



Zechariah - Chapter Seven

I Zechariah 1:1-8:23 - Oracles and Visions (continues)

Summary of Chapter Seven

Two years has passed since Zechariah had received the eight visions. Some men came from Bethel to enquire of the Lord as to whether they should fast. The Lord's response through Zechariah is that, like those in exile, they fast only for themselves and not as an act of worship.

The people who had inhabited the land before the exile had failed to follow God's laws and requirements; instead they followed their own hearts. This is the reason why God had sent them off into exile, leaving the land desolate.

I.c Zechariah 7:1-8:23 - From Fasts to Festivals

A deputation comes from Bethel to ask whether a fast instituted in memory of the calamity of Jerusalem was still to be observed. In answer to the inquiry, the delegates are told that fasting is in itself an indifferent thing, but is to be estimated by the conduct of those who observe it. The people are further reminded that they had been disobedient in former days, and had been punished by exile.

The Lord promises to show his love for Zion, to dwell among his people, and to fill Jerusalem with joy. The people are exhorted to be of good cheer, for God will henceforth give them his blessing, which, however, was conditional on their obedience to him.

Finally, there follows the direct answer to the question originally proposed. The fasts should be turned into joyful festivals, with former calamities being forgotten. Then the change would extend its influence so that the Gentile nations shall worship the God of Israel, and esteem them an honour to be received into fellowship with the Jewish nation.

I.c.i Zechariah 7:1-14 - Ritual or Reality

Like the former prophets before him, Zechariah emphasises that ritual without obedience and justice is empty.

I.c.i.1 Zechariah 7:1-7 - Hypocritical Fasting Condemned

It is now 518 BC and the Temple is nearing completion. These verses deal with a question from the Jews at Bethel about keeping a certain fast day. Verses 1-3 give the situation and state the question; while vv.4-7 reveal the prophet's response.

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.

² Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men, to entreat the favour of the Lord, ³ and to ask the priests of the house of the Lord of hosts and the prophets, 'Should I mourn and practise abstinence in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?'

Zechariah 7:1-3

The ninth month of the fourth year of King Darius, i.e. December 518 BC, is two years after Zechariah's earlier prophecies, which is after the ceremony to re-establish the temple but before its completion. The month Chislev overlaps with November/December; refer to the Hebrew Calendar on the website.

Sharezer and Regem-melech came from Bethel in the north with an inquiry addressed to the priests and the prophets. The dual address may be because the question dealt with an issue of ritual to which there was no obvious answer in the law given to Moses. Weeping and abstaining from food and other luxuries were ritual acts of mourning aimed at demonstrating repentance and thereby changing God's disposition toward the penitent; refer to 2 Samuel 12:21-22.

Should I mourn? The prophet will answer this question too: <<*The land shall mourn, each family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself, and their wives by themselves; and all the families that are left, each by itself, and their wives by themselves*>> (Zechariah 12:12-14).

The fifth month was the month in which the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar nearly 70 years earlier; refer to 2 Kings 25:8-9. Now that the temple was being rebuilt, it was natural to question whether there was any need to observe the rite any longer.

The Law of Moses only commanded one day of fasting and that on the Day of Atonement; refer to Leviticus 16:29-34. In addition to this day, during the exile the Jewish people instituted four more festivals to remember key dates in the tragic defeat of their nation and one by those who remained behind to celebrate the salvation of the Jewish nation. Here are the additional festivals:

<u>Month/Day</u>	<u>Reason</u>	<u>Reference</u>
4/17	Mourning the capture of Jerusalem.	Jeremiah 52:6-30
5/9	The burning of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple.	2 Kings 25:2-10
7/3	The assassination of Gedaliah and the massacre of 80 men.	Jeremiah 4:1-10
10/10	The beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's siege against Jerusalem.	2 Kings 25:1
12/13	The Festival of Purim, which was implemented after the exiles had returned by those who remained.	Esther 9:18-32

Psalm 137 beautifully and powerfully describes the sadness of heart that made the exiles remember their sin and tragedy with these additional days of fasting.

To ask the priests of the house of the Lord. These men knew that during their forced exile in Babylon they observed these festivals that remembered the tragic fall of Jerusalem, which had come about by their own hand: <<*Did King Hezekiah of Judah and all Judah actually put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favour of the Lord, and did not the Lord change his mind about the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster on ourselves!*>> (Jeremiah 26:19). Since God's people were now back in the land and the temple was rebuilt, they wanted to know if it was appropriate to continue to these fasts of mournful remembrance, and the priests were the men to ask: <<*On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Ask the priests for a ruling*>> (Haggai 2:10-11). The matter brings up an issue relevant today: How long should one remember and mourn over the past? Should a believer do things to remember either their sin or the tragedies of the past?

