

**BOOK OF ZECHARIAH**  
**RITUALISM OR REALITY?**  
**ZECHARIAH 7:1-7**

**Introduction**

The *seventh* and *eighth chapters* are the **third distinct division** of the **PROPHECY**.

The **first portion** was *a call to NATIONAL REPENTANCE and TURNING TO THE LORD for HIS COVENANT BLESSINGS*.

After a **NATIONAL TURNING TO THE LORD, ZECHARIAH** was granted **EIGHT REMARKABLE NIGHT VISIONS** which we looked at that culminated in the **PROPHECY** related to the **FUTURE EARTHLY REIGN OF THE MESSIAH!**

Here in *Chapter 7*, almost two years have passed since those **EIGHT VISIONS** describing the **FUTURE OF ISRAEL** had been given. It was *518 BC*. The **TEMPLE** had been steadily rising before the people's eyes because the **OBSTACLES** for the completion of the **TEMPLE** were removed with the **DECREE OF DARIUS** which confirmed the original **DECREE OF CYRUS** (*Ezra 6:1-14*).

The **NATION'S** situation at this point looked promising. Although the walls of **JERUSALEM** were still in ruins and parts of the town were in desolation, the city and the surrounding country side were beginning to take shape again.

The question naturally came to the minds of the **PEOPLE** that since signs of apparent prosperity were beginning to abound, should they continue to **OBSERVE THE DAYS OF NATIONAL SORROW AND FASTING**, which had been instituted in memory of the **DESTRUCTION** of the **TEMPLE** while they were captive in **BABYLON**.

At this time, the **LORD** again spoke through **ZECHARIAH** and granted them an answer of far more than what they expected. The **LORD'S DESIRE** in this **MESSAGE** to **HIS PEOPLE** was to curb the **JEW'S** trend toward **FORMALISM** in **RELIGION** and for them to **MOVE TO SOMETHING MORE REAL!**

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What the **LORD** wanted from **HIS PEOPLE** was **TRUE JUSTICE IN THEIR DEALINGS** combined with **MERCY AND COMPASSION FOR THE WEAK!**

**HE** wanted them to **OBEY THE MORAL PRECEPTS AND PRINCIPLES OF HIS WORD** which was way more important than **CEREMONIES** and **MAN-MADE TRADITIONS** [like abstinence from food and drink enacted while the people were in **BABYLON**].

**I. WE SEE THEIR QUESTION ABOUT THE FAST. (Vs 1-3)**  
A new **WORD OF THE LORD** came to **ZECHARIAH** in *verse 1*.

As in the case of **ZECHARIAH'S** opening **MESSAGE** a date is given according to the **BABYLONIAN CALENDAR**. The fact that it was in the **fourth year** of **DARIUS** that this **PROPHECY** came is important. For by this time the **DECREE OF DARIUS** that was given in *Ezra 6:1-11* was being fulfilled and the harassment of those **REBUILDING THE TEMPLE** had been ordered to cease.

The **TEMPLE** was at this point about halfway completed and **SACRIFICES** had begun (*Ezra 3:3*). After a lapse of nearly two years, with the resistance to **REBUILDING THE TEMPLE** ended, **ZECHARIAH** was again called to **PROPHECY**.

The **OCCASION** for the **PROPHECY** is given in *verse 2 and 3a*. A **DELEGATION** had been sent to the **HOUSE OF GOD** to:

- 1) **To PRAY** before the **LORD** (*lit. - to make sweet, pleasant, or stroke the face of the Lord*).

- 2) **To speak unto the PRIESTS** which were in the **HOUSE OF THE LORD OF HOSTS, and to the PROPHETS**.

They had a question that was troubling them, so they came to those whom the **LORD** had appointed for such circumstances. (*Deuteronomy 17:9-11; Ezekiel 44:23-24*)

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*Malachi 2:7*—“For the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

The **DELEGATION’S** question is found in the last half of *verse 3*.

So, we see here that they inquired of the **PRIESTS** and **PROPHETS** as to whether they should continue the self-imposed tradition of **MOURNING** and **FASTING** or not.

*(The idea here is that they wanted to be free of this custom they had kept during their captivity.)*

The ***fifth month*** was the month the **BABYLONIAN** army destroyed **JERUSALEM** and the **TEMPLE** as recorded in both **2 Kings 25:8-9**, and **Jeremiah 52:12-13**. **2 Kings 25:9**—“And he burnt the house of the LORD, and the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man’s house burnt he with fire.”

