

Should we Still Fast? **Zechariah 7:1-8:23**

Why does someone become a dentist? Let's look at three hypothetical people.

- Person A becomes a dentist because they want to make lots of money. Dentists charge a pretty good rate per hour. There's a shortage of dentists, so there should be no shortage of customers. It seems like a good, solid pathway to becoming reasonably wealthy.
- Person B becomes a dentist because they want to help relieve the pain people suffer when things go wrong with their teeth. They don't like to see people suffer. They want to do all they can to remove that suffering.
- Person C becomes a dentist because they're fascinated by people's reactions to pain. It's something that's always intrigued them. Being a dentist gives them a good opportunity to experiment.

Three people doing the same job. Outwardly, there may not be much difference in the results – their customers' teeth look much the same – but which of the three would you prefer to go to?

Why do people come to church? Let's find another three hypothetical people.

- Person X comes to church because they think it'll impress God. They want to get into God's good books and they think coming to church will help them do that.
- Person Y comes to church because they're looking for a partner. They think churches are full of relatively nice people and so it's a good place to look.

- Person Z comes to church because they want to learn more about God. They're in relationship with God, but they realise there's so much more about God they need to understand.

Outwardly, they're all doing the same thing – not much difference in their actions. But how will God feel about these three different people? Will God's view of them be identical?

Why are you a Christian? Is your motivation basically self-centred or God-centred?

- Are you a Christian because of what you can get out of it? The rewards are pretty good and there seem to be a whole lot of fringe benefits.
- Or are you a Christian because God's great and God's God and you really want what God wants and you think God should be honoured because He is God and you want to see everything done according to God's perfect will?

Ouch! It's not a very nice question to ask, is it?

Is this Fast still Relevant?

Zechariah 7 has another reference to time. It's nearly two years after the previous reference in 1:7 – nearly two years since Zechariah had that series of eight visions. A delegation comes to Jerusalem to ask a question of the priests and prophets. The question's in verse 3:

Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?

This fast, it seems, had to do with the events leading up to the exile. It probably commemorated the burning of the temple in 587BC. If you look forward to 8:19, you'll see that Zechariah also mentions fasts in the fourth, seventh

and tenth months.

- The one in the fourth month probably remembered the capture of Jerusalem in 587_{BC}.
- The one in the seventh month probably remembered the assassination of Gedaliah, the governor of Jerusalem – although it's possible it also could be the fast on the Day of Atonement as commanded by the law.
- The one in the tenth month probably remembered the siege of Jerusalem in 588_{BC}.

The events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem made a huge impact on these people. They were devastating events. There was huge destruction of property. There was much loss of life. God's house was destroyed. People were taken into captivity and exile. It was tragic. It radically changed their lives. They set aside special days so they wouldn't forget. It's like having annual memorial services for 9/11 or the Bali bombings. It's like having special events on Anzac Day each year.

But now these people are back in the land. The exile's over. The temple's well under way. Life's slowly returning to normal. – to how it should be for God's people living in God's land. So, should they still have the fasts? Now they're back in the land, is it appropriate to continue denying themselves on these particular days?

God's answer's pretty blunt. Verse 4:

Then the word of the Lord Almighty came to me: "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were

you not just feasting for yourselves? Are these not the words Yahweh proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?"

Why did they fast? They fasted because of what they hoped to get out of it. They felt sorry for themselves. They'd been beaten up pretty badly. They lived in exile – in a foreign land far from the land God promised them. Life was rather miserable. They desired a means to make life better.

- They wanted out of the exile.
- They wanted their own land back.
- They wanted a better lifestyle.
- They wanted the good old days.

And they thought fasting may get it for them. Maybe if we beat ourselves about the head a bit, God'll feel sorry for us. Maybe we can sort of twist His arm so we can get Him to do what we want. God says: True fasting is going without sin.

It's a hard call, isn't it? Why do you relate to God the way you do?

- Is it because God's so great and there's no one else like Him – no one who comes even close – and you just want to see Him honoured because He's so majestic and magnificent and great beyond measure?
- It is because God's so good and right and just and you long for a world where everything's perfectly good and justice is done completely and there's not a shadow of evil anywhere?
- Is it because God's God and we're not and the only

appropriate thing for a creature to do in relation to God is to submit to Him and treat Him as God?

- Or is it for some self-centred motive? You want to selfishly get all the blessings God promises His followers. You want prestige in His kingdom. You want to save your own skin.

