

ZECHARIAH

Please turn in your Bibles this evening to Zechariah chapter 7 as we continue our study through the Word of God. Now keep in mind that the prophet Zechariah was with the group of people that returned home to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. And as we have seen, his first prophetic messages were given during the reign of King Darius, in his second year as King, in 520 B. C. A spiritual awakening was taking place as both Haggai and Zechariah ministered to the people, correcting them of their error and encouraging them to walk with God, putting the Lord first in their life.

And as we get into chapter 7 of Zechariah we see that an interval of some two years has passed by, it is now the fourth year of the reign of King Darius.

And these four messages were given on December 4, 518 B. C. and the work on the Temple has been going on for some 2 years now, encouraged by Haggai to restart the work. Thus, they had about two years to go until the work was completed, according to the book of Ezra.

Now three of these messages are introduced by the phrase, “**The word of the LORD of hosts**” and we see that in Zechariah 7:4, Zechariah 8:1, and Zechariah 8:18. And one has the phrase, “**The word of the LORD**” that is found in Zechariah 7:8. Thus, these messages were not born out of the imagination of Zechariah’s heart, but from the heart of God who revealed these things to Zechariah.

But, as we will see, there was this problem. You see, they were very religious, they went through all the rituals and yet, their heart was far from God. And make no mistake about it, God is interested in your heart, your relationship with Him and not some empty ritual.

But man thinks by doing these things he is right with God and as we will see, God does not see it that way. I realize that is hard for many people who are doing all kinds of things so they can obtain favor with God to hear, but those things are empty. And here's the thing, you can't cause God to love you anymore than He already does nor can you cause God to love you any less.

But God does want that intimate relationship with you and as we know, sin has broken that fellowship with God. Thus, it is only through the shed blood of Christ on the cross of Calvary that our sins are washed away and we can have that fellowship. Not religion but a relationship.

Now before we are too hard on the Jews for what their relationship with God deteriorated into, we need to look at our own lives, our own nation. I think we are a religious nation but as I have said, God is not interested in religion, He wants a relationship with us. Let me share this with you and then we will get into our text this evening. We are told,

Sometimes we hear people say that the United States is the most religious nation among developed nations. And in spite of increasing multicultural diversity, some insist that we are a "Christian nation."

Well, in a recent piece for The Guardian, theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas slams the very idea that Americans are more religious (much less Christian) than people in countries like Britain. Instead, Hauerwas contends that the "religion" most of us Americans espouse is that of autonomously choosing who or what constitutes "god," and then using what that "god" purportedly gives us (a nation that guarantees freedom of choice, for instance) to justify our freedom to choose the "god" of our choosing. In the end, all of this comes down to utilitarian religion and self-fulfillment.

Here's part of what Hauerwas writes:

Even if more people go to church in America, I think the US is a much more secular country than Britain. In Britain, when someone says they do not believe in God, they stop going to church. In the US, many who may have doubts about Christian orthodoxy may continue to go to church. They do so because they assume that a vague god vaguely prayed to is the god that is needed to support family and nation.

Americans do not have to believe in God, because they believe that it is a good thing simply to believe: all they need is a general belief in belief. That is why we have never been able to produce interesting atheists in the US. The god most Americans say they believe in is not interesting enough to deny, because it is only the god that has given them a country that ensures that they have the right to choose to believe in the god of their choosing. Accordingly, the only kind of atheism that counts in the US is that which calls into question the proposition that everyone has a right to life, liberty, and happiness.

America is the exemplification of what I call the project of modernity. That project is the attempt to produce a people that believes it should have no story except the story it chose when it had no story. That is what Americans mean by freedom.

The problem with that story is its central paradox: you did not choose the story that you should have no story except the story you chose when you had no story. Americans, however, are unable to acknowledge that they have been fated to be "free", which makes them all the more adamant that they have a right to choose the god that underwrites their "freedom."

