

Zechariah

Chapter 7

XIII. A Picture of True Religion - Part 1 - Zechariah 7

7:1 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; 7:2 When they had sent unto the house of God Sherezer and Regemmelech, and their men, to pray before the LORD, 7:3 [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? 7:4 Then came the word of the LORD of hosts unto me, saying, 7:5 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? 7:6 And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat [for yourselves], and drink [for yourselves]? 7:7 [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? 7:8 And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah, saying, 7:9 Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and show mercy and compassions every man to his brother: 7:10 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. 7:11 But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. n 7:12 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. n 7:13 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: n 7:14 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.

What we see in this chapter of Zechariah is the answer to one of the burning questions men have had for centuries. That question is "What does God really expect of me? Does he want attitudes, actions, or both?". It is in this chapter that we find God's answer, an answer that was neglected by the Pharisees of Christ's day.

Zechariah 7:1-2 - The Delegation

These two verses introduce us to the section of scripture before us. We are told that the town of Bethel sent several men to the temple to ask a question. The original Hebrew of verse two is beer translated as "from Bethel" rather than "unto the house of God". In Hebrew, Bethel comes from Beth=house and El=God.

Also, we are given the time of this visit, that being the fourth day of the ninth month. This is approximately two years after Zechariah received his visions recorded in the first six chapters. At this time, the temple was almost halfway completed.

Zechariah 7:3 - The Question

These men had come to the temple to ask a very specific question, that being "shall we weep in the fifth month as we have done these so many years?".

This question refers back to the fast set up by Israel during the Babylonian captivity to commemorate the burning of Jerusalem and the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar. This seems to have been a customary practice of the Jews, that of commemorating certain disasters by fasts and certain victories by feasts (Purim). It seems that this fast was instituted sometime after the destruction of the temple and the city so that the Jews in captivity would not forget this sorrowful event in their history.

So we see that the real question being asked by this delegation is "Do we really need to keep commemorating this event since the completion of the temple is almost at hand?". It is hard not to sense a feeling of weariness on the part of these men to observe this fast every year.

Zechariah 7:4-7 - The Answer

It is a characteristic of God to answer the questions of a true seeker. Many think that God hides behind a cloud and plays "hide and seek" with men. This is not true. God desires to reveal himself, especially to those who seek him in sincerity.

In these four verses we find that God answers the question of the delegation with a question of His own, which paraphrased is, "Did you keep that fast with me in mind, or with your tradition in mind?". God does not beat around the bush, instead he strikes at the very heart of the matter. He reveals that the answer to the question is seen in the attitude of the faster, not the action of the faster.

It is on this issue that the Pharisees of Christ's day wiped out. They kept all of the external actions passed on from generation to generation. They had instituted many fasts and religious extras to the law, so much so that it was not possible for a single man to keep all of them. When they were confronted by Christ who showed them that although they kept the external action they lacked the internal attitude sought by God, they rejected him and ultimately killed him.

We see this point brought out in John 4:22-24. In verse 22 we find Christ telling the woman at the well that ye (Samaritans) worship what ye (Samaritans) know not but we (Jews) know what we worship. In other words, "you Samaritans do not worship God the way God requires you to worship him, however we Jews do worship God (externally) the way God requires". The problem pointed out by Christ in this verse is that the Samaritans worshiped God in attitude, but not in action and the Jews worshiped God in action, but not in attitude. Verse 23 gives the correct form of worship acceptable by God, that being worship given in truth (the way God wants it) and in attitude (with a desire for worship). If either one of these elements is missing, the worship is unacceptable to God.

This same idea is brought out in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. In this sermon Christ makes the point time and time again that God is after a proper attitude, not just a proper action. It is not sufficient to never kill someone, we should not even hate them. It is not sufficient to never commit the act of adultery, we should never even think it. God is more interested in the attitude of the heart than he is in the external actions of the man. David was a man after God's own heart

although he committed gross sin in his life. We are not saying that actions are irrelevant, but that right actions without attitude are just as reprehensible to God as wrong actions.

This is the point made in Zechariah 7:4-7. God pointedly asks "When you fasted, was it to me? When you ate, was it to me? What you really need to do is listen to what I have to say!". Note the following facts we see in these verses:

1. What we do in the way of fasting and feasting is not as essential as what our attitude is.
2. If we fast or feast with the proper attitude towards God, then God accepts our expression of worship.
3. External fasts and/or feasts are irrelevant if they are not coupled with an obedient heart.
4. God is more interested in our obedience, than in our acts of worship.

Zechariah 7:8-14 - The Answer Explained

Now that God has asked the delegation to examine the motives for the fast, God explains what he truly desires. It is of the utmost importance that we understand the fact that worship without obedience is idolatry as far as God is concerned. In fact, idolatry can be seen as consisting of the following categories:

1. **Worshipping the wrong God in the wrong way.** An example of this would be any one of the many idolatrous religions of the world (fetishism, demonism, animism, etc.).
2. **Worshipping the right God in the wrong way.** Examples are the Pharisees, Catholicism, and the Judaism of Christ's day. Those who worship the true God with disobedience in their lives fall into this category as well.
3. **Worshipping the wrong God in the right way.** Examples of this is worshipping an invalid image of God in a right way. For example, worshipping a God of love and no justice is to worship a God not revealed in the scriptures. We can term this category "Christian Idolatry".

These verses expand on the second category of idolatry mentioned above. The Jews worshiped the right God, but they did it in a wrong way. Note the following specific points mentioned by God:

1. **Execute true judgments (verse 9).** One of the characteristics of Israel prior to the captivity was a corruption of justice in the land. Many of the prophets speak against this corruption of justice.
2. **Show mercy and compassion (verse 9).** One of the least compassionate periods of Israel's history was in the times immediately preceding the captivity and in the times of Christ. Remember Christ's condemnation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 regarding their greed in devouring widow's houses.

3. Oppress not the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger (verse 10).
4. Do not dream up evil against your brother so as to take advantage of him (verse 10).
5. Listen, do not stop up your ears (verse 11).
6. Do not make your hearts as hard as diamonds (verse 12).

Unfortunately, Israel did not listen to the words of the Lord spoken by the former prophets, i.e. those prophets which prophesied of the coming judgment on Israel. Because of Israel's disobedience, God scattered them throughout the world.

The major lesson of this passage is that God desires true worship from a heart of obedience to his commandments and a love for him. Any worship given without those two necessary ingredients is seen by God as idolatry, and rejected by him.