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Reel or Real.

Zechariah 7:1-14

Zechariah 7:1-14, *Now in the fourth year of King Darius it came to pass that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, on the fourth day of the ninth month, Chislev,² when the people sent Sherezer, with Regem-Melech and his men, to the house of God, to pray before the Lord,³ and to ask the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and the prophets, saying, "Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?"⁴ Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying,⁵ "Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?'⁶ When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?'⁷ Should you not have obeyed the words which the Lord proclaimed through the former prophets when Jerusalem and the cities around it were inhabited and prosperous, and the South and the Lowland were inhabited?' "*

Disobedience Resulted in Captivity

⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying,⁹ "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Execute true justice, Show mercy and compassion Everyone to his brother. ¹⁰ Do not oppress the

widow or the fatherless, The alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart Against his brother.’¹¹ “But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear.¹² Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the Lord of hosts.¹³ Therefore it happened, that just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen,” says the Lord of hosts.¹⁴ “But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned; for they made the pleasant land desolate.”

The issue of ritualism versus genuine faith was a central theme in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus entered a world where Jewish ritual had reached its peak, and He responded by preaching the message of authentic faith rooted in reality, not in empty rituals.

The apostle Paul also criticizes the form of Judaism that prevailed at the time.

Romans 2:17 and following.

Paul writes that while people may take pride in their heritage, defend the fact that they have received the Law, and consider

themselves to be guides for the blind, lights in darkness, instructors for the foolish, and teachers of children, the truth is that they fail to live according to God's Law. As a result, God's name is dishonored because of their hypocrisy.

Apostle Paul warns that this same kind of ritualism substituting for reality will find its way into the church.

2 Timothy 3:5, *having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!*

There is a ritual but there is not a reality.

2 Corinthians 5:12, *For we do not commend ourselves again to you, but give you opportunity to boast on our behalf, that you may have an answer for those who boast in appearance and not in heart.*

Throughout the history of the church, we have fought the battle of ritual versus reality.

Satan has endeavored to substitute a form or a routine or a rite or a ceremony or a ritual for true worship.

We can go all the way back to the worship of Baal as opposed to the worship of Yahweh God.

Throughout the history of pagan religions, there has always been some form of ritual, some outward demonstration that substitutes for the true worship of the one true God, which must come from the heart.

Satan's great lie that has persisted since the Old Testament and continues today. For the Jews, it was their birthright, circumcision, ceremonies, fasts, feasts, works, and sacrifices.

Similarly, in the church today, it can be baptism, communion, church attendance, good works, or whatever else Satan can get us to cling to, treating it as if it were the essence of truth, while it only serves as a substitute for the real thing.

The Bible makes it clear that God judges' ritualism and will always oppose the final system of false religion will ultimately be destroyed.

Zechariah 7, the prophet addresses precisely this issue:
The problem of ritual/ reel versus true worship.

The theme of Zechariah 7 is about true worship, as opposed to mere ritual.

1 Samuel 16:7, *But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."*

God has consistently defined true worship as something that comes from the heart, not from rituals or performances. This is the core message of Zechariah 7.

1. The Question.

V 1-3, *Now in the fourth year of King Darius it came to pass that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, on the fourth day of the ninth month, Chislev,² when the people sent Sherezer, with Regem-Melech and his men, to the house of God, to pray before the Lord,³ and to ask the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and the prophets, saying, "Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?"*

We have just finished a series in the book of Zechariah of night visions.

Great pictures of the prophetic future of God's plan for Israel and the nations. The night visions are over in chapter 6.

Now two years have passed since these night visions.

Zechariah 1:1, *In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying,*

This is the next Word of God through His prophet Zechariah.

Two years later, while Israel is greatly comforted God comes back to them with a tremendous message of warning.

- They came back from captivity at the beginning of the book of Zechariah.
- They looked at their temple which was in ruins.
- They looked at their city which was in ruins.

God moved in and comforted their hearts by giving them these visions through Zechariah to tell them that God would rebuild their city, and God would rebuild their temple.