A people so constituted will ask questions such as "Why does a good god let bad things happen to good people?" It is as if the Psalms never existed. The story that you should have no story except the story you chose when you had no story produces a people who say: "I believe that Jesus is Lord – but that is just my personal opinion."

- <http://www.christianblog.pw/2010/10/stanley-hauerwas-how-real-is-america.html>

I don't know about you but that is not something that I would die for, my own personal opinion. Make no mistake about it, if you think Christianity is your own personal opinion then you don't know the God of the Bible. It has nothing to do with your opinion. Either God is real and has spoken to us through His Word, through Jesus or He is not and then what in the world are we doing here.

You see, I don't place my faith in my opinion or even someone else's opinion but in the living God who loves me so much that He died for me to pay in full the penalty for my sins so that I can fellowship with Him, I can have that intimate relationship with Him. Thus, all that I do is not out of some religious obligation but it is done out of love!

That truly is the focus of what we will be looking at this evening, genuine faith or religious activity. With that as our background, let's begin reading in Zechariah chapter 7 beginning in verse 1 and let's see what the Lord has for us as we study through His Word.

ZECHARIAH 7

VERSES 1-3

1. This message that was given on December 4, 518 B. C. was in response to a delegation of men who came from Bethel to Jerusalem with a question. Now in the New King James Version it speaks of "**the house of God**" which is the Hebrew word "*Bethel*" and it seems to indicate that is where they went, to the Temple. Actually, they went to Jerusalem to inquire of the priest, for verse 3 speaks of "**the house of the LORD**", which is in Jerusalem, it was the Temple.

The Amplified Bible makes this verse very clear when it says "**Now the people of Bethel has send Sharezer and Regem-Melech and their men to pray and entreat favor of the LORD.**" And keep in mind that Bethel was a town in Ephraim, which was located in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the place where one of the two golden calves were placed to worship God by. It was a place of idolatry!

Now their question is this. Should they continue to fast and mourn on the fifth month as they did while they were in Babylon? First of all, the only fast that God had instructed His people in was on the day of Atonement.

Then what was this fast all about? In the fifth month the city of Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Babylonians and their King, Nebuchadnezzar. And thus, they fasted and mourned over what had taken place.

When we get into chapter 8 of Zechariah we will see three more fasts that they instituted during their captivity in Babylon. But, the point being made here is this. Since the Temple is being built, do we need to continue with fasting and mourning in the fifth month? God will answer that question fully in chapter 8 but we will get some insight in this chapter as well.

2. Keep in mind that these fasts were not commanded by God but they were instituted by man. They became traditions, religious activities and how many people do that very thing today. Why do churches baptize infants? Because it is tradition, it is what the church has done for years and they must be right! Wrong, God did not command that infants be baptized but for people who repent of their sins and ask Jesus to be Lord and Savior of their lives, they are to be baptized. Do you see how easy we can let tradition guide our lives instead of the Word of God!

3. How can we apply this to our lives today? I think this is interesting because we are living in a day where Christians are remembering and holding onto their past, they won't let go and they mourn over it! We like to do things that help us to remember the past so we don't forget. Let it go! Come on, what is wrong with us!

You can't change the past and you can't do anything about the future but you can live in the present, this day that God has given you and serve Him because you love Him instead of mourning over this and mourning over that.

Paul put it like this in Philippians 3:12-14, **“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

“But this happened to me and that happened to me!” ***PRESS ON!*** “But you don't understand how hard it was for me. My parents wouldn't get me that official Red Ryder, carbine action, two-hundred shot range model air rifle!” ***PRESS ON!*** I am not trying to negate or water down what you went through but if you are going to hold onto it, you are going to become stagnant in your walk with God. Thus, ***PRESS ON!***

I understand that you may not like that, you may even be angry with me but all I can tell you is what Paul said, **“... I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”** May we do that!

VERSES 4-7

1. Now the Lord not only speaks of the fast in the fifth month, but also in the seventh month that they were observing. And this was commemorating the murder of Gedaliah, who was the governor of those people who were left in the land when the rest of the nation was taken captive to Babylon.

