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The Question of Religious Service

Zechariah 7-8

The word *religion* has become a bad word in Christianity. In many places it speaks of dead orthodoxy... of spiritual activity void of content. When I was a young Christian, I remember being told that Christianity is NOT about religion, BUT a relationship with God.

Yet “religion” is not a bad word; in fact, it is used positively in the Bible. It speaks of the God-wrought fear of the Lord that exists in every image bearer by which they stand at all times in a relationship with Him. Now for the vast majority of mankind, that relationship

is one of alienation on account of sin. Yet for those in Christ, that relationship is one of love and commitment which typically results in self-sacrifice and the service of others.

James 1:27, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Accordingly, we ought NOT to have a problem with the word *religion*. Our qualm is when a person's religion (~relationship with God) is based on their ethical behavior and therefore is comprised largely of external "religious" acts. That is what Paul is talking about when he wrote Romans. Speaking of his Jewish contemporaries, Paul said this:

Romans 10:2-3, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own [via their religious activity], they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God."

We see it when Paul, going well-beyond Judaism, predicted that in the last days, men will be:

2 Timothy 3:3b-5a, "...haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness [that is, external religious activity], although they have denied its power."

Zechariah 7 and 8 is massively important for it serves as *The Crux Interpretum* of the book of Zechariah. This prophecy is divided into three sections, the first section (Zechariah 1-6) consists of eight visions which God gave to His people as they endeavored to serve the Lord as His redeemed people. The final section (Zechariah 9-14) consists of a series of prophecies which detail the triumph of God over His and our enemies via the service and sacrifice of the Messiah!

Now sandwiched in between these two sections — Zechariah 7-8 — is actually of two sermons.¹ Both serve to warn God's people — you and me — of the danger of empty religion with an incredibly sober message. If you and I choose to relate to God on the basis of religious activity, then we will have gutted/eviscerated the message of this prophecy!

The message of this book is predicated upon the goodness of God, the kindness of the Lord, and so the grace of Christ — NOT our religious activity!

Does that mean we should NOT care about religious activity? Absolutely not! RATHER, for it to be "pure and undefiled", it must be in response to God's grace — NOT an attempt to acquire it! That is the message of the Zechariah 7-8! We pick it up in vv. 1-3 with a religious inquiry.

Zechariah 7:1, “Then it came about in the fourth year of King Darius², that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth *day* of the ninth month, *which is* ChisLeviticus³”

The dating of this verse places this account two years after the visions of chapters 1-6. Using our calendar, the actual date was December 7, 518 BC — which means the temple rebuild was well underway!

Zechariah 6:2-3, “Now *the town of Bethel*^{4,5} had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men [the idea behind this is that of a delegation sent by the leaders of Bethel] to seek the favor of the Lord, speaking to the priests who belong to the house of the Lord of hosts, and to the prophets saying [Since God did NOT instruct the exiles to engage in the fasting referenced in our text, they sought wisdom from both offices.⁶ Here’s their question...], ‘Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?’”

Allow me give you the background.

Following the exile of Judah in 586 BC, God’s people lacked the forms and structures by which they had worshipped and the served the Lord for a millennium. The temple was gone as were those feasts associated with the temple. Accordingly, during this time, the Synagogue became a mainstay amongst God’s people. Here they followed the worship liturgy of the Temple with the exception that when there was a sacrifice, they recited a prayer or read Scripture. Yet that is not all. They also instituted four fasts referenced in part in this text (in 8:19 we see all four).

What was the purpose of these fasts?

1. The First Fast (which occurred in fourth month/July) sought to remember the fall of the city walls (cf. Jeremiah 39:2).
2. The Second Fast (which occurred in the fifth month/August) marked the destruction of the temple (cf. 2 Kings 25:8).
3. The Third Fast (which occurred in the seventh month/October) remember the murder of the righteous Jewish governor, Gedaliah (cf. 2 Kings 25:25; Jeremiah 41:1ff).
4. The Fourth Fast (which occurred in the tenth month/January) marked the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kings 25:1, 2; Jeremiah 39:1).

