

# **Zechariah 07 - Questions About Fasting; Two Oracles of God; Condemnation of Empty Ritualism; Condemnation of Past Covenant Failure**

## III. Questions and Answers About Fasting (Zech 7:1—8:23)

### (1) Question (7:1-3)

- (A) Date (7:1)
- (B) Questioner (7:2)
- (C) Question (7:3)

### (2) Four divine answers (7:4—8:23)

- (A) Condemnation of empty ritualism (7:4-7)
- (B) Condemnation of past covenant failure (7:8-14)
  - (a) Covenant requirements (7:8-10)
  - (b) Covenant rebellion (7:11-12)
  - (c) Covenant judgment (7:13-14)

## III. Questions and Answers About Fasting (Zech 7:1—8:23)

This section begins the second of the three divisions of the book. It is within this, the book's structural core, that we find the interpretive essence of Zechariah's entire message. The Lord Himself is undertaking to encourage His people to take heart and rebuild the Temple because He is returning to once again inhabit Jerusalem, glorify the city and bless its inhabitants.

Leaving behind the apocalyptic imagery of the previous chapters, Zechariah launches into a sermon of prophetic exhortation. The basis of this ethical appeal to the people is a response to a question asked of Zechariah by a delegation from the city of Bethel in regard to the continued appropriateness of observing certain days of fasting. This elicits a visceral response from the prophet, who tells the people that no matter the particular circumstances, it is faithfulness to the covenant that God is concerned about, not manmade rituals. The worshipers' attitudes must be congruent with their exercise in order for God to appreciate their worship.

This two-chapter portion is dated Dec 7, 518 BC, almost two years after Zechariah's night visions, and over two years since the reconstruction of the Temple had begun. Temple

construction was about halfway completed (Cf. Ezra 5:16; 6:15). This chapter begins as the city of Bethel sends a delegation to the Jerusalem priests who served at the then half-completed Temple to inquire as to whether it was appropriate to continue observing the fast day of Tisha B'Av, the commemoration of the day of the Temple's destruction in 586 BC. Zechariah, speaking for the Lord, denounces the people for observing this and other fast days with inappropriate motives, with being more concerned with observance than obedience. The Lord charges them with self-centeredness and forgetting the covenant stipulations of social justice, mercy and societal compassion. ***They had hypocritically substituted the consideration of man-made memorials for God-ordained requirements.*** The people are reminded that it was this very attitude of covenantal neglect and insubordination which had invoked the Lord's severe wrath and resulted in the Babylonian exile.

## **Zechariah 7**

(1) Question (7:1-3)

(A) Date (7:1)

**1** 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.**

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**1** During the fourth year of the reign of King Darius, a message from the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month Kislev.

**1** And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Darius, that the word of the Lord came unto Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month, even in Chisleu;

- "...fourth year of King Darius" - 2nd date given in Zechariah (Cf. 1:7); the events of Zech 7 took place about two years after the events of Zech 1 ("second year of Darius")

- "...fourth day of the ninth month" - the exact date was December 7, 518 BC

- "...Chislev" - the Babylonian name for the ninth month; corresponds to Nov/Dec

(B) Questioner (7:2)

**2** Now the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to seek the favor of the LORD,

**2** Now the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to seek the favor of the LORD,

**2** The people of Bethel were sending Sharezer, Regem-melech, and their men to pray in the LORD's presence

**2** When they had sent unto the house of God Sherezzer and Regemmelech, and their men, to pray before the LORD,

- "...Bethel" - a well-known city before the exile, once filled with idolatry, about 10 miles north of Jerusalem. Many of the city's former inhabitants had returned from exile (Cf. Ezra 2:28; Neh 7:32; 11:31).

— The town apparently sent two representatives, along with their men, to the priests in Jerusalem to get some spiritual answers...

- "...Sharezer and Regemmelech" - Babylonian names, showing that they were Jews who were born in Babylon during the exile and since returned to Israel

### (C) Question (7:3)

3 speaking to **the priests** who *belong* to the house of the LORD of armies, and to **the prophets**, saying, "Shall I weep in the **fifth month** and fast, as I have done **these many years?**"

3 speaking to the priests who belong to the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, "Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?"