And as you can see, the Lord is not commending them for their fasting but the Lord is rebuking them for their religious activity that was devoid of spiritual truth. You see, they did not do these things for the Lord, but for themselves. It made them feel better or they tried to feel better, but it was meaningless to the Lord.

And look at how this religious activity deteriorated. It had become nothing more than a pity-party, they were not truly seeking God but complaining because of all that had happened to them. Thus, they were doing these fasts for themselves and it really had nothing to do with the Lord.

And think about it. Did they really think that a few days of fasting per year covered all the sin they filled their lives with? Of course it didn't! They were living for themselves and not for God and God called them on it!

In Isaiah 58:3-5 we see the Lord rebuke them for their fasts and how hypocritical they were. They were not fasting to draw closer to God but they were for themselves. We are told, **“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 laborers. 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. 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?”**

In Amos 5:21-24 we are told, **“I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, For I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream.”**

And lastly, in I Samuel 15:22-23 we are told what Samuel said to King Saul for his disobedience to the Lord, **“So Samuel said: ‘Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He also has rejected you from being king.’”**

God is not looking for empty rituals but a relationship with Him. And if you are living a life that is in rebellion to God, all that you do will not be accepted. They are empty. God wants obedience and it is out of that obedience that we serve Him!

2. Now as you look at verse 7 we see that the Lord wants them to examine their hearts and their actions. He is asking them why they didn't listen to the prophets who warned them of the coming judgment if they continued in their sin?

You see, like I have said, obedience is more important than feast days, then fasting, then mourning. Their fathers obeyed the feast days and yet disobeyed the Lord and it led them into captivity! I think people substitute religious activity, rituals, sacrifice for what God really wants, obedience, because it makes them feel good or they want to feel good about doing something for God even though they are not obeying Him. And the Lord is saying to us, if we go down this path, if we continue down this road, we will find ourselves in captivity, for the truth will set you free but sin will place you in bondage!

3. Now let's deal with this issue of the past and holding on to it, remembering it. God wants us to walk in obedience to Him and as we dwell on the past, as we hold on to the past are we really walking in obedience to Him? I don't think so. Meyer put it like this, "There is no need to observe the sad anniversaries of our sins and their accompanying punishment, if once we are assured of God's free forgiveness. When He forgives and restores, the need for dwelling on the bitter past is over . . . Too many of us are always dwelling beside the graves of the dead past." Perspective is everything, ***LET GO OF THE PAST, GIVE IT TO THE LORD AND MOVE ONWARD!***

VERSES 8-10

1. Remember what we read in Zechariah 7:7, "**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?**"

In other words, God rebuked their ancestors for their disobedience and the people of Zechariah for continuing in their footsteps. And here we see God explain what that disobedience was all about, how they were treating people. In fact, they had no problem fasting a few times a year and yet they could not treat their brethren the way God wanted them to!

And let me say this. If their relationship with their fellow man was off it was not because they just had a bad day. It was because their relationship with God was off and it was manifested in the way they treated others. And that is true today of us. How we treat others, how we speak of others is just a manifestation of how our relationship with God is. I realize that some are put off by that, but it is just the reality.

Jesus tells us to love those who hate us, to pray for those who spitefully use us! We are to show them love. "They don't deserve it!" Well, that may be true but you did not deserve God's love and yet He freely gave it to you through Jesus. Now God is saying to each of us, "Do the same!"

2. As you read what God is asking them to do they are not some outrageous requests. Not at all. What He is asking them to do is to have true justice, to show mercy, to have compassion towards people, not to oppress the less fortunate, and not to plot evil against another.

But like I have said, the problem with doing these things is when your relationship with God is not right, your relationship with man will also be off. And thus, these things are not going to flow from your life. And the idea is we love mercy when it is shown to us, but we don't like to show mercy towards others. We don't like to be cheated.