Not only that, but God would also give them the Kingdom in the day to come. God had these all planned for them. They were greatly comforted because of those visions.

Now **518 B.C.**

The temple is rising. Probably halfway up by the time we come to chapter 7. Those people are encouraged. Every obstacle has been removed to the rebuilding of Jerusalem because of the decree of **Darius** recorded in **Ezra chapter 6**.

The situation looks great.

Their city is going to be restored.

Their temple is going to be restored.

The people are thrilled about all of this.

There is a great danger that they will fall back into a pattern that they fell back into in the past. As it turned out, they fell back into it again.

Once they restored their temple and their patterns of worship, they would substitute the form for reality.

Hence the Word of God comes to them.

V 3, *“Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?”*

This question about whether they ought to weep and separate themselves is the question that keys **chapters 7 and 8**.

The town of Bethel is translated as the House of God, but it should be really the town of Bethel here.

Bethel, although its literal meaning is House of God, is never used to describe the temple, it is never used to describe a temple.

The House of the Lord is used 250 times to speak of the temple. The House of Elohim is used 50 times.

But not Bethel the House of God. So, it's a term that designates a town or a location.

In this town which is twelve miles north of Jerusalem there were some men, and these men come down to ask a question.

Now perhaps these men had returned from Babylon.

Most likely, because they have Babylonish names, that they were Jews born in the captivity. They have come back to the town of Babylon, and they now come to Jerusalem because they have a question.

- They represent their little town of Bethel.
- They came down because they had this question on their minds. They came down to pray before the Lord.
- They were beseeching/ seeking the Lord. They were pleading with the Lord.

Do we have to keep on with this fifth month fast?

This is really becoming a drag.

Background.

God had only instituted one fast in the history of Israel that was permanent and that was the Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 23:37, *‘These are the feasts of the Lord which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire to the Lord, a burnt offering and a grain offering, a sacrifice and drink offerings, everything on its day—*

It is only implied, not directly stated as though that was to be a fast, that is a time when you didn't eat.

But that was the only permanent fast that we know of in the Old Testament. But through the years several other fasts had been added by the people.

Whenever some big event happened, they would say that was a great event and we will remember that every year by having a fast. Every year when that comes around, we will have a fast.

They began to pile up the fasts.

This particular fast in **verse 3**, was in the fifth month, the month of **Av. (means father)**

This was to remember the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians.

When the Babylonians had come in and wiped-out Jerusalem and the temple, that was a devastating thing in the history of Israel. They wanted to remember it with a fast and so they had this fast.

Now the captivity is over, and years have passed since they have returned But some of them are still keeping the fast.

There are some orthodox Jews today who still keep that fast.

But these people have been keeping it in Bethel and they were a little tired of the whole idea.

They come and ask, “**do we have to keep weeping? Do we have to keep separating ourselves?**”

They use a Hebrew word there that is also the root word for Nazarite, or the Nazarite vow of separation.

Do we have to keep consecrating ourselves and weeping and mourning every time the fifth month and we commemorate this special fast?

One way this is a sad thing, because of the very fact that they asked the question that the whole purpose for which the fast was instituted had already passed by. All it was a ritual.

There was nothing meaningful left in it. They were simply going through the motions, and it had become a monotonous task.

What may have started with good intentions had devolved into an institution, a mechanical ritual that felt more like an annual obligation than a genuine act of worship.

It had turned into a time of spiritual humiliation, a ritual that had lost its significance. The fact that they were questioning its purpose shows that it no longer held any true meaning for them.

V 3, *“as I have done these so many years.”*

They were tired of this deal.

It was a real pain.

Zechariah 8:19, *“Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘The fast of the fourth month, The fast of the fifth, The fast of the seventh, And the fast of the tenth, Shall be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts For the house of Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.’*

They had the **fourth, the fifth, the seventh and the tenth** fast going. They were getting a little tired. Every time you turned around there was another fast.

Should we keep all this fasting?

It was legalistic void, there wasn't any genuine commitment or any genuine consecration there.

2. Intention.

The Word of the Lord comes in answer straightforward.