3 and to speak to the priests assigned to the Temple of the LORD of the Heavenly Armies along with the prophets, asking, "Am I to go about mourning, denying myself throughout the fifth month, as I have these many years?"

3 *And* to speak unto the priests which *were* in the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years?

- "...the priests" - the delegation from Bethel came to inquire of the priests because it was their duty to give decisions on points of the Law (Cf. Deut 17:9).

- "...the prophets" - Haggai and Zechariah

- "...I" [2x] - the questions were asked in the first person, but the answer from the Lord through Zechariah went out to all the people (v5), because they were all interested in and affected by the same condition.

- "...fifth month" - Av (mid-July to mid-August); the the ninth day of the fifth month was the date that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 586 BC. The fast in the fifth month memorialized it's destruction.

— Josephus records that the destruction of the second (Zerubbabel/Herod's) temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, also occurred on the 9th of Av, the same date as Solomon's Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC:

*So Titus retired into the tower of Antonia, and resolved to storm the temple the next day, early in the morning, with his whole army, and to encamp round about the holy house; but, as for that house, God had for certain long ago doomed it to the fire; and now that fatal day was come, according to the revolution of ages; it was the tenth day of the month Lous (Av), upon which it was formerly burnt by the king of Babylon;*

*although these flames took their rise from the Jews themselves, and were occasioned by them... [Josephus, Antiquities, 6.4.5]*

- "...these many years" - during the time of their exile in Babylon
- Their question was about how they should worship the Lord (Cf. Mal 1:9). Now that they were back in the land, and the temple was being rebuilt, the two men wanted to know if they should continue to weep and fast.
  - The original purpose of the fasting and weeping was because it was the anniversary of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the temple in 586 BC. The fasting to commemorate this had become a Jewish tradition, but was never prescribed in the Mosaic Law. The only fast prescribed in the Mosaic Law was on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29; 23:27-32).
  - The fasting had become burdensome to them, and it had fallen out of favor with the people considering present circumstances. The fasts had been instituted by the nation, not the Lord, but now they wanted to know from the Lord whether they should continue them or abolish them.
  - Men are always looking for rules, but God instead gives them principles, whereby they can conduct their lives under the Spirit's direction. Too often, we want to shrink our responsibility before God into a checklist. This appeals to us because we like controlling the what, when, and how of serving God. But God hates plastic religion that fails to alter the way we think and live.

Note that in all four oracles of God to Zechariah, which all revolve around this question about fasting by this delegation from Bethel, no direct answer is ever given to their question. The reason for this is that God doesn't care about their question, it's not an important issue. It is their attitude behind the question that God is answering through Zechariah in these four oracles.

(2) Four divine answers (7:4—8:23)

(A) Condemnation of empty ritualism (7:4-7)

- 4 Then the word of the LORD of armies came to me, saying,
- 4 Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying,
- 4 Then this message from the LORD of the Heavenly Armies came to me:
- 4 Then came the word of the LORD of hosts unto me, saying,
  - This begins the first of four oracles in Zech 7-8 (Cf. 7:4; 7:8; 8:1; 8:18), all of which address the question raised by this delegation

5 "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh *months* these **seventyyears**, was it actually for Me that you fasted?'"

5 "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?

5 "Talk to everyone in the land, as well as to the priests. Ask them, 'When you were fasting and mourning during the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, were you really fasting for me?

5 Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh *month*, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, *even* to me?

- What seemed like an innocent question about the need to continue a fast was actually a question filled with hypocrisy and a complete misunderstanding of God.

- God's seemingly harsh answer condemns the empty ritualism that they were not keen on continuing. He condemns this ritual they started because they were mourning the consequence, but not the cause behind it.

— They were upset and grieving over the fact that the temple was destroyed, but they were not upset or grieving over their violations of God's Law, which forced Him to discipline His people, which resulted in the temple being destroyed.

— They should have been more upset about what got them into this mess than what the mess looked like. Their eyes were on the *effect* of the destruction, not on the *cause* of the destruction. They were upset about doing the time when they should've been upset about the crime that led them to doing the time.

— The people had turned these fasts into occasions for self-pity over their current condition (in exile in Babylon, with no temple, and Jerusalem in ruin) rather than engaging in prayer and genuine spiritual repentance.