But listen to what Isaiah said in Isaiah 58:6-12, after the Lord told them that He was not accepting their fasts He told them, **“Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is 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? Then 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. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, If you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your darkness shall be as the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, And satisfy your soul in drought, And strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Those from among you Shall build the old waste places; You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; And you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.”**

That is what God is telling His people here and us as J. Vernon said, “If you want to fast the way that pleases Me, begin with getting right with your brothers and sisters. Stop oppressing others, and reach out to help others.”

Getting right with God begins with repentance and then by stopping the evil we do towards others. And then, getting right with God continues by doing loving things for other people. This is all born out of our relationship with the Lord and not apart from Him!

Now please understand that this is not a works salvation but a salvation that works. It is born out of a right relationship with the Lord as I have said. Loving those things that He loves and hating those things that He hates. This is what God is looking for in our lives, true faith that is manifested in the carrying for the poor, the fatherless, the widowed, for God is concerned for those that are less fortunate and so should we be.

You see, they went through all the motions trying to feel good, but they were miserable. And they couldn't understand it. Thus, if we do the things that God desires from us, if we are obedient to Him, then we will meet the needs of others and that joy will return, we will be satisfied!

3. How did they respond to what God was instructing them to do? Let's read on and see.

VERSES 11-12

1. This is an interesting response by the Jewish people. And please understand that there was a progression to their rebellion against God. First of all they "**refused to heed**" or they did not want to hear God's Word any longer, they were not going to follow what God had said!

Then we are told that they "**shrugged their shoulders**" and the idea here is "Big deal" or a kind of self-justifying shrugging of their shoulders. They heard what God said and it didn't matter, they were going to do what they wanted.

From there we see that they "**stopped their ears**" or they didn't want to hear what God was saying any longer.

And finally, notice what happened to their heart, **“they made their hearts like flint.”**

They had become insensitive to the things of God. When God spoke to them through the prophets or through His Word it bounced off their hard heart and it never penetrated.

This reminds me of when my children were young and they would have temper tantrums. They didn't like what I said, and the children of Israel didn't like what God was saying to them.

The prophets of God spoke for God and the people refused to obey, they closed their ears and hardened their hearts. And maybe they thought that they won, but they didn't! God's wrath came upon them and they went into captivity for their actions. You see, we don't let our children get away with disobedience and our heavenly Father does not let us, His children, get away with anything because He loves us!

2. Now because they turned from God, they did not listen to what God was telling them, notice what happens.

VERSES 13-14

1. As some read this they come to the conclusion that God is being harsh or unfair here, not at all. First of all they refused to listen to God and in response to that God refused to listen to them, He refused to answer their prayers and thus, they were taken into captivity by the Babylonians!

But if they are crying out to God doesn't God respond to our hearts cry? Please understand that they were not repenting of their sin and returning to God, not at all! They were crying out to God because of the difficult situation they were in and they wanted to be delivered from that!

It is as Paul said in the book of Corinthians regarding two types of sorrow. He wrote, **“For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.”** II Corinthians 7:10.

You see, one is sorry they got caught and the consequences that came upon them, and that sorrow will lead to death, it does not change the heart. But there is true repentance, and that leads to life! This was not true repentance on their part and thus, judgment came upon them, God did not hear their cries!

And please understand that God did everything possible to get them to turn back to Him, but as we read, **“But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. 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.”** Zechariah 7:11-12.

Make no mistake about it, we have seen the examples in the Scripture, that when we allow religious rituals to take the place of a relationship with God and obedience to His Word, there will be scattering and desolation in our lives as we see with the Jewish people!

ZECHARIAH 8

VERSES 1-2

1. In all their unfaithfulness, in all their rebellion, notice how God loves the Jewish people. He is zealous for them, He has great zeal for them, great fervor! God is not done with them, but He is going to restore them, and that is truly the focus of this message, restoration!

And keep in mind that when it says that God is “**Zealous for Zion**” the idea is “to become intensely red.” In other words, God’s emotion for us is so deep that His face becomes red! Make no mistake about it, God is passionate for His people and I am so thankful for that!

