

Zechariah Chapter Seven

The night visions (Zechariah 1-6) have resulted in the re-display of God's glory in the earth; a Man is reigning as Priest-King clothed in the splendour of deity (6.13). Zechariah 7-8 contain a re-statement of God's grace towards Israel in the *past, present* and *future*. The call is to live appropriately in the light of such grace, especially their past judgment and future glory (7.9-10; 8.16-19). Specifically, the two chapters contain *four* messages (cf. 7.4, 8; 8.1, 18) dealing with the issues of **fasting** and **feasting** introduced by a question from a delegation sent from Bethel (7.2-3). The matter concerned an outward form of religious activity (ritualism) without a corresponding inward reality and practical righteousness. The question is not directly answered, but the attitude revealed by the question is of great concern and receives comprehensive treatment. The *first* two messages (7.4, 8) are a rebuke of past and present behaviour (negative). The *second* two messages (8.1, 18) are a revelation of future blessing (positive). Note the balance between reproof and correction *and* instruction and encouragement (2 Timothy 3.16).

The Delegation from Bethel (vv.1-3)

v.1: Zechariah began prophesying in the *eighth* month (October/November) of the *second* year of Darius (520BC). The eight night visions were received on 15 February, 519BC. It is now a little under two years later (22 months), being the *fourth* day of the *ninth* month, Chisleu (7 December, 518BC). The re-building of the temple would be completed in two years' time (516BC) and signal the end of the seventy years desolations (Jeremiah 25.11; 2 Chronicles 36.21). **v.2:** The 'house of God' is the Hebrew word *bethel* – always used in the OT of the town of Bethel (located 12 miles north of Jerusalem) not the temple. Indeed, many exiles had returned here (Ezra 2.28; Nehemiah 7.32). Their coming from Bethel is significant as before the exile it was a chief site for the idolatry of Jeroboam and a centre of apostate worship (1 Kings 12.28-33). In Bethel, Jeroboam built a temple in *imitation* of, and as *rival* to, the temple in Jerusalem. The delegation coming to Jerusalem suggests the acknowledgement of the rebuilt temple as the place the Lord had set his name and hints at a renewal of the united kingdom of Israel. 'Sherezer' ['protect' or 'preserve' the king] and 'Regem-melech' ['friend of the king'] were sent, with others, as a representative delegation on behalf of Bethel. Not only were they seeking guidance from the priests and prophets, but also came to 'pray before the Lord'. The Hebrew is vivid and literally means 'to stroke the face', i.e. to entreat favour, probably by the means of offering propitiatory sacrifices. They were possibly pleading that God might bring an end to the seventy years desolation.

v.3: *Priests* (Deuteronomy 33.10; Malachi 2.7) and *prophets* (Haggai 1.13) were the two sources of revelation in the temple precincts. Hence the question: 'Should I weep' (*mourn* as an evidence of humiliation) and 'separate myself' (*abstain* from food, the word being used of the Nazarite) in the 'fifth month' (the time of destruction of the city and temple, Jeremiah 52.12-16)? The question seems reasonable. After all, the temple was now at the point of being rebuilt, thus why the need to mourn its destruction any longer? But, the only fast God ever prescribed was in association with the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16.29). It seems, therefore, the Jews themselves had instituted *four* fasts connected with events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem (8.19). They were self-imposed, not divinely commanded. Also, the fact they even asked the question suggests that fasting had become *ritual* and *routine* rather than an exercise in self-humiliation to express genuine repentance before God (Isaiah 1.10-15). 'These so many years' tells us they had become *weary* of fasting and desired to be free from its weight with good conscience.

The Danger of Ritualism (vv.4-7)

v.4: The answer to the question is given in *four* distinct messages all introduced with the same formula, cf. 7.4, 8; 8.1, 18. The first was a message of rebuke given by the Lord through *Zechariah*. The word of the Lord did not come unto the *priests*, suggesting they themselves were affected by the empty ritualism, as well as 'all the people of the land'. **v.5:** Not only did they fast in the *fifth*, but also the *seventh* month (the most recent of the four) which possibly commemorated the murder of Gedaliah, the Jewish governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 40.5). The crux of the matter is *why* they were fasting. Was it for the Lord ('even to me') or for themselves? Literally, the reading is: 'fasting, did you fast to me, me?' **v.6:** Wasn't their *fasting* as self-centred as their *daily eating and drinking* to satisfy their own needs? The underlying motivation was wrong; it had not been for the Lord, but to entreat His favour for themselves. In *all* our daily activities, especially those which are *spiritual* in nature, we should be seeking the glory and honour of God (Romans 6.4; 1 Corinthians 10.31). Thus, the feasting was mere empty ritualism. But, God desires **realists** not **ritualists**. Luke 18 gives an excellent example of the difference. The Pharisee (a **ritualist**) prayed with *himself*. He was merely engaging in proud formal religion with no interest in godly sorrow or repentance (vv.11-12). *MacArthur: If true worship consisted in abstaining from food, rather than abstaining from sin, in giving money to God rather than giving your heart to God, then this is a deeply religious man.* The publican (a **realist**) will not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven. He offers no ritual, merely a broken and a contrite spirit.