— God wouldn't have been so against their ritual mourning the destruction of the temple if they more mindful of the cause of the destruction rather than the effect of it. Throughout Scripture, God issues very sharp condemnations of empty ritualism (Cf. Is 29:13; Mark 7:13).

- "...seventy years" - during the 70-year captivity in Babylon, the Jews faithfully kept this ritual of fasting and mourning in the fifth and seventh months

- "...was it actually for Me that you fasted?" - with one question, God tore away all the sham and hypocrisy in their attitude. All their fasting and mourning were done solely to gratify themselves.

— The essence of piety, taking God into account in every detail of life, was sorely lacking. The meaning of a fast is always of more importance than the time element. It is "Why?" not "When?" Their fasting did not please God at all.

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

6 When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves?

6 And when you eat and drink, you're eating and drinking for your own benefit, aren't you?

6 And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat *for yourselves*, and drink *for yourselves*?

- The same spirit of selfishness that existed in their fasting was also present in their feasting

7 Are *these* not the words which the LORD proclaimed by the **former prophets**, when Jerusalem was **inhabited and carefree** along with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?"

7 Are not *these* the words which the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous along with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?"

7 Isn't this what the LORD proclaimed through the former prophets, when a prosperous Jerusalem was inhabited, as were its surrounding cities, the Negev, and the Shephelah?"

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?

- "...former prophets" - pre-exilic prophets (Isaiah, et al). If Zechariah's words appear harsh here, he's not saying anything different than what other prophets before him said (Cf. Is 66:1-3; Jer 7:21-24; 25:3-7; Amos 5:21-27).

— The calamities that caused the fasts in the first place (in this case, the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem), were the results of their disobedience to God's Word through His prophets.

— Now Zechariah is saying, Why concern yourselves with what He has not commanded (the fasts) when you should be listening and obeying what He has clearly and repeatedly told you to do.

— They should rather obey the words of the prophets who prophesied before the exile when the land was settled and inhabited. If they would have done that, they wouldn't have ever fasted or mourned because the temple and Jerusalem would still be standing.

— They fasted because of their judgment, but the judgment was brought upon them by their sin. Therefore, the cause of their fasts was their sins. If their sins were removed, the fasting would be unnecessary.

- "...inhabited and carefree" - when God originally spoke through Isaiah, Jerusalem was populated and without care, as were its suburbs, and even the foothills and the Negev were inhabited.

— Israel never thought the captivity would happen...the economy was up, the stock market was up, unemployment was down...everything was good

Is 29:13: Then the Lord said, "Because this people approaches Me with their words And honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of *the* commandment of men that is taught;

(B) Condemnation of past covenant failure (7:8-14)

(a) Covenant requirements (7:8-10)

**8** Then **the word of the LORD came to Zechariah**, saying,

**8** Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah saying,

**8** This message from the LORD came to Zechariah again:

**8** And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah, saying,

- "...the word of the LORD came to Zechariah" - oracle 2 of 4 (Cf. 7:4; 7:8; 8:1; 8:18)

— The second oracle outlines the Mosaic Laws that were broken, which led to the destruction of the temple

— Israel was upset about the destruction of the temple, but they were not upset by the covenant violations that led to its destruction

— Verses 9-10 summarize the covenant requirements that Israel violated; v11-12 is the covenant rebellion

**9** "This is what the LORD of armies has said: '**Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother;**

**9** "Thus has the LORD of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother;

**9** "This is what the LORD of the Heavenly Armies says: 'Administer true justice, and show gracious love and mercy toward each other.

**9** Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother:

- God recapitulates what caused the Babylonian captivity in the first place

- "...Dispense true justice" - numerous provisions of the Mosaic Law relate to how Israel was to "dispense true justice"

— The administration of justice must always be based on truth. God hates unrighteous judgment, for He is the righteous Judge of the earth (Cf. Gen 18:25).