VERSE 3

1. Please understand this, Israel being in the land today is not the fulfillment of this prophecy. The Lord is not in their midst, ruling and reigning in Jerusalem. It is not called the city of Truth today. And the streets are not safe.

This is speaking of the Lord’s return when truth will flow from the nation and peace will permeate the land. God is encouraging His people who are living in very difficult times, giving them hope for the future to live in the present!

And as much as God’s presence will fill the land with truth and holiness, so too do we see that with God’s presence in our life. We become people of truth, a holy people, people who are set apart for the Master’s use. It is as Paul said in II Corinthians 3:18, “**But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.**” More of Him and less of us in our lives!

VERSES 4-5

1. It speaks of old men and women, people of “**great age**” who will be in the streets of Jerusalem. That probably wasn’t the case in Zechariah’s day due to the difficult journey to make it to Jerusalem from Babylon and to just survive in a city that was laid waste! Not that there were any people of “**great age**”, but the streets were not filled with them.

Also, the city itself was not safe, the walls were ruined and yet Zechariah is talking about a day when there will be peace and safety in Jerusalem and that is in the Kingdom Age! And to show how safe things will be we see children filling the streets playing safely. One writer put it like this regarding what this is all about. He wrote,

G. Campbell Morgan said that when he wanted to catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God, he didn't go into a room where adults were praying but into the street where kids were playing. If you really want to know about the kingdom, watch little kids. Jesus said essentially the same thing when He placed a child in the midst of the disciples and said, "You must become as a child to enter into the kingdom" (Matthew 18:3). In the kingdom age, crime will be eradicated, allowing children to play without fear.

- Jon Courson, Jon Courson's Application Commentary Old Testament, Volume 2, p. 900

What a day that will be when Jesus rules and reigns from Jerusalem and righteousness fills the land!

VERSE 6

1. We read these stories looking back and what God has done in Israel. But keep in mind that during the days of Zechariah, trying to imagine a transformed, a prosperous, a safe Jerusalem was more than they could believe!

Keep in mind that the city was still a mess, maybe half-built. The walls themselves would not be completed for another 60 years! And yes, looking at this through the eyes of man it seemed impossible. But it is not impossible for God! Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 19:26, "**... 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'**"

We need to keep that in mind as we walk by faith! That nothing is too difficult for God and what He has promised He is more than able to bring to pass! I like how Spurgeon puts this into perspective for us regarding the marvelous works of God.

He wrote, "I remember when a boy being taken to see the residence of one of our nobility, and the good friend who took me noticed my astonishment at the largeness of the house. I was amazed at it, having never seen anything like it, and so I said, 'What a house for a man to live in!' 'Bless you, boy,' said he, 'this is only the kitchen!' I was only looking at the servants' apartments, and was astonished at the grandeur thereof; but the mansion itself was a far nobler affair. Oftentimes when you see what the Lord has done, you are ready to cry out, 'How can all this be? His goodness, his mercy, is it as great as this?' Rest assured that you have only seen a little of his goodness, as it were the kitchen of his great house: you have not seen the palace of the Most High, where he reveals his full power and splendor."

May we not lose sight of that no matter what we are going through in life!

VERSES 7-8

1. We have witnessed the Jews returning to the land of Israel in 1948, they became a nation once again. And since that time there has been an exodus of Jews from around the world, they are returning to Israel. And it continues on even today!

But that is only a partial fulfillment. This regathering into the land of Israel that is spoken of here is speaking of the Kingdom Age when God will bring them home from all over the world!

In Matthew 24:29-31 we are told, **“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”**

2. What is interesting to me is that in Israel today only about 8% of the people are religious. Most of the nation is secular, no love for God, no need for God. And the religious are focused on keeping the Law and not on Jesus, the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world!

But there is coming a day, during the Tribulation Period, that the Jews will return to their Messiah, to Jesus and receive the cleansing that is only found in His shed blood! Paul tells us in Romans 11:25-27, **“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.’”** As the Lord said, it truly will be wonderful, it will be marvelous in that day!