The focus of the inquiry of our text revolved around the second fast which was held to commemorate the destruction of the temple. So here is the question (and it’s legitimate): since the temple rebuilding project was well underway, ought the people of God observe the fast associated with its destruction? The question seems reasonable, until we learn what was behind it! God brings this out in the reproof.

The Revelation of God's Reproof, vv. 4-6.

Zechariah 7:4-6, "Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me saying, '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 years⁷, was it actually for Me that you fasted? And when you eat and drink [in the context of the religious feast days of Israel], do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves?'"

Do you see the issue here? The question wasn't innocent! Behind it stood the destructive notion that believed that God could be placated by religious activity! God's responsive question was this: Were they fasting and abstaining simply to get the Lord to like them more? Or were they doing it out of a love and concern?

Now, the biblical purpose of all fasts and feasts in the Bible was to provide a God-word look of devotion and dependence.⁸ Fasting was observed in order to demonstrate our dependence upon this world. And so instead of eating, one spent the breakfast, lunch, or dinner hour in prayer and devotion, praying that your soul would long for God as our body does its food! BUT that is NOT what God's people were doing in the exile. Their fast was NOT motivated on account of these things:

- The wretched state of God's Kingdom on the earth and the impact that had on God's glory (cf. Zephaniah 3:18)!
- The rebellion of the nation which sent God's people into exile in the first place (cf. Daniel 9:7).

RATHER, the fast was motivated out of a desire to placate God so that someday He might bring them back to the Promised Land to rebuild the city and the temple!

If there is anything we have learned from our study of the prophets throughout the years, I hope you haven't missed this incredibly important message, "As the righteousness of man is filthy rages" (Is. 64:6), there is nothing we could ever do to placate or satisfy God's just anger toward us on account of our sin! NOTHING! And that God's people endeavored to do that here — AFTER the Lord Himself restored them to the land — was a moral travesty! To demonstrate this, God gave Zechariah's generation an example from their history with which they all would have been familiar!

A Case Study in Rebellion, vv. 7-14.

Zechariah 7:7, "Are not *these* the words which the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets [that is, all the Old Testament prophets prior to this time], when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous with its cities around it, and the Negev [south of Jerusalem] and the foothills [the Shephelah] were inhabited?"

The “prosperity” language is stressed here to demonstrate that God does NOT need to be placated in order to bless His people! Throughout all the time Israel lived in rebellion in the land- from 1051 BC all the way down to 586 BC — the Lord blessed Jerusalem! It truly was a “prosperous city”! Yet, throughout this time, God’s people cared little for the Lord and so turned their back on Him.

Zechariah 7:8-10, “Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, ‘Thus has the Lord of hosts said, “Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; 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.”””

This was NOT God’s command to His people in Zechariah’s day, BUT a summary of the commands given throughout the Theocracy. For example, listen to the call of God when it came to His people, in Isaiah:

Isaiah 1:16-17, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Jeremiah 22:16, “‘He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?’ declares the Lord.”

Ezekiel 22:7-8, “They have treated father and mother lightly within you. The alien they have oppressed in your midst; the fatherless and the widow they have wronged in you. You have despised My holy things and profaned My sabbaths.”

With that, notice the characteristic response of the people throughout all this time.

Zechariah 7:11-12a, “‘But they refused to pay attention [the focus here is on submission], and turned a stubborn shoulder [this speaks of an ox which fights against being yoked] and stopped their ears from hearing [they covered their ears so that they could not hear]. And they made their hearts *like* flint [that is, a diamond which is the hardest naturally occurring mineral on the earth] so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit⁹ through the former prophets...”

This really is incredible! The religion of God’s people during the Kingdom years was incredibly superficial. It was all about them! God’s people had long forgotten the statement made when God organized His people into a nation and brought them into the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 9:6, “Know, then, *it is* not because of your righteousness *that* the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people.”

In other words, I'm NOT giving this land because you are so wonderful and worthy!

Had God's people held on to this truth, they might never have lost the Promised Land. BUT as it was, they quickly forgot this and so became proud! God to them had become a Santa Clause figure who existed to make them happy. As such, their relationship with God revolved around them! And so, they held to a form of godliness, BUT they had denied its power! Recall the words Christ spoke to the Jewish leaders of His day — describing the Old Testament people of God:

Matthew 15:7-8, "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, 'This people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.'"