For me, if I'm honest with myself, there's an awful lot of self-centredness in the way I relate to Him. I'm more interested in myself and what I get out of it than in truly honouring God and truly seeking goodness.

The Problem in the Past

God drives it home further in verse 8:

And the word of Yahweh came again to Zechariah: 'This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'

"But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by His Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry.

"When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen', says the Lord Almighty. 'I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or go. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate'."

What was their problem? The destruction of Jerusalem? The burning of the temple? The being taken into exile?

The things they remembered in their annual fasts? Those things were tragic – but they weren't the real problem. They were only the consequences of the problem. The real problem was their failure to listen to God – their failure to be concerned about the things God's concerned about. They'd ignored things like justice and mercy and compassion. They were too busy enjoying life in the land – too busy self-centredly enjoying all the blessings God gave them – that they failed the fundamental requirements of living as God's people.

In the book of Job, the Satan challenges God – he says to God: "Job's not interested in You. Job doesn't really love You. All you've done is bribe him. The only reason Job serves You is for what he gets out of it". In relation to Job, the Satan was shown to be wrong – but it may have been a different story altogether with the people Zechariah addressed.

And what if the same challenge was issued about our lives? It's a struggle I face. God's blessed me abundantly with material goods – far more than I need. They're His good gifts. But what's my attitude towards them?

- Do I think I deserve them?
- Do I think they're mine by right – I've earned them?
- Do I hoard them for myself?
- Do I treat them selfishly?

Am I more interested in my materialistic lifestyle than true righteousness? Am I more interested in getting more things than in justice and mercy and compassion? Am I more interested in investing in my kingdom than God's kingdom.

This is why these people were still struggling in their

current situation. Their ancestors did the wrong thing. Their ancestors didn't listen to God. Their ancestors failed to show justice and mercy and compassion. God punished their ancestors. Three things:

- He didn't listen to them when they called to Him for help.
- He scattered them in the exile.
- He turned the promised land into a desolation.

They'd now returned from the exile – but they were still learning to cope with the land that had been desolated.

The challenge that's set before them is: Don't make the same mistakes as your ancestors. Why are you fasting? Do you really want God? If you want God, it'll show in the way you live. You'll seek justice and mercy and compassion – not just that others will show those things to you, but that you'll desire to show those things to others.

God's about to make some amazing promises in chapter 8 – promises that relate to the question about fasting – but, before He does that, the people need to have the lesson of the exile firmly planted in their minds. Wanting God is not simply a matter of wanting a genie to give you a luxurious ride through life. Wanting God's a matter of wanting what God wants.

- The danger is that we want a god who conforms to our self-centred and selfish idea of what a god should be like – a god who blesses me and my self-centred plans and gives me what I want and helps me to do what I want to do. We want a god who fits into the way we want to live life and who helps us achieve our goals.
- That's not the real God. The real God does want to bless us – to bless us greatly – but on His terms.

For He's the only one qualified to say what real blessing is. He's the only one qualified to say what the purpose of life is and how He made it to be lived and what He's decided is the goal of history.

So, before He tells these people about the great things He's going to do, He reminds them of what happened to their ancestors when they failed to treat Him as God. He calls on them not to make the same mistake.

God Promises to Bless

Ten times in chapter 8 we have a statement to the effect:

This is what the Lord Almighty says ...

That's how the NIV translates it. More literally, it's *Yahweh of hosts*. That is, it's God's personal name (Yahweh) and an indication that He has hosts at His disposal. It points to God's might – to His ability to do the things He's about to promise.

Let's look briefly at each statement in turn. Verse 2:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her."

There is a right type of jealousy. God's jealous for His people. He wants what's good for them. He wants the best for them. He wants to bless them. After all their unfaithfulness, He still wants them. Yet, for that to happen, they have to stay in right relationship with Himself. They have to be treating Him as the one true God. They can't go chasing after other gods or other philosophies or other worldviews. They may look attractive for a time, but there's no real blessing there. They're empty because they're not the truth. God's jealous that His people remain in the truth.

The second one – verse 3:

This is what the Lord says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain."

In the opening chapters of Ezekiel, the prophet records a vision of God leaving Jerusalem. It indicates God's abandoned His people. Jerusalem will fall. The city will go into exile. But now the exile's over. The people have returned. God promises to again dwell in their midst. More than that, He says the city – His people – will be characterised by truth and holiness.

The third one – verse 4:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there."