God realizes the trend toward ritualism on the part of a people who used to be idolatrous and were used to falling in these same old patterns of ritual and routine. So that their own religion had no meaning at all, and they could move very comfortably into another kind of ritual that belonged to another god.

V 4-5, *Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying,* ⁵ *“Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?’*

Was this ever real?

Was there ever any reality in this fasting?

- On the Lord’s Day, when you gathered in this place to celebrate the resurrection, was it ever truly meaningful for you?
- Or did you just show up, take the communion, get baptized, and go through the motions? Did you do it for Me, or did you do it for yourself?
- Was it real worship, or were you merely going through your routine, praying without sincerity, patting yourself on the back, and thinking you were fulfilling an obligation?
- Did you truly connect with Me, or were you just cranking out the ritual, lost in the performance?

V 6, *When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?*

When your fast became a feast, was it for you?

God is really probing a deeper problem.

Their fasts and their feasts, equally, were their own, and God was seldom considered is the implication.

The actual question that they were asking – should we keep the feast of the fifth month? is never answered.

That question is never answered because that isn't the point.

The point is, you can worship, and you can celebrate with a fast or you can celebrate with a feast any time you want, if it's truly done to the honour and glory of the Lord?

There is no answer to the question.

The deeper issue, the serious evil that was truly afflicting Israel, that all their religious practices had become mere performances. They had lost the meaning behind them, and the outward actions had become disconnected from true devotion.

In **V 5**, God highlights this by asking, "Did you do it out for seventy whole years?"

This isn't just about the passage of time.

It is about the weariness they felt from going through the motions without any real heart behind it.

God is reemphasizing their disillusionment. Had they really been offering true worship, or had it all become an empty routine that they simply endured?

This question challenges them to reflect on whether their faith was just a ritualistic habit or a genuine relationship with God.

When you fast, it is because of your sins. When you eat and drink, it is for your own profit. The whole matter is for yourselves.

But what have God in all this?

For neither in the fasting nor the feasting is there anything for God's glory.

When you fasted it was like self-punishment, and when you feasted it was for your own satisfaction.

Where did God ever come in?

Did you ever fast for Me?

Some people today fast. It's a good thing. Wonder if we fast in the way that the Bible says we ought to fast, without letting people know we fast, in order that it might be something done to the glory of God and not something done for us for the praise of men?

Or simply not having the occasion to miss a couple of meals because we have been busy and then telling ourselves that you fasted.

The true fast is that of a broken contrite worshiping heart, that's what God is saying.

Don't ever think because you went through the religious formality that you worshiped God.

That is something that must come out of the heart.

V 7, Should you not have obeyed the words which the Lord proclaimed through the former prophets when Jerusalem and the cities around it were inhabited and prosperous, and the South and the Lowland were inhabited?' "

You should listen to the prophets.

Obedience to the Word of God is the issue.

Should you not hear the words which the Lord spoke, divine revelation?

You should have listened.

The sad reality is that the whole reason they went into captivity was because they didn't listen.

There was a time when Jerusalem was inhabited, prospered, the suburbs around it prospered, a time when people went all the way from the Negev to the Shephelah.

From one end of the land to the other, to Negev is in the south, to Shephelah in the west, and all the land in between. Everything flourished and there's a picture of the whole land.

Should you not hear the words which the prophets spoke?

If you did, then you never would have experienced this thing if you had.

When you listen to God's Word there will be joy and there will be peace and there will be prosperity.

it isn't about ritual but hearing the Word of God.
It isn't routine but obedience.

Their whole intention in the feast was wrong. There was no spirit of obedience. They never would have gone into their problems the way they did, even from the beginning in their history.

Little had changed, even through the captivity with some of them.

3. Instruction

V 8-10, *Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying,*⁹ *“Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Execute true justice, Show mercy and compassion Everyone to his brother.’*¹⁰ *Do not*

oppress the widow or the fatherless, The alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart Against his brother.'

This is the main issue.

You kept the feasts, and you kept the fasts.

What you should have done was listen to the former prophets.