Because of this we read this:

Zechariah 7:12b-14, "...therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts [a wrath which culminated in the four exiles of His people in 722 BC, 605 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC]. And it came about that just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen,' says the Lord of hosts; 'but I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations¹⁰ 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."

Such a sad state for the people of God. As a nation they rebelled against the Lord. And so, as a nation, God gave them over to the Babylonians to be terrorized.

Now, did the exiles occur because God no longer loved His people? NO! It was because He loved His people and so would NOT allow them to live a lie! Recall, when God organized His people into a nation, the people of God enjoyed a dual relationship with God.

1. As the children of Abraham, they were a religious nation whose existence was predicated upon the unconditional love and grace of God. Speaking of God's favor by which Abraham was saved, Paul made it very clear:

Romans 4:10, "How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? [that is, did Abraham's religious activity somehow placate God?] Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised."

This was their status as a religious nation. They stood before God on the basis of God's unconditional love and grace — a grace they could never lose!

2. Yet as to the Theocracy, its existence was predicated upon Israel's national obedience.

Deuteronomy 28:15, “But it shall come about, if you will not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.”

And so, because of the corporate rebellion of the nation, the Theocracy was destroyed, and God’s people were brought into exile. Had God forsaken His people? No! God had forsaken the theocracy. Moses speaking of when God disowned the nation, we read,

Leviticus 26:42a, 44, “Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well... when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God.”

That meant that when God’s people returned to Jerusalem, they did so NOT because of anything they had done or would do, BUT because they were “the apple of His eye” (Zechariah 2:8) and so ones on whom God had set His love, favor, and blessing!

Yet they missed that truth and so continued to engage in religious activities in order to placate God! Then when they saw that God was indeed bringing about the completion of the temple (which means their placation worked!) — they asked the question, “Do we still need to placate the Lord?”

It should be obvious that God could NOT answer simply in the negative, for the question sprung forth from error. So, God in Chapter 7 addressed this error by telling them that placation NOT ONLY is NEVER something God desires, BUT it will undermine whatever service they do in the name of Christ.

That having been said, God then turned to the question of the hour; if their religious sacrifice and service could NOT placate God, then where did they stand as a people and what ought they to do? The answer to these questions is given in Zechariah 8 which begins with a glorious reassurance!

The Grace of God, vv. 1-3.

Zechariah 2:1-3, “Then the word of the Lord of hosts came saying, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, “I am exceedingly jealous for Zion, yes, with great wrath I am jealous for her.’ Thus says the Lord, ‘I will return to Zion and will dwell¹¹ in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts *will be called* the Holy Mountain.’”

This is the gospel! The good news is that because of God’s grace, God’s people have always been “the apple of His eye.” Therefore, in spite of their moralistic proclivity, God was moving at this time to bless His people! In fact, this text says that as strong and

adamant as was God's wrath toward the Theocracy, so it was now in the same proportion when it came to His love for His people! Joyce Baldwin wrote of this:

...whereas the divine jealousy and wrath elsewhere oppose Israel, in Zechariah they work on her behalf... The zeal with which God had carried through his chastisement of Israel and then of the nations (1:15, 21) was now burning to restore the covenant bond. (Baldwin, 1972, p. 159)

If there was any question regarding this, God gives an overwhelming list of the blessings that were upon His people on account of His grace.

The Blessing of God's Grace Explicated, vv. 4-15

The blessings God promised to His people at this time can be summarized this way:

1. It would Result in Blessing Upon the Jerusalem, vv. 4-5.

Zechariah 8:4, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Old men and old women will again sit in the streets of Jerusalem¹², each man with his staff in his hand because of age.'"

The picture here is of utmost security!

2. It would Result in Blessing Upon the People, vv. 6-8.

Zechariah 8:8, "And I will bring them *back*, and they will live in the midst of Jerusalem, and they will be My people and I will be their God in truth and righteousness."

These are the words God spoke to us on our wedding night! Despite the exile, nothing had changed in His relationship with the child of God!

