

ZECHARIAH

Chapter Seven

Introduction

God never commanded the Israelites to fast anywhere in the Old Testament. He established many *feasts*, but no *fasts*. The many fasts you read about in the Old Testament were established by the Jews themselves, usually in response to some catastrophe which was a consequence of their own sin and disobedience.

Some would object and point to the Day of Atonement as an annual fast. When you read about the Day of Atonement in Leviticus twenty-nine, it doesn't specify fasting. It only recommends that you "afflict your souls." Fasting was adopted by the Jews as one way of afflicting their souls, but it was *not* specified by God.

I'm not suggesting that fasting was or is wrong. In the New Testament Jesus spoke of fasting, along with prayer and giving, as a valid spiritual discipline. Fasting was and is appropriate at certain times and for certain things.

We would call fasting a **rite**, spelled r-i-t-e, a spiritual observance or practice. The question is: When is the rite of fasting, **right**? And when is it **wrong**?

In our text, a delegation of Jews from Bethel arrived in Jerusalem to ask that very question of the priests and prophets. The Jews had established a fast in the fifth month of their year to commemorate the destruction of Solomon's Temple by the Babylonians. Once the new Temple was built, they wondered if they should continue to observe that annual fast or not.

God ultimately answers their question in chapter eight, verse nineteen, saying,

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.'"

This verse will find its fulfillment in the future Kingdom of God on earth. There will be no fasting, only feasting!

They weren't in the Kingdom yet; what about fasting in the sixth century? God answers their question by asking them questions in chapter seven. His questions establish principles by which they were to measure the true value of not only fasting, but of all religious rites. Those same principles are still applicable today.

We'll organize our thoughts around these two points: #1 Your Rites Are Right When They Are Motives Of The Heart, and #2 Your Rites Are Wrong When They Are Matters Of Habit.

#1 Your Rites Are Right When They Are Motives Of The Heart (v1-6)

While captive in Babylon for seventy years the Jews had established four fasts to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians:

1. They fasted in the tenth month because that is when Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem
2. They fasted in the fourth month because that is when the Babylonians penetrated the defenses of the city.
3. They fasted in the fifth month because that is when the Babylonians burned Solomon's Temple.
4. And they fasted in the seventh month because that is when their governor was slain.

The new Temple, called Zerubbabel's Temple after their current governor, was nearing completion. Should they still keep the fast in the fifth month? Let's see.

Zechariah 7:1 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, Chislew,
Zechariah 7:2 when *the people* sent Sherezer, with Regem-Melech and his men, to the house of God, to pray before the LORD,
Zechariah 7:3 *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?"

It was a full nine months before the scheduled fast, but the fasting committee was already hard at work!

God answered their question by asking them questions:

Zechariah 7:4 Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying,

Zechariah 7:5 "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?'

Zechariah 7:6 When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink *for yourselves?*'"

The technique of answering your spiritual questions by asking questions needs to be brought back. We want to immediately answer people's questions and thereby solve their problems. But often you don't know what is really going on in their lives; the information they give you can be partial or even misleading.

Jesus often answered questions by asking questions. It is a great way to reveal the true motives of the heart. It gives God the Holy Spirit an opportunity to work in the person's life.

God shifted the focus off of the outward observance and onto the inward motive. If the motive of the heart is right, then the observance of the rite is right.

Fasting is the issue in chapter seven, but we could talk about any observance. Every church has *rites*, *traditions*, and a *liturgy*.

1. Rites are spiritual practices. They include those prescribed by Jesus for the church – baptism and the Lord's Supper. They include the three spiritual disciplines Jesus discussed in His Sermon on the Mount – fasting, giving, and praying.
2. Traditions are established by churches as they determine when and how often to celebrate the rites. Jesus told us to remember Him by observing the Lord's Supper, but left it open as to how often and in what manner we practice it.
3. Liturgy is a word that simply indicates the order of service surrounding the rites and traditions.

Some churches are very formal; some are very informal. Either extreme or somewhere in the middle, we all have rites, traditions, and a liturgy. We should constantly ask ourselves if we are observing these things for the Lord from the right motive of our hearts.

Religions are full of rules, rites, and rituals. Christianity is a relationship. It is not what you *observe* that matters, but whether you *obey*. No rite, even one prescribed in the Bible, can overcome a wrong heart.

Growing up in the Catholic church I weekly went to confession and took communion. Neither of those rituals had any affect on my heart... Or they might have had the very evil affect of convincing me that I could live like a sinner if I occasionally performed the rituals of a saint.

Just because we are Protestants doesn't mean we are immune from this problem. A lot of Christians are simply going through the motions without the emotions. Jesus Himself rebuked the church at Ephesus for putting their emphasis on their activities when their attitude was wrong. Attitudes, not activities, are what matter most. This is supposed to be *Christianity*, not "*churchianity*."

Let me put this in a slightly different way. God is interested in you, not in what you do. When I come to church on Sunday to deliver the sermon, God is more interested in my morning than in my message. Was I kind and helpful to my wife? What was my attitude toward His saints who I encountered before I stepped into the pulpit? What is my real motive in teaching God's Word?