— When God thinks of justice, He thinks of those who are oppressed: not paying employees who earned their pay; putting someone to death to obtain their property (Ahab); balances/weights that aren't fair, and many other provisions

- "...practice kindness" - *hesed*, kindness and pity were to be practiced in both public and private relationships

- "...compassion each to his brother" - commandments 5-10 taught the Israelites how to relate to each other; Israel was not practicing these commandments with each other

- None of this was new; Zechariah is not giving these returned exiles a new message. The principles of God's righteous governance are eternal. Man should never be in doubt as to the course of life and conduct that pleases God and assures His favor and blessing.

10 and **do not oppress the widow or the orphan**, the **stranger** or the poor; and do not **devise evil in your hearts** against one another.'

10 and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.'

10 You are not to wrong the widow, orphans, the foreigner, or the poor, and you are not to plan evil against each other.

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.

- "...do not oppress the widow or the orphan" - they were not looking out for the widows and orphans, in fact they were oppressing them (Cf. James 1:27)

- "...stranger" - *ger*, an alien, a non-Israelite. Describes a person who entered Israel and followed legal procedures to obtain recognized standing as a resident alien. They were legal immigrants.

— Ruth is a good example. Although a Moabite, she was allowed to enter the land (even though God said in Deuteronomy that the Moabites and Ammonites could not enter the land). Thus, God Himself recognized the distinction between being a *ger* and those who entered the country illegally (*nekhar* or *zar*) for nefarious reasons. Ruth entered Israel legally and submitted to both their culture and religion.

— There is a significant difference between an alien (*ger*, used in v10) and a foreigner (*nekhar* or *zar*) used elsewhere in the OT

- "...devise evil in your hearts" - they were devising evil in their hearts; they were turning on each other because the evil was emanating from their heart (Cf. Prov 4:23)

(b) Covenant rebellion (7:11-12)

11 But they **refused to pay attention**, and **turned a stubborn shoulder** and **plugged their ears from hearing**.

11 But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing.

11 But they refused to pay attention, turned their backs, and stopped listening.

**11** But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear.

- "...refused to pay attention" - they refused to pay attention to the covenant, and refused to pay attention to the prophets who were pointing out their covenant violations. Although repeatedly warned and lovingly entreated, their forefathers pre-exile refused to hear the all-wise exhortations of God.

— God took this as a rejection of His Word. There are many ways that we can reject God's Word...from burning our Bible to organizing our life in such a way that we're so busy that we don't have time to read, study or pray.

- "...turned a stubborn shoulder" - an agrarian term, relating to the difficulty in yoking an unyielding ox; intractable refusal

— They weren't actively opposing the prophets...they simply ignored them and their warnings from God. Their lifestyles were setup that they had everything else to do except pay attention to what was important to God.

— The more they refused the truth, the more earnestly the messengers of the Lord pleaded with them.

- "...plugged their ears from hearing" - eventually they willingly drown out the prophet's messages by purposefully plugging their ears, silencing the voices of the prophets (Cf. Is 6:10; Jer 7:26)

— Stephen's politically incorrect sermon condemning 1st century Israel of their guilt of not recognizing their Messiah resulted in the Sanhedrin "covering their ears" just as they began to stone him (Cf. Acts 7:57).

**12 They also made their hearts as hard as a diamond** so that they could not hear **the Law and the words** which **the LORD of armies had sent by His Spirit** through the former prophets; **therefore great wrath came from the LORD of armies.**

12 They made their hearts *like* flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts.

12 They made their hearts hard like a diamond, to keep from obeying the Law and the messages that the LORD of the Heavenly Armies sent by his Spirit through the former prophets.

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.

- "...They also made their hearts as *hard as a diamond*" - finally, they hardened their hearts like stone. This is the climax. After repeatedly refusing the light of the prophets, their hearts became more and more hardened, cold, and unresponsive.

— Spiritual hardening of the heart is just as real as physical hardening of the arteries (sclerosis), but infinitely more disastrous. When the center of life, the heart, is infected and hardened, the patient is in desperate condition.

- Calvinism points to this verse and says, "Their hearts were as *hard* as a diamond" and use that to argue for their doctrine of Total Depravity. What they completely miss is the first part of the verse that indicates that the people ("they") "made their hearts...hard" of their own volition. God didn't harden their hearts.

— Calvinists do the same thing with Pharaoh in Exodus...they always point out that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but what they overlook is that the text says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart 6x before it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (see notes on Ex 4:21).