3. It would Result in a Modification of God's Discipline when it Came to the Redeemed, vv. 9-13.

Zechariah 8:10-11, "'For before those days [during the theocracy] there was no wage for man or any wage for animal; and for him who went out or came in there was no peace because of his enemies, and I set all men one against another. But now [now that the theocracy was gone such that all they were before the Lord was a Religious Nation] I will not treat the remnant of this people as in the former days,' declares the Lord of hosts."

4. It would Result in the Modification of God's Purpose for the Redeemed, vv. 14-17.

Zechariah 8:15, "So I have again purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear."

Because the Theocracy was established on a conditional basis, God's purpose for His people involved two different things: Blessing if they obeyed AND Cursing if they disobeyed. Yet now that the Theocracy was gone, God's people returned to their status of simply being a religious nation before the Lord — a nation which stood before the Lord on account of the work of the Messiah. Because of this, God's purpose as it related to His people would only be that of blessing. After the nation fell, what did God say?

Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope."

Does God love His people? Without a doubt! Could His plan in Christ in any way involve our demise? Never!

If that is true, what then becomes of religion? It is enjoyed NOT in the attempt to placate God, BUT as an overflow of a heart of love and devotion to the Lord! As a result, notice the call God placed on His redeemed and forgiven people.

Be Holy in your Relationship with Each Other, vv. 16-17.

Zechariah 8:16-17, "These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate," declares the Lord."

This is law, brothers and sisters. But it is NOT law in order to placate God. RATHER, it is law as the direction for a people who already have "placated" the Lord in Christ! This gives feet and hands to the desire that results from grace: *"God I want to serve You! Just tell me how!"* So, what ought we to do? Be holy in your relationships with each other! But then ultimately be holy in your relationship with God.

Be Holy in your Relationship with God, vv. 18-19.

Zechariah 8:18-19, "Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth *months* will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace.'""

It is amazing what happens to any and all religious duty when you completely remove from it any element of placation! The fast becomes a spiritual feast, as do the rest of teaching of Scripture:

- Bible reading.

- Church attendance.
- Worship.
- Scripture memory.
- Fellowship.
- The Lord's Supper.

Will become "joy, gladness, and cheerful[ness]" - for they no longer are viewed as a bribe BUT enjoyed as God intended, as an opportunity to gaze upon Christ, enjoy His beauty, and so express one's love to Him! With this foundation, what in the end would become of God's people?

The Gentile Mission, vv. 20-23.

Zechariah 8:23, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'""

At the time, I'm sure this promise seemed so far removed from where God's people were living. Yet today, it is not! Think of it: From the biblical perspective we are the Gentiles of this text who have come to the Lord willingly with great longing!

All that being said, what is the "take-away" from this text. What is the message of the two sermons Zechariah preached here? It is twofold. First, flee from all forms of religious placation in your walk with God. Live in light of the truth of the gospel which says that God loves you and so has cleansed you from all your sin! Today you stand before Him as a child in whom He delights! Secondly, no longer define yourself by the mud puddle you recently climbed out of! Ian Duguid put it this way:

Since the fathers did not take to heart the words of the earlier prophets and live like covenant-keepers, they reaped the whirlwind. But his argument in chapter 7 is preliminary, setting up the point he is making in chapter 8. God's covenant faithfulness is determinative for the future, not the unfaithfulness of his people. (Duguid, 2010, p. 144)

May God give us the grace so to do!

References

- Baldwin, J. G. (1972). *Haggai Zechariah Malachi (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)*. Downers Grove: Tyndale.
- Boice, J. M. (2006). *The Minor Prophets, Volume 2*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Duguid, L. (2010). *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (Ep Study Commentary)*. Grand Rapids: EP Books.

End Note(s)

¹ Zechariah 7:4-14 and 8:9-17 along with its intervening commentary.

² “The passage opens with the third and final date formula in the book of Zechariah. The formula separates chapters 7–8 off from 1:7–6:15 and marks this passage as a new section. This is the seventh date in Haggai/Zechariah 1–8, a feature that binds together the two books. Its precise form also creates an inclusio with the first date in Haggai 1:1. These two are the only dates in this sequence that begin with reference to the year of ‘Darius the king’, and then are followed by the calendar date. In some ways, therefore, Haggai 1–2 and Zechariah 7–8 act as bookends around the visions of Zechariah 1–6.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 130)

³ This is the Babylonian name for December.