Some people hear this and think, "Well, I don't need to observe anything, then. If going to church and partaking of baptism, communion, and the rest are simply outward observances, I'll just stay home and obey God in my own way."

Wrong thinking! Jesus gave us baptism and the Lord's Supper to observe; He calls us to meet together as a fellowship of believers; He inspires us to worship; He illuminates His Word as it is taught. We ought to observe these things. When my heart is right, then my outward observances become a joyous celebration of my relationship with Jesus. The right motives of your heart in wanting to honor Him and glorify Him give meaning and value to your outward observances.

Obey, *then* observe. Keep it in that order and you'll be fine.

#2 Your Rites Are Wrong When They Are Matters Of Habit (v7-14)

God answered by asking questions. He also made a few observations, beginning in verse seven.

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?”

Ouch! If they had obeyed the Lord, they never would have gone into captivity and would have had *nothing* to afflict their souls about. Their fasts commemorated their own sin and disobedience.

God outlines the life of obedience that would have kept their fathers from becoming captives:

Zechariah 7:8 Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying,

Zechariah 7:9 “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother.

Zechariah 7:10 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.’”

If you read the prophets who wrote prior to the Babylonian captivity you’ll see that the Jews were very religious. They went to the Temple and observed all of its rites and rituals. But you’ll also read about their abuse of justice and of the poor and of the widows and of the fatherless. They were very *religious*, but not very *righteous*.

Kindness toward their brothers and sisters, and pity towards anyone outside of their nation, was what God required. Their religion was to have been motivated by their heart. Instead, it became a matter of habit.

Zechariah 7:11 But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear.

Zechariah 7:12 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.

God put their disobedience into human terms they could understand. He was their Father and they were acting like disobedient and rebellious children who needed a spanking. God described them using three figures:

1. They “shrugged their shoulders.” Rather than a nonchalant shrug, the picture here is of a child whose shoulder you reach out to grab, but they rebelliously pull it away.
2. They “stopped their ears.” Ever had a kid walk away from you when you are talking to them? Or maybe they are listening but not really paying attention – just blowing you off?
3. They made their hearts stone-hard. No matter how much God pleaded, they refused to obey.

“Thus great wrath came from the Lord of hosts.” God disciplined them. In their case, that meant a seventy-year captivity in Babylon and the destruction of their city and its Temple.

Zechariah 7:13 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.

Zechariah 7:14 “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.”

Nebuchadnezzar besieged their city; the Babylonians entered the city; the Temple was burned; their governor was killed. In response to these four catastrophes the exiles had established four fasts. **But to observe the four fasts and not repent of the sins which caused the catastrophes in the first place was to miss the whole point of God’s discipline.**

One interesting thing I’d like to point out. God said in verse fourteen, “thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned...” Even though they had been held captive for seventy years, their land was still waiting for them. The Babylonians hadn’t built their own city there. Through the centuries that the Jews have been scattered around the world, their land has remained desolate – waiting for them. It is their land by God’s decree. We may not support everything Israel does, but we support her right to exist as a nation in her own promised land.

The Jews wanted to know if they should keep on observing the fifth fast. It had become a tradition. To their credit, they were willing to examine their tradition. They sought God’s Word about their tradition.

Tradition is not a bad thing. The word “tradition” comes from the Latin word that means *to hand over*. The basic doctrines and teaching of the Christian faith must be handed over from generation to generation. The particular traditions of the church in practicing its faith don’t carry the same authority as the inspired Word of God. In fact, as times change, many of the practices of an earlier generation of Christians can actually become detrimental to furthering the Gospel. For example: Centuries ago, when the first missionaries went to Moravia, they weren’t allowed to preach in the Slavic language. Why? *Because the only “holy languages” the church approved were Hebrew, Greek, and Latin!* That’s ridiculous – and so are many traditions individual churches still cling to.

Churches are like families; each one has its own set of traditions. Many of them are good. Changing circumstances dictate changes in some traditions. We need to be able to distinguish between *tradition* and *traditionalism*. Someone once put it this way: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

Israel’s *fasts* will indeed be turned into *feasts*, as we saw in chapter eight, verse nineteen. In the mean time they were to examine their hearts for the right motives behind their rites and to eliminate all matters of mere habit.

The same is true of us. Warren Wiersbe writes,

“Churches, families, and individual believers need to examine their cherished traditions in the light of God’s truth. Perhaps some of our fasts need to be turned into feasts” (*Be Heroic*, page 123).

Only you know if your spiritual observances have become a matter of habit rather than the motive of your heart.

Conclusion

If you ask the average person if it is more spiritual to feast or to fast, fasting would probably be their choice.

I like the fact that God never commanded a fast in the Old Testament, but that He did call for many feasts. Your relationship with Him is something to be celebrated and enjoyed.

If you choose to fast as a spiritual practice, it should be as a personal expression of your joy. Perhaps that is why Jesus said,

Matthew 6:17 "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,
Matthew 6:18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

I'd apply Jesus' thinking to all of your rites, traditions, and liturgies. Look and live as though you are enjoying your relationship with God – as if it is a feast others would be blessed to attend.