The principle should be a challenge to us all. Even when engaging in spiritual activities, we can have the wrong motive. For example, when we remember the Lord Jesus at the Breaking of Bread are we gathering *for Him*, to offer *to Him*, to seek *His* glory? Or has it become mere self-centred routine and ritual to maintain our reputation? *Why* do I come to the prayer meeting or Bible class? *Ironside: Is it with me but a weariness of the flesh, and a matter of form? Has it become simply legal drudgery, which I carry on because of custom? Or do I seek thus to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ?*

v.7: This was not a new problem. These are the very things (cf. 7.9-10) which the Lord had already ‘cried’ through the prophets prior to the captivity when the nation was *numerous* (spread throughout Judah) and dwelt in *prosperity* (security). Thus, God’s desire was not abstaining from food and drink but obedience to His word (cf. 1 Samuel 15.22-23; Deuteronomy 10.12-13). To *obey* is infinitely better than meaningless ceremony.

The Description of Reality (vv.8-10)

v.8: Zechariah summarises the message of the ‘former prophets’ with two *exhortations* and two *prohibitions*. The Lord was again calling His people to repentance (1.1-6). They must change their *way* of living. God’s blessing did not attend to their ritualistic activities in the temple, but the kind of lives they lived. *Spurgeon: The spirit of pharisaism had commenced in the time of Zechariah. Great attention was paid to the formalities and externals of worship, but the vitality of godliness was unknown.* Note. Man’s duties to man are emphasised. If a person is in right relationship with God, so will he be with his fellow men.

- ‘Execute true judgment’ (**v.9**). Administer justice based on truth. Includes the thought of *impartiality* and the entire absence of *falsehood* or *dishonesty* (1 Timothy 5.21; James 3.17).
- ‘Show mercy [*hesed*] and compassions [*rahamim*]’ (**v.9**). *Hesed* is an unending love and kindness. *Rahamim* means ‘a deep awareness and sympathy for another’s suffering’. The root word is ‘womb’ and emphasises brotherly feeling characterising those born from the same womb (Romans 12.10; Hebrews 13.1).
- ‘Oppress not the widow...’ (**v.10**). The *widow*, *orphan*, *foreigner* and *poor* were examples of the vulnerable in society. They had the fewest legal rights and were not supported by a welfare state. Thus, they must not be oppressed or exploited (James 1.27).
- ‘Let none of you imagine evil’ (**v.10**). To plot, scheme or plan vindictively against others (often in a legal dispute). Includes an attitude of bitterness, grudging or backbiting towards another (cf. 8.17; Matthew 5.23-24).

The Discipline of Israel (vv.11-14)

v.11: The response of their ancestors to the preaching of these ‘prophets of old’ is now set forth as an example not to be emulated. Note the *four-step* progression which resulted in a *four-fold* divine judgment.

- ‘Refused to hearken’ (**v.11**). They did not take God’s word seriously, treating it with indifference. They willed not to hear it. It is a sign of terrible moral corruption when even those who claim the Christian name throw doubt on the inspiration of Scripture by denying its plain teaching (2 Timothy 4.3-4).
- ‘Pulled away the shoulder’ (**v.11**). Draws upon the image of an animal which refuses the constraint of a yoke (Hosea 4.16). They continually rebelled against the imposed authority and supposed restraint of God’s word.
- ‘Stopped their ears’ (**v.11**). Literally ‘made their ears heavy’. They deliberately refused to listen to God’s word and thus became dull, unresponsive and insensitive to it (Isaiah 6.10). The word no longer convicted them as before.
- ‘Made their hearts as adamant as stone’ (**v.12**). Ultimately their hearts (mind, will and affections) became as hard as diamond (Jeremiah 17.1). It was impenetrable and impervious to the truth, the word ‘adamant’ being used for a stone on which nothing could be graven by any other instrument. Only the grace and power of God can take the ‘heart of stone’ and create a ‘heart of flesh’ (Ezekiel 11.19; 36.26).

In all this, the people rejected the two-fold revelation of God through the Law and Spirit-filled prophets. This is a rare instance in the OT where the Spirit is identified as the source of inspired Scripture (cf. Nehemiah 9.20, 30; 2 Peter 1.21).

v.12: The divine response to the rebellion of Israel was *four-fold*. Firstly, a great wrath came upon them, a clear reference to the exile (cf. the last words of the Hebrew Bible, 2 Chronicles 36.14-17). **v.13:** Secondly, when His people cried in the distress and anguish of the ‘wrath’, Jehovah would not listen as they had not listened to his word through the prophets. The Lord turned a deaf ear to their cries for seventy years (Jeremiah 11.11; Isaiah 1.15; Proverbs 1.27-28). **v.14:** Thirdly, God ‘scattered’ or hurled them by a storm (whirlwind) among the nations, like chaff being driven by the wind (Hosea 13.3). They couldn’t say that they hadn’t been warned (Deuteronomy 28.36-37, 64-68). Finally, the ‘pleasant’ (fruitful, wealthy) land that once flowed with milk and honey now became ‘desolate’ (a waste) with ‘no man passing through or returning’ expressing a land destitute of population. All because they failed to heed the written and spoken word of God.