When the **CHILDREN OF ISRAEL** went into **CAPTIVITY** they established **this time of MOURNING and FASTING to commemorate this national calamity**. (So they had been having this event for 70 years or so.)

Now, this ***fifth month*** **FAST** was **only one of four fasts (7:5, 8:19)** that were presently held concerning the fall of **JERUSALEM**.

[The ***first fast*** was for *when the siege began* in the **10<sup>th</sup> mo.**, the ***second fast*** was for *when the enemy entered the city* in the **4<sup>th</sup> mo.**, this ***third fast*** commemorated the burning of the city and the **TEMPLE** in the **5<sup>th</sup> mo.**, then the ***fourth fast*** held in the **7<sup>th</sup> mo.** was *in memory of the assassinations and massacre* that took place.]

Understand that the **O.T.** required only one **FAST** - the one known as ***Yom Kippur***. (or **THE DAY OF ATONEMENT**.)

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Also, at times, when **GOD’S** people backslid from **HIM** and **HE** sent **CHASTISEMENT** upon them, **GOD** had been known to issue a call for a period of national **FASTING** (*see Joel 1:13-14*). But these calls to **REPENTANCE** were never intended to become an **ANNUAL MECHANICAL** season of **WAILING** and **FASTING**.

From the words ‘*these so many years*’ we can note a sense of **DISTASTE** and **IMPATIENCE**. These folks had lost the sense of **VOLUNTARY DEDICATION** to the **LORD** in this **TRADITION** of **WAILING** and **FASTING** that they instituted to keep alive the **MEMORY** of the **TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES** of turning their backs on the **LORD!**

So their **LEGALISTIC OBSERVANCE** of these extra **FASTS** were devoid of any **GLORY TO GOD** or **SPIRITUAL BENEFIT** to themselves. They had been doing it because they thought it was something **EXPECTED** of them and/or they did it to **PLEASE MEN**.

[*weep*: means *to mourn by crying or bewailing, showing emotion of grief or humiliation*.]

So the question was one concerning this **RELIGIOUS EXTERNALISM** or **CEREMONY** which had become merely a **HUMAN TRADITION**. They had become weary of this **MEANINGLESS RITUALISM** that was so **VOID OF SPIRITUAL REALITY** in their lives.

They wanted to be free from this load without offending those that were responsible for carrying on these **TRADITIONS**.

**II. WE SEE THEIR SELFISHNESS EXPOSED. (Vs 4-7)**  
Instead of letting the **PRIESTS** and **PROPHETS** answer the question, in *verse 4* the **LORD** begins **HIS** response.

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**ZECHARIAH** was one of the **PROPHETS** present when they posed this question. From the word order we know the question was primarily addressed to the **PRIESTS** but the **LORD** responded through **HIS PROPHET ZECHARIAH**.

When this **DELEGATION** came with this question they must have expected a simple **YES** or **NO** response, but the **LORD** uses this question and its historical circumstances as a back drop for some far-reaching **PROPHECIES** dealing with the **NATION** and its **FUTURE**. (*Chapters 7 & 8*)

Now understand that whenever we **OFFER UP OUR REQUESTS TO THE LORD**, it must be with a **READINESS TO RECEIVE INSTRUCTIONS FROM HIM**, for if we **TURN AWAY FROM HEARING HIM**, we cannot expect that our prayers should be acceptable to **HIM**.

In *verse 5* the **LORD** challenges the whole community to **CHANGE ITS ATTITUDE**. The **SINFUL ATTITUDE** revealed in the question of the **SELF-IMPOSED FAST** is that it was **NOT OBSERVED** for the **LORD'S GLORY** and so the **WORD OF THE LORD** would be revealed.

This **WORD OF THE LORD** was not just for these folks, but for all the **PEOPLE** of the land, including the **PRIESTS!**

This **DELEGATION'S** question is not answered directly for it was inconsequential whether they kept the **WAILING** and **FASTING**.

The important issue was the problem of **OBSERVING MAN-MADE RULES** as if it is **WORSHIP OF THE LORD** when it carries **NO HEARTFELT DESIRE**. The **ATTITUDE** of this question is **SYMPTOMATIC** of the **DEEP EVIL** that was **INFESTING THE NATION** and we will see how it will receive exhaustive treatment over the next two chapters.

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**THE LORD'S** question does not focus on the **FACTS** or **ORIGINS** of their **FASTS**, but on the **RELIGIOUS MOTIVATION** behind them. **HE** pointedly asks in so many words, "*Was it really for Me that you fasted?*"

The **LORD** admitted that **they had performed the external act of complete absence of food and drink along with the public mourning** that was being done, and being done for some 70 years.