- "...the Law and the words" - the prophets showed up during times of national disobedience and filed a "covenant lawsuit" (*rîb*)

— In the lawsuit, they pointed out the specific violations of the Mosaic Covenant, and the consequences that would come as a result if they did not repent and return to the Lord in obedience.

— This ritualistic fasting that they had been doing, and wanted to stop doing, was in remembrance of the consequences of their disobedience, not their own sin and covenant violations that brought on the consequences in the first place.

- "...the LORD of armies had sent by His Spirit" - there is no other mention of the Holy Spirit as the Mediator of God's Word to the prophets, who were themselves mediators, anywhere else in the OT prophetic books. Zechariah is the first to record this aspect of the Doctrine of the Spirit.

— What this means is that Israel in the OT did not reject the prophets themselves, they rejected God Himself. Today, if we reject a Bible teacher who is faithful, you're not rejecting that Bible teacher, you're rejecting the Spirit-led message that the teacher is communicating.

- "...therefore great wrath came from the LORD of armies" - for such continued disobedience, there could be but one outcome: the outworking of the curses of the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 28:15-68).

— This wasn't new revelation from Zechariah...the Mosaic Law was 1000 years old when Zechariah prophesied. He's just saying the same thing that all of the other prophets said, and communicated the curses of Deut 28 for covenant violations.

— God has a right to bring covenant discipline upon Israel for covenant disobedience because Israel entered into the Suzerain-Vassel Treaty with God at Mount Sinai.

Hosea 4:1: Listen to the word of the LORD, you sons of Israel, Because the LORD **has a case** [*rîb*] against the inhabitants of the land, For there is no faithfulness, nor loyalty, Nor

knowledge of God in the land.

Micah 6:1-2:

1 Hear now what the LORD is saying, "Arise, plead **your case** [*rîb*] before the mountains, And let the hills hear your voice.

2 "Listen, you mountains, to the **indictment** by the LORD, And you enduring foundations of the earth, Because the LORD has a case against His people; And He will dispute with Israel.

(c) Covenant judgment (7:13-14)

13 And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the LORD of armies;

13 And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the LORD of hosts;

13 Therefore, just as when I cried out and they would not listen, so also they will cry out, and I will not listen,' says the LORD of the Heavenly Armies.

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:

- Just as the Lord had cried unto them by His prophets, so often and so patiently, yet they would not hear, so they would cry to Him in their distress for deliverance, and He would not hear.

— God says, I'm shouting at you, but you would not listen, so I'm going to put you into a circumstance through divine discipline where you're shouting at Me, then it's My turn not to listen (Cf. Is 1:15; Micah 3:4; Jer 11:11; 14:12).

14 "but I **scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations** whom they did not know. So **the land was desolated behind them so that no one went back and forth**, since **they made the pleasant land desolate.**"

14 "but I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations whom they have not known. Thus the land is desolated behind them so that no one went back and forth, for they made the pleasant land desolate."

14 'I will scatter them to all of the nations, which they have not known.'" Now the earth was left desolate after them. As a result, no one came or went because they had turned a pleasant land into a desert.

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.

- Instead of the Lord hearing their prayers, He scattered them with a violent whirlwind among the nations whom they had not known
- "...I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations" - this prophecy could not have been fulfilled in the return from Babylon, because that was only one nation (not many "nations").
- This is a foreshadowing of the scattering that would take place leading up to 70 AD, consequent to their great disobedience in rejecting their promised Messiah, and last for almost 2000 years.
- Even though "scattered" here is in the past tense, God is speaking in the "prophetic past" in which a future event is so certain that the prophet considers it as if it had already happened (Cf. Is 44:28; 52:14; 53:1-6).
- "...the land was desolated behind them so that no one went back and forth" - as a result of the Babylonian Captivity, the land was left desolate. But God, in His remarkable providence, no foreign powers took possession of it. When the rightful inhabitants were absent, it was preserved for the day of their return after 70 years.
- In his work *The Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain wrote the following after visiting Israel in 1869:
 

*...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.*
- "...they made the pleasant land desolate" - though the judgment was of God, and though He used the enemy as His instrument for punishment, they, the people of Israel, are charged with making the land desolate.