It's a picture of peace and security. These are the early years after the return from exile. Who made the trip back home? For most of them, it was those who were relatively young and strong. The journey itself was hard. The conditions back home were hard. There was a lot of hard work to be done. This was not a time of having the aged enjoying the benefits of age. Nor was it a time of having children playing safely in the streets. But that time would come.

The fourth one – verse 6:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "It may seem marvellous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvellous to Me?" declares the Lord Almighty.

In other words: Is anything too hard for God? From a

human perspective, this may seem impossible. Life was tough. Progress was slow. Enemies hindered their work. Foreign nations still had the final say. But God will bring about His promises. He has the power to do it. He has the desire to do it.

The fifth one – verse 7:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "I will save My people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be My people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God.

In chapter 7, God reminded them they'd been scattered with a whirlwind. He sent them all over the place among foreign nations. Now, some had returned – but more will follow.

The sixth one's much longer. Verse 9:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "You who now hear these words spoken by the prophets who were there when the foundation was laid for the house of the Lord Almighty, let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built. Before that time there were no wages for man or beast. No one could go about his business safely because of his enemy, for I had turned every man against his neighbour. But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past," declares the Lord Almighty.

"The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of the people. As you have been an object of cursing among the nations, O Judah and Israel, so will I save you, and you will be a

blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong."

There's a reminder of the covenant promises to Abraham – the promises about the land and its abundant production and about being a blessing to the nations. This is what God will do – so there's also an encouragement to keep going. Don't give up.

The seventh one – verse 14:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Just as I had determined to bring disaster upon you and showed no pity when your fathers angered Me," says the Lord Almighty, "so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. These are the things you are to do: speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbour, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the Lord.

As with the sixth declaration, so also this one: there's a contrast between the past – the disaster of the exile – and what God will do for them in the future. God's determined to do good to His people. Yet, they have a responsibility too: a responsibility to turn away from evil and seek truth and justice. God tells them the things He hates – He expects them to hate them too.

The eighth one – verse 18:

Again the word of the Lord Almighty came to me. This is what the Lord Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace."

Now we get back to the original question – the one about

whether they should continue with their fasts. God says He'll turn those fasts into joyous occasions – times of feasting and festival. God's blessings will be so abundant that sorrow and sadness will be unknown. When? He doesn't say. What should they do about the fasts in the meantime? They're not told – although I suspect there's a fairly strong implication they should stop.

The ninth declaration – verse 20:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going.' And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat Him."

It's a picture of people desiring God and desiring what God wants. God's people are encouraging one another to relate properly and fully to God. And it's gone beyond the nation of Israel – other nations are joining them in wanting to truly serve God.

The final declaration – verse 23:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'."

It's the reversal of the tower of Babel. There God acted in judgment on human wickedness and spread people out in various languages and nations. Now the nations are coming to Jerusalem – wanting to know about God; wanting to know God.

Conclusion

Overall, it's a great picture, isn't it? God living with His people. Safety. Security. Prosperity. Peace. Harmony. People celebrating God – including the Gentiles. A time of joy and gladness. This is what God will do. Fasting will turn into celebration.

Five hundred years later, some people asked another prophet a question about the appropriate time to fast (Mk.2:18-20):

How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while He is with them? They cannot, so long as they have Him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast."

At one level, we live in the time promised by Zechariah – the time anticipated by Israel.

- God has come and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus. God continues to dwell among us by His Spirit.
- God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.
- God has set us apart as His special people.
- God has guaranteed our future because Jesus died for us – that is perfectly secure.
- God is bringing in people from all nations to join His people and to worship and celebrate Him.

And so the New Testament is full of encouragement to us to rejoice in what God's done for us. Philippians 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord

is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Yet, at another level, we still live in anticipation. At this point in time, we still suffer. We still go through hard times. We still struggle with evil in this world and in ourselves. We await Jesus' return. We await the perfection of God's kingdom as it will be. We know that's coming. We know we'll be part of it. That keeps us going as we groan in the present. We have an inner contentment even as we face trials and difficulties and hard times – for we know the future God has for us and we know God uses even those difficulties to achieve His good purposes in our lives.

While we wait, we get on with God's purposes in the world – the things mentioned in Zechariah.

- We work at loving the things God loves – at becoming people of justice and mercy and compassion. That's what God loved then; it's what God still loves.
- We work at bringing the nations to God. We want others to celebrate the greatness of God and His goodness to us.