VERSES 9-13

1. I love this because God is encouraging His people not to lose hope, don't give up, to continue on in the work of the rebuilding of the Temple. You see, God's promises of future blessings were to encourage the people in the work that was before them. And that should also be true for us as Christians. God's promises to us for the future should strengthen us and encourage us in the present work we are doing!

And God also reminds them of all the turmoil, the chaos that filled the land when they stopped the rebuilding of the Temple. It is as Isaiah 57:21 says, **“There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’”** And notice here in Zechariah that the Lord is in control, He set the people against each other for their disobedience to awaken them out of their spiritual sleep.

Remember what Proverbs 14:34 says, **“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.”** Their sin, their rebellion brought devastating consequences to their lives. But now that they returned to the Lord, they were blessed by God. The land was fruitful again. The rains returned. The people were prosperous. And the nations are looking to Israel as a blessing and not a curse.

2. Keep in mind that the complete fulfillment of this is seen at the end of the Tribulation Period as the nation of Israel turns to the Lord Jesus and God saves them from their sin. It is as Jesus said in Matthew 23:37-39, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’”** There is coming a day when the nation of Israel will call upon the Lord and He will return to set up His Kingdom and forgive them of their sins!

3. And again, all this was spoken to them to encourage them in the work as we see in verse 13 of Zechariah chapter 8, **“... So I will save you, and you shall be a blessing. Do not fear, Let your hands be strong.”** May we not forget that. Look to the Lord, let His Word encourage you in the work He has called you to do. Don't lose hope, keep focused on Jesus!

VERSES 14-17

1. If you think about it, this is kind of a different way to encourage His people. What we see here is that God is looking to the past captivity of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, showing how that came to pass just as He said it would, to encourage His people regarding the future blessings, the future restoration of His people.

I think that is also important for us to apply to our own lives. Not only God's future promises to live in the present, but God's past accomplishments in our own lives, the things He has done in us, to strengthen us for what we are going through today and it gives us the confidence for tomorrow's promises, that what God has said, will come to pass!

God's Word, opened up to us by His Spirit encourages us and yet, so many times we don't read God's Word or we read it without asking the Holy Spirit to open it up to us.

Remember the encouraging words that God gave to Joshua as he was going to lead them into the Promised Land. In Joshua 1:8-9 we are told, **“This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”**

You see, that strength, that encouragement comes from reading and applying God's Word to our lives as God speaks to us through His Spirit! May we not forget that.

2. Now in verses 16 and 17 of Zechariah chapter 8 we see what the children of Israel were to do. They were to speak the truth, give righteous judgment, live peaceably, let no evil grow in your heart against another, and not give false oaths. Why was God asking them to live like this?

Because these are the things that flow from God, and God wants us to be in harmony with Him. Thus, if we are, these are the things that will flow from our lives. James tells us the same thing as he wrote, **“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.”** James 1:27.

As some read that they wonder what that is all about. There is nothing about the Lord Jesus, only works. What is that all about? I think James 2:14-18 tells us, **“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”**

You see, it is not a salvation by works, but a salvation that works! I know I have said that often but we need to understand that. Faith apart from works is empty faith, it is dead faith. You see, what this is saying is that what God has done in your heart will overflow into your life.

Thus, James tells us, **“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”** James 1:22. Truly we see James talking about faith in action! Live out your faith!

And then the Lord speaks of things that He hates. Evil in our hearts against others, being deceitful or a false oath, God hates what is evil and loves what is good! And since God says that He hates these things so should we. The problem isn't necessarily knowing what God likes and hates; the problem comes in the doing!

You see, the flesh is ugly and self-seeking. And many religions will tell you what is good and what is evil. Even Buddha said, “What you don't want people to do to you, don't do to them.” And Buddha went on to say materialism is our problem and if we can separate ourselves from the material world, we won't be anxious, we won't be stressed out, there won't be strife. If you can divorce yourself from these things' then you will reach nirvana!