If your fathers had listened to the former prophets, you never would have gone into captivity to start with.

Even through all of that, you still don't listen to the former prophets, and you moved out a ritualistic approach to religion. What you should do is to hear the words of the Lord.

Execute true judgment.

It isn't the fasts and the feasts that I Am interested in your non-partiality.

No respect of persons.

You are not to prefer certain people over others.

You are not to give certain people justice because they have money, or because they have prestige, or because you seek to win their favor.

You are to show no partiality.

There is no respect of persons with God.

Exodus 18:19-23, *Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. ²⁰ And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. ²¹ Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. ²² And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you. ²³ If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."*

All are to be treated equally.

Paul says it in Philippians, "All having the same love."

Jeremiah 7:4-6, *Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.' ⁵ "For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour, ⁶ if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt,*

God's blessing does not attend your activity at the temple, but it attends the kind of life you live.

The first thing is to execute true judgment.

Let it be that you are impartial.

Let it be that you are peacemakers.

Let it be that you restore unity and harmony.

Show mercy and compassion.

Two words that would help in all human relationship that is to be kind and sympathetic.

Hosea 12:6, *So you, by the help of your God, return; Observe mercy and justice, And wait on your God continually.*

Do not oppress the helpless.

Do not oppress the widow, or the fatherless, or the stranger, or the poor.

We have a list of the helpless members of society, those most easily exposed to the evils of unscrupulous men.

God is saying that your religion is absolutely useless unless there is in your life justice and kindness, mercy, and compassion. Those are the things that speak of a regenerated heart. Those are the things that speak of true religion.

James 1:27, *Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

- True religion isn't lighting candles and walking up and down steps.
- True religion isn't going through certain rituals.
- True religion is taking care of orphans and widows.

Matthew 5:23-24, *Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

Don't go through any routine unless you have covered the bases in terms of the real heart attitudes.

You can't come and worship God while you have got some bitterness or grudge, or backbiting, or lawsuit, either in action or in your mind.

You can't worship God unless the heart is right.

God is simply saying,

- I am not interested in how many fasts you have.
- I am not interested in how many feasts you keep.

- I am not interested in how you bow.
- I am not interested in how you pray.
- I am not interested in how you read or sing or attend services.

What I want to know is what's cooking in your heart.
God wants to see the spirit of total obedience.

Isaiah 58:3, *Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?' "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your labourers.*

Here we are pounding and doing our religious workout, and You don't seem to pay any attention.

Isaiah 58:4, *Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day, To make your voice heard on high.*

God says that while you are fasting, it is business as usual.

You have got your employees all working.

You demand that they work hard.

You have got everybody fasting and you are having a wonderful spiritual time, while the poor guy who works for you is working hard and hasn't got anything to eat because he is fasting.

You have got everybody fasting, but you who are the proprietors are working the rest of the people to the place where you're all losing your tempers.

Isaiah 58:5, *Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the Lord?*

Is it some kind of game?

Is it some kind of routine?

Is it some kind of show you put on where you put funny things all over yourself and you walk around with ashes on top of you so you can gain some glory?

What is the fast God chooses?

Isaiah 58:6-9, *Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the Lord? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard ⁹Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'*

Do you want God to answer?

Then quit the ridiculous kind of fast and live the pure kind of life.

Very basic.

The self-righteous faster is to be replaced by the one whose heart is filled with love and kindness and sympathy and compassion.

In **1 John** where he talks about true love being the reaching of my compassion to a brother in need.

So, we see the question.

We have seen the intention.

We have instructions.

Conclusion.

Then Zechariah receives a word from the Lord about the cheek. In spite of God's instruction, Zechariah faces the fact that the people may rebel as the people before the captivity had rebelled.

V 11-12, *“But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. ¹² Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the*

former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the Lord of hosts.

He says the generation before you didn't listen, they substituted ritual for reality.

He shows a four-step progression here.
They refused to hear them.

Simply means they didn't take God's Word seriously.
They treated it flippantly and indifferently.

Secondly, they turned a rebellious shoulder. That phrase is used in **Hosea 4:6** and I believe it's in **Nehemiah 9:29**.