⁴ “This town, 12 miles north of Jerusalem, had been the centre of worship for the northern kingdom from the time of Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12:29). Though it escaped destruction at the time of the Babylonian conquest, it was destroyed ‘by a mighty conflagration during the latter part of the Neo-Babylonian period or possibly the beginning of the Persian’. Associated throughout its history with a syncretistic cult, the struggling new Bethel may have found its religious affinities with the Samaritans.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 151)

⁵ “...there are good reasons for thinking that the delegation did not come from Bethel. (ii) King Darius, named in verse 1, has been suggested as the one who sent the deputation. E. Lipinski arrives at this by omitting as a gloss ‘the word of the Lord came to Zechariah’, and so making ‘he sent’ refer back to Darius as the antecedent. The supposed motive of Darius would be to satisfy himself that his contributions to the temple were being used to best advantage. It is unlikely that Darius was responsible for sending the delegation and furthermore there is no ground for omitting the clause in verse 1 which, unless it is omitted, alters the sense required by this interpretation. (iii) The most probable solution is to take Bethel-Sharezer as a personal name and make it the subject of the verb, as does NEB. A similar compound, Nergal-Sharezer, is recorded in Jeremiah 39:3, while names compounded with Bethel are known from the fifth-century BC Elephantine papyri and from Neo-Babylonian cuneiform texts. The Babylonian equivalent to Bethel-Sharezer occurs in a text dating from the years 541–540, close enough to the date of Zechariah to be the very person named there. This translation involves omitting one ‘and’, but otherwise follows the Hebrew text. It is very likely that the delegation came from Babylon, if only because there was a delay of three and a half months between the fast and their arrival. This was the approximate length of time required for the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:7–9). The delay would be inexplicable if the men had come only from Bethel, and moreover there would be nothing remarkable about a delegation arriving from so short a distance to cause the date to be remembered. On the other hand a delegation which had taken the arduous journey from Babylon, and was setting the precedent of consulting the prophets and priests in Jerusalem before making any liturgical changes, might well be recorded in the annals.” (Baldwin, 1972, pp. 151-152)

⁶ “It is unusual in the Old Testament to have a query addressed to both priest and prophet. Normally, the priests dealt with issues of interpretation of the Scriptures (see, for example, Hag. 2:11), while the prophets handled questions concerning the will of God (at least after the Urim and Thummim ceased to be viable means of divination; see, for example, 1 Kings 22:6). Here the question dealt with an issue of ritual (hence the involvement of the priests), yet it was a question to which there was no obvious ‘Torah-based’ answer, a fact which may explain the inclusion of the prophets. Alternatively, the petitioners could simply have been appealing to all of the available authorities.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 131)

⁷ “In view of the fact that the events commemorated in the fast did not take place before 587 BC, Zechariah must be reckoning the seventy years from that date in this verse.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 154)

⁸ “The Mosaic Law had established only one fast for Israel—the fast of the Day of Atonement, and even then the fast was only a part of that day’s observance.” (Boice, 2006, p. 517)

⁹ “This remarkable doctrine of the Holy Spirit as mediator of God’s word to the prophets, who were themselves its mediators, has no parallels in the prophetic books. In Isaiah 42:1 and 61:1

God's Spirit is given to someone other than the prophet. The closest parallel is Nehemiah 9:30, a passage which may have been part of the pre-exilic liturgy for days of national mourning." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 157)

¹⁰ Cf. Ezekiel 1:4.

¹¹ The words "will return" and "will dwell" are in the perfect tense indicating that these are actions that already had occurred.

¹² "There is a double merism here: old and young, male and female are depicted relaxing and playing in the open areas of Jerusalem—an idyllic picture of opposite extremes that implies peace for all ages and both sexes. Such healthy play and relaxed rest contrasted dramatically with the slave labour, malnutrition and starvation that had been the fate of the former Jerusalem, and even with their present straitened circumstances." (Duguid, 2010, p. 138)