As I have done for so many years. These additional fasts were not commanded by God, but instituted by man. Yet because they were traditionally practiced for so long, at least 70 years, they developed an authority of their own. They thought, 'We've done this for so many years, we may as well keep doing it.'

⁴ Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: ⁵ Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? ⁶ And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink only for yourselves? ⁷ Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, along with the towns around it, and when the Negeb and the Shephelah were inhabited?

Zechariah 7:4-7

Zechariah's ruling applied not simply to the petitioners but to all the inhabitants of the land, and also included the fast observed in the seventh month commemorating the assassination of Gedaliah, refer to Jeremiah 41:1-3, the last act of rebellion against the Babylonian governor of Judah, refer to 2 Kings 25:25.

Seventy years. This is probably counted from the first exile in 605 BC to the first return, variously dated from 538 to 535 BC: <<*He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years*>> (2 Chronicles 36:20-21). However, seventy may be a rounded number, as it is elsewhere: <<*The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away*>> (Psalm 90:10).

Proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity. If their ancestors had been obedient they would have never needed to fast, and their land would not have been conquered and desolate.

The Negeb or Negev is the mainly desert area to the south of Jerusalem, around Beersheba, while the Shephelah is the lowlands to the west of Jerusalem. Although the original inquiry reflected a ritual concern, the Lord's response asks a deeper question: 'When you fasted and mourned, was it really out of a concern over the loss of my favour? If you stop fasting and return to normal eating and drinking, does that mean an abandonment of that concern?' If the people had learned the lesson that the destruction of the temple was intended to teach, and had truly repented and turned from their sins, then they could stop fasting. The temple was being rebuilt. However, if they have simply been fasting for themselves all along, then their fasting was a waste of time.

I.c.i.2 Zechariah 7:8-14 - Punishment for Rejecting God's Demands

The pre-exilic inhabitants had not obeyed God's edicts or commandments and had broken their covenant promises to him over and over again. Because they had not listened to him, he had not listened to their cries for help and had banished them into exile.

⁸ The word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying: ⁹ Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; ¹⁰ do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Zechariah 7:8-10

The test of true repentance is a life of obedience to God, specifically, true judgements that show kindness and mercy to the widow and the fatherless, the alien and the poor. These naturally disadvantaged groups in society were easy targets for the strong to oppress. This concern for the weaker members of society was what the Lord had required of his people in the former days, before Jerusalem's fall: <<*You shall not abuse any widow or orphan*>> (Exodus 22:22), <<*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow*>> (Isaiah 1:16-17), <<*Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place*>> (Jeremiah 22:3), and: <<*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*>> (John 13:34).

Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. Some among the people of God found it easier to fast a few days a year instead of truly treating others in a godly way. Their bad relationship with others demonstrated a fundamentally bad relationship with the Lord.

¹¹ But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear. ¹² They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts.

Zechariah 7:11-12

But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear. Zechariah vividly describes a progression of rejection. It begins with simply refusing to heed God, then a self-justifying shrugging of their shoulders, then stopping their ears. It all ends with hearts as hard as flint.

The law and the words of the former prophets were the two parallel means of God's communicating his will to his people, through the priests and prophets. Yet former generations refused to pay attention to God's self-revelation. They turned their backs on the Lord, closing their ears and hardening their hearts, thus incurring his anger (1:2). Zechariah did not doubt that the Spirit of God genuinely inspired his words and the words of other prophets.

¹³ Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts, ¹⁴ and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and a pleasant land was made desolate.

Zechariah 7:13-14

Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear. Since God's people refused to listen to God, God would refuse to listen to and answer their prayers, as he had done in the past: <<*Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me*>> (Proverbs 1:28), <<*Although they fast, I do not hear their cry, and although they offer burnt-offering and grain-offering, I do not accept them; but by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence I consume them*>> (Jeremiah 14:12), <<*you have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through*>> (Lamentations 3:44), and: <<*Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly*>> (Micah 3:4). This is just another good reason to stay under the teaching of God's word, so that prayers will be answered.

The Lord's judgement came upon his people like a whirlwind, scattering them among nations that they had not known. Fittingly, they themselves joined the ranks of the vulnerable classes that they had oppressed, and the land was left desolate: <<*So my wrath and my anger were poured out and kindled in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; and they became a waste and a desolation, as they still are today*>> (Jeremiah 44:6).