It describes the conduct of an ox when the ox will not take the yoke. He is saying they didn't listen. They treated it flippantly. Then when I tried to place My Law upon them, they shrugged, and they wouldn't take a restraint, and they didn't want any authority over them, and they demanded self-styled freedom.

Then there is another step in their progression.

- They stopped their ears.
- They went all the way to a deliberate refusal to listen to God.
- The word no longer touched them and reached them.
- They hated God's Word and yet they cranked out the ritual.

- They made their hearts like an adamant stone.

Another term for diamond, they were hard-hearted as a diamond which is the hardest thing there is.

So, here are these people. They have got all their ritual and God says to them, “I just want your hearts,” and they stopped their ears, and they make their hearts as hard as stone.

Their minds and their wills were set against God. He says you ought to remember history because when that happened, they had a terrible judgment. So, the inquiry and the intention and the instruction and the insolence.

He finally reminds them of the indignation.

V 12, *Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the Lord of hosts.*

He cried and they would not hear.

The Lord of hosts scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations.

V 13-14, *Therefore it happened, that just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen,” says the Lord of hosts.* ¹⁴ *“But I scattered them with a whirlwind*

among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned; for they made the pleasant land desolate.”

The wrath of God.

For 70 years God didn't hear them.

They wouldn't hear Me, so I stopped listening to them.

What was the answer then to the original question?

Do we have to keep the fast and feasts?

God's Word came to Zechariah the feast ever for Me anyway?

The point is that all you have done is make a form of religion.

God is not interested in the form. God is interested in the reality that's in your heart.

That reality springs from hearing the words of the Lord. The last generation didn't hear the words of the Lord, and they were judged.

God does not want us to be indifferent and He does not want us to be disobedient to His Word.

Simple message for us.

We can't substitute any form for reality.

My prayer tonight is that you know the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not that you go to church, or that you have had some ritual. I

Psalms 23 Reciting Story:

The actor was overcome with the silence, stood up and he said, “I think I know the difference. I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd.”

There are lots of people who know the Psalm. Sadly, there are not so many who know the Shepherd.

A parable that our Lord taught that has great significance for the theme of the seventh chapter of Zechariah which we’ll look at in a moment.

Luke 18:9-14, *Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:*¹⁰ *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*¹¹ *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.*¹² *I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’*¹³ *And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’*¹⁴ *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

There are many lessons this parable can teach, and I don't want to get into all of them, but I would like to just pull out one thought. And that is that there are two approaches to worship. One is the approach of the ritualist and the other is the approach of the realist. And we see them here.

The self-righteous ritualist.

For him religion is ritual. He doesn't pray to God, but to himself.

He is not trying to reach God, but simply he was reciting certain things that are prescriptions for his religion.

He is not interested in repentance.

He is not interested in sorrow or love or humility or even true worship.

He is only interested in reciting his credentials.

He proceeds to say, "I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of everything that I possess," and pat himself on the back.

If true worship consisted in abstaining from food, rather than abstaining from sin, in giving money to God rather than giving your heart to God, then this is a deeply religious man.

But unfortunately, religion is not made of giving your money or from abstaining from food and so, he is anything but religious, he is a ritualist.

In his ritual and his routine and the performance of the prescriptions of religion, he has alienated himself from the reality of knowing God. He does not go to his house justified.

The self-repentant ree man.

The tax collector who stands afar off doesn't even so much as approach the center place, or the place of prominence, or perhaps the location of this other man.

He beats upon his breast in the sign of humility and guilt and conviction and penitence and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

- He is sorry.
- He is broken.
- He is humble.
- He offers God no ritual.
- He offers God broken and a contrite heart.

Jesus says that's the man who goes home to his house justified.

Jesus gives us a good contrast between reel and real.

Through history, people who thought that because they were baptized in water like this, they were therefore saved, that because they were baptized or sprinkled or confirmed or whatever, that they are all right because they have performed the ritual, but that is exactly what the Bible wants to counter.

Will you be real before God tonight?