from the tribe of Benjamin.

How does the fact that the land became desolate reinforce this is talking about AD 70?

Israel being gone from the land would be longer this time and it did indeed become desolate as Mark Twain wrote about when he visited there in 1867:

“... A desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds... a silent mournful expanse.... a desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action.... we never saw a human being on the whole route.... there was hardly a tree or shrub anywhere. Even the olive tree and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country.”

Since the Jews are returning to Israel, the once desolate land is turning around as prophesied...

Isaiah 35:1-2 – *The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice, even with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it*

What applications stand-out from our discussion today?

- Tradition is useful if it brings us closer to God but should be abandoned if it becomes a distraction.
- God desires obedience over sacrifice; focus on the cause of our chastening, not the consequences of it.
- God does not want us to dwell on our past in guilt; the abundant life looks to the here and now and the future.
- Practice kindness, it is evidence of spiritual growth and God uses it to extend His kingdom.
- Practice true justice and expose the evil agenda behind social justice.
- Remember that people have a choice in their salvation; seek opportunities to get them to consider it.
- All Scripture is inspired by God thus we should not neglect this great resource God has given us.
- Bible prophecy is being fulfilled in Israel today so we should have joy that God's plan of redemption is near.