And what Buddha said is basically true. He put the golden rule in the negative, Jesus put it in the positive when He said, **“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”** Matthew 7:12.

Also, in speaking of material things, James tells us, **“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war . . .”** James 4:1-2.

Buddha told us what to do, not how to do it, how to achieve it. On the other hand, Jesus not only told us what to do, but He told us how to do it. Obviously, and we have all found this out, you are not going to be able to do this by the power of your flesh, but by the power of God’s Spirit.

It is as Jesus said in Luke 24:49 to His disciples, **“Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.”** He is telling us the same thing. We need to submit our lives to Him, asking to be empowered by His Spirit so we can do what we can’t do in our own strength, by our own effort, live a life that is in harmony with God! And as we do there are blessings that we receive, not because we are good but it is what flows into our lives by living that way!

VERSES 18-19

1. Now we see the four fasts they made while they were in captivity in Babylon. The fast of the fourth month was remembering when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians breached the wall of the city of Jerusalem, II Kings 25:3-4, Jeremiah 39:2.

The fast of the fifth month was in remembrance of the Babylonians burning the city of Jerusalem and the Temple to the ground, II Kings 25:8-10.

The fast of the seventh month commemorated the murder of Gedaliah, who was the governor of Judah after the fall of Jerusalem, II Kings 25:25, Jeremiah 41:2.

And the fast of the tenth month commemorated the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, II Kings 25:1-2, Jeremiah 39:1.

And what we see here is that God answers their question about continuing these self-imposed, man-made fasts. He tells them not to continue with them, but instead have a feast not a fast, and be filled with joy and gladness. Rejoice over what God is doing!

2. I like that and I think that is a good lesson for the church to learn. Some think that the more you afflict yourself, the more you mourn, the more God is pleased with you. Monks do this, mother Teresa did this and it is unbiblical and untrue.

We are told in Psalm 34:8, “**Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!**” Taste and see and don’t make an ugly sour face. If you truly have tasted the Lord, you will see that He is good, and thus, we are to have joy, gladness, a feast in the Lord! Think about all that the Lord has done for you and you will not be able to stop yourself from shouting for joy - taste and see that the **LORD** is good!

VERSES 20-23

1. Obviously this is not speaking of today for most Jews are not leading people to come and worship before Jesus and Jesus is not ruling and reigning in Jerusalem. This again is speaking of a future restoration of Israel, which will occur at the end of the Tribulation Period and on into the Kingdom Age. And this is not only speaking of the Jews being in the Kingdom, but also Gentiles, all those who have come to Christ during the Tribulation Period and have survived the persecution of the Antichrist.

It is as Isaiah 2:2-4 says, **“Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; he will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”**

Interestingly enough, that word “**grasp**” used in verse 23 is also used for grabbing a lion by its beard (I Samuel 17:35) and for grabbing a snake by the tail (Exodus 4:4). What’s the point? Simply, you are grasping something that you can’t afford to let go! One writer put it like this, “This prophecy teaches, then, that Israel will be the means of drawing the nations of the earth to the Lord in the time of the Messiah’s reign of righteousness upon earth.” (Feinberg, cited in Barker)

2. Now what we see here with the Jews as they are bringing people to come and worship the Lord Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, that is what we should be doing, bringing people to Jesus, let them see Christ in us! In Colossians 1:27 we are told, **“To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”** May people, as they see Christ in us, that hope of glory, say, **“Let us go with you for we have heard that God is with you.”**

May they see that hope of glory that is in us, may they see Jesus and desire to have what we have! It is as Boice wrote, “We are all clinging to the seamless robe of that *one* Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who because of His work on the cross is the only basis on which anyone may approach God and entreat Him for spiritual blessings.”

And I will close with this. What a day that will be when people will flow to Jerusalem to come before the Lord! That day is fast approaching, may we be faithful in the work until He comes! May people be drawn to Jesus because of our deep love for Him. Not a religion but a relationship with the true and living God!