Yet the **LORD** viewed these acts with indifference because while they were done, **THE PEOPLE WERE CENTERED ON THEMSELVES**. So **HE** begins by overthrowing the false notion that **FASTING** (or any other act) is in itself a meritorious act.

**FASTING** was something to be engaged in at **TIMES OF SORROW AND CRISIS**, particularly **NATIONAL CRISIS**.

As a **SPIRITUAL EXERCISE**, it was to be accompanied by **CONFESSION OF SIN**, by **REPENTANCE** and by **A RECOGNITION OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S TRUE STANDING BEFORE GOD**. *Joel 2:12*—"*Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:*"

But, their **FASTS** and **MOURNINGS** were **NOT** the outward sign of a **HEART OF REMORSE** and **REPENTANCE**, but rather they were **OUT OF SORROW** over their **EXTERNAL CALAMITIES**—over the **CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR SIN!**

Their **SELF-DENIAL** was for **SELF-INTEREST, NOT OVER THEIR SIN AGAINST THE LORD!** They wanted the **EFFECTS** of their **SIN REMOVED**, rather than **WANTING THEIR SIN TO BE REMOVED** from them! They regarded their **FASTS** not only as meritorious, but also as an end in themselves, rather than as a turning away from self and a turning to God.

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It **COULD HAVE** and probably **SHOULD HAVE** been a healthy **REMINDER** of the **DESERVED AFFLICTION SUFFERED** at the **LORD'S HAND** **AND** done as an **OFFERING OF GENUINE REPENTANCE** in light of **GOD'S CHASTISEMENT**.

*Verse 6* addresses their normal lives [or the eating and drinking included in their other religious celebrations or festivals].

Not only were their **SPECIAL FASTS NOT DONE FOR** the **LORD'S GLORY**, but neither were their **DAILY LIVES**.  
*(represented by the normal routine of eating and drinking.)*

Their **DAILY LIFE** was **NOT LIVED** for the **LORD'S GLORY!** They were living for themselves. They did not **LIVE FOR GOD'S GLORY**, but to fill their bellies out of a **natural craving to satisfy their self-serving appetites**.

The very life they lived was **MECHANICAL, FORMALISTIC** and an **EXTERNAL PIECE OF EMPTY RITUAL**. Instead of their living **being motivated by a higher plane of action, they did what they did for self-motivated reasons!**

How much better it is to **LIVE DAILY FOR GOD** than to **EASE THE CONVICTIONS OF CONSCIENCE** through a **FORMAL RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE**.

Apart from the application of these words to the **JEWISH PEOPLE** at that time there is also a **SOLEMN LESSON FOR US** that we should lay to heart.

Do we think that our mere **EXTERNAL RELIGIOUS EXERCISE** no matter **HOW REGULAR** and **HOW LONG DONE** acquires any **MERIT WITH GOD?** Or do we come to truly **WORSHIP** and **SERVE GOD**, to **DRAW NEAR** to **HIM**, and to **GIVE HIM** the **HONOR** and **GLORY DUE HIS HOLY NAME?**

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Do we live out our **DAILY LIVES** as a **SELFISH ROUTINE** or do we live to **BRING GLORY** and **HONOR TO GOD THROUGH THE ROUTINE OF OUR DAILY LIVES?**

The Apostle Paul exhorted us with how we are to live in:  
*1 Corinthians 10:31*—“*Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*”

*Verse 7* of our text indicates their **ATTITUDE** was the same **ATTITUDE** that **GOD HAD DEALT WITH** in their ancestors.

To **OBEY THE MORAL PRECEPTS AND PRINCIPLES OF THE WORD** is infinitely more important than ceremonies and abstinence from food and drink.

**Conclusion**

The **PEOPLE OF ISRAEL**, by-and-large had not yet learned their lesson.

And whatever **PROSPERITY** they may have been experiencing would soon disappear regardless of whether they had their empty ritual of national wailing and fasting or not.

When we come to **CHURCH** is it about **US** or about **THE LORD?**

**GOD** wants to **BLESS US AS HIS PEOPLE** but **HIS BLESSING** comes as we **LIVE A LIFE** intended to bring **HIM HONOR** and **GLORY!**

And **GOD'S DESIRE** is for **US AS HIS PEOPLE** to **WORSHIP HIM IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH**, not in ritual and formality. *(Cf